

DEAR DIARY, THEY STAYED

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DEAR DIARY, THEY STAYED

A YEAR OF HOSTING, WITNESSING, AND
BECOMING

by

Shalini Ajay Singh

DEAR READER

Hey,

Dear reader,

Before you jump into this book, I need to tell you something important. You're probably thinking: Why should I buy this book? Or worse... Why am I even reading this right now? Relax. I get it. I'd be thinking the same thing.

Let's be honest — we are deeply interested in famous people's lives. We want to know who they're dating, what they ate for breakfast, and whether they cried after their last breakup. But our neighbors? People we pass every day? Yeah. . . we don't give a damn most of the time.

I started writing because, to me, every human is a character. Not a side role — the main hero or heroine of their own film. Including you. Yes, you, holding this book and judging me silently.

When I was five years old, I saw death for the first time — my great grandmother's death. Unlike kids today (who somehow know every-thing), I was a little slow. I didn't know what death was, why everyone was crying, or where they were taking my

Amma. I just knew something strange was happening and nobody explained it properly.

That evening, I asked my Dadu, “What happened to Amma?” He said, “We are all stories, like films. Her film just finished.” At the time, I didn’t understand a word of it. Honestly, I was probably more upset about missing my evening snacks. But that sentence stayed with me.

From then on, I started seeing people differently. Not as good or bad. Not as heroes or villains. Just stories. Everyone you meet is carrying a beginning, a middle, and a lot of unexpected plot twists. Some are funny.

Some are sad. Some feel like they were written by a very confused writer at 3 a.m.

So here you go — 38 stories. Real people. Real moments. Some will make you laugh, some might make you pause, and a few might make you think about that one Airbnb guest you’ll never forget.

Enjoy the stories. And have a great reading ahead.

PREFACE

I didn't open my home because I trusted people.
I opened it because I was curious about them.
As an actress, I've always watched more than I spoke.
Running a BnB turned that habit into a life.
People arrive with bags, but what they really bring are stories.
Some unpack.
Some don't.
Some leave things behind without knowing it.

What happens when a woman with nothing to lose opens her home to strangers-and what they reveal about fear, loneliness, and survival.
A year of hosting strangers while waiting for a career-and a life—to return.
This isn't about Airbnb.
It's about waiting, watching, and being watched.

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RIO

You're going to read a lot about Rio in this book.

Fair warning.

He is my son, my pet, my emotional support system,
and occasionally the reason my food disappears mysteriously.
Basically, he's almost everything to me.

Rio was born on 27th June 2020, and I officially adopted him on
11th August 2020.

I still remember that day clearly—
it was raining cats and dogs outside.

Which, honestly, felt very dramatic and appropriate,
because my life was about to change forever.

Enter:

a tiny creature who didn't pay rent but he took over my entire
heart.

Slowly, this little fluff ball became my life.

Somewhere along the way, I stopped calling myself a dog owner
and confidently started calling myself a parent.

And yes, I now say things like,

"My son doesn't eat that."

without any shame.

He is the calmest, most loving dog you'll ever meet.
I could write an entire book about him—
actually, if this book accidentally turns into that, please don't
complain.
While I'm writing this, he's sitting nearby waiting for his food,
staring at me like I owe him money.
And I'm smiling like an idiot.
Rio is the best thing that ever happened to me.
He's now five years old,
steals food like a professional thief, and steals hearts without even
trying.
He loves his walks, his sleep,
and acting like he's never been fed before—
five minutes after eating.
According to my guests, he's the best host ever.
According to me, he's the best son.
And if you have a dog,
please tell him or her I said hi.
Rio would approve.

Dear Diary, They Stayed



Shalini Ajay Singh

In loving memory of Muffin 🐾🐾

CHAPTER I

THE FIRST GUEST

My first guest was sweet.

That's the word I used for him then.

He arrived around ten at night, quiet and polite, the kind of person who didn't ask too many questions.

He went straight to his room.

I remember thinking how easy the check-in had been.

How hosting might not be so complicated after all.

About fifteen minutes later, he came back out.

He stood a little awkwardly, like he didn't want to take up space, and asked us—very politely—if he could order dinner for us.

Chinese food, he said.

We agreed.

We thanked him.

That night felt simple.

Normal.

I went to sleep thinking I had made the right decision to open my home.

The next morning, he checked out without incident.
A brief goodbye.
A quiet exit.
I filed him away as my first guest—nothing more.
A week later, he texted me.
He said he liked cleaning.
He said it made him happy.
He asked if he could come back—not as a guest, but as my servant.
I read the message twice.
Then, a third time.
Because my mind refused to accept it the first two times.
He said he would do anything I asked.
Anything.
There was a sentence I wish I could unread.
I felt something shift in me then.
Not fear exactly.
But a cold awareness.
The kind that arrives when you realise that kindness can be misunderstood.
Politeness can invite the wrong door to open.
I didn't want to be rude.
I didn't want to be cruel.
I didn't want to shame someone who was clearly not well.
So I chose the softest response I could find.
I told him that I thought he needed help.
I suggested he speak to a doctor.

I tried to close the conversation gently.
But the messages kept coming.
The same words.
The same request.
Again and again.
Eventually, I did the only thing I could do to protect myself.
I blocked him.
That was my first lesson as a host.
People don't always arrive as who they really are.
Sometimes, they reveal themselves only after they've left.

Magic happens to those who believe in magic.

CHAPTER II

THE MAN WHO WAITED

He was middle-aged.

An alcohol lover.

Very kind to Rio.

He came to spend one week by himself.

He had a routine.

Every day, it was the same.

Work in the morning.

Chai.

Then a long conversation with Rio.

As if my dog understood everything he was saying.

After that, he would lock himself in his room for hours.

In the evening, alcohol.

Dinner.

And then another long talk.

Mostly with Rio.

It felt like he was more comfortable with animals than with people.

We didn't talk much at first.

He was polite.

Gentle.

It was distant in a way that didn't ask for attention.

But one evening, our paths crossed long enough for a conversation to begin.

He told me he was married.

He had a son.

And during the lockdown, he lost his wife, his child, and his mother.

All three.

He didn't pause for sympathy.

He didn't cry.

He said it like someone listing facts they had already accepted.

"I'm not chasing death," he said.

"Not money.

Not anything."

He looked at Rio while he spoke.

"I just want to breathe," he continued.

"And wait for my time.

One day I'll meet them again."

The room went cold.

Not physically.

But the kind of cold that settles inside you.

The kind that makes you aware of how fragile everything is.

How loneliness can exist even when someone is sitting right in front of you.

I didn't know what to say.
So I changed the topic.
I offered him tea.
He smiled.
"Kid," he said,
"That's life.
Please don't feel bad for me."
Then he added, softly,
"Actually, I'm thankful to you.
Because of Rio, I smiled a couple of times."
He blessed me.
I watched him leave a few days later.
Slowly.
Quietly.
Like someone who wasn't in a hurry to be anywhere.
Some guests are running.
Some are searching.
He was waiting.
And in that waiting, he found a little comfort in a dog who
didn't ask questions.
While writing this chapter, I was reminded that not all pain is
loud. Some people don't ask for sympathy.
They just ask for space to breathe.
This character represents those who are not running from life.
Nor chasing anything anymore.
Only waiting.
Rio symbolizes unconditional comfort.

The kind that doesn't demand explanations.

I hope this chapter makes you pause and notice the silent strength around you.

CHAPTER III

WHERE MANNERS END

She arrived with a smile that felt familiar.

An old lady—soft-spoken, neat, carrying the comfort of age and routine.

I welcomed her the way I welcome all my guests.

Politely.

Warmly.

Without measuring how much kindness costs.

We talked.

We shared meals.

She told me stories of her past.

And I listened.

By night, the house felt calm.

I went to bed thinking this would be one of those easy stays.

The kind that passes gently.

Without leaving a mark.

I was wrong.

At around six in the morning—maybe six-thirty—there was loud bang-ing on my door.

Not knocking.

Banging.

I woke up startled.

Heart racing.

Still half inside my dreams.

I opened the door and asked, quietly but firmly,

“What happened?”

She stood there, impatient.

“Where is my breakfast?” she asked.

For a moment, I was speechless.

I looked at her face.

Old.

Expectant.

Certain.

I knew I could soften my words.

I knew I could pretend.

And because she was old.

Because I didn’t want to be rude.

I chose gentleness over reaction.

“Auntie,” I said calmly,

“I’m your host.

I’m not your servant.

The kitchen is open.

Please feel free to cook.”

She looked straight into my eyes.

“This generation has no manners,” she said.
The words landed hard.
I wanted to say so many things.
About respect.
About boundaries.
About how kindness is not duty and age is not entitlement.
I wanted to ask her if manners meant waking someone up like
this.
If manners only flowed in one direction.
But I didn’t say anything.
I smiled.
And I locked my door.
Inside my room, the questions came quietly.
One after another.
Why do I need to please someone when I know I haven’t been
disre-spectful?
Why is silence mistaken for lack of manners, and obedience
mistaken for virtue?
And when did kindness start meaning submission?
I stayed in my room the rest of the day.
The next morning, I didn’t speak to her at all.
Not out of anger.
Out of clarity.
Some people mistake access for authority.
And some lessons don’t need words.
Just distance.
Kindness does not mean losing yourself.

Respect does not come with age alone.

It comes with behavior.

Sometimes, the most graceful thing a woman can do is smile.

Step back.

And choose her peace.

CHAPTER IV

THE GUEST WHO WAS A LESSON

She came from the South, and from the very first moment, I knew—this stay would not be easy.

Three bags for a one-week trip.

A sharp tone disguised as confidence.

Eyes that seemed to be searching for something to disapprove of.

She said she was here for a course.

But for me, it felt like hosting a walking complaint box.

Nothing was ever quite right.

Every evening, without fail, she would call me into her room.

“Shalini, come,” she’d say—already seated, already prepared.

I would sit on the chair across from her as she unloaded her day.

The people.

The food outside.

The weather.

The city.

The world.

At first, I listened patiently.
I told myself stories to survive it.
Maybe she's lonely.
Maybe she doesn't have anyone else.
Maybe this is how she copes.
But patience, I learned, can be heavy.
By the fourth evening, my body would tense the moment I heard
her voice.
I wasn't just hosting her—
I was absorbing her frustration, her anger, her dissatisfaction
with life itself.
And yet, I stayed kind.
Not because it was easy.
Because it felt necessary.
Then one evening, after yet another long list of complaints, she
paused.
Her voice softened.
Almost shy.
"Shalini," she said,
"I know I'm a bad guest."
I looked at her, surprised.
Then she continued, almost casually,
"But get used to it.
You'll get worse guests.
You should know how to handle them."
I nodded.
Not because I agreed.

Not because I was defeated.
But because something inside me clicked.
She wasn't apologizing.
She was preparing me.
In that moment, I understood something important:
Not all guests come to be pleasant.
Some come to train your boundaries.
Some come to stretch your empathy.
Some come to show you who you must not become.
She left a week later, just as demanding as she arrived.
But I was not the same host she had met.
I had learned to listen without absorbing.
To stay polite without shrinking.
To understand that discomfort is sometimes a classroom.
She didn't come to stay.
She came to teach.
Some lessons arrive wrapped in warmth.
Others arrive wrapped in resistance.
Not every difficult person is meant to be endured forever—some
are meant to sharpen you,
strengthen you,
and quietly leave once their job is done.

Always listen to your intuition and act after it.
Believe that miracle can happen and will
happen to you.

CHAPTER V

THE YOUNGEST GUEST WHO TAUGHT ME GRATITUDE

She was just eighteen.

French.

Here for NGO work.

A cat person who, within minutes, fell completely in love with Rio.

There was something tender about her presence—light, unassuming, like she didn't want to disturb the space she occupied.

Her days were long.

From nine in the morning until seven-thirty at night, she worked tire-lessly.

And when she returned, she ate her dinner quietly, almost like it was a ritual she needed to complete before resting. No complaints.

No demands.

Just gratitude in small, consistent ways.

One night, she ordered dal makhani and naan.

She took one bite—and suddenly ran into my room, eyes wide with excitement.

“Hey! You have to try this.

It’s so good!”

I laughed and followed her.

In the blink of an eye, Rio had eaten all her naan.

She looked at the empty plate, sad for half a second, and then laughed. “Okay,” she said,

“I’ll survive.”

That sentence stayed with me.

I wasn’t having it.

I ordered dal makhani, naan, rice, and paneer for her.

From that day on, I started cooking dinner for her.

She loved Indian food, and cooking for her stopped feeling like hosting—

it felt like caring for a little sister far from home.

She danced in my kitchen while I made parathas.

Barefoot.

Unbothered.

Fully present.

Her music filled the room—

Oscar-winning speeches by Raye playing in the background, slowly becoming our song.

The kitchen wasn’t just a kitchen anymore.

It was a place of laughter, movement, and shared silence.
One evening, I asked her,
“What is life for you?”
She paused.
Thought for a moment.
Then said simply, “Being in the moment.”
No philosophy.
No overthinking.
Just truth.
I told her I loved Paris.
She smiled and said,
“Please visit me whenever you are coming.”
She checked out eventually, as all guests do.
But she didn’t really leave.
Even now, we share reels on Instagram.
Little moments.
Quiet joy.
But more than that, she left me with something
precious—gratitude.
Not the loud kind.
The kind that lives in routine, in laughter, in dancing while
someone else cooks.
At eighteen, she reminded me that joy doesn’t need permission.
Presence doesn’t need planning.
And kindness doesn’t need age.
It only needs a heart willing to feel.
Sometimes, the youngest people carry the oldest wisdom.

They don't teach it through advice—
they teach it by the way they live.
Gratitude is not something you learn.
It's something you catch, quietly, from someone who knows how
to be alive.

CHAPTER VI

THE GUEST WHO COULDN'T HANDLE RIO

Some guests walk in, and you instantly know—this one will be a story.

He was tall.

Imposing.

The kind of presence that fills a room without asking permission.

He booked my BnB for a week, but from the moment he entered, it felt like he had already decided he didn't belong.

No hello.

No smile.

No small talk.

He walked straight into his room and locked the door behind him.

I let it go.

Hosts learn quickly—silence can be a personality too.

Later, while I was making tea, he appeared in the kitchen, almost like a shadow.

I offered him some.

He nodded.

Rio, doing what Rio always does, went straight to him—tail wagging, heart open, ready to make a new friend.

He drank his tea without a word.

Then, casually, he asked,

“Can I invite a female friend over?”

I shook my head.

“No, sir. That’s not allowed.”

Something shifted instantly.

The color drained from his face, as if someone had switched him off.

Without another word, he stormed back into his room and slammed the door.

Rio, loyal and curious, followed him inside.

I knocked gently.

“Sir, I’m going for groceries.

Rio’s here—is that okay?”

A long pause.

Then, reluctantly, “Yes.”

That’s when the calls started.

Messages.

Complaints.

BnB notifications.

The dog is too loud.

The guest is uncomfortable.

He wants to cancel.

I went to his room.

Before I could even speak, he exploded.

“I booked this room to meet people!” he shouted.

“If I can’t meet them, what’s the point?”

I listened, trying to understand the logic that kept changing shape.

One moment, he was angry about the dog.

Next, about the rules.

Then about the BnB.

Then about life, it seemed.

The contradictions were endless.

The drama was exhausting.

It felt less like hosting a guest and more like managing a storm that didn’t know what it wanted.

Eventually, he left.

Not quietly.

Not gracefully.

He stormed out like a character from a sitcom—
frustrated, dramatic, unresolved.

Minutes later, my phone buzzed.

A WhatsApp message.

“Hey, sorry... I had no option.”

I stared at the screen, then looked at Rio—

who was calmly lying on the floor, completely unaffected by human chaos.

And just like that, my week went from peaceful hosting to a masterclass in managing unpredictability.

Some guests come to rest.

Some come to connect.

And some come carrying battles that have nothing to do with
you.

They leave quickly.

But their stories stay—

if only to make you laugh later.

Not every uncomfortable situation needs a dramatic response.

Some simply need patience, boundaries, and a deep breath.

Hosting teaches you this:

you are not responsible for someone else's confusion.

CHAPTER VII

TEE, MY FAVORITE GUEST

Because of my past experiences, I always feel a twinge of anxiety when a female guest books my BnB.

Another lesson.

Another story.

Maybe heartbreak.

Maybe drama.

Then Tee booked for four days.

I told myself: no friendship this time.

Just be a host.

That's it.

The doorbell rang.

I opened the door.

She was small—four foot nine, long curly hair with bangs—and hon-estly, too cute for words.

I kept my guard up.

No friendship.

Rio, of course, went straight to her.

She was polite, gentle, soft-spoken.

I was heading out for a walk and asked if she wanted to spend some time with him.

She agreed.

Later, she told me Rio had fallen asleep while she sang a song to him.

My heart melted.

If you are nice to my Rio, I thought,

I'll be nicer to you.

Simple. Honest. True.

The next night, I asked about her plans.

"Let's go to the market," she said.

"I want to eat Vada Pav."

We went. We shopped. We ate Vada Pav. And it was delicious.

The next evening, she offered me pizza.

I offered her Bailey's.

And just like that, our first candlelit dinner happened.

I couldn't resist her warmth—her comforting presence, the effortless way she made even ordinary moments feel special.

By the end of her stay, I realized something magical had happened.

She wasn't just a guest.

She wasn't just someone I hosted.

She was a friend.

Now, we buy dresses for each other, share our lives—problems, successes, dreams, almost everything.

I joke that I'd love to host her for life.

Some guests leave stories behind.

Tee left something rarer: a friendship that feels like home.

Not all connections come with grand gestures.

Some arrive quietly, over shared meals, walks, and laughter.

Some guests don't just stay in your house—they stay in your heart.

Tee is one of those guests.

Think of your purpose more than your need.

CHAPTER VIII

THE GUEST WHO MADE ME HIT THE GYM

I wasn't even in India when the inquiry came.

A young woman wrote: "I really like your place, but I don't have the budget right now.

Can you lower your price? I'm a dog mom too."

I replied honestly: "I'm not in India. I'll be coming on your last day if you book.

But... I've had some bad experiences hosting female guests, so please don't be another lesson."

She laughed.

"Don't worry," she said.

And somehow, that made me trust her.

When I returned to India, I finally met her in person.

She was young. A model. A body that looked sculpted by dedication.

Naturally, the first words out of my mouth were: "How do you main-tain this?"

She smiled, calm and unbothered. “Hit the gym and eat clean.”

I laughed nervously.

Gym? Me? I had never set foot in one in my life.

And yet. . . we clicked instantly.

Over dogs. Over stories. Over laughter that echoed across my little BnB. And slowly, without even realizing it, I felt inspired.

Watching her dedication.

Her discipline. Her energy. I thought, Maybe I can do this too.

That week, I changed.

I went to the gym for the first time in my life. I worked out. I pushed myself.

Not just to follow her example—but because sometimes, people who walk into your life, even briefly, carry a spark that lights your own fire.

It wasn’t just about fitness.

It was about realizing how easily we can be inspired by those who bring their best selves into our space.

Sometimes, guests don’t just leave memories.

Sometimes, they leave life lessons.

And sometimes, those lessons come with a smile, a wagging tail, and the courage to change.

Inspiration doesn’t always knock softly.

Sometimes, it enters through your front door, sits on your couch, and makes you realize—change is possible, even for one week.

CHAPTER IX

THE GIRL WHO ASKED FOR TEA

My next guest arrived quietly.

She was only twenty-two.

And she had two little daughters holding her hands.

I paused. My mind did the math before my heart could stop it.

Twenty-two. Two children.

I asked, almost without thinking,

“How old were you when you got married?”

She looked at me gently and said,

“Please give me some tea. I have a long story to share.”

So I made tea.

When the cups were warm in our hands, she began.

She was married at fifteen.

By sixteen, she was already a mother.

Before she could even learn how to be a woman, life had handed her responsibility.

Before her daughter was a year old, her husband found someone else.

Love turned into cruelty.

Words became blows.

Nights became something to survive.

She ran—not away from marriage, but toward safety—to her mother's home.

But even there, peace did not wait.

Her bhabhi's words cut deeper than bruises.

Every day, taunts.

Every day, reminders that she was unwanted.

That even her child was a burden.

One night, exhausted and broken, she decided she could not do it any-more.

She decided to end everything—her pain, her daughter's pain.

But life. . . had other plans.

She survived.

A friend's brother helped her find a job.

For the first time, she felt capable. Strong. Seen.

She worked hard. She smiled again.

And in that place of healing, she met a man who treated her gently.

She married again.

She believed again.

She gave birth to her second daughter.

Then, four months later, her husband died in a truck accident.

Just like that.

Now she stood in front of me.

Two daughters.

One job.

No one else to lean on.

When she finished, the tea had gone cold.

That night, after she went to sleep, I cried.

I cried for her childhood that never existed.

For the strength she never asked for.

For the unfairness of a life that kept testing her—and somehow
never broke her.

I had thought I was suffering too much.

That night, I thanked God.

For my pain.

For my blessings.

For the reminder that every guest carries a universe of stories
behind their silence.

Some stories don't knock loudly.

They sit across from you.

Ask for tea.

And stay with you forever.

Life is fragile, complex, and often unfair.

But resilience is quieter than we expect.

Some guests don't just pass through your house.

They leave behind a universe of courage.

And sometimes, all you can do is listen—and let their story stay
with you.

Everything you did brought you where you are
now. Where you belong....trust the process.

CHAPTER X

THE GUEST WHO STAYED BEYOND THE CALENDAR

The doorbell rang, and I opened it to my first international guest.

He was supposed to stay for ten days.

He ended up staying for three months.

In his sixties.

No wife, no children, no family in India.

Quiet. Reserved. Mostly keeping to his room.

Our greetings were simple.

A “hello” or “hi” in the evenings, usually in the kitchen where he had his fixed dinner: popcorn and Diet Coke.

He said it was to lose a little fat, though I thought he looked perfectly fine.

One evening, curiosity got the better of me.

I asked, “Hey... what is life for you?”

Most people fumble for answers. He didn’t.

He simply said,

“Everything between me and God is life.”

I smiled. Quietly amazed.

That line lingered in my head long after the words left his mouth.

He was in India for his acting career—like me, chasing the art of stories, the magic of cinema.

After that, we spent hours talking.

About life.

About coffee.

About movies.

About the small wonders of the world.

He also played a little game with Rio, my dog, who adored him.

Watching them together, I realized something:

Even the quietest souls can leave the loudest impressions.

Three months later, he moved nearby.

But our connection stayed.

I still visit him sometimes.

He knows—without me saying a word—that he is my favorite guest.

Life, it seems, has a funny way of teaching you lessons:

Not in grand gestures.

Not in fireworks.

But in popcorn, Diet Coke, quiet conversations, and a man who re-minds you that the simplest truths can hold the deepest meaning.

Some guests don't just pass through your home.

They leave a quiet echo in your life.

A reminder that beauty doesn't always shout. Sometimes, it whispers.

CHAPTER XI

THE GIRL WHO CROSSED THE LINE

The next guest was a woman in her early twenties.

She said she was here to learn something.

I never quite understood what.

The moment she arrived, she didn't go to her room.

She sat at my dining table like she had always belonged there—and started talking.

Not small talk. Everything.

Her life spilled out without pause, without permission.

As a host, I listened. That's what hosts do.

Her mother had run away with her lover.

Her father had turned into an alcoholic.

Her brother lived with his girlfriend.

She said she was the only one earning.

I felt sorry for her—until she casually added that for the last year she'd been living with her boyfriend who paid for everything.

"Now I know what luxury is," she said.

“I can’t go back to that shithole.”
Sympathy turned cautious.
She began her course.
And every week, she fell in love with a new man.
Every Sunday, she cried at my table.
“No one loves me.”
Tears. Sobs. Broken sentences.
Every Monday, there was another man.
Another obsession.
Another story.
This went on for a month.
I told a few friends.
They all said the same thing: Stay away.
She wants attention.
But she was already everywhere—in my space, my routine, my silence.
Then one night, she came to me crying harder than usual.
“Tomorrow is my last day here,” she said.
“I don’t have anywhere to go. My boyfriend booked the BnB. We broke up. He blocked me everywhere.”
She looked at me like I was the last door left open.
“Can I stay with you?”
Against my better judgment, I said yes—for a couple of days.
Eventually, she left because her father was in the hospital.
She went back home.
I thought it was over.

Three days later, she called again. “Can I come back and stay with you?” This time, I said no.

I was flying out of India. I already had guests.

That’s when she flipped.

Her voice changed. The crying vanished.

What came next was venom.

She cursed me. Said things no one deserves to hear.

And then—deliberately—she said the one thing she knew would hurt the most.

She knew how much I love Rio.

More than anything.

“I wish Rio dies soon,” she said.

My hands started shaking.

I cried instantly.

My body reacted before my mind could catch up.

I told her, quietly but firmly,

“Don’t cross your line.”

And I blocked her. Everywhere.

That night, the house felt different. Not haunted. Violated.

Some guests don’t leave memories.

They leave alarms inside your body.

They teach you that kindness without boundaries can turn dangerous.

That not everyone who cries is broken—some are simply empty, look-ing for somewhere to pour it.

I held Rio a little tighter that night. And I slept with the doors locked.

Being kind doesn't mean being vulnerable. Sometimes,
protection is love too.

Not for them. For yourself.

Boundaries aren't walls—they're safety lines, drawn clearly and
un-apologetically.

CHAPTER XII

THE GUEST WHO COULDN'T BREAK FREE

She arrived like sunshine.

A young actress, bright smile, energy that filled the room the moment she stepped in.

But then my eyes caught the dark marks on her hands.

I was making tea and offered her a cup.

She waved me off.

"I can drink tea anytime," she said, and we sat quietly together.

But I couldn't ignore the marks.

"What happened?" I asked.

She looked at me, eyes steady but hollow.

"My boyfriend," she said. I froze.

"How... why?"

She told me everything. Four years.

Every argument.

Every time he was upset—he bit her, left bruises, left pain.

I asked the question I didn't want to hear.

“After all this. . . why do you stay?”

“Rent is too high,” she said.

“My family isn’t supportive.

I’m an actress. Sometimes I don’t earn for months.

What else can I do?”

I wanted to help—but I didn’t want pity.

“Can you perform an audition for me?” I asked.

“Let me see what’s going wrong, why you aren’t getting jobs and living this life.”

She nodded.

The next day, after my work was done, she performed. It was... lacking. Not bad, but not enough.

I gently suggested she find a job, move out of that relationship, and start a new life.

She broke down.

Showed me pictures of her abuse.

Begged me to help.

I called a couple of friends.

One agreed to give her an opportunity.

We worked together, prepared her for an interview, and she landed a job.

For the first time in months, I saw hope ignite in her eyes.

I thought it was over.

She was leaving the past behind. She was finally starting again.

But the night of her check-out, the doorbell rang. I was in my room when she appeared, panicked. “I’m going. He’s here,” she whispered.

“Who?” I asked. “My boyfriend.”

I never felt so helpless in my life.

I wanted to shout, warn her, drag her away—but I only nodded, said goodbye, and closed the door.

That night, I realized something hard.

Sometimes, no matter how much you help, some people are trapped in their own chaos.

And sometimes, boundaries are the only way to survive. I hugged Rio tighter that night.

And I decided something for myself.

Female friendship, sometimes, is unpredictable. And that’s okay.

Helping doesn’t mean fixing. Boundaries don’t mean you don’t care.

Sometimes, the best way to love someone is to protect yourself first.

A thing is a thing, not what is said about that
thing.

CHAPTER XIII

THE GUEST WHO BROUGHT SUNSHINE

He arrived the day after my beloved Muffin passed—the little soul whose absence had left my home unusually quiet, and my heart heavier than usual.

He was a navy officer, calm and steady, yet I could see the shadows behind his eyes.

Over the course of a few days, I learned why.

He had lost his own dog during COVID, and in his silence, I saw a reflection of my grief.

One afternoon, noticing the tears I couldn't hide, he asked softly, "What happened?"

I choked back my voice and told him about Muffin—how she had been my shadow, my comfort, my little heartbeat under my feet.

He nodded quietly and said, "Sit with me."

We sat together in silence, letting the weight of loss sit between us.

Then we shared stories—of dogs lost, of dogs loved, of mornings that felt empty without their wagging tails.

Our voices cracked. Tears fell.

And somehow, it felt like we weren't strangers anymore.

Just when the sadness seemed unbearable, he asked, "Do you want coffee?"

I nodded, and we went for a walk.

On our way back, he returned with a blueberry muffin and a hot latte—something simple, yet it felt like the universe had handed me a small, unexpected blessing.

From that day, a quiet ritual began.

Every afternoon, he would call me to his room.

Without a word, he would read passages from the Bhagwat Geeta, his voice steady and gentle, and I would listen, letting the words wash over me.

In the evenings, the same muffin and coffee would appear—again, silently, faithfully, like sunlight seeping into a dim room.

When it was time for him to check out, he looked at me and said softly, "She'll be there forever—in your heart and mind. Take care."

And just like that, he left a mark—soft, comforting, and enduring.

He reminded me that even in grief, even in the quiet hollows of heart-break, strangers can arrive like sunlight and warm the coldest corners of your soul.

Grief teaches us that loss can feel endless, but love, even in small gestures, has the power to return light to the darkest spaces. Sometimes, healing doesn't come from grand gestures—it comes in muffins, coffee, quiet words, and the presence of someone who understands without asking to be asked.

Get back to doing the things that made you
smile and laugh.

MUFFIN, MY LITTLE OCEAN

Meeting Muffin for the first time felt like discovering a piece of my own heart I didn't know was missing. She wasn't my dog—she belonged to a friend—but the moment she sniffed me and walked calmly into her room, I knew we were destined to be friends. I'm a dog mother at heart; if a human rejects me, it stings, but if a dog rejects me... it hurts in a way I can't explain.

From that day, I brought her treats every time we met, and slowly, over a month, we became inseparable. She became my little daughter, my com-panion, my Saturday joy. Her eyes—oh, her eyes—were oceans. Deep, trusting, and full of love that I felt I didn't deserve. I would tell my sister and my mother, "The way Muffin looks at me... I feel like she wants to give me everything."

Saturdays became sacred. Two beagle babies in my life—one my Rio, my heartbeat, and one Muffin, the friend I never expected but couldn't live without.

Then came the news that shattered everything: Muffin had cancer.

I loved her even more fiercely after that. Her little body, so sensitive to the cold, seemed even more precious. The day I saw her in the hospital, so fragile and small, I felt my soul leave my body for a moment. I forgot where I was, who was around me—I just cried, my heart breaking in ways words can't contain.

When it was time to place her in the freezer for the funeral, my mind raced. She used to get cold so easily, and now we were putting her in this cold box. The injustice of it, the heartbreak—it felt unbearable.

But Muffin is still with me.

She lives in my heart, in my mind, in every Saturday memory, in every quiet thought. And I know that one day, I will meet her again.

Love you, Muff.

Dear Diary, They Stayed



You were my favourite HELLO and my hardest
GOODBYE.

CHAPTER XIV

THE GUEST WHO LOVED BURGERS. . . AND RIO

He arrived from Bangkok like a man on a mission: a mission to live entirely with himself.

From the very first day, I noticed his routine was... impeccable. Almost military in precision.

Sleep till afternoon. Take a shower.

Ask me for a cup of coffee. Eat some snack.

Start drinking alcohol. Eat a burger.

Talk to Rio. Go to sleep.

And that—repeated like clockwork—was his life for four days. I was fascinated.

He had come to my BnB not to meet people, not to explore, not even to see India properly—he had come to live with himself.

And he was doing it spectacularly.

Then came day five.

He ordered his burger, like every day. Went to the bathroom.

Meanwhile, my mischievous Rio, ever the opportunist, decided to taste-test his guest's dinner.

And by taste-test, I mean completely devour the burger.

When he returned, bleary-eyed and slightly drunk, he looked at me politely and said,

"Shalini, I'm ordering a burger for me. I don't know what happened... I just had a burger, but I'm still feeling hungry."

I blinked.

Part of me wanted to tell him, "Sir, it wasn't you—it was Rio."

But he was too drunk.

So I smiled, nodded, and said,

"No, sir. Thank you. I'm going to sleep."

The next morning, when he asked me for coffee, I decided it was time.

I leaned in and said, "Sir. . . about last night." I told him everything.

His laughter filled the kitchen like music.

He patted Rio, his new favorite companion, and said, "Well. . . I guess he's a better burger lover than me!"

From that day on, he never ordered a burger without Rio supervising.

And for four more nights, the laughter, the coffee, and Rio's antics became a tiny ritual that reminded me: sometimes, the simplest joys—burgers, a dog, and a little chaos—are all you need to create memories.

Some guests come to teach you patience.

Some come to test your diplomacy.

And some... come to remind you that life is funnier than you think, especially when a dog is involved.

Remember:

If your guest ever seems extra hungry... check the dog first.

Being ready is a myth. You start. You suck. You
figure it out. You get better.

CHAPTER XV

THE GUEST WHO QUESTIONED MY CHOICES

For the first three days, he seemed like any other guest—curious, polite, and slightly chatty.

Cafe-hopping during the afternoons, asking endless questions: How did I become an actress?

What had I done beyond my work?

He bought flowers for me, treats for Rio, and complimented my cooking.

On the surface, a perfect guest.

Then came the night that changed the tone.

He was a little drunk, sitting across the table, beer in hand.

He offered me one. I politely refused.

“Can I ask you a question?” he said.

“Yes,” I replied cautiously.

“I’ve noticed you,” he started, his words slow and deliberate.

“You clean your house. You cook. You don’t talk much.

You are so. . . beautiful. Wife material. So why are you doing this?"

I blinked. For a moment, I didn't get him. "What do you mean by that?" I asked.

He leaned back, sighing, as if sharing a secret he had been holding onto.

"I mean... strangers coming into your home.

I'll suggest you get married and stop doing this."

I felt a strange mix of surprise and calm.

He was polite, but his words carried weight.

"I believe," I said gently, "that life, death, and love can't be chased. They will come at the right time. I have only one life, and I will marry the love of my life when the time is right.

I host people because I enjoy meeting new souls, hearing their stories, and sharing my own. That is my choice, and I am proud of it."

He paused, blinked, then said slowly,

"Arey. . . but still. Why not? You could get a rich guy right now."

I smiled softly, feeling a quiet strength rise in me.

"I don't wish to change my mind. And I cannot let someone else define my path. What is meant for me will come in its own time."

The rest of the night passed in silence, both of us reflecting.

It was a conversation that could have been uncomfortable, even frustrating—but instead, it became a quiet declaration: that my choices, my independence, and my life belong to me alone.

Sometimes, guests challenge more than your hospitality.

Sometimes, they challenge your choices, your beliefs, your very life path. It's intense. It's uncomfortable.

But it is also a reminder:

No one else can define the life you are meant to live.

No advice, no suggestion, no expectation can replace your own conviction.

And that night, I realized: hosting strangers isn't just about welcoming them—it's about standing firm in yourself, even when the world politely questions why.

"I don't need anyone" is a statement often
made by those who at some point needed
someone, but no one showed up.

CHAPTER XVI

THE GUEST WHO MARRIED IN A BNB

When I saw his inquiry and booking, I couldn't resist.

I started reading his old reviews—and one caught my eye immediately. “I'll never forget this guest,” a Japanese host had written, “because they got married in my BnB.”

I paused.

Married... in a BnB?

My curiosity skyrocketed.

Who does that? Why would anyone do that?

My mind was buzzing with questions, and honestly, I couldn't wait to meet him.

The day he arrived, he carried an air of calm enthusiasm, and immediately, it was clear he loved love.

He even made a small portrait for Rio—my dog, the unofficial judge of character.

I smiled.

Maybe this was going to be interesting.

Later, I knocked on his door.

My excitement barely contained, I said,

“Hey! I’m really curious—I just have to know.

How did you get married in a BnB?”

He looked at me casually, like it was the most normal thing in the world. “Oh, that? Nothing special. I was in love and couldn’t wait any longer, so I got married.”

I stared at him, expecting some grand romantic saga, a story filled with drama or magic.

“Damn... that’s it?” I asked, half laughing.

He shrugged and smiled.

“People do stupid things in love,” he said, as if that explained everything.

I asked,

“So... how’s love treating you now?” He paused.

A long, thoughtful pause. Then he muttered,

“Okay, I guess...”

And with that, he returned to his room.

I couldn’t help but laugh.

Some stories aren’t meant to be fully explained—they’re meant to live in the space between curiosity and disbelief.

And sometimes, love itself is the story, messy and unpredictable, waiting for no one’s permission.

Some guests teach you lessons.

Some guests leave memories.

And then there are the guests who make you realize. . .

love doesn't wait for the perfect moment, the perfect place, or even a perfect story.

It just. . . happens.

Sometimes in a BnB, sometimes anywhere at all.

Don't forget to Imagine the best case scenario,
too.

CHAPTER XVII

THE GUEST WHO CHANGED ME WITHOUT MEETING ME

The day he was supposed to check in, life threw a curveball. I got a call from my mother in the morning: my mama had passed away. Heart heavy, tears threatening to spill at every second, I had to attend the funeral. And yet. . . as a host, I had responsibilities. I sent him a message: "The key is there. I won't be around, but feel free to stay like it's your home. If you need anything, drop me a text." I dropped Rio at a friend's place, tried to compose myself, and went to pay my respects. That day, life felt surreal—grief and duty intertwined, leaving me breathless. A week later, I got a call from him. "Hey," he said casually, "while I was at your BnB, I noticed your 369 manifestation book, your small temple, and even your earrings. I'm guessing you are a spiritual person. I want to help." At that moment, I was at my lowest. Sad, lost, vulnerable—and ready to accept any guidance that could lift me.

“Yes, please,” I whispered. He asked me to buy a small gold earring and wear it regularly. He suggested small changes to my daily routine, my Pooja, and introduced me to Maa Lalita Tripura Sundari. I won’t claim my life changed magically overnight. There were no miracles, no sudden revelations. But something subtle, profound, and lasting did happen. Whenever I feel stuck, overwhelmed, or low, he is the first person I call—without hesitation, without meeting him in person. Just a voice, advice, and a presence that feels grounding. It’s rare to meet someone in life who can touch your spirit without ever standing in front of you. And yet, he did.

Some guests leave memories of laughter. Some leave lessons about patience or kindness. And some... leave a quiet spiritual imprint on your life, a guide you never see but always feel. Even without meeting, even without sharing a meal or a room, some souls arrive exactly when you need them the most. And for that, I am forever grateful.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE GIRL WHO BORROWED FEAR

She was young—twenty, maybe twenty-one. A fashion designer. She arrived with the confidence of someone who had already decided who she was becoming.

Her clothes were effortless, her phone always in her hand, her life clearly unfolding somewhere outside my house.

She was here for a week, working under someone, chasing opportunity the way young people do—without pausing long enough to question anything else.

She had a dog back home.

That's why she bonded with Rio instantly.

Animals recognize familiarity faster than humans do.

Rio didn't need conversation; he needed presence.

And she gave him that easily.

They played every night, no matter how late she returned.

That was her routine.

She would leave around nine.

Come back.

Play with Rio.

Then go out again—parties, beer, random dates with men whose names didn't seem important enough to remember.

She didn't talk much to me.

And honestly, I was okay with that.

Not every guest needs intimacy.

Some just need space, and I respected that.

One evening, I went to the temple.

It started raining suddenly—heavy, unapologetic rain.

The kind that forces you to pause your plans and sit with yourself whether you like it or not.

I stayed there for about thirty minutes, letting the rain decide the pace of my return.

That's when my phone vibrated. Three missed calls—from her.

I called back immediately.

My first thought wasn't irritation. It was a concern.

When a quiet guest calls repeatedly, something usually is wrong.

She answered quickly.

"I'm home," she said, her voice tight.

"There is a boy in your room. Please come back soon." I paused.

"Oh," I said calmly.

"Yes, he's my friend. Don't worry. It's raining outside.

He just came to meet me. I'll be home soon."

There was a short silence. Then she said,

"Okay."

The call ended.

Minutes later, my phone started ringing again.

This time, it wasn't her.

It was her mother.

She didn't speak.

She attacked.

Her voice was loud, sharp, and deeply disrespectful.

She didn't ask questions—she made accusations. “How can you do this?”

“This is unacceptable.”

“I will complain to the BnB.”

“This is not allowed.”

I tried to explain—slowly, clearly, repeatedly.

“He's my friend.”

“He's in my room.”

“It's raining.”

“He will leave once I'm home.”

But explanation requires listening.

She wasn't listening.

She kept calling.

Threatening.

Raising her voice like volume alone could turn her fear into truth.

Then came the call I didn't expect.

From the BnB itself.

“There's a complaint,” the man on the line said. “Can you explain what's happening?”

I explained everything—calmly, honestly, without defensiveness.

There was a pause.

Then he laughed.

“You’re a super host,” he said.

“Please handle this. Have a good day.”

And just like that, the official part of the drama ended.

The personal one hadn’t even begun.

When I reached home, the house looked exactly the same.

No tension in the air.

No chaos.

No fear.

She was in her room. Watching reels.

I knocked and asked gently,

“What happened? Did he make you uncomfortable? Did he say any-thing to you?”

She didn’t even look up from her phone. “No,” she said.

“I haven’t even seen his face.” I waited.

“That’s it?” I asked. “Yes,” she said.

“I just saw a man in your room. So I called my mother.” That was it.

No threat.

No interaction.

No discomfort.

Just a borrowed fear—passed instantly to someone else and returned multiplied.

Her mother called again.

“My daughter is feeling unsafe,” she said loudly.

“What are you doing? You can’t do this.”

I didn’t argue.

I went into my room and explained everything to my friend. He laughed.

“I haven’t even seen her face,” he said. “What’s the problem then?”

Then his expression softened.

“I already have enough drama in my life,” he said. “I’m going home. We’ll meet soon.”

We hugged.

A simple, quiet hug—the kind that doesn’t need reassurance. I dropped him to the lift.

When I came back, I went to her room again.

“Please tell me now,” I said.

“What was the problem?” She looked at me.

“Nothing.”

I went into my room. Closed the door.

Sat on the bed.

And for the first time in a long while, I felt something heavy—not anger, not rage, but sadness.

A slow, sinking sadness.

Because I realized something important.

I didn’t deserve this kind of guest.

She taught me a lesson I never asked for.

That fear, when unchecked, becomes an accusation. That privilege often disguises itself as vulnerability.

And that silence, sometimes, is not peace—it's avoidance. She lived freely.

She partied.

She dated strangers.

She trusted the world on her own terms.

But the moment that world entered my space—without even touching hers—it became a problem.

Not because she was unsafe.

But because she had learned to outsource fear and let others fight her battles loudly.

That day, I understood that hosting doesn't mean accepting disrespect disguised as discomfort.

Hospitality does not require self-erasure.

And not every guest deserves access to your kindness. Some stays are lessons.

And some lessons arrive quietly, leave loudly, and remind you to choose yourself next time.

CHAPTER XIX

THE MAN WHO SMOKED HIS SILENCE

He was twenty-seven.

I remember his age clearly, maybe because at that age you're supposed to have answers—or at least the confidence to pretend that you do.

He arrived with a backpack that smelled faintly of smoke and roads, and before he spoke to me properly, he bent down and greeted Rio.

That's how I knew he would matter.

He loved two things immediately: Rio and beer. In that order.

Rio followed him everywhere, as if he had found a new axis to orbit around.

And he, in return, gave Rio the kind of attention men rarely give anything when they are tired of being strong all the time.

He smoked.

Not casually.

Not socially.

He smoked like breathing wasn't enough.

I had never seen anyone smoke that much—each cigarette lit as if it was answering a question no one else could hear.

The smoke followed him like a second personality, curling into the air, lingering long after he left the room.

His music taste, though—that was perfect.

Every song he played felt like it belonged exactly where it was played. Old rock, classics, sounds that carried both rebellion and loneliness. Music you don't listen to for fun, but for survival.

He stayed for two weeks.

And in those two weeks, I saw multiple faces inside one man.

Some days, he was warm.

He helped me record my auditions, holding the camera with surprising patience, adjusting angles, asking me to try again—not because I wasn't good, but because he believed I could be better.

On days when I wasn't feeling well, when my body felt heavier than my ambition, he cooked for me.

Simple meals.

Quiet gestures.

No dramatic concern, just action.

We watched classic movies together—films that carried weight, films where silence spoke louder than dialogue.

We'd sit side by side, sometimes talking, sometimes not, both understanding that some films aren't meant to be discussed immediately.

Those were the good days.

Those were the days where he felt present. And then there were other days.

Days when he ignored me completely.

No hi.

No hello.

No acknowledgment.

He would walk past me like I was part of the furniture.

Like I had been placed there earlier and forgotten.

No explanation.

No mood swings loud enough to prepare me. Just absence.

At first, I thought I had done something wrong.

Then I thought maybe he was tired.

Then I thought maybe this was just who he was.

But silence, when it comes without warning, has a way of making you question your own existence.

I didn't confront him.

Not because I didn't want to—but because something in me knew that whatever wall he was standing behind wasn't built for me to knock down.

One night, sitting with a beer in his hand and smoke curling upward like a confession that refused to form words, he said, almost to himself: "It's hard to be a man in this world."

I didn't interrupt.

"I have too much responsibility," he continued.

"I'm the only one earning at home."

He stared ahead, not at me, not at Rio—just somewhere far beyond the room.

“Sometimes I’m tired,” he said.

“I don’t want to do it. But I have to.” There was no drama in his voice.

No self-pity. Just resignation.

Like a man who had accepted that wanting things was a luxury he could no longer afford.

I listened.

That’s what I did best with him.

I listened when he spoke, and I watched when he didn’t.

There were days I wanted to ask him, Why are you ignoring me?

Days I wanted to say, Silence won’t solve your problems.

Days I wanted to remind him that shutting people out doesn’t make the weight lighter.

But I didn’t.

Because some people don’t need questions. They need witnesses.

From a distance, I watched him like someone observing a caged animal—not dangerous, not aggressive, just trapped.

Trapped in responsibility.

Trapped in expectations.

Trapped in the role of “provider” with no door marked exit. The cage wasn’t visible.

That’s what made it cruel.

There were moments of strangeness too.

He was weird in ways that didn’t ask to be explained.

Sudden shifts in mood.

Sudden disappearances into himself.

Sudden returns, as if nothing had happened.

He could be deeply kind and emotionally unreachable in the same hour.

I learned not to expect consistency.

Instead, I learned to accept presence when it was offered.

When he finally left after two weeks, the house felt quieter—not emptier, but muted.

Rio waited near the door longer than usual.

The air felt like it had lost some smoke but gained some heaviness. We didn't hug dramatically.

We didn't promise to stay in touch. Some people don't need closure.

They need acknowledgement.

And we had already given each other that.

He taught me something I didn't know I needed to learn.

That not all silence is personal.

Some people are fighting battles that don't leave room for conversation.

Some men are raised to believe that exhaustion is normal, that loneliness is strength, that carrying everyone else is their only worth.

He wasn't rude.

He was tired.

Tired in a way sleep can't fix.

I learned that hospitality isn't always about warmth—it's also about allowing someone their quiet without demanding explanations.

Some guests don't come to be healed.

They come to survive.

And sometimes, all you can do is sit nearby, watch the cage, and silently wish there was a door.

CHAPTER XX

A QUESTION OVER TEA

He arrived like many others—quiet, polite, carrying years in his shoulders rather than in his suitcase.

A retired uncle, here only for two nights. To meet old friends.

To talk about life.

To drink a little more than he should, the way people do when they want to feel young again.

At check-in, he smiled gently and asked, almost shyly, “Beta, can I have sugar-free tea?”

“Of course,” I said.

When I handed him the cup, he looked around and asked, “Where is your tea?”

I hadn’t planned on sitting. Hosts rarely do.

But I made another cup.

We sat across from each other, steam rising between us like an unspoken agreement.

Over tea, life unfolded—his stories of time passing too quickly, of friends growing older, of retirement feeling both like freedom and loss. I listened.

I always do.

Before leaving, he said,

“I’m going for a retirement party. I’ll see you tomorrow. I’ll come back tonight.”

The house returned to its quiet.

The next afternoon, a message came.

Please don’t cook dinner. It’s on me. I’ll come early.

The food arrived before he did.

I ate, grateful and slightly amused by his insistence on taking care of the host.

It felt kind.

Familiar.

Safe.

He came back around 10:30 that night. Drunk.

Not loud.

Not aggressive.

Just heavy with alcohol and memories. He went straight to his room.

I thought the day had ended. Then my phone rang. “Beta,” he said,

“I know you’ve eaten. Thank you for dinner. But can you sit with me for a few minutes? Let’s talk before I sleep.”

I hesitated.

Then agreed.

We spoke—about nothing and everything. About how life circles back.

About how nights feel longer when you've lived enough years.

Mid-conversation, he paused.

"Beta... can I ask you a question?" "Yes," I said.

He looked at me, his voice suddenly steady.

"How safe do you feel. . . hosting completely unknown people in your house?"

The room changed.

For a moment, I didn't understand why my heart beat faster.

Why fear rose where comfort had lived minutes ago.

Why a simple question felt like a door opening to a place I had avoided. I smiled.

Women smile when they want to stay strong. "This is my house," I said.

"I feel safe. I've never felt unsafe in my own house." He nodded.

Said nothing more.

I went to my room that night and lay awake, staring at the ceiling, re-playing the question again and again.

How safe do you feel? Not from him.

From the world.

I had opened my home to strangers for a year—welcomed them with keys, tea, and trust.

I had learned how to host, how to listen, how to be kind.

But no one had ever asked me how it felt to be the one holding the door open.

That night, I understood something quietly but clearly: Bravery is not the absence of fear.

Sometimes, it is simply choosing to stay open—even when a question follows you into the dark.

Some guests stay for a night. Some stay for a memory.

And some leave behind a question that changes the way you see your own strength.

This is not a story about fear.

It is a story about awareness, boundaries, and the courage it takes to create a safe space—first within yourself, and then for others.

CHAPTER XXI

THE ROOM WHERE HE BECAME HERSELF

Some bookings arrive quietly. No special requests.

No long messages.

Just dates, payment, confirmation.

And then there are bookings that announce themselves—not loudly, but honestly.

His message came shortly after the booking was confirmed.

“Hey. I know I’m a man. But I really like makeup. Will you be okay with that?”

I read it twice.

Not because I was confused, but because I could feel the weight behind the words.

This wasn’t a casual question. This was a test of safety.

Of acceptance.

Of whether this house would allow him to exist as he truly was—even briefly.

I replied simply. “Yes.”

No explanation.

No curiosity disguised as concern. Just yes.

Sometimes, that's all people need. He arrived looking like a man.

Mask covering half his face. Clothes neutral.

Body language careful, guarded.

He went straight to his room, like someone who knew exactly where he could and couldn't take up space.

I explained the house rules at the door, the way I did for every guest. When I asked if he'd like tea, he nodded.

"Yes."

I went to the kitchen, made two cups of tea, the routine grounding me.

When I walked back toward his room, my mind was still in host-mode—thinking about check-out times, towels, breakfast.

I knocked lightly.

When the door opened, the room changed. Standing in front of me was a beautiful woman. Long skirt flowing softly.

Makeup done with care, not excess.

A wig that framed her face so naturally it felt like it had always belonged there.

Her posture was different now—lighter, freer, as if gravity had loosened its grip.

For a second, neither of us spoke. Then I smiled.

"You're looking beautiful," I said. She blushed.

Not the shy embarrassment of being seen—but the relief of being recognized.

Like a flower opening because someone finally said, I see you. We sat with our tea.

She told me she comes to Mumbai for this. "For this version of myself," she said.

At her office, she couldn't.

In front of her parents, she couldn't.

At home, she was expected to be a son. At work, a professional man.

In society, a role is already written for her. Her parents didn't know.

"They want me to get married," she said quietly. There was sadness in her voice, but no anger.

Just exhaustion.

"I want to explain," she continued.

"But deep down, I know they'll never understand this side of me." She looked down at her hands—carefully manicured, trembling slightly. "So I want them to be happy," she said.

"And I'm okay like this."

That sentence stayed with me. I'm okay like this.

Not happy. Not fulfilled. Just okay.

That night, after she went back to her room, I sat alone for a long time. I thought about how many people live entire lives in compartments. How some truths are allowed to breathe only behind locked doors.

How courage sometimes doesn't look like rebellion—it looks like quiet endurance.

From that day on, something shifted.

I developed a soft corner for her. Not pity.

Respect.

She came back again. And again.

Each time, she arrived as a man—and became herself inside that room. And each time, I treated her as a woman.

Not performatively. Not dramatically.

Just naturally.

Because that's what made her happy. She smiled more.

Sat differently. Spoke more openly. Even laughed louder.

It was like watching someone step into sunlight after years indoors. My house became her pause button.

A place where she didn't have to choose between truth and family. A place where she could exist without explanation.

I never asked her to decide anything. I never told her what she should do. Some stories aren't meant to be fixed. They're meant to be held.

She taught me that identity isn't always loud. Sometimes it whispers, Please let me exist here.

She reminded me that courage doesn't always look like confrontation. For some, courage is survival.

It's choosing peace over constant war.

It's loving your parents enough to protect them from a truth they may never be ready for—while quietly protecting yourself in the only ways you know how.

Hosting her taught me that hospitality is not just about space.

It's about permission.

Permission to be seen.

Permission to be called what you feel like. Permission to sit, sip tea, and exist without fear. My house didn't change her life. But for a few days at a time, it gave her back to herself. And sometimes, that's more than enough.

She was brave & strong & broken, all at once.

CHAPTER XXII

THE BROTHER WHO WASN'T

Some lessons don't arrive loudly.

They don't announce themselves as warnings or come wrapped in obvious danger.

They arrive softly—wearing familiarity, borrowing names, and sitting at your table like they belong there.

He came into my life like that.

His name was the same as my younger brother's. That alone did something to me.

Names carry history. Memory.

Attachment.

Without realizing it, I had already placed him somewhere close before he even unpacked his bags.

He was young.

Too young, I thought, to be carrying the kind of heaviness he carried so casually.

I treated him like a brother from the start—protective, gentle, unquestioning.

He told me he was going through something.

“I have a therapist,” he said.

“There’s no one else to talk to.” I listened.

“Where are your parents?” I asked carefully.

“They’re too busy,” he replied, his voice flat, practiced—as if he had said this many times before and had learned not to expect a response.

I tried to explain something, not to dismiss him but to ground him.

“Please don’t get me wrong,” I said.

“They’re busy working so they can give you everything—your college, your rent, food, your car. That is love too.”

He didn’t argue.

He didn’t agree either.

He just walked away and started playing with Rio.

And in that moment, I told myself what I always tell myself—I respected his silence.

I assumed time would do the talking.

The next day, my sister came to meet me.

I told her about him—about his loneliness, his sadness, his belief that no one was there for him.

Her heart softened instantly.

She went to talk to him.

“We’ll be there for you,” she told him.

“You can talk to me about anything.” They hugged.

That hug sealed something.
From that day, he wasn't just a guest.
He became family.
We went to the temple together for his mental peace.
We cooked for him.
We cleaned his laundry.
We made space for him at the table without him having to ask.
He didn't have to earn his place.
We gave it freely.
For a while, it felt right.
Like we were doing something good.
Like we were filling a gap life had left unattended. Eventually, he
found a flat and shifted there.
But he didn't disappear.
He came over often—especially for lunch.
I asked him about college, about classes, about plans.
I checked in the way older sisters do—without keeping count. I
never imagined I would need to.
Then Rio fell critically ill. Four days in the hospital.
Four days of beeping machines, sleepless nights, silent prayers,
and fear that settles into your bones.
I was exhausted—mentally, physically, emotionally. And in the
middle of all that, I had a big audition. One I couldn't miss.
My body was running on adrenaline.
My heart was split between hope and helplessness. I didn't know
what to do.
So I called him. "Hey," I said.

“What’s your plan tomorrow?” “Nothing,” he replied.

“We can hang out.” “No,” I said gently.

“Rio is in the hospital. I have this audition. Can you please stay with him for one hour so I can give the audition?”

There was a pause.

Long enough to make my stomach tighten.

Then he said,

“Di... I can’t do this.” I waited.

“He’s like your son,” he continued.

“I know. But he’s just a dog for me. I won’t waste my day on him.” Something cracked inside me.

Tears filled my eyes instantly—not loud tears, not dramatic ones.

The kind that arrives when understanding hits you all at once.

I couldn’t say anything.

There was nothing left to explain.

I ended the call and went to the hospital.

And all I could think was how easily I trust people.

He didn’t teach me cruelty.

He taught me clarity.

I realized that day that kindness doesn’t guarantee reciprocity.

That giving someone a place in your life doesn’t mean they will recognize its value.

And that sometimes, people accept care not because they’re grateful—but because they’re comfortable taking.

I don’t blame him. He was young.

He was honest in his own way.

But I learned something about myself.

I learned that I confuse empathy with responsibility.
That I adopt people without checking whether they want to belong.
That I offer family where some people only want convenience.
Rio survived.
But something else didn't.
The part of me that believed love, once given, naturally returns.
Now I know better.
Some guests arrive as lessons.
And some lessons stay longer than the guests ever do.

Maturity is learning to walk away from people
and situations that threaten your peace of
mind, self respect, values, morals and self
worth.

CHAPTER XXIII

SKY BLUE DREAMS

I had been waiting for this moment all week—well, for more than a week, really.

There aren't many things in life I love more than my dog Rio, my mom, and cars.

That's it.

Everything else can wait.

And finally, a guest had arrived who might let me talk endlessly about one of those passions—cars, specifically my ultimate obsession: the Porsche 911 and the Supra.

He walked in quietly, polite and calm, a Japanese man with a soft smile, asking for a cup of coffee.

"I'm here only for four hours," he said casually.

"Then I have to catch a flight."

My excitement wavered for just a second.

Four hours wasn't a lot of time for a conversation I had been daydream-ing about for weeks.

I smiled and said,

“I was looking forward to meeting you and talking about cars, but now... well, play with Rio, have some coffee, rest a little.”

He laughed—a sound that was unexpectedly warm—and replied, “That’s alright. Let’s talk about cars.”

And just like that, all my anticipation came rushing back.

We sank into the living room, and I started rambling, as I always do, about why the Porsche 911 was my dream car, why one day I’d own it, and why, in my opinion, nothing else could compare.

He listened quietly, nodding, occasionally smiling. Then he shared his story, and the room shifted. “I’m a Porsche owner myself,” he said softly.

“It was my dad’s car. He’s not with us anymore. This is a vintage model... sky blue. I drive it whenever I can.”

Sky blue.

That word alone made my heart skip.

I could picture it in my mind, the curves, the shine, the way light would catch its lines perfectly in the sun.

And now, sitting here, the man who drove that very car was talking to me in my living room.

I felt a thrill like no other.

For two hours, we spoke almost nonstop—gear ratios, engine roars, the thrill of acceleration, why some cars steal your soul in ways nothing else can.

He shared stories about his father, memories tied to the car, and the bittersweet weight of loss mingled with joy.

I shared my dreams, and for a few hours, it felt like time had paused. Finally, he glanced at his watch.

“It’s late,” he said.

“I’m going to rest for an hour, then I must leave.”

I nodded and retreated to my room, curling up on the bed while a show played quietly on the TV.

I kept thinking about that sky blue Porsche, about the warmth in his voice, and about how rare it felt to connect with someone so quickly over something so pure.

An hour later, I got up to grab a drink from the fridge, and there it was—a small, handwritten note stuck with a magnet.

Hey, pretty one. You will be a Porsche owner soon. I will pray for you. Take care.

I held it in my hands for a long time, feeling a strange mix of awe and warmth, the kind you only get when someone quietly sees your passion and your dream and acknowledges it as if it already exists.

The note, the conversation, even the brief hours we had shared—it stayed with me.

Sky blue dreams have a way of lingering long after the engine’s roar has faded.

Sometimes, the people who pass briefly through our lives leave the deep-est impressions.

In a few hours, a stranger shared his memories, his passions, and even a quiet blessing for my dreams.

And in that fleeting moment, I realized that connection doesn’t always need time—it just needs honesty, shared joy, and a touch of wonder. Sky blue dreams remind us that hope can arrive in

unexpected forms, and that sometimes, the universe whispers encouragement when we least expect it.

He came for only four hours, yet left a mark that felt timeless.

A vintage Porsche, stories of a father lost, and a fleeting note—they reminded me that life is fragile, but dreams are resilient.

Even brief encounters can ignite the soul, and sometimes, it's the strangers who remind us why we dare to hope, to love, and to chase what feels impossible.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE BRITISH PETROLHEAD

When my next guest arrived from the UK, I wasn't sure what to expect. At first, he barely spoke.

No hello.

No small talk.

Just him, his laptop, and an air of quiet focus that filled the room.

I watched him from afar for a few days, wondering if he was just shy or if he didn't care to connect.

Then one evening, I saw him in the hallway wearing a Sëñna t-shirt. My heart skipped a little.

"Are you a petrolhead?" I asked, trying to sound casual. He looked up, a small smile tugging at his lips.

"Yeah. . . I love cars, especially engines," he replied.

Then, almost teasingly, he added,

"I know you love Porsche.

Don't worry, you'll buy that someday." Something clicked.

From that day on, we started talking. Not about the weather.

Not about trivial things. But about cars.

Engines.

Models.

Curves.

Speed.

Horsepower.

He listened, laughed, and even argued a little about performance specs.

Our conversations became my favorite part of the day.

But life has a way of knocking at the door when you least expect it.

That afternoon, I received a message from my casting director.

Rejected.

Again.

I went quiet, retreating into the familiar shell I had built around my disappointments.

But then—knock, knock. It was him.

Standing there, concerned, patient.

“What happened?” he asked. “I’m... so tired,” I confessed.

“I just need a project to prove myself, to live my life, and maybe... buy my dream car someday.”

He didn’t pity me.

He didn’t try to solve it.

He simply sat down and talked with me—about life, failures, persistence, and the strange ways hope shows up when you least expect it.

It was exactly what I needed.

From that day forward, he became my quiet cheerleader.

Whenever he noticed my mood dip, he'd crack jokes—bad law jokes, hilarious in their absurdity—just to make me laugh.

Even when he had to leave, he left a mark that I could carry with me. On the day he was leaving, he handed me a ten-pound note.

"This will bring prosperity into your life," he said, smiling.

"You're a rock star."

I still keep that note in my wallet.

It's more than money—it's a symbol of belief, encouragement, and the simple yet profound way strangers can become friends, and friends can become lifelines when life feels heavy.

Sometimes, the people who barely speak can leave the loudest echoes in your heart.

In a simple note, in a laugh shared across a hallway, or in the quiet encouragement of someone who believes in you, you find a reminder that even in your darkest moments, kindness and hope exist.

And occasionally, it comes wrapped in a ten-pound note and a promise that you're destined for more than you see in yourself.

Be wildly delusional about what you want,
until it becomes your reality.

CHAPTER XXV

THE BOY WITH THE GUITAR

It was around Diwali.

I had thought I wouldn't host anyone.

I imagined blocking the dates, celebrating with my sister and Rio, keeping the house warm and familiar.

But a five-day booking came through, and I accepted it without think-ing too much.

He arrived with a guitar. Early twenties.

Maybe younger.

There was a tiredness in him that didn't match his age.

The kind you usually see after years of disappointment, not at the beginning of life.

I offered him tea and a sandwich.

He held the cup with both hands, like he needed the warmth.

After a while, I asked him what had brought him here.

He looked at me and said,

"Everyone ignores me. Like I don't exist at all."

It came out suddenly, like he had been waiting for someone to ask. He told me he was from a middle-class family.

He spoke about money and fame like they were answers, not desires. In his mind, they would solve everything.

If he had them, people would look at him. Listen to him.

Stay.

Then he started crying.

“I want to be famous,” he said.

“So famous that no one can ignore me.”

I asked him why he wanted fame so badly.

He looked at me and said,

“You’re famous. That’s why you’re happy.” I shook my head.

I told him that was a myth.

I told him he was still nineteen.

I told him not to chase things that don’t love you back.

He kept crying.

I didn’t know how to console him.

There are some sadnesses that don’t want solutions.

They just want to be seen.

The next morning, I asked him gently if he wanted to celebrate Diwali with us.

With my sister.

With Rio.

With light and noise and people. He said no.

He wanted to be alone. So I left.

I went to my sister’s place with Rio.

I messaged him through the day, small check-ins, nothing heavy.

When I came back after Diwali, the house was empty.

He had checked out.

On the fridge, there was a note.

Hey, thank you. You are my favourite host. I stood there for a long time.

Some guests come looking for a room.

Some come looking for proof that they exist.

I hope he finds a way to feel seen—without needing the whole world to look at him at once.

Happiness is found in three things: letting go
of what's gone, enjoying what's here, and
trusting what's ahead.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE ONE WHO CHASED RIO

Before he arrived, he called me.

“Hey, I’m coming from Bangalore,” he said. “Let me know if you need anything.”

I said no.

“I’ll reach by twelve,” he continued. “I just want to try this tiramisu place.” I said okay.

I liked that he had priorities.

The next morning, I had my own plan.

I’m a car lover, and I badly wanted to watch F1.

I assumed he’d come by twelve, settle in, and I’d make it for the three-o’clock show.

So I booked the ticket. I started waiting.

By 2:30, he called and said he was running late. I told him it was fine.

I told him the key was there.

I told him my dog, Rio, was inside. "Please open the door very slowly," I said.

"He's a runner. If he escapes, I won't be there to catch him." He laughed.

"Don't worry," he said. "I got this."

He did not, in fact, have this.

Just as I reached the theatre and my movie was about to start, my phone rang.

"Hey," he said.

"I'm here... but Rio ran away." My heart dropped.

I love my dog more than most people. I didn't know what to do.

For the first thirty minutes of the movie, I wasn't really there.

I was on WhatsApp with him, watching videos and messages, giving instructions I didn't know I had.

Left.

Right.

Check near the gate. Ask the watchman.

Somehow, with the help of the watchman and a lot of panic, he caught Rio.

I exhaled for the first time in half an hour.

After the movie, he called and asked if I wanted to go for coffee. I said no.

I needed to see my dog with my own eyes. When I got home, Rio was fine.

Slightly proud of himself. We all laughed.

We started talking—about Rio, about cafés, about sneakers. The house felt easy again.

Normal.

Safe.

Then he said,

“Actually, we should share our Instagram.” It felt natural, not forced.

Like something that was already decided. “We’re friends now,” he added.

And we were.

I’ve hosted him three times since.

I’ve hosted his girlfriend. I’ve hosted his sister.

Somehow, one escaped dog turned into familiarity. Not all guests leave you alert.

Some leave you smiling.

And some chase your dog through the building and stay in your life longer than expected.

Disappear if you have to. Focus on you.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE MAN WHO SAT ON THE FLOOR

He arrived in a white car.

I noticed because everything about him was white.

He brought a white flower for me and a packet of treats for my dog.

It felt rehearsed, like he had imagined this moment before arriving.

I thanked him.

My dog wagged his tail.

Nothing felt wrong yet.

After the greeting, he said he had an early morning shift and would go to bed.

His voice was calm.

Polite.

He disappeared into the guest room, and the house returned to its usual quiet.

We didn't see each other the next morning.

I'm not a morning person, and he left early.

I remember feeling relieved without knowing why. In the evening, we met again.

I was in the kitchen making tea when he walked in. I offered him some.

He nodded and followed me inside.

Instead of taking a chair, he sat down on the floor. I laughed lightly and said,

"Why the floor? Please sit on the chair." He smiled.

"No," he said.

"I'm comfortable here." I didn't insist.

I should have, but I didn't.

I stood there holding my cup while he sat cross-legged on the kitchen floor, looking up at me.

The distance between us felt wrong—too intimate, too close, too un-even.

We started talking.

About life.

About thoughts.

About people.

About love.

His voice was soft.

Thoughtful.

The kind of voice that invites confession.

I found myself listening more than speaking.

The house felt very still, like it was holding its breath.

At some point, I asked him a question I often asked guests, half out of curiosity, half out of habit.

“When were you in love last?” He didn’t hesitate.

“I was doing a post-mortem on a girl in 2021,” he said.

“She had failed her tenth standard.”

“I’m still in love with her.” The room changed.

My body froze before my mind could catch up.

I remember the weight of the cup in my hand.

The steam rising.

The sound of my dog breathing somewhere behind me.

Everything slowed down, like a scene stretching too long. I didn’t ask anything.

I didn’t react.

I didn’t know how.

I finished my tea.

I picked up my dog.

I told him I had somewhere to go and left the house.

That night, I slept at my sister’s place.

I didn’t look back when I locked the door.

Some guests leave behind memories.

Some leave behind lessons.

He left behind silence—and the knowledge that you never really know who is sitting in your house, or what they carry with them, even when they arrive with white flowers.

Nothing stays the same forever.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE GUEST WHO STAYED LONGER THAN HIS BAGS

The message came a day before his arrival.

“If you want anything from Singapore, tell me.” It was simple, polite, and almost old-fashioned.

I stared at the screen for a moment, surprised not by the question itself, but by the sincerity behind it.

In a world where guests usually asked what they would get—early check-ins, late check-outs, discounts—here was someone asking what I might want.

I typed back, “No thank you.”

And I meant it.

At that point, I had already hosted enough people to know that the best things guests bring are never things you can pack into a suitcase.

He arrived in the afternoon, when the sun was soft but present, the kind that doesn’t rush you indoors.

He stood at the gate with a small bag and a slightly uncertain smile, like someone who had rehearsed confidence but still wasn't sure if he was doing it right.

He was my first Chinese Singaporean guest.

I noticed how neatly he placed his shoes before entering.

How his eyes took in the house—not greedily, not critically, but with curiosity.

As if he was trying to understand the space before asking it to accept him.

I offered him tea. He smiled and said, "I already like Rio."

Rio, my dog, had already decided he liked him too. That was his magic.

Rio didn't warm up to everyone. He was instinctive.

Protective.

Selective.

But that day, he sat beside this stranger like he had known him forever. Sometimes, that's how stories begin—quietly, without announcement.

That evening, a female friend of mine came over.

She was warmth personified—laughter in her voice, generosity in her movements.

The moment they met, something clicked. It wasn't romantic.

Not exactly.

It was more like recognition.

They spoke different languages.

Came from different worlds.

Yet somehow met in the same emotional frequency.

Within minutes, they were teasing me together.

Suddenly, I was outnumbered.

They formed a team so effortlessly that I felt like a guest in my own house.

They laughed at my habits. My expressions.

My seriousness.

They pulled my leg gently. Lovingly.

The way only people who feel safe with you can.

And I let them.

Because watching two people from such different backgrounds find ease in each other felt like watching a small miracle unfold in my living room.

In the days that followed, the house changed its rhythm.

My friend cooked for him—simple Indian meals, rich with spices and care.

He watched her closely, unsure how to eat with his hands. Hesitant like a child afraid of doing something wrong.

So she fed him.

With her hands.

No awkwardness.

No hesitation.

Just instinctive kindness.

I remember pausing in the doorway, watching that moment.

It wasn't dramatic.

No one said anything profound.

But it felt sacred in its own quiet way.

Feeding someone is intimate.

It's trust.

It's saying,

"I will take care of you for this moment."

And he accepted it with such innocence.

Slowly, the house stopped feeling like a BnB.

It started feeling like a home.

He told us about his life in pieces.

About work.

About travel.

About how he wanted to marry an Indian girl someday.

He said it casually.

Like it was already decided somewhere in the universe and he was just waiting for the coordinates.

We smiled.

But inside, I worried.

Not because love shouldn't cross borders—but because he was too pure.

Too trusting.

Too gentle.

In a world that often mistakes kindness for weakness.

One night, he told us about a girl he was talking to on Instagram.

"She gave me a list," he said, almost proudly.

A list of gifts.

He had bought everything. Every item.

And now, she wanted the gifts to be sent through courier.

Because she couldn't meet him.

Some work.

Some reason.
Always later.
As he spoke, his voice didn't carry anger.
Or suspicion.
Just confusion.
My friend's face changed first.
Then mine.
We felt bad—not in a dramatic way.
But in the quiet sinking way you feel when you realize someone's
good heart might be getting used.
She hugged him.
Just like that.
No lecture.
No judgment.
Just a hug.
Because sometimes, that's all you can offer someone who hasn't
yet learned that the world doesn't always love back the way they
love it.
That evening, the three of us took Rio and went to the beach.
The sky was wide and forgiving.
The sea was calm.
Listening more than speaking.
We sat there until night fell.
Our legs stretched out.
Sand clinging to our clothes like memories you can't quite shake
off.
We talked about life.

About love.

About dreams that felt too big and fears that felt too personal.

He spoke about wanting a simple family.

About choosing connection over convenience.

About believing that good intentions eventually find their way home.

I watched him talk.

The waves reflecting in his eyes.

And I wondered how many people like him walk through this world quietly.

Leaving softness behind them without asking for anything in return.

Rio lay beside us.

Loyal.

Present.

As if grounding us to the moment.

For those hours, we weren't host, guest, or friend. We were just people sharing a night.

He left after that stay. But not really.

He came back again. And then again.

I have hosted him three times so far.

Each time, the formality reduced. The distance softened.

The conversations deepened.

He no longer asked where things were. He knew.

He didn't knock as carefully. He laughed louder.

He stayed longer in the common spaces. Some guests leave behind empty rooms. Some leave behind stories.

And some—rare ones—leave behind a relationship. He became a friend.

Not because we planned it. Not because it was convenient.

But because something about shared meals, shared vulnerability, and shared silence builds bonds stronger than time.

Running a BnB taught me something no acting school ever could.

People don't arrive as guests.

They arrive as unfinished stories. Some are loud.

Some are guarded.

Some are broken in ways they haven't named yet. And some—like him—arrive with hearts open.

Unaware of how easily the world can bruise them.

I learned that hosting is not about perfect rooms or good tea. It's about presence.

It's about noticing when someone needs food fed by hand.

A hug without advice.

Or a beach night with no agenda. He came from another country. Another culture.

Another language.

But he reminded me of something deeply human. Innocence still exists.

And when it walks into your home, you protect it for as long as you can.

Not every guest stays forever.

But some stay just long enough to change the way you see people.

And that, to me, is the real meaning of hospitality.

Don't force what isn't meant to be. Some people are only supposed to be temporary.

CHAPTER XXIX

TEN DAYS OF SILENCE

My next guest arrived on a calm afternoon, the kind of afternoon where the air feels still and time seems unhurried.

The sun filtered softly through the trees outside my home, and Rio lay stretched across the floor, half-asleep, his ears twitching at every distant sound.

She was an Australian model—at least, that's what her profile said—but there was nothing loud or attention-seeking about her presence.

She wasn't here for work, photoshoots, or city noise. She was here for something quieter.

Inner peace.

She was tall, fit, and undeniably beautiful.

But what stood out more was the calm she carried with her.

It wasn't forced.

It wasn't performative. It felt real.

Like someone who had learned the value of stillness the hard way.

As she stepped inside, Rio lifted his head, curious as always.

She smiled instantly and bent slightly, her voice soft as she whispered, “Hey, Rio, come here.”

I couldn’t help but smile. She already knew his name.

Rio wagged his tail and trotted toward her, instantly trusting. As if he sensed something gentle in her spirit.

She reached into her bag and pulled out a small toy and a packet of treats she had brought just for him.

“These are for you,” she said, placing them down carefully.

“Thank you so much,” I replied, genuinely touched.

She smiled and nodded. Not saying much more.

There was an ease in the silence between us. No awkwardness.

No pressure to fill the space with words.

After settling in, she paused, as if gathering the courage to speak.

“I have one request,” she said.

“Yeah, please,” I answered.

She looked at me honestly and said,

“I read your reviews on the BnB. Everyone says you’re an excellent host. But I don’t wish to talk much. I don’t want conversations or questions. I just want to sit with myself. That’s all.”

I didn’t hesitate.

“I understand,” I said. “You’re welcome here.”

No explanations were needed. No justifications.

From that moment on, an unspoken agreement formed between us—one built on respect and space.

The days passed quietly.

She would wake up early, sometimes before the sun fully rose, and sit outside with a cup of tea, watching the sky change colors. Other times, she would walk slowly around the property, barefoot. As if grounding herself with every step.

I never asked where she went or what she was thinking. She never asked about my life either.

And somehow, that mutual silence felt comforting rather than distant. Rio became her quiet companion.

He would sit beside her during long moments of stillness. His head resting near her feet.

Sometimes she would gently pet him.

Her movements slow and thoughtful.

Like she was fully present in every second.

We shared the same space without invading each other's worlds.

Meals were simple.

If our paths crossed in the kitchen, we exchanged small smiles.

Occasionally, a soft "good morning" or "good night" passed between us.

But nothing more.

No small talk.

No forced friendliness.

And yet, there was a connection. Not one built on words.

But on understanding.

I noticed how she seemed lighter as the days went on. Her shoulders relaxed.

Her breathing slowed.

Whatever noise she carried with her from the outside world slowly faded here.

In return, I learned something too. Silence isn't empty.

It's full—of thoughts, healing, and presence. She stayed for ten days.

Ten days without work.

Ten days without explanations.

Ten days of mutual respect.

There were no dramatic moments.

No emotional confessions.

No expectations.

Just two people sharing space.

Honoring boundaries.

Allowing peace to exist.

Sometimes, the most meaningful connections are the quiet ones.

The ones that don't demand anything from you.

On the morning of her departure, the house felt different.

Still calm.

But aware of change.

She packed her things neatly and stood by the door for a moment.

Then she walked toward me and, without saying much, gave me the warmest hug possible.

It wasn't rushed. It wasn't awkward. It was genuine.

She knelt down and gently petted Rio.

Whispering something only he could hear. He wagged his tail.

As if saying goodbye in his own way.

She looked at me, smiled once more, and then left.

No long farewell.

No promises to stay in touch. Just gratitude.

Understood without words.

Later that day, I watched the quiet return to its original rhythm.

And I realized something important.

Some people enter your life not to stay.

Not to change it dramatically.

But to remind you that peace exists. And that it's okay to choose it.

She went back to Australia.

The silence stayed with me.

This story is about the beauty of boundaries and the power of quiet understanding.

Not every connection needs words, drama, or permanence to matter. Sometimes, respect is the deepest form of care we can offer another person.

In a world that constantly demands attention, choosing silence can be an act of healing.

This moment—these ten days—taught me that hosting isn't just about providing space.

It's about allowing someone to be exactly who they are, without questions.

And sometimes, that's enough.

The moment you ask yourself if you deserve
better is the very moment you realise you do.

CHAPTER XXX

THE GUEST WHO DIDN'T NEED A ROOM

By the time the thirtieth guest arrived, I thought I had learned the pat-tern of people.

I thought I could read them the way one reads a booking mes-sage—between the lines, in the punctuation, in the urgency or calm of their words.

I thought experience had trained my instincts.

After twenty-nine chapters, after strangers who left stains on pillows and memories on walls, after laughter and lies and borrowed loneliness, I believed there was nothing left that could truly surprise me.

I was wrong.

He arrived without noise.

No dramatic entrance, no restless energy, no visible cracks.

He carried himself the way achievers often do—light luggage, straight back, eyes that scan a room not for comfort but for control.

He was almost my age, which immediately erased the invisible wall I usually kept intact with guests.

Age does that.

It creates familiarity before permission. He was a topper, he said casually.

School.

College.

University.

As if listing groceries.

A surgeon at twenty-seven. Spine.

His dream was clear, linear, impressive—be the best spine surgeon in India.

Not one of the best. The best.

Ambition spoke through him fluently, like a language he had practiced since childhood.

He was in town for a three-day concert. That surprised me.

Surgeons didn't usually talk about concerts with that kind of excitement—eyes lighting up, hands moving, voice lifting.

He looked almost boyish when he said it. "I'm excited," he told me.

I smiled and said, half-joking, half-prophetic,

"My last guest was here for a concert too. He lost his iPhone in the crowd. Be careful."

He laughed.

We didn't know then how cruel irony can be when it decides to repeat itself.

We talked a lot—about medicine, about discipline, about how success in India often comes wrapped in exhaustion rather than joy.

Conversations flowed easily, without performance. There was no flirting, no guardedness.

Just two people existing honestly in the same space. The next day, we had lunch together.

Ordinary food. Ordinary conversation.

He left for the event with the same excitement he'd arrived with.

He returned at one in the morning.

I was half asleep when I saw him.

Something about the way he stood—still, heavy—pulled me fully awake.

He didn't look drunk. He didn't look tired. He looked emptied.

I could have gone back to sleep.

Hosts are allowed to have boundaries.

Hosts are allowed not to ask questions they don't want answers to. But I asked anyway.

"What happened?" He hesitated.

Then the words came out simply, without drama. He had lost his phone.

And the girl he liked—they had fought. They were done.

I told him it was okay. Phones can be replaced. Hearts take time.

I offered comfort the way people do when they don't yet understand the scale of the wound.

Then I went to sleep.

The next morning, he took Rio for a walk.

Rio—my silent co-host, my emotional barometer, my truth detector. Dogs know things before humans do.

When they choose someone, it is never accidental.

They returned, and I saw it immediately.

The sadness hadn't softened.

If anything, it had settled deeper.

"It's okay," I said gently.

"It's just a phone." He nodded.

Then said something that made the air shift.

"I forgot to take my antidepressants."

I looked at him again. Really looked.

I asked him to repeat it, because sometimes the mind refuses to accept what it hears the first time.

He did.

There are moments when your life divides itself into before and after a sentence.

That was one of mine.

I didn't ask why right away. I didn't ask how long.

I just said,

"If you want to talk, I have time."

He looked relieved—not emotional, not dramatic. Just relieved.

As if someone had finally placed a chair under the weight he'd been carrying.

And then he told me. Not with tears.

Not with self-pity.

He told it the way surgeons tell stories—precise, controlled, factual. About loss.

About grief that accumulates quietly when no one notices.
About three dogs, gone one after another, taking with them the only unconditional love he'd ever known.
About relationships that were not safe.
About how being brilliant doesn't protect you from being broken. About institutions that crush empathy in the name of excellence. About the trauma that hides behind white coats and ranks and medals. About how, at one point, life had felt unbearable enough that he needed help to stay alive.
He didn't describe anything graphically. He didn't glorify it.
He spoke of it like a past storm—one that had passed, but left damage you still learn to live with.
His sisters had stepped in. Help had arrived.
Medication became a lifeline. Four years now.
Four years of surviving quietly while the world applauded his achievements loudly.
I listened.
That's it.
I didn't interrupt.
I didn't fix.
I didn't offer clichés. I just listened.
And somewhere between his words and my silence, something shifted inside me.
I realized how little we actually know about people.
How easily we confuse success with stability.
How often we assume smiles mean safety.

How many battles are fought behind locked doors, behind professional titles, behind perfect résumés.

He stayed for four days.

Four days that felt slower than time usually allows. He loved Rio.

Rio loved him back.

They formed their own language—morning walks, quiet companion-ship, mutual understanding.

Animals don't ask questions. They don't care about your past.

They meet you where you are.

By the time he left, he looked lighter. Not healed.

Not transformed.

Just... seen.

And that was enough.

When the door closed behind him, I didn't feel relief the way I usually did when guests left.

I felt something else. Responsibility.

Because hosting, I realized, was never just about providing a bed.

It was about holding space.

About noticing.

About asking the second question instead of stopping at the first answer.

If I hadn't asked him what was wrong that night, I would have remembered him as just another successful young man who lost his phone at a concert.

Instead, he became the chapter that rewrote the entire book.

People think hosting is about hospitality.

Clean sheets.

Warm water.

Good reviews.

But after thirty guests, I know better. Hosting is about witnessing.

It's about understanding that every person who walks through your door is carrying an invisible history.

Some arrive loud. Some arrive broken.

Some arrive so polished you'd never imagine they're surviving one day at a time.

This book was never about the guests alone.

It was about what they revealed—to me, about me, about us. As an actress, I was trained to observe human behavior.

As a host, I learned to feel it.

Chapter 30 didn't end with a dramatic exit or a grand revelation. It ended with awareness.

That if we don't ask how people are really doing, we will never know. That strength and suffering often live in the same body.

That sometimes, the most important thing you can offer a stranger is not advice, not solutions—but presence.

Thirty guests came and went. But this one stayed—with me. And maybe that's the real story. Not who stayed in my home, but who changed me while they were there.

Trust that everything meant for you is already
finding its way to you.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE GUEST WHO STAYED FOR A WEEK

It was mid-afternoon when my phone vibrated. Not a polite inquiry.

Not a question.

A decision.

Hey, I just booked your place instantly.

I'm too free these days. Read all your reviews and now I wish to spend a week with you, so I booked for a week.

I do smoke. Hope you don't mind.

I stared at the screen longer than I should have. A week.

With a stranger.

People usually book places to sleep—to drop their luggage, to disappear behind locked doors.

Who books a week because they want to spend time with someone they have never met?

By sunset, the house settled into its familiar stillness. Sunday has a way of slowing things down without asking permission. I sat

with a cup of chai, watching the sky fade, while Rio—my beagle, my constant—waited near the door, impatient for his evening walk.

The doorbell rang.

“Hey, I’m at the door,” she said.

I left the cup in the kitchen.

It had already gone cold.

When I opened the door, she stood there as if she had rehearsed the moment. Late thirties. Calm eyes that had seen too much and learned not to ask for mercy.

A white saree with blue elephants printed across it, brown boots worn thin by years of walking, a vintage watch clinging tightly to her wrist—like time was something she refused to lose control over.

In one hand, a large tote. In the other, flowers.

“These are for you sweetheart,” she said, smiling.

“Oh—Rio,” she said, surprised.

“My gosh,” she laughed, bending down instantly.

“He’s too handsome.”

Rio attacked her boots without hesitation, claiming them like they were already his.

She laughed—not politely, not carefully—but freely, like someone who hadn’t laughed often enough.

“It’s alright,” she said. “I get it. It’s unfair—you got flowers and nothing for him. I’m so sorry, Rio. I’ll buy boots for you.” Something loosened inside the house.

“Let me show you your room,” I said.

She studied my face for a moment.

“Are you in a hurry?”

“No... why?”

“How about a cup of tea?”

In the kitchen, she stood quietly while I made it. Not scrolling her phone. Not filling the silence. Just watching—my hands, the kettle, the small domestic rituals people perform when they don’t yet know what they are to each other.

I handed her the cup.

She thanked me and went into her room.

A few minutes later, the doorbell rang again.

It was my friend.

Her eyes were swollen.

Her voice broke before she even sat down.

A breakup—fresh and violent, the kind that makes you question your worth.

I made her tea too.

We sat in the kitchen while her pain spilled out in half-formed sentences.

“It’s okay,” I told her.

“You don’t deserve this.

That was bare minimum effort anyway.”

That’s when my guest walked in.

She stopped.

Looked at me. Then at my friend.

She introduced herself softly and asked, without hesitation, “Do you love him?”

My friend blinked. "What?" "Do you love the guy?" "Yes."

She tilted her head slightly. "Describe love."

My friend thought for a moment.

"Someone who cares. Respects me. And doesn't cheat." The guest nodded slowly.

"Am I boring you?" "No."

"Can I tell you my story?"

There was no drama in her voice. No desperation. Just quiet certainty.

"If you're comfortable," my friend said.

"Absolutely, sweetie, I booked this place only because of that." she replied.

She disappeared into her room.

Rio curled into a corner and fell asleep.

She returned wearing a long white tee, hair tied into a loose bun, cigarettes in her hand.

"It's going to be a long story," she said. "So I need this."

She lit one. Took a deep drag.

Then began.

She was born in a small village. Five sisters. One brother. Poverty that didn't visit—it stayed. Decided everything. Her father chose that only the son would go to school. The daughters worked—fields, home, survival.

But she loved books.

After hours of labour, she would sneak into a neighbour's house. Their daughter was educated. She taught her basic Hindi,

English, and mathematics. Letters became escape routes. Knowledge became a dangerous hope.

Her father died. Hunger finished what poverty had started. Three sisters were married off quickly. Her brother dropped out of school to earn.

She watched her life close in on itself.

One afternoon, while wrapping vegetables in an old newspaper, her eyes caught a small column.

Nothing glamorous. Just a few lines—about junior artists, about work in the film industry.

At the bottom, a phone number.

She didn't understand the industry.

She didn't know how films were made.

She didn't know what a junior artist really did.

All she knew was this:

it didn't ask for a degree.

She kept that paper folded under her mattress for days.

Then one evening, heart racing, she borrowed a phone and called the number. A man answered.

She told him everything—too much, too fast. Her village. Her sisters.

Hunger. Wanting to work. He listened.

He was poor too. A junior artist himself.

He didn't promise success. He didn't lie.

He just said, "If you come to Mumbai, I'll try to help." That was enough.

She ran away.

No money. No phone. No spare clothes.

Mumbai didn't welcome her. It swallowed her.

At the station, she begged strangers to borrow their phones.

Many ignored her. Some scolded her. Finally, one man stopped.

She called him. Once. Twice. Thrice. "I'm here, Mumbai station."

She said. "Wait there, I'm coming." He replied.

He took her to his one-room-kitchen flat. Twelve men lived there. No space. No privacy. But they were kind.

They gave her food. Old clothes. A corner to sleep in.

The next morning, someone said, "There's a show. You can work as a junior artist. Seven hundred a day."

She agreed.

For months, life was only survival. Seven hundred rupees—when there was work. Some days she stood outside studios from morning till evening, sun burning her skin, only to be told, Not today. Some days she worked twelve hours to appear on screen for five seconds. With the first month of my salary I bought a phone because at this point it was a need, not luxury.

She counted everything.

Auto fare.

Food.

Phone recharge.

Some days tea. Some days only water.

At night, lying on a mat under a tired fan, she asked herself—Was leaving worth it?

Six months passed like this.

Then one day, quietly, someone handed her an envelope. "From now on," they said, "you'll get one thousand a day." Three hundred rupees more.

To someone else, it was nothing. To her, it was air.

She did the math again and again. I can send money home now.

She called her brother.

"Bhai... from this month I can send a little money."

He replied, "No need to send any money because our mother has passed away because of you."

She didn't say anything further, locked her in that tiny washroom and cried her heart out. She wanted to explain but what is the point of that now?

Me and my friend looked at each other. At this point we kind of forgot our little pain because her pain was far bigger than ours. We wanted to console her because she was crying but we couldn't.

I asked her slowly, chai ??? She nodded.

She had tea and then other cigarettes. There was unspoken pain. And guilt. And silence.

She started sharing her story again. Then the serial went off air.

Work stopped. Money stopped. Phones stopped ringing.

She auditioned again. One-day roles. Two-day roles. Enough to eat. Enough to stay.

One afternoon, waiting for a bus, dust clinging to her saree, someone waved.

It was the producer from her earlier show.

They spoke about work. About how suddenly everything ends in Mumbai.

He shared his number with her and they started talking and they started meeting once a week . After months .

He asked, “Where do you stay?” She laughed.

“I share a room with eight men. I sleep on a mat.” Something shifted.

He helped her find a place. A bare one-room-kitchen. Slowly, things appeared—bed, fridge, utensils, clothes.

Care pretending to be a coincidence.

She knew he was married. She knew there was no future. But when someone lifts you off the floor, gratitude quietly turns into devotion. “He became God,” she said softly. “Without asking.”

“And gods are hard to stop loving,” she added .

One random afternoon, she said, she was going for auditions when she saw him—with his wife.

They looked happy.

“I felt something break,” she said. “Not jealousy. Something worse.

Like I didn’t belong anywhere.”

She started ignoring him and that used to hurt her more than anything. Every-time from then whenever she used to meet him a voice in her keep questioning her own worth.

She said I’ve seen hunger and the worst side of life . I lost my parents and I don’t have a family so I don’t have to lose anything at all. All I have is my dignity, I can’t lose that.

She decided to disappear. No goodbye.

"How do you say goodbye," she asked, "to someone who lives in your mind and heart?"

"I'm Hindu," she said quietly. "We believe in next life . If I come back again, I want him to be my lover, my partner, my husband."

Tears slid down her face. She lit another cigarette. "Funny thing," she said, "I'm still in love with him." She looked at my friend.

"Would you call this love?"

"No," my friend said. "He cheated." She nodded.

"But he gave me a home," she said. "Food. Respect. A life." She paused.

"I don't know much about love," she said. "Maybe I can't describe it.

But if you love someone genuinely... you choose that love over and over again."

"I'm a writer now," she said softly. "I write Telugu shows." She smiled, tired.

"I'll never marry in this life," she added. "Because I'm still in love with him.

She went into her room with tears in her eyes and me and my friend felt too heavy and grateful for life at the same time .

She stayed for a week. Not like a guest.

Like someone the house slowly surrendered to.

Mornings began without plans. We spoke about books that saved us, about hunger that teaches patience, about ambition that feels sinful when survival is still recent.

She spoke to Rio as if he carried old souls in him. He followed her everywhere, loyal without asking why.

She spoke to my mother on the phone—long conversations filled with warmth and pauses. I listened from another room, unsure why it made my chest tighten. Maybe because she sounded like someone who had already lost a mother and was quietly borrowing one.

She cooked for me. South Indian food, slow and deliberate. Food that tasted like care rather than skill. Watching her in my kitchen felt intimate in a way I couldn't name—like she belonged to a version of my life I hadn't lived but somehow recognized.

At night, we sat in silence more than we spoke. Some silences weren't empty. They were heavy with things that didn't want language.

Once, I asked her if she was lonely. She smiled.

"No," she said. "Loneliness is when you expect something. I don't." On the last day, she folded her clothes neatly. Too neatly. Like someone who had learned to leave without leaving traces.

At the door, she hugged me. Not briefly.

Not politely.

She held me too tightly. As if loosening her arms meant something would collapse inside her. I felt her shoulders shake before I heard her cry. I didn't tell her it would be okay. I didn't ask her to stay in touch. Some goodbyes don't want promises.

We cried—not because it ended, but because it happened at all. She walked away without looking back.

The house didn't feel quiet afterward. It felt exposed.

Like something essential had passed through and left a mark I couldn't scrub away.

Rio sat near the door for a long time. I didn't call her.

She didn't message.

Some people are not meant to remain. They are meant to alter.

I still don't know if what she felt was love. But I know this—

Love doesn't always arrive clean. Sometimes it arrives as gratitude. Sometimes as survival.

Sometimes as debt disguised as devotion.

We like love stories that are mutual, balanced, morally sound. We want love to be fair. Equal. Safe. But what happens when love grows in unequal soil? When one person saves another from hunger, from invisibility, from the floor?

Is it love—or is it dependency wearing poetry?

And if someone feeds you, shelters you, restores your dignity—do you owe them your heart?

She didn't choose him freely.

She chose him because he arrived when she had no other choices.

And yet—who decides which loves are valid?

We condemn infidelity easily when we have never starved. We speak of boundaries when our lives were never built from borrowed kindness.

Her love was not romantic. It was existential.

It kept her alive.

Maybe that's why she couldn't leave it behind. Maybe that's why she chose loneliness over marriage.

Maybe that's why she still carries him into the next life she believes in—because this one didn't allow space for him.

Some loves don't end. They don't heal.

They don't transform.

They just stay, quietly shaping the way a person chooses pain
over comfort, absence over replacement.

And some guests—

they don't just stay in your home.

They dismantle your ideas of right and wrong, love and loss,
choice and consequence.

They leave you asking questions you didn't know you were brave
enough to hold.

And maybe that's the point.

How Much Love Is Too Much Love?

CHAPTER XXXII

HE WANTED TO BE LOVED TWICE

My next guest was mysterious — not in the cinematic way, not in the charming way. Just... difficult to understand.

He stayed for five days. We spoke every single day. And yet, I never quite reached him.

He was from Congo. A businessman. Owned three hotels, several other ventures. He arrived with a driver, expensive luggage, and a face that looked like it had forgotten how to rest.

He didn't greet me.

No hello. No smile. No water, please.

His first question was, "Where can I get hukka?"

I blinked.

"I don't smoke, sir," I said calmly. "You can Google it."

He extended his hand. "Keys?"

I handed him the house key. He stepped out again before I could process the energy he had brought into my home.

I didn't see him until the next afternoon.

He walked in and said, "Good morning."

It was 3 PM.

I laughed softly. "Good afternoon, sir. Are you alright?"

He paused.

"Not really. I'm in a big mess."

There are guests who want tea. And then there are guests who want confession.

"If you want to share," I said, "I'm listening."

He sat across from me, elbows on his knees, staring at the floor like a man calculating his own mistakes.

"I'm married," he began. "Ten years. Love marriage. I have a four-year-old son."

His voice softened when he spoke about the boy.

"My wife handles everything. Hotels. Accounts. Operations. She's strong. Smarter than me, maybe. I just work."

I waited.

"I don't see a problem yet," I said carefully.

He gave a tired smile. "You won't. Because on paper, my life is perfect."

But perfection, I have learned, is often silent loneliness dressed well.

He travelled alone most of the time. Business trips. Inspections. Expansions. His wife was always busy. Meetings. Staff. Numbers.

"Even at the dining table," he said, "we only talked about work."

No laughter. No random stories. No 'how are you really?'

Then last year, during one of his trips, he met someone.

"A girl," he said. "We just... talked. Normal human talk."

The way he said normal felt like he had discovered oxygen.

They spoke for hours. Four. Five. Every day.

"I wasn't sad anymore," he said. "My wife took care of the business part of my life. She took care of the emotional part. I was the luckiest man."

I looked at him carefully.

Luck is such a selfish word.

Then one day, the girl ended it.

"She said her parents were looking for someone for her. She said we should stop. I agreed. But after a few days... I couldn't breathe."

He described withdrawal like an illness.

Sleeplessness. Irritation. Emptiness.

His wife noticed.

"What's wrong with you?" she had asked.

And one day, unable to carry the weight, he told her everything.

His wife asked for the girl's number.

She called her.

"Do you love him?" she asked.

The girl replied, "I don't know, didi."

His wife said something that made me stop stirring my tea.

"If you love him, you can marry him. I'll give him divorce."

The girl panicked. "No, no. I can't be a homebreaker."

"He's too sad," his wife insisted. "Please marry him."

"I'll leave his life," the girl said finally.

When he finished telling me this, I laughed.

“It feels like a 90s Bollywood film,” I said.

He didn’t laugh.

“You’re laughing,” he said quietly, “but I felt terrible. Two women I loved were throwing me like a football to each other. And I was just standing there.”

I looked at him for a long moment.

“Forgive me,” I said. “But I can’t be sad for you.”

His jaw tightened.

“What you did was wrong. She’s your wife.”

“I did nothing wrong,” he argued. “I’m human. I can’t talk about work 24/7.”

Not evil. Not cruel. Just entitlement wrapped in vulnerability.

He didn’t want to leave his wife. He didn’t want to leave the other woman. He wanted to be understood by both.

He wanted to be loved twice.

From that day on, we spoke often. Not about the girl. Not about the wife.

About life.

About expectations.

About how ambition quietly replaces intimacy.

One evening he told me, almost casually, “I’ve transferred everything to my wife’s name. The hotels. The assets. All of it.”

“And now?” I asked.

“Now I just want to travel. I don’t want anyone. I don’t know till when. But this is what I want.”

Men sometimes confuse escape with healing.

On his last evening, the air between us felt different.

Confessions, when repeated over days, lose their sharpness. They become almost human.

He was quieter. No restlessness. Just tea.

"Can I ask you something?" he said.

"Of course."

"You know so much about me now. But I don't know anything about you."

Guests often forget that hosts have stories too.

"Ask me what you want to know."

He leaned back. "What do you do apart from hosting people and consoling them?"

There was no mockery in his voice. Just curiosity.

"I'm an actress," I said. "Waiting for a project that changes my life. I'm a mother to Rio. A host to you. And... I'm an author now."

He raised his eyebrows. "An author? What do you write?"

I looked at him over the rim of my cup.

"Stories of my guests."

He burst into laughter.

"So I just gave you a story?"

"Yes," I smiled. "But if you're not comfortable, I won't write it."

He shook his head quickly. "No, no. Please write it."

There was something urgent in his tone.

"Many women will take my wife's side. Like you did. I know that. But even if one woman understands what I'm saying... if

one woman chooses companionship over just partnership... maybe that will save her marriage.”

I didn’t argue.

Writers learn something very early —everyone is the hero of their own version.

“Your story still bothers me,” I said quietly.

He looked up.

“Marriage feels scary. If a woman works, it’s a problem. If she’s a homemaker, it’s a problem. If she works too much, that’s the problem. What exactly should she be?”

He exhaled.

“I know you’re judging me.”

“I’m not.”

He searched my face.

“All we want is a companion,” he said. “Not just a business partner. Not just a mother to our child. Not just someone efficient. Someone who sees us.”

His words were simple.

But simplicity can hide selfishness...and truth at the same time.

“I never judge my guests,” I said softly. “I just try to understand.”

And that is the most dangerous thing a writer can do.

Because understanding does not mean agreeing. And listening does not mean approving.

That night, after he went to his room, I sat with my diary longer than usual.

Here is what I did not tell him:

Women are asked to be everything —ambitious but available,independent but nurturing,strong but soft,successful but never too successful.

And when men say they want companionship,what they sometimes mean is —don't let your strength replace my comfort.

But here is what I also understood:

He was not a villain.He was lonely.

And loneliness inside marriage is far more frighteningthan loneliness alone.

He left the next morning before I woke up.

No dramatic goodbye.

Just a message:“Thank you for listening.”

Diary, I will write him honestly.

Not to take his side.Not to take hers.

But to show how fragile companionship really is.

He stayed five days.

And he reminded me —marriage is not destroyed by ambition.It is destroyed when two people stop being curious about each other.

Everything you've survived has made you
someone stronger than you realize.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE MAN WHO WANTED ONE HUNDRED RUPEES

She didn't look like someone who carried chaos.

She folded her clothes neatly. She washed her own cup. She spoke softly to Rio as if he understood every word.

If you saw her in the kitchen, sunlight touching her cheek, you would assume life had been gentle.

It hadn't.

When I told her I was writing a book about the guests who pass through this house, she paused — not shy, not excited — just measuring.

"I have a crazy story for you," she said.

And suddenly we were back in lockdown.

She lost her job like the rest of the world did — through a notification. No meeting. No explanation. Just "due to current circumstances."

Her 2BHK apartment didn't shrink just because her income did.

The rent stood there, solid and unapologetic.

So she listed the spare room everywhere — OLX, Facebook groups, random WhatsApp forwards. Survival doesn't care about pride.

Weeks passed. Silence.

Then one message blinked.

"Hey. I'm interested. But I'm a guy. Are you comfortable?"

She hesitated. Only for a second.

"Yes."

Need makes you brave in strange ways.

He messaged every day after that.

Morning check-ins. Evening plans.

"You don't have a TV? I'll buy one." "I love coffee. I'll bring a machine." "We should get a dishwasher. I'll arrange it."

He spoke in future tense.

As if he was already inside her house.

It felt stable. Like something was coming together in a world that was falling apart.

After a week she said, "Send me the down payment so I can block the room."

"Sure. Send me your GPay."

She did.

Minutes later:

"I don't know why I can't transfer. Can you send me 100 rupees? Just to check something."

One hundred.

Small enough to feel harmless.

But something inside her tightened.

“Why 100?” she asked.

“I just want to check something.”

She thought for a moment.

“If you want to check something, I’ll send 1 rupee.”

And she did.

One rupee.

A boundary disguised as compliance.

That’s when he exploded.

“You’re so cheap.” “I can’t live with a cheap person.” “This mentality is disgusting.”

The same man who offered appliances was now offended by a coin.

And then — blocked.

Gone.

No explanation.

No closure.

Just silence and a chat window that suddenly felt like a trap.

When she told me this story, she laughed. But her fingers were tight around her cup.

“What happened after?” I asked.

She didn’t answer immediately.

That’s when I knew the real story was coming.

For weeks after that, she couldn't trust any inquiry.

Even genuine ones.

If someone asked for basic details, her mind would replay his messages.

If someone sounded too polite, she would assume manipulation.

If someone offered something extra, she would think — what's the hidden price?

She stopped responding to half the messages.

Rent kept pressing.

Savings kept shrinking.

But the bigger loss wasn't financial.

It was psychological.

She started questioning herself.

Was I overreacting? It was just 100 rupees. Maybe I was rude sending 1 rupee. Maybe I am cheap.

That's the cruelest part.

Manipulators don't just try to take money.

They plant doubt.

Two months later, she finally found a female roommate. Quiet.

Simple. No promises of coffee machines.

They split rent evenly.

No drama.

But even then, she double-checked every transaction screenshot.

Every payment notification.

She became cautious in a way that didn't feel empowering.

It felt exhausting.

“And you know what’s funny?” she told me that night in my hall.

“If I had sent him 100 rupees, he would have asked for 500 next.

Or 1,000. Or something bigger.”

She wasn’t upset about the money anymore.

She was upset about the audacity.

About how easily someone can play stability just to test your obedience.

After she finished, Rio rested his head on her knee.

She looked at him and said softly, “Good thing I trusted my instinct.”

And I realized —

The story wasn’t about 100 rupees.

It was about the moment a woman chooses her intuition over politeness.

In our world, that choice is radical.

Because we are trained to be agreeable.

To not offend.

To not appear “cheap.”

Dear Diary,

Some guests don’t bring their drama into my house.

They bring the echoes of it.

Tonight I understood something else:

Trust doesn’t break loudly.

It cracks quietly, in small digital conversations, in one-rupee transactions, in sudden blocks.

And yet —

She didn't bend.

She didn't send the 100.

She chose instinct over approval.

Maybe that's what survival looks like in modern times.

Not grand heroism.

Just sending one rupee when someone expects one hundred.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE NIGHT A STRANGER OPENED HIS LIFE

My house had been quiet for four days.

Not the peaceful kind of quiet, but the kind that makes you check your phone a little too often, wondering if something is wrong with the listing... or if the universe has simply decided to pause your little home for a while.

When you host, you get used to movement—new faces, luggage wheels rolling across the floor, doors opening and closing, small conversations in the hallway. Strangers passing through your home like short chapters in a book.

But for four days, nothing.

Then suddenly a booking appeared.

Two days.

I remember feeling a small wave of relief. I prepared the room the way I always do—fresh sheets, pillows neatly arranged, small

details carefully placed. I like people to feel warmth when they enter my home.

By evening he arrived.

Just another guest.

Later that night, after Rio's walk and dinner, the house slowly returned to its usual quiet. The lights in the hall were soft and the city outside glowed faintly through the window.

I was sitting there when he came and sat across from me.

For a moment he looked around the room, then at me.

"Hey," he said politely, "I'm getting a little bored. Let's talk, if you don't mind."

I smiled.

"Okay," I said. "Tell me."

That's how the conversation began.

Simple. Casual. Two strangers sitting in a quiet living room.

After a few minutes I asked him,

"So... how old are you?"

"Thirty-two," he replied.

I nodded and asked the next question almost playfully.

"So are you married... or do you have a girlfriend?"

He smiled.

Not a big smile. Just a small one.

"I have two kids," he said.

For a second I blinked in surprise.

"Oh damn," I said instinctively.

He laughed softly.

"One is six," he said. "The younger one is just two."

And then, almost quietly, he added something that changed everything.

“My wife disappeared one day.”

The sentence landed in the room so simply that for a moment I didn’t react.

A mother of two children... just vanished?

My mind filled with questions.

Why?

How?

Was she unhappy? Was she struggling with something nobody noticed? Did she leave... or did something happen to her?

I asked some of these questions gently.

He listened to them quietly.

But he didn’t really have answers.

Then he said something slowly, almost as if he had already thought about what people usually ask.

“I don’t know if you’re going to ask me this,” he said, “so I’ll answer it anyway.”

He looked ahead while speaking.

“I tried to be the best husband I could.”

“I worked hard. I bought a car for her. I gave her everything I could... time, comfort, respect.”

He paused for a moment.

“That’s why sometimes I still wonder... why she left without saying anything.”

Then he added something even heavier.

“But my biggest question isn’t even that.”

He looked down at the floor.

“My biggest question is... will she ever come back to see her kids?”

The room became very quiet.

I asked him softly,

“Do you miss her?”

His answer came instantly.

“Every day.”

There was no anger in his voice.

No bitterness.

Just truth.

And somehow that made it sadder.

He continued speaking slowly.

He told me he runs a successful company. He takes care of his parents because they are old. He raises his children.

From the outside, everything in his life works.

Then he said something that stayed with me.

“At this point I feel like I’m just a robot.”

“I wake up. I run my company. I take care of my kids. I solve problems all day.”

He paused.

“But when I sit with myself... I feel nothing.”

He looked at his hands.

“Just a big hole inside.”

Then he said quietly,

“I don’t even know if I like myself.”

I didn’t try to fix that moment.

I just listened.

Because the truth is, I couldn't fully understand that feeling. I'm someone who loves being with herself. Silence never scares me. I enjoy my own company.

So hearing someone describe the opposite—feeling empty inside your own life—felt like looking into a world I had never lived in.

And I kept thinking about something else.

People always say you should marry at the right age.

He married when he was twenty-six.

Now he's thirty-two.

Two children.

A successful company.

And no wife.

Life can follow every "correct" timeline and still break somewhere quietly in the middle.

Eventually the conversation faded.

The night grew deeper. The city lights outside softened. Rio had fallen asleep nearby.

At some point I went to my room.

But one small detail stayed with me.

He never went to his.

Sometime during the night he fell asleep on the recliner in the hall.

Just there in the living room.

Like someone who had been carrying life on his shoulders for so long that when he finally paused... he simply stopped wherever he was.

The next morning I woke up and saw a message from him.

“Hey, I’m going for a movie. After that I’ll catch my flight back home.”

Then another message.

“Thank you for listening to me.”

And the last line stayed with me the most.

“All the best for your Porsche. Maybe next time when we meet you’ll already have your Porsche... and maybe you can teach me how to love myself.”

I read that message twice.

Sometimes people don’t come into your home because they need a place to stay.

Sometimes they arrive carrying something invisible.

Something heavy they’ve been holding alone for a very long time.

And sometimes all they really need...is one quiet night, a stranger who listens, and a moment where their heart can finally breathe.

And as I looked at that empty recliner in the morning light, I realized something strange about life—

Sometimes the deepest conversations we ever have are with people we may never see again.

Writer’s POV

That night stayed with me longer than I expected.

Not because something dramatic happened. Nothing extraordinary actually took place.

Two strangers just sat in a quiet living room and talked.

But sometimes the most ordinary settings hold the heaviest truths.

What struck me the most wasn't that his wife disappeared.

It was the way he carried it.

No anger.No blame.No shouting at fate.

Just a man quietly living inside unanswered questions.

I kept thinking about something while he spoke.

From the outside his life looked complete.

A successful company.Two children.Responsibilities handled.Life moving forward.

But inside, he felt like a robot.

And that made me realize something uncomfortable about people.

Sometimes the strongest-looking lives are the emptiest on the inside.

And sometimes the people who seem completely fine are simply the ones who learned how to carry pain quietly.

That night also made me aware of something about myself.

I realized how lucky I am to enjoy my own company.

To sit with myself and feel peace instead of emptiness.

Because somewhere out there are people who would give anything just to feel that simple thing.

Self-love.

Maybe that's why his last message stayed with me.

Not the Porsche part.

But the other line.

"Maybe you can teach me how to love myself."

And the truth is... I don't think self-love is something you can teach someone in a conversation.

But maybe it begins somewhere smaller.

Maybe it begins the first time someone feels safe enough to say out loud that they're hurting.

And maybe that night, for a few quiet hours in my living room... he finally did. 🌙

CHAPTER XXXV

THE WOMAN WHO CHOSE TO STAY

While I was hosting a French guy, I got a booking from China. Wait... I know what you're thinking. "Where's the story about the French guest?"

There isn't one.

He was... normal.

The kind of normal that wakes up, goes out, meets people, sits in cafés, comes back home, plays with Rio, smiles politely, and disappears into his room. We spoke in passing, shared small laughs, but nothing that stayed long enough to become a story. And maybe that's okay. Not everyone is meant to leave behind a chapter.

Some people are just... commas.

Anyway—

The day I got the booking, I casually told him, "Hey, I'm going to host a Chinese lady next."

We ended up talking about China for a bit—how beautiful it is, how developed, how different from here.

And then his stay ended, just like it began—quietly.

And then... she arrived.

She walked in softly, almost like she didn't want to disturb the air around her. She introduced herself politely, smiled at me, bent down to pet Rio... and went straight to her room.

No drama. No noise.

Just... presence.

Later that evening, I saw her in the kitchen.

I smiled and asked, "So, what's your plan?"

She paused, smiled a little awkwardly and said, "English... oh very weak."

We both laughed.

She quickly brought out her translator, and just like that, a new kind of conversation began. Not fluent. Not fast. But... intentional.

Word by word, pause by pause, she told me her story.

Born in China. Raised in Japan. Lives in London. Weekdays in London... weekends in Paris.

"Partner in Paris," she said, smiling.

I blinked.

French theatre artist.

She speaks French and Chinese.

And there I was... standing in my own kitchen, holding a cup of chai, thinking—wow... she's living a life I've only seen in films.

The next morning, my mother called.

“How’s your new guest?” she asked.

I smiled and said, “Weirdly... amazing.”

“Why weird?” she laughed.

And I told her everything.

She paused for a second and said, “Yeah... I agree with you.”

And that was it. Some feelings don’t need long explanations.

They just... land.

Days passed.

She stayed for a week.

A quiet, beautiful week.

She carried this little camera everywhere. She loved clicking portraits of strangers—not posed, not perfect... just real.

One day she asked me, “Can I click your pictures?”

I laughed and said, “Yeah sure, I’m an actress... I do this for a living.”

She looked at me, a little surprised, and said, “Oh wow... you look like a student.”

We both burst out laughing.

Then she asked, “Can you guess my age?”

I immediately shook my head. “No, I’m terrible at that.”

“Try,” she insisted.

I looked at her carefully.

Her skin was glowing, her eyes soft but alive, her smile... effortless.

“30... 35?” I said.

She stared at me for a second.

And then...

She laughed.

Not a small laugh.

A full, uncontrollable, five-minute-long laugh that filled the entire house.

When she finally stopped, she looked at me and said,

"I'm 68 years old."

I froze.

Just... stared at her.

68?

No.

There was no way.

But there she was—standing in front of me, glowing, laughing, alive in a way that many people in their 20s aren't.

"And..." she added, "I've been living with my boyfriend for 30 years."

I didn't say anything.

I just... kept looking at her.

At her grace. At her ease. At the quiet confidence of a life fully lived.

That day, I started liking her... a little too much.

One evening, curiosity got the better of me.

"30 years... with your boyfriend?" I asked. "Why didn't you get married?"

She paused.

Not in a sad way. Not in a heavy way.

Just... paused.

“We planned for a baby,” she said softly. “But God didn’t approve. We couldn’t have kids.”

For a second, my heart sank.

I looked at her, feeling a strange kind of sadness.

But before that sadness could settle, she smiled and said,

“In life... love is the biggest relationship. Marriage, no marriage... it doesn’t matter.”

And then she laughed.

“I’m the baby for my partner.”

And just like that... the sadness dissolved.

We both started laughing again.

She would buy treats for Rio every other day. Video call her partner—sometimes four times a day.

And through that tiny screen, I could see it—the way they looked at each other.

30 years... and still like that.

Still choosing each other.

Still... staying.

On her last night, she came to say goodbye.

She hugged Rio, kissed his head, and laughed, “My partner told me to kidnap him.”

We both laughed.

But somewhere in that laughter... I felt it.

A small ache.

The kind you feel when you know something beautiful is about to leave.

Before leaving, I told her, “I want what you have.”

She looked at me, curious.

“Younger skin... even at 68,” I smiled, “A loving partner who video calls you four times a day...and a positive, healthy mind.”

She didn’t respond immediately.

She just smiled.

A soft, knowing smile.

And then she said—

“We all have an angel and a devil inside us. It depends on what you choose.”

She paused.

“Just choose wisely.”

And then she added, almost like she was handing me a piece of her life—

“30 years of relationship means...300 times ‘hey, I forgive you.’ 300 times ‘hey, I care for you.’ And most importantly...300 times ‘hey, I’m here for you.’”

I didn’t realize when my eyes filled with tears.

Or when my lips curved into a smile.

But both happened... at the same time.

We hugged.

Tightly.

Like two people who knew—this wasn’t just a goodbye.

This was something... that would stay.

Writer's POV

Some people don't enter your life loudly.

They don't come with chaos or promises or intensity.

They arrive quietly—with a soft voice, a gentle smile, and a life so beautifully lived... that it humbles you.

She didn't try to teach me anything.

She didn't sit me down and give me lessons about love, or life, or patience.

She just... lived her truth in front of me.

And somehow, that was enough.

Enough to make me question everything I thought I knew about love. Enough to make me realize that maybe... love isn't about finding the perfect person.

Maybe it's about choosing the same imperfect person—again and again and again... even on the days when it's hard.

Especially on the days when it's hard.

We live in a world that glorifies beginnings.

First dates. First kisses. First "I love yous."

But no one really talks about the middle.

The staying. The forgiving. The choosing... when leaving would be easier.

30 years.

Three decades of waking up and saying, "I'm still here."

Not because you have to. But because... you want to.

And maybe that's the kind of love I've been looking for all along.

Not the loud kind. Not the kind that burns fast and bright and disappears just as quickly.

But the kind that... stays.

Softly.Consistently.Quietly.

Like her.

Like the way she held her camera.Like the way she said
goodbye.Like the way she loved.

And maybe... one day...

someone will look at me like that.

Or maybe more importantly—

Maybe one day...I'll learn to stay like that too.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE ONE WHO DIDN'T CHECK OUT

Some guests ask too many questions.

The kind that doesn't feel like curiosity... they feel like an intrusion. Like someone slowly trying the handle of your life before deciding whether to step in.

That evening, I was in the kitchen.

Oil crackling. Spices in the air. Rio asleep near the balcony, his chest rising and falling in a rhythm that made the house feel alive.

Normal.

Safe.

Then my phone buzzed.

"Hey, I'm a guy but I dress like a lady. Are you okay with that?"

I didn't think much.

I had hosted someone like that before. Kind. Respectful. Gentle.

So I replied the same way I always do when I want to keep things simple:

“I don’t care. Just be kind to Rio.”

Within seconds, the booking came.

10 days.

Confirmed.

And just as quickly—

“Share your number and address.”

I sent it.

Without thinking.

Without pausing.

That’s the part that replays in my head the most.

Not what happened after.

But that moment.

How easy it was.

The messages started immediately.

One after another.

My phone didn’t buzz—it trembled.

Images.

Dozens of them.

I opened one.

Then another.

And then I stopped.

Semi-nude pictures. Poses that felt staged but invasive. Eyes that didn’t look at the camera... but through it.

Through me.

“I dress like this. Hope you don’t mind.”

I didn’t reply.

I couldn't.

Something inside me had gone very still.

The flame in the kitchen burned too high. Oil smoked. Rio barked once.

But I just stood there.

Holding the phone like it had burned me... but I couldn't drop it.

I took screenshots.

Every image.

Every message.

Sent them to customer care.

My hands were shaking, but my actions were clean. Precise.

Within hours, the booking was cancelled.

And just like that—

The system told me it was over.

A week later, a courier arrived.

No sender.

Just my name.

My address.

Nothing else.

I opened it at the door.

Inside—

Two glossy magazines.

Heavy.

Silent.

I flipped one open.

And closed it immediately.

Nude.

Explicit.

Deliberate.

Sent.

To me.

I threw them away.

Both of them.

I remember the sound they made hitting the bin.

A flat, final sound.

Like something ending.

That night, Rio didn't sleep near the balcony.

He sat near the main door.

Watching.

Not barking.

Not moving.

Just... watching.

I called him twice.

He didn't respond.

Only when I touched him did he flinch—like I had pulled him out of somewhere far away.

Two days later, I got a message.

Unknown number.

No name.

No picture.

“Did you like the gift?”

I didn’t reply.

Another message.

“You didn’t see everything.”

My stomach tightened.

I walked to the bin.

Opened it.

One magazine.

Just one.

The other—

Gone.

That’s when the house stopped feeling like mine.

The nights changed first.

Silence became heavy.

Not empty.

Occupied.

Every small sound felt intentional.

The click of the switch.

The hum of the fridge.

The faint shift of air under the door.

Rio stopped going near the entrance.

He slept closer to me.

Sometimes, in the middle of the night, he would growl.

Low.

Uncertain.

Like he wasn't sure what he was sensing... only that it wasn't right.

The messages continued.

Different numbers.

Same tone.

Short.

Watching.

"You shouldn't cancel guests." "I was coming." "You said you don't mind."

I stopped replying.

But that didn't stop anything.

One night, it rained.

The kind of rain that swallows the city whole.

For the first time in days, I felt hidden.

Protected.

I lay in bed, watching the shadows move with the streetlight.

Rio slept beside me.

The house felt quieter.

Almost normal.

Then my phone lit up.

No sound.

Just light.

My gallery was open.

I frowned.

Scrolled.

And saw it.

A new video.

Timestamped—

Now.

I pressed play.

The frame shook.

Dark.

Grainy.

Then it steadied.

And I saw my building.

From outside.

Rain falling in streaks across the lens.

The camera moved.

Closer.

Closer.

Until it reached the entrance.

Then the stairs.

Slow.

Patient.

Step by step.

The breathing behind the camera... calm.

Too calm.

My heart started pounding.
I wanted to stop the video.
But I couldn't.

The camera reached my floor.
Turned.
Faced my door.
My light was on.
Visible through the gap.
The camera moved closer.
Until the door filled the entire frame.
Then it stopped.

For a few seconds—
Nothing.
Just rain.
Just silence.

Then—
A soft knock.
Inside the video.

And at the exact same moment—
From my door—
I heard it.
Knock.

My body froze.
The phone slipped slightly in my hand.
But I didn't move.
Couldn't.

The video continued.
The camera didn't move.
Just waited.
Listening.
Like it knew I was on the other side.

Then a voice.
Low.
Almost a whisper.
Right next to the camera.
"You said you don't mind..."

Rio stood up.
Slowly.
Positioned himself between me and the door.
And growled.
But not directly at it.
Slightly to the side.
Like whatever was there...
Wasn't standing where it should be.

The knocking didn't come again.

The video ended.

The rain continued.

I didn't open the door.

I never did.

Writer's POV

There are things we are taught to fear.

Darkness.

Strangers.

Footsteps behind us.

But no one teaches you to fear what doesn't leave.

What doesn't need permission.

What learns your patterns, your silences, your kindness—

And stays.

Not loudly.

Not violently.

But patiently.

Like it has time.

Like it knows...

You will think about it.

Every night.

Every time your phone lights up.

Every time someone knocks.

Maybe it was a person.

Maybe it was obsession.

Maybe it was something darker than both.

I don't have answers.

Only a feeling.

That something came close to my door that night.

And even though I never opened it—

It didn't leave empty-handed.

Because sometimes...

They don't need to enter your house.

To stay with you.

You owe yourself the love you keep giving
everyone else.

CHAPTER XXXVI

ANETTE WITH DOUBLE T

Some guests simply pass through a home.
And some... stay with you long after they've left.
She was in her seventies. From Sweden.
Like every other guest, she booked my place for three days. A
normal booking request. She asked for the address and the house
rules politely.
I get a little anxious when a woman books my place.
So I did what I always do when I'm nervous about hosting
someone new.
I cleaned the house a little extra. Bought fresh flowers. Lit some
candles.
I wanted the house to feel warm. Safe. Welcoming.
Still, there was a little nervousness in my heart.
Then she called.
"Hey, can you come downstairs? I don't know which building is
yours."
I went down to pick her up.

And the moment I saw her, I felt something shift. You know those rare moments when you meet someone and it instantly feels familiar — like the universe quietly placed them in your path?

It was that kind of moment.

She came upstairs, met Rio, and within minutes they bonded like old friends. After her long journey she went to take a shower, and I made coffee for both of us.

When she came out, we sat down.

Two women. Two cups of coffee.

And then we started talking.

She told me many stories from her life, but one of them stayed with me more than anything else.

At one point she asked me,

“What’s your favorite quote?”

I smiled and replied without thinking,

“Magic happens to those who believe in magic.”

She looked at me for a moment and smiled gently.

Then she said, “Let me tell you something.”

She told me she was raised by a single father until she was fifteen.

Then he remarried. Her stepmother came into their life — and she was cruel.

“She used to beat me badly,” she said quietly.

After that, she started missing her mother even more.

Whenever she asked her father about her mother, his answer was always the same.

“She doesn’t want to meet you.”

For years she tried to find her.
Google searches. Churches. Records. Any clue that might lead
her somewhere.
But nothing worked.
When she turned twenty, her father passed away.
She told me that was the moment she felt truly lost.
No answers. No parents. Just questions.
So she started visiting his grave twice every week.
The graveyard was on a hill outside the town. She would sit there,
talk to him, cry sometimes, and slowly make her way back home.
One evening she stayed longer than usual.
By the time she stood up, it was already getting dark. The church
was closed.
And suddenly she realized something very human and urgent.
She really needed to pee.
She laughed while telling me this part.
“In Sweden you don’t knock on people’s doors like that,” she
said. “People find it very offensive.”
But she had no choice.
She saw a small house nearby and gathered the courage to knock.
A woman opened the door slightly and asked in a heavy voice,
“What do you want?”
She replied politely,
“Miss, I just need to use the washroom. I’ve been holding it for
hours and the church is closed. I’m really sorry.”
The woman nodded and let her in.
She used the washroom and came back out.

“Thank you,” she said.

The woman looked at her carefully.

“So what are you doing here?”

“I came to the graveyard.”

“For whom?”

“My father... and my grandparents.”

The woman paused.

“What’s your father’s name?”

She told her.

And suddenly the woman jumped forward and hugged her tightly.

She started crying uncontrollably.

Not soft tears. Deep, heavy crying.

For more than ten minutes.

She said she had absolutely no idea what was happening.

Finally the woman stepped back, held her face, and said:

“Annette... I’m your mother.”

When she told me this story, I felt goosebumps all over my body.

Of all the ways someone could find their mother again, this felt like something written by the universe itself.

On the second day I asked her something random.

“Why do you have two T’s in your name?”

She smiled.

“In Sweden it’s very common.”

From that moment I started calling her “Annette with two T’s.”

Her three-day stay turned into a week because her flight got cancelled due to the war.

And somehow that extra time felt like a gift.
She watched my TV shows. We drank coffee. We talked about life,
love, mistakes, and second chances.
She once told me,
“I’ve dated more than ten men in my life. I was usually the one
who broke their hearts.”
But there was one man after her divorce.
“He was perfect,” she said softly. “And one day he just told me we
had no future... and disappeared.”
She spoke about her son and her grandson with so much love.
Her face would light up every time she mentioned them.
One afternoon I asked her,
“When was the last time you were in love?”
She looked at me and said calmly,
“I am in love.”
She was seventy-five.
The man was thirty.
They had met in Goa.
For a moment I didn’t know whether to laugh or be amazed. But
the way she said it — with such honesty and freedom — made it
feel completely natural.
Love, according to her, had nothing to do with age.
It had everything to do with courage.
We also spoke a lot about cars.
Especially Porsche.
We both loved them.
It became our little joke.

One afternoon we even went shopping together like two friends
who had known each other forever.

On her last evening I told her,

“Annette, I love your story. I write about my guests sometimes.

Can I write yours?”

She smiled and said,

“Yes. And you should call it ‘Annette with Double T.’”

We laughed.

The next morning she left early for the airport.

When I woke up, the house felt unusually quiet.

Then I noticed something on the fridge.

A note.

It said:

“Keep believing in magic.

It will happen.

Get your Porsche soon.

And come to Sweden to meet me.

I love you.”

— Annette

Dear Diary,

Sometimes I think hosting people is less about opening a home
and more about opening a door to the universe.

Annette walked into my life like a stranger and left like a
reminder.

A reminder that life has strange ways of connecting people. That a girl searching for her mother might find her simply by knocking on a random door. That love doesn't follow rules, age, or logic. And that magic still exists — quietly waiting for those who believe in it.

When she left that note on my fridge, it felt less like a goodbye and more like a small blessing left behind in my home.

And maybe that's why I keep writing these stories.

Because sometimes the people who stay for just a few days end up leaving behind something that lasts forever.

And if Annette ever reads this someday, I hope she knows one thing:

I'm still believing in magic.

And yes...

I'm still dreaming about that Porsche.

Your heart knows the way. Listen to it.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE BOY WHO CAME HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

Some guests leave a five-star review.
Some leave forgotten socks under the bed.
And then, once in a while, someone leaves behind a story.
This is one of those stories.

It was Christmas.

Like every other check-in notification, his booking appeared on my phone. Nothing unusual. Just another guest staying at my Airbnb.

Before arriving, he sent me a message.

"Hey, I'm coming from Edinburgh. Let me know if you need anything from there."

Most hosts would probably reply with a polite "No, thank you."

But curiosity has always been one of my biggest strengths... and occasionally, my biggest weakness.

I opened Google and searched, "What is Edinburgh famous for buying?"

Scarves.

Whisky.

Shortbread.

Souvenirs.

Then one thing caught my eye.

An Islander bag.

I loved it.

So I messaged him back.

"Can you bring me this? I'll pay you when you arrive."

He replied almost instantly.

"Sure."

That was it.

No bargaining.

No awkwardness.

Just "Sure."

When he arrived, the first person he greeted wasn't me.

It was Rio.

Rio, as usual, welcomed him like he'd been waiting his whole life for this guest.

After spending a few minutes petting Rio, he quietly carried his backpack, hoodie, and laptop to his room.

I asked,

"Tea or coffee?"

He smiled.

"I read your reviews. Everyone says you make amazing chai."

"So chai it is."

I laughed and went into the kitchen.

A few minutes later, he walked back carrying a small gift.

Actually...

Three gifts.

One toy for Rio.

Christmas chocolates.

And the Islander bag.

I reached for my wallet.

"How much do I owe you?"

He looked confused.

"Nothing."

"It's Christmas."

I froze.

I wasn't expecting kindness from someone I had known for less than an hour.

The bag wasn't expensive.

But that's never what gifts are measured by.

I suddenly felt guilty.

I had nothing to give him in return.

He had arrived as a guest.

Yet somehow...

he was already making me feel like I was the one being hosted.

He stayed for ten days.

The funny thing about hosting is that every guest arrives as a stranger.

Some remain strangers.

Others slowly become familiar faces in your kitchen.

And a very few...

become stories.

Slowly, we started talking.

Not all at once.

Just little conversations over chai.

Over Rio chasing his toy.

Over breakfast.

Over silence.

At that time, I was writing my very first book.

I was excited.

Scared.

Overthinking every page.

One evening I jokingly told him,

"I can't wait to read the book you write one day."

He looked surprised.

I continued.

"And whenever you write my story... please write a good one."

We both laughed.

Neither of us knew...

I would end up writing his instead.

One lazy afternoon he was fixing my kitchen exhaust fan.

I stood there doing what I do best.

Asking questions.

Too many questions.

"So... how old are you?"

He looked at me.

"Guess."

I observed him carefully.

Beard.

Calm personality.

Quiet confidence.

Maybe...

"Thirty-two?"

He burst into laughter.

Proper laughter.

The kind that makes you bend forward.

"I'm twenty."

I stared at him.

"No way."

"I'm serious."

"And where are you from?"

I expected another country.

Another city.

Another long story.

Instead he casually said,

"Mumbai."

Now I was confused.

"Then why are you living in Edinburgh?"

He stayed quiet for a few seconds.

Then said something that completely changed the mood.

"Do you want the short version or the real one?"

"The real one."

He wasn't running away from a country.

He was running away from home.

His father was a well-known lawyer.

Successful.

Respected.

Owned his own firm.

For some people, that sounds like privilege.

For him...

it sounded like a prison.

He had worked under his father.

Not because he wanted to.

Because he was expected to.

He told me how his father constantly humiliated him in front of employees.

Every mistake became public.

Every opinion became disrespect.

Every dream became unacceptable.

His father had already decided his future.

Law.

Courtroom.

The family legacy.

But his own dream lived somewhere much farther away.

Above the clouds.

Among rockets.

He wanted to become an aerospace engineer.

One day...

he wanted to work at SpaceX.

Imagine loving the stars...

while someone keeps forcing legal books into your hands.

So he left.

Moved to Edinburgh.

Started studying.

In the beginning his father paid the fees.

Later...

the arguments returned.

Calls became fights.

Fights became silence.

Eventually his father stopped sending money.

His final words were simple.

"Never come home again."

I listened quietly.

But one sentence hurt more than everything else.

"My mom stopped talking to me too."

That sentence stayed in the kitchen long after he finished speaking.

Sometimes silence is louder than crying.

I wanted to hug him.

I really did.

But we weren't friends long enough for that.

So instead I asked,
"Do you have siblings?"
His face softened.
"A little sister."
He smiled for the first time during that conversation.
"I bought gifts for her."
He was going to meet her.
He looked genuinely excited.
Like a child.
He left.
Came back later that evening.
The next afternoon we met again in the kitchen.
I immediately asked,
"How was it?"
His eyes answered before his words did.
He had cried.
His father had given his younger sister an impossible choice.
"If you ever meet him again...
I'll stop paying for everything."
Money.
Education.
Security.
A child should never have to choose between love and survival.
He quietly said,
"So... that was probably the last time I'll see her."
The kitchen went completely silent.
Rio had absolutely no idea what heartbreak looked like.

He continued running around with his toy.
Making funny noises.
Demanding attention.
Somehow...
Rio managed to make him smile.
Just a little.
I made coffee.
For both of us.
Sometimes coffee isn't meant to solve anything.
It's just there to keep someone company while life hurts.

Being a curious host, I kept asking questions.
Eventually...
we reached the universal topic.
Love.
"Tell me about your girlfriend."
I expected a cute story.
I got another heartbreak.
He laughed before answering.
"I was dating someone ten years older than me."
I couldn't help myself.
I judged him for exactly three seconds.
He noticed.
We both started laughing.
She was his first love.
His first relationship.
His first everything.

Long distance slowly became loneliness.
Loneliness became cheating.
Again.
And again.
And again.
He loved her.
But eventually he chose himself.
He walked away.
Not because it stopped hurting.
Because staying hurt even more.
Then he quietly admitted something.
"I had no family around me.
New country.
No girlfriend.
No one to talk to."
So he started working part-time.
Focused on college.
Focused on surviving.
Then came Christmas vacation.
He found my Airbnb.
Saw Rio in the pictures.
And booked immediately.
"Honestly," he laughed,
"I booked because of your dog."
Rio looked very proud of himself.

The following days became unexpectedly beautiful.

We played Ludo.
Tic-Tac-Toe.
Card games.
And somehow...
he won almost everything.
I accused him of cheating.
He denied all allegations.
Very convincingly.
Probably because he actually wasn't cheating.

Then came New Year's Eve.
Midnight celebrations have never really existed in my family.
My dating life was... well...
nonexistent.
I didn't have anyone waiting for my call at midnight.
Family could be wished in the morning.
Friends too.
So I hugged Rio.
Turned off the lights.
And decided to sleep.
Meanwhile...
he was awake.
Taking a shower.
Eating watermelon.
And crying.
The next morning he smiled awkwardly.
"I waited for you."

"I thought maybe we could celebrate together."

I felt terrible.

Not because I had done something wrong.

But because loneliness had walked into my house wearing a hoodie...

and I hadn't noticed.

So we fixed it.

We went to a café.

Ordered coffee.

Talked about dreams.

Parents.

Life.

Books.

The future.

Nothing extraordinary happened.

And somehow...

it became one of those afternoons you never forget.

I showed him the first draft of my book.

From that day onward...

he unofficially became my editor.

Time passed.

Life became busy.

But every now and then...

one of us would call the other.

No agenda.

Just life updates.

One day my phone rang.

He sounded excited.

"Guess what?"

"What?"

"I went on a date."

Finally.

Progress.

I waited for good news.

Instead he continued.

"She's twenty-seven."

I laughed immediately.

He laughed too.

Then he delivered the ending.

"After the date she texted me..."

"You're too old for me."

I was walking Rio that evening.

I laughed so loudly on the road that strangers actually turned around to see what was happening.

Poor guy.

Even rejection had a sense of humour.

The last time we spoke...

his voice sounded different.

Quieter.

He had returned to Mumbai.

His father had suffered a stroke.

"I came back to see him."

I smiled.

Not because everything had magically become okay.

But because despite everything...

he still chose compassion.

I simply said,

"I'm proud of you."

Sometimes forgiveness doesn't erase the past.

It simply refuses to let the past decide who you become.

Dear Parents,

Before we were your children...

we were simply human beings waiting to be loved.

You chose to become parents.

We didn't choose to be born.

So please...

don't punish us for dreams we never asked to inherit.

Your son is not your unfinished ambition.

Your daughter is not your second chance.

They are not investments.

They are not trophies.

They are not extensions of your ego.

They are people.

Ask them what they dream about.

Ask them what keeps them awake at night.

Ask them what scares them.

Ask them what makes them feel alive.

Listen without correcting.

Love without conditions.

Guide without controlling.

Protect without imprisoning.

And please...

never make your children earn your love.

Because home should be the one place where they never have to audition for acceptance.

A child can survive without luxury.

A child can survive without expensive schools.

A child can survive without the latest phone.

But no child should have to survive without feeling safe inside their own home.

Writer's Note

People often ask me what the best part of hosting an Airbnb is.

They expect me to say the reviews.

The business.

The money.

The beautiful guests from different countries.

But they're wrong.

The best part is discovering that every person who rings my doorbell is carrying an invisible suitcase.

Not filled with clothes.

Filled with stories.

Stories of broken families.

Impossible dreams.

First love.

Loneliness.

Forgiveness.

Hope.

Sometimes all a person needs isn't advice.

They need someone to ask one simple question:

"Would you like to tell me your story?"

I never expected a boy who came with a backpack, a hoodie, a laptop, and a Christmas gift to leave behind one of the most unforgettable chapters of my own life.

He arrived looking for a place to stay.

Maybe, without either of us realizing it, he was also looking for a place where he didn't have to explain why he was hurting.

And for ten days, between cups of chai, Rio's wagging tail, board games, quiet afternoons, and conversations in a small kitchen, he found one.

If you're reading this and you're a parent, love your children before the world teaches them how lonely love can feel.

If you're reading this and you're someone's child, don't stop believing that your dreams deserve to exist, even if the people closest to you don't understand them yet.

And if you're reading this as a stranger...

I hope that wherever life takes you, you find at least one kitchen where someone asks,

"Tea or coffee?"

...and truly means,

"You're safe here."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shalini Ajay Singh is an Indian television actress who has experienced both the whirlwind of back-to-back shoots and the quiet pauses that arrive when work slows down. In those still moments, she lives simply with her beloved dog, Rio—more than a pet, a constant companion and the quiet centre of her life.

Though she has travelled to more than five countries, Shalini had never experienced BnB stays, always choosing hotels instead. A casual conversation with a creative friend on a television set changed that. What began as a suggestion soon became an exploration, and eventually led her to open her own BnB, Rio's Paradise, where she has since hosted dozens of guests from around the world.

Dear Diary, They Stayed is her first book—a collection of diary-style reflections inspired by the people who passed through her home and the quiet moments of connection, resilience, and understanding that linger long after the guests have left.

