

TALES OF THE SAME WORLD

LIVING HALF IN DISGUISE, HALF IN TRUTH

KHUSHBOO



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Stories Matter
New Delhi • London

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*There was so much I wanted to ask, so much I
wanted to say. Instead, I hid behind a character who,
in the end, carried my silence too.*

Please welcome my first book....yes, the literary masterpiece where grammar filed a resignation letter, logic shows up late (if at all), and my brain decided to freestyle like it had nothing to lose. Some sentences may feel illegal. Some may feel like they were written at 2 a.m. during an existential crisis because they probably were. Punctuation? A suggestion. Structure? A rumor. But somehow, against all odds, the feelings are real. Very real.

So no, this is not the place to bring your red pen and academic expectationsthis is more of a “sit down, buckle up, and emotionally survive” situation. You will judge me. You will question my life choices. You might even reread a line twice, just to confirm I really wrote that and yes, I did. But somewhere between the chaos, the questionable decisions, and the accidental comedy, there’s a story that mattered to me more than I’d like to admit. And once you’re done laughing, judging, or quietly relating (don’t think I won’t notice), drop a review at @writer_under_trial. Be kind, be brutal, be honest....I’ll pretend I can handle all three.. Enjoy the imperfection....they’re not mistakes, they’re just... aggressively authentic.

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A NOTE FROM ENAYA

Hi... it's Enaya.

Or maybe that's just a name someone gave me—a character shaped by another's imagination. Yet sometimes I wonder if that is all I am. Stories have a way of slipping beyond pages, into pauses, into hearts that recognize them. Perhaps that is where I truly exist, because characters do not live in books... we live in the hearts that recognize us.

This story is not entirely mine. It belongs to the person I loved most or perhaps it was written by that person. A fragment of that soul lives within me—in the way I speak, feel, and tremble when love becomes too heavy to hold.

Am I that person's creation? Or a quiet refuge for the pieces the world cannot see?

Walk gently through these pages. What you are about to read might not be only a story—it might be a memory from the world of Nee.

With love,
Enaya

SAM AND ARYA!

Usually, I never praised anyone—except for a few rare people. And among them, Sam was the undeniable beauty of our school. Her eyes were deep and endless, catching the light in a way that made them glow like amber. Her skin, the colour of golden honey, was soft and smooth, as if kissed by the morning sun. She wore her short, wavy hair with effortless grace. But more than her beauty, it was her soul that set her apart—kind, calm, brave, and gentle. A rare soul in this world. Almost every boy in the school carried a quiet, hopeless crush on her.

It was often said that children inherited the traits of their parents, but Sam was a stark, almost unbelievable exception. She had been born to parents who were unfaithful, arrogant, and cruel. Her father was foolish and completely without remorse, while her mother was a master of manipulation. Both of them cheated on their spouses.

And yet, Sam... Sam was like a lotus blooming from mud—pure and untouched by the filth around her. Sometimes I couldn't help but wonder whether she had been adopted, because the goodness she carried felt unreal, an uncommon kindness that was painfully rare in this world.

As if beauty and kindness weren't enough, Sam also seemed to be blessed with extraordinary luck. She was the school topper, and effortlessly—almost unknowingly—she captured Arya's heart.

Now you might be wondering—who was Arya? Obviously, the other main character of this story.

Arya was the superstar of our school—Mr. Perfect himself, and also my best friend. He was tall and strong, with a gummy smile that became his trademark charm. His eyes were a shade of blue that could sweep you away with a single glance, like a lone leaf pulled into the tide—helpless to resist, unable to turn back. His skin carried a soft golden tone that glowed whenever light touched him. His hair,

soft and slightly messy, fell over his forehead in gentle waves. A sharp jawline cast a quiet shadow over his face, and the veins on his hands ran beneath his skin like delicate streams.

My personal favourite was his Adam's apple, rising and falling with every word he spoke like a rhythmic pulse that gave depth to his voice. His voice was deep and strong, yet soothing—the kind you wanted to hear again and again. His nose was sharp, like the peak of a small hill, and his lips, thin and soft, reminded me of rose petals. His eyebrows were perfectly shaped, as if painted by an artist's careful hand.

Honestly, even though Arya was my best friend and Sam was my good friend, they were officially just friends. Still, I couldn't help myself—I shipped them relentlessly.

They were like the moon and the sea—forever leaning toward each other, pulled by a gravity older than reason. The moon loved the sea in silence, and the sea answered through its tides, never allowed to rise high enough to hold her. They touched only through longing, through distance, through the promise of “almost.” Made for each other, yet condemned by fate to love without possession.

They were meant to choose each other, and they did. But fate decided otherwise—not because they were wrong, but because life is cruel to pure things. Some souls are written to love deeply, but never long enough. And some loves are not meant to survive, only to scar.

On a day when doom and boon were wrapped into a single moment, Arya was about to perform on stage—and let me tell you, the stage had never looked so alive. It buzzed and shimmered like the finale of a reality show—lights flashing, the audience roaring, energy crackling in the air. It felt far too grand for our school. Normally, that stage looked like the set of a horror movie—dim, dusty, and so forgotten that if someone accidentally got locked inside, finding their remains would probably take years. They'd end up as a ghost story passed down to the juniors.

But that day?
Pure magic.
Well... almost.

There stood Arya, frozen at the centre of it all, his heart racing. Not because of stage fright—Arya didn't even know what that meant. He was the same guy who once danced to *Sheila Ki Jawani* at the annual function without a shred of embarrassment. He had been the entire show—actor, dancer, comedian, all rolled into one—just to make the audience laugh and ease everyone's pressure.

No, what had him sweating bullets was betrayal.
Sam was gone.
Vanished.

No texts. No calls. No casual "Hey, I'll be late." Nothing. She wasn't even picking up calls. Just... gone. And suddenly Arya, the superstar of our school, stood there with his heart pounding—not to the beat of the music, but to the terrifying realization that something was terribly wrong.

I was standing beside him, ready to be his partner, because Sam—his dance partner—hadn't shown up.

Now I know what you're thinking.
Did I try to replace her?
Was I the villain of this story?

No.

Honestly, I was just as tense as he was. At first, I joked around, trying to lighten the mood. But as the minutes passed and the seriousness of the situation sank in, so did I. Arya was my best friend. I couldn't just stand there and watch him fall apart.

I had to help him. You might wonder how I even knew the dance. The truth was, every evening when Sam and Arya practiced, I was always there, hovering around and keeping them company. I didn't know why back then, but maybe fate had been quietly preparing me all along.

Backstage and the stage itself were alive with applause echoing, laughter spilling through the curtains, and excitement buzzing in waves. Behind all that noise, Arya stood unnervingly still. Cold anger rose inside him like a tide. They had rehearsed for weeks. They had promised each other they would shine together, no matter what. Now... she was gone.

The music started. Arya took a deep breath and stepped forward. He danced with me. At first, I could feel the hesitation in him. His movements were stiff and unsure, as if he didn't fully trust me. Maybe he didn't. But the show had to go on. He had no choice.

Fate had already pressed play. The dance wasn't perfect, but it was far better than anyone expected. The applause came down like thunder. For just a moment, I saw Arya's face light up. He smiled—a real smile. The storm inside him, the loneliness, the betrayal, the confusion—all melted away under the spotlight.

And me?

I was overwhelmed.

I ran down the hallway, excitement pounding in my chest like a drum. Pride flooded me. I was practically bursting. Honestly, the litres of water I had drunk before the performance chose that exact moment to rebel, forcing me toward the common washroom—a place I had been avoiding because of the smell, but had no choice but to enter.

I sprinted to the washroom like a mad person and swung the door open.

Boom.

I froze.

My blood pressure dropped so fast I thought I might faint.

There, lying unconscious on the cold floor...was Sam.

For a second, my mind refused to believe what my eyes were seeing. The person we had been searching for over the last sixty minutes was right there, sprawled on the filthy washroom floor—pale, motionless, almost lifeless.

The washroom itself felt wrong.

Too quiet.

Too still.

Large, cracked mirrors lined the walls, stretching my reflection into distorted shapes. A flickering tube light buzzed weakly above, casting a sickly yellow glow that made the stains on the floor look darker, older—like they had been there forever. Water dripped endlessly from a broken tap, each drop echoing through the room like a countdown. The air smelled of damp walls, rust, and neglect. And in the middle of all that filth and silence...She lay there.

My chest tightened. My thoughts spiralled. How long had she been here? Was she breathing? Why hadn't we found her sooner?

Panic threatened to paralyse me, but instinct pushed me forward before fear could take over. I dropped to my knees, the cold floor biting into my skin. My hands trembled as I wrapped my arms around her fragile body. She felt too light. Too still. I pressed my ear against her chest, searching desperately for a heartbeat. It was there. Faint—but there.

I lifted her, my arms aching, my throat burning as I shouted for help. My voice bounced off the mirrors, coming back to me broken and unfamiliar, as if the room itself were mocking my fear. Within moments, teachers came running, their footsteps loud against the hollow silence. The washroom that had trapped her now felt even smaller, closing in on all of us. Together, we rushed her out—leaving behind the mirrors, the dirt, the shadows—leaving behind the place that had swallowed her whole.

The medical room was bright, clean, alive—everything the washroom wasn't. But even there, time refused to move. Minutes stretched into eternity as I sat beside her, my hands clenched so tightly they hurt, my heart pounding against my ribs. I watched her chest rise and fall. Again. And again.

I prayed silently, desperately, that she would open her eyes. That she would come back. That we hadn't been too late. Every second

felt heavy. And all I could think was how close we had come to losing her... without even knowing she was there.

When she finally opened her eyes, she looked straight at me. Her lips trembled, as if words were fighting to escape, and then she suddenly broke down—crying the way someone does when they have been strong for far too long. Her sobs tore through her, violent and uncontrollable, shaking her entire body as if every fear, every second of loneliness, was spilling out all at once.

I held her tightly, afraid that if I loosened my grip even for a second, she might disappear again. My hand moved gently through her hair, my arms forming a quiet shelter around her. I whispered nothing because words felt useless, but I stayed—holding her, grounding her, And in that moment, all that mattered was this—

She was here.

She was breathing.

She wasn't alone anymore.

But inside me, something heavy settled.

Guilt.

I had performed in her place. Even though I had done it for Arya, even though I had never meant to replace her, it still felt wrong. It felt like betrayal, no matter how pure my intentions had been. So I confessed. Everything. I braced myself for anger. For pain. Maybe even hatred in her eyes. But it never came. Instead, she looked at me with quiet understanding. No rage. No blame. Just a calm acceptance.

"If someone else had been in your place," she whispered softly, "they would have done the same." After a pause, she told me everything. While we had been at the stage—surrounded by excitement, applause, laughter, and glowing lights—Sam had been trapped in a dim, abandoned bathroom, completely alone. Cracked mirrors reflected her fear back at her. Scribbled drawings covered the walls, staring at her like silent ghosts. The hallway outside had been empty, its silence deafening. She rubbed her arms, as if she could still feel the cold.

“The floor was filthy. Wet. I remember thinking I shouldn’t sit down—but my legs felt too weak to keep standing. The drawings on the walls... they felt like they were watching me, like I wasn’t supposed to be there.” Her voice trembled as tears spilled over. “I started shouting for help. I really did. I screamed your names, the teachers’ names—anyone’s name. Again and again.”

Her breathing quickened. “My throat started hurting. My voice cracked. I banged on the door until my hands were red, until they burned. I cried so hard I couldn’t see properly anymore. But no one came. Not even once.” Her eyes dropped to her lap. “It was so quiet outside. Too quiet. That’s when it hit me—maybe no one even knew I was missing. Maybe everyone had just... moved on.”

She took a sharp breath. “I pushed the door with everything I had. I screamed until my chest hurt, but it didn’t move. It never moved.” Her voice broke. “And then I realised... I had forgotten. While I was there crying, begging, panicking, I kept thinking about the stage. About Arya. About the performance.”

Her lips quivered. “I imagined all of you standing under those bright lights... and someone else standing where I was supposed to be. That thought destroyed me. Our moment—gone.” She gave a small laugh that quickly turned into a sob. “I felt so guilty. So helpless. Like I didn’t matter anymore.”

Her words came faster now. “My heart was racing. I couldn’t breathe properly. Everything started spinning. The walls felt like they were closing in.” She blinked rapidly. “My vision blurred, and I remember thinking—this is it. This is how it ends.”

She looked at me, tears streaming down her face. “And then... everything went black.”

After she calmed down, I asked her gently, my voice barely above a whisper, “Sam... do you have any idea who could have locked you in? Was it someone you know?”

She shook her head slowly, exhaustion weighing down every movement. “No one locked me in. The lock was already broken. It had happened before during practice. I got stuck once or twice, but

I didn't think it was a big deal." She gave a weak smile that never reached her eyes. "I didn't even bother telling the teachers. It just felt like... nothing."

There was a long pause before she whispered, "But I was wrong. What I thought was nothing... became everything." She took a shaky breath, her fingers tightening around the bedsheet. "That same broken lock. That same empty space I kept ignoring—it came back for me right before our performance."

Her voice dropped to almost nothing. "The silence in that room. The shadows. The door that wouldn't open... it felt like everything I had brushed aside suddenly came alive and swallowed me whole." Tears pooled in her eyes. "It felt like a coffin. Like that bathroom was ready to be my coffin. Like it was waiting for me."

And in that moment, I understood—this had never been just about a door or a faulty lock. It was about a fear she had buried deep inside herself. A warning she had seen before, felt before... and chosen to ignore. And when it mattered the most, it had come back for her. What she had once dismissed as nothing had become everything—enough to destroy her moment, her stage, her light.

I stayed silent for a moment, then quietly left the room. There was something I needed to bring back—something that had been weighing heavily on me.

When I returned and sat beside her again, I finally gathered the courage to reach into my bag and take out the trophy resting inside. Slowly, I placed it in her hands.

"This was always yours," I said softly. She looked up at me instantly, shaking her head. "No... I can't take it. You performed. You earned it."

I gently closed her fingers around it anyway.

"I can't keep what never belonged to me," I said quietly.

Her grip tightened around the trophy as tears spilled freely again—perhaps not of fear this time, but of release. Of being seen. Of being returned to her place. And in that quiet room, I knew—

victories weren't always won on a stage.

Some were simply given back to where they belonged.

THE SILENCE AFTER THE SONG

After everything that had happened, Sam and Arya stopped talking to each other. I wanted them to talk to clear up the misunderstandings, to finally say the things they had been holding back, but instead, they acted as if the other had never existed. Sam, drowning in guilt, and Arya, burning with anger, became masters of avoidance. They passed each other in corridors without stopping, avoided eye contact, carried on like strangers, even though deep down, they were anything but...

It was painful to watch.

They were my friends, the ones I rooted for, the ones I believed in. And even though I didn't fully understand relationships back then, I knew this much: they belonged together. Something about them felt inevitable, but the silence between them was deafening. Yet I knew it wasn't hatred that kept them apart; it was hurt. Time was the one thing they both needed but didn't know how to ask for.

I noticed the small things. The way Arya would slow his steps when Sam walked ahead of him, as if afraid of getting too close. The way Sam would pause when she heard his voice, her fingers tightening slightly around whatever she was holding. The way they both looked back just for a second when they thought no one was watching. Once, Sam forgot her water bottle backstage. Arya picked it up without thinking, followed her halfway down the corridor... then stopped, lowered his hand, and placed it quietly on a table instead. Another time, Arya tripped during the assembly. Sam took a step forward instinctively, worry flashing across her face before she caught herself and turned away. Those moments told the truth: they refused to speak. There was love between them—real love. Somehow, those small gestures hurt more than any argument ever could.

Although I liked to believe I was smart, nothing came to mind about how to bring them back together. No plan. Nothing at all.

But I am the mastermind, after all.

I had never really celebrated my birthday. It was always a reminder of my father's abandonment. No, he didn't leave for heaven; he didn't even deserve a place there. He chose another woman over my mother and me, and every year, on this day, his absence felt louder than any celebration ever could.

But that time, I decided to break the pattern. I thought, if I couldn't heal the scars of my own past, maybe I could help heal theirs.

So I threw a birthday party.

Not for me. For them.

It wasn't a big party, actually; it was painfully small. Only Sam was there, along with her little sisters, Eric and Enaya. And of course, Arya, my only real best friend. I hadn't had many close friends. The funny part? Almost the entire school knew me, almost everyone called me their friend—but when it came to people who truly mattered, the list was very short, or I mean only two. Honestly, that was enough.

At some point of the party - aka my mission, I did what I decided—I created space. I gently pushed Sam and Arya into a conversation of their own and stayed back, taking full responsibility for entertaining two energetic little girls on my own birthday.

Yes.

On my birthday.

Lol.

I laughed with Eric, listened to Enaya's endless stories, and pretended not to glance at the table where Sam and Arya sat talking—really talking. I didn't interrupt. I just waited.

They came back. They sat down, exchanged a look, and smiled—one of those smiles that says everything without saying much.

"We're together now," they told me.

Just three simple words.

At that moment, every ache, every effort felt worth it. I smiled so wide my cheeks hurt. That was my birthday present. Because sometimes, the best way to celebrate your own life is by fixing a little piece of someone else's.

Honestly? I wouldn't have had it any other way.

Maybe I didn't need a father to celebrate my birthday. I had my people—and they were enough. After so long, when I finally decided to push past the sad boundaries of my past. I chose what I had — love, presence, family and friends. And thanks to my unmatched grace (you're welcome), they finally got together. Lol. I was there during the crucial moments, subtly holding the chaos together like the emotionally intelligent genius I am. Watching them felt like seeing my own plotline come to life.

By the end of the day, I celebrated my birthday with my mom and grandma, the women who survived raising the miracle. Let's be clear: It was the day their house received a lifelong subscription to my personality... lol. Who needs expensive celebrations when you have pure love, inside jokes, and two women still wondering how they got such a masterpiece?

Later, watching Sam and Arya filled me with a quiet pride I **can** still feel today. They were living proof that late-night talks, reassurance, and silent support were more powerful with them. For a while, everything felt exactly how it was supposed to feel. We were happy. Just genuinely, peacefully happy. I didn't feel like a third wheel. I felt included, wanted, necessary even. I felt like I had a place beside them — not behind them. They made space for me in their joy, in their plans, in their everyday life. Their happiness didn't feel separate from mine. It felt shared — like we were all standing in the same sunlight.

But

Life is never as steady as we want it to be. It lifts you with warmth and laughter, then suddenly drops you into a silence you don't recognise. Everything was fine... until it wasn't. Sometimes change is gentle. Sometimes it shatters the air between people without

warning. Sometimes it takes things from you slowly enough that you feel it slipping through your fingers. The hardest realisation is this: no matter how much something means to you, you cannot control where it goes. Because when it's someone else's life, someone else's love story, you are not the one they stay for... just the one they grow from .

Something happened to them... something broke quietly inside me.

In my novel, sadness found its place. As for theirs... I don't know how the story continued. I only know I wasn't standing as close to it anymore. People used to say that best friends change when they get into relationships. I used to defend us. I used to laugh at the idea.

Until one day, I felt the distance myself.

Maybe I loved being their third wheel. Or maybe I only loved the feeling of belonging to something that felt whole. I thought they felt it too — that I wasn't in the way, that I was part of the balance. Maybe I wasn't. Maybe I felt included while they felt crowded.

It started with small things. They stopped waiting for me after class. Conversations that once wrapped around the three of us slowly folded into quiet whispers meant for two. I would send a message and get a reply hours later — short, polite, nothing like the warmth it used to carry. Sometimes I'd be walking beside them, and before I realised it, I'd fallen a few steps behind. They didn't notice. Instead of fighting, instead of demanding my place where I once belonged, I stepped back. I accepted it. Somewhere deep down, I understood something painful: sometimes time changes people... and sometimes people change with time.

Maybe, without meaning to, I became the weight in their relationship. They weren't wrong for choosing each other. He wasn't wrong for protecting what mattered to him. I couldn't make myself a victim of a story that didn't have me.

It hurt me daily , and I was left hollow , as if pieces of me had been stolen.

I cried that night — over something that sounded small when spoken out loud yet felt enormous in my chest. My eyes burned the next morning, but still I went to school in the hope everything would be normal but I lost hope when they walked past me in the hallway, laughing softly.

I waited for something — a glance, a pause, a flicker of recognition. Nothing came. That was my first heartbreak. Sometimes heartbreak is simply realising you are no longer someone's priority — even if you once were. Loving them meant letting them choose each other.

As Hope is ruthless. It doesn't care how tired your heart is — it keeps whispering, "Maybe." So I waited for the day we would reunite—and guess what? My patience paid off. That day finally came.

It began quietly, almost by accident. A teacher paired Arya and me for a project . At first, it was stiff — two people pretending the cracks between them had never existed. Slowly, naturally, something softened. Conversations returned in small pieces. Laughter followed, hesitant at first, then familiar. Sam helped us through it all — stayed back after class, guided us, correcting our mistakes even when she didn't have to. She carried us more than we realised at the time. When the result day came, we won. The victory belonged to them-their ideas, effort, and dedication held everything together. I did my part, yet it felt small beside theirs. Still, when we celebrated, it didn't feel uneven. It felt shared.

Things began slipping back into place. Life felt gentle again. Warm. There were late-night walks after tuition, shared lunchboxes, stolen bites of food, whispered gossip from the last bench. We laughed at nothing , at everything. They felt like my best friends again — the kind who understand you in ways you can't explain. We talked about the distance, the misunderstandings, the hurt we never properly named . We promised , quietly, sincerely , that we'd stay together forever. In that moment, it felt indestructible. For a while, it truly was.

Then again something happened - Something that made me question everything — even the second chance we had been given.

Maybe it would have hurt less if we had stayed distant. Maybe reopening old doors only made the loss sharper.

I thought I was learning how to live with the worst kind of heartbreak. I was wrong. This wasn't heartbreak. This was destruction.

The phone rang. In a matter of seconds, the world I knew stopped making sense.

“She's gone.”

Gone where? Gone how? Gone forever? They said she jumped into the river. I remember staring at the wall, waiting for someone to say it was a mistake, that there had been confusion, that she was at the hospital, that she was breathing. There was only silence. The river flowed as if nothing had happened, as if it hadn't swallowed someone's daughter. Someone's friend. My friend. They called it suicide. My heart rejected the word. I knew her family. I knew her past. I knew the man her mother remarried—her stepfather. The devil.

When she died, I tried. I begged. I searched. I fought. I went through memories, through places, through people. I chased rumors and asked questions that made others uncomfortable. I wanted proof. I needed proof. Something—anything—that could speak for her when she no longer could. There was nothing. No evidence. No witnesses. No truth strong enough to stand against the lie they chose to believe. Once again, the world accepted the easier story. The lie won. The case went cold. So did hope.

In the middle of it all, when I was still searching—still refusing to let it end like this—Arya stopped me. He just looked at me and said, “Stop. For Sam.” His voice was steady, but his eyes were breaking. “She's at peace now. She wouldn't want this. She wouldn't want you fighting like this, destroying yourself, going against everything she believed in.” I wanted to tell him that peace without truth isn't peace at all, that justice mattered, that she mattered. I couldn't deny him

either. Somewhere deep down, I knew he was right. Even if I kept trying, one day everything would grow cold. That decision hurt almost as much as losing her. The guilt never left. It still lives in me—the thought that I couldn’t protect her, couldn’t save her, couldn’t even give her justice.

Yet in the middle of it all, Arya stood like a lighthouse. While everyone else fell into pieces, he held us together. He carried grief with maturity. I felt proud—proud that someone like him was my friend.

Still, the story felt incomplete. We didn’t just lose a life. We lost a future that would never get the chance to exist. The river knew the truth. It had seen everything. Yet it would never speak. The ending remained weak—unfinished, unresolved. I was left with guilt and grief, trapped in a story that found no justice, no closure, no real relief. Only silence. And the sound of water that never stopped flowing.

LIFE PRESSED BETWEEN PAGES

For weeks afterward, Arya and I couldn't stand the sound of water. It mocked us. Every ripple felt like laughter at our loss. At first, we avoided the river as if it were cursed. Hatred toward it settled deep within us. The river kept moving—steady, indifferent—while our world had stopped the moment she disappeared beneath its surface. We hated how it kept flowing as if nothing had happened, how the world hadn't paused when she disappeared into it. Just hearing the faint sound of water was enough to tighten my chest. I didn't want to look at it, didn't want to remember, didn't want to feel.

But Grief carries a cruel double standard: it shatters you first, then quietly rebuilds the person left behind.

Somewhere between the pain and the numbness, a realisation slowly settled in. That place—however we hated it—had been the last place that held her. The river was cruel, yes, but it was also the only witness to our loss. Avoiding it began to feel like avoiding her, and we couldn't do that forever.

So one day, without planning it, we found ourselves walking back.

The river seemed to pull us toward it—as if it had known we would return. Avoiding the river started to feel like avoiding her—as if turning our backs on the river meant turning our backs on her memory.

Every day after school, at the same time, same place. Thirty minutes of silence. It slowly became a ritual because it kept us close to her. At first, we stood there in anger, arms crossed, hearts clenched. With time the anger softened into exhaustion. Eventually it faded into something that felt like surrender. We no longer hated the river the way we once did. We stood there with a foolish hope—against all logic—that she would return. That the water would give her back. We never spoke. Words felt unnecessary, even disrespectful. Sometimes Arya would glance at me, and I would nod, as if saying

yes, a silent acknowledgment that I felt the same. Then, without a single word exchanged, we would turn and walk back home—carrying the same weight, just in different ways.

But that day felt different.

We stayed longer than usual. Arya sat beside me, legs dangling off the edge, eyes fixed on the moving water. After a long moment, he finally murmured, “It’s her birthday.”

I said nothing.

He turned toward me, his voice cracking as he spoke again. “I used to hate this place so much. Still do.” He swallowed. “But it’s weird... sometimes I think maybe—if we sit here long enough—she’ll come back.” His eyes never left the river. “This river kept her away from me. This river owes us our precious.”

I nodded. I wanted to say so much—yet somehow, nothing came out.

He turned back again, eyes locked on the water. Silence followed. Not an empty one—but a heavy silence, the kind that presses against your chest. A tear slipped down his cheek. He didn’t wipe it away.

“You left,” he said softly, “but your memories stayed behind. Every day. Every night.” “They sit beside me when I’m alone. They walk me to school. They laugh in the background of every quiet moment. They are in every song I listen to. They sit with me in class, follow me on my way home—they are with me everywhere I go.”

He let out a small, broken laugh and wiped his tears. “Somehow... I don’t ask them to leave. Your memories are sweet.” A pause. “But they’re also the most bitter part of my life, and my life craves this sweetest bitterness.”

He stared hard into the current, as if his eyes could reach inside it—as if, somehow, he could pull her back.

I don’t know why,” he whispered, “but I still hope you’re alive.” A shaky breath. “I search for you in crowds. I keep thinking—maybe

you're in another city... another state... another country... maybe even another world—hiding from me.”

He laughed bitterly, tears pooling in his eyes. “Deep down, I know my life isn’t a movie.” A pause. “And maybe it would’ve been easier if it were.” His voice dropped to a painful murmur. “It would’ve been better if we had already broken up. At least then... I wouldn’t be carrying this guilt.”

His hands trembled. “I couldn’t heal you. I couldn’t fix your problems. I couldn’t even take your pain away.” A broken sob escaped him. “What kind of love is that?”

Arya broke down completely. His cries were raw, uncontrollable. I pulled him into my arms, holding him tight, letting him fall apart against me—because sometimes comfort isn’t words, it’s presence.

After a few minutes, his breathing slowly steadied. I eased back when he finally calmed down. He looked at me again, eyes swollen, voice cracked beyond repair. From his bag, he pulled out a small, worn journal.

“You know,” he said quietly, “Eric gave me the most precious thing she left behind”. “Her journal and I can’t open it as every word feels heavy. Every night I try—but I can’t. I’m scared it’ll pull me back into everything.” He clutched it tightly. “I carry it with me everywhere. Every day. Every time.” His fingers curled around it as if it could disappear. “I’m afraid that if I ever leave this behind... it’ll vanish too—just like her.”

A long pause.

“And I really want to move on,” he whispered. “But I don’t know how... without leaving her behind.”

“But maybe,” I said softly, barely above a whisper, “she wanted you to read it.”

Arya shook his head. “I don’t know what she wrote inside,” he said, voice hollow. “But I hope... I hope she wants me to live and what if I never come out of it? What if opening it breaks whatever is left of me?”

I placed my hand on his shoulder. “Maybe, you’ll be able to move on.”

He stayed silent.

“Then why do you keep it,” I asked, frustration slipping into my voice before I could stop myself, “if you won’t even open it?”

“Because it’s the only thing I have left of her,” he replied quietly. “Her words. Her handwriting. Her scent.” He paused. “She’s still in there... in words.”

My grief twisted into anger. “But if you never open it, how will you ever feel her words? Her thoughts? On the other hand, you say you want to move on. First decide what you truly want.”

Silence fell between us—heavy, suffocating.

Guilt rushed in immediately. “I’m sorry, Arya. I didn’t mean to hurt you. I really didn’t.” I looked down. “I don’t know what came over me. You can keep it unopened as long as you want. I won’t force you.”

He didn’t respond.

I glanced at my watch. It was four. Across the river, I noticed my mother standing there, watching me. She hadn’t said a word, but her gaze alone was enough to tell me it was time to leave. I slowly got up.

“Arya, let’s go. We’re already late,” I said. “Otherwise we’ll get scolded.”

He didn’t move. He sat there, silent—like a statue carved out of grief.

“It’s okay,” I added softly. “If you want to stay a little longer, you can. I have to go.” I gave him a small nod and turned to leave.

That’s when I felt someone grab my bag. I turned back.

Arya stood there—one hand holding my bag, the other clutching the journal. He gently placed the journal into my hands.

“I’ve decided,” he said quietly. “I wanted to keep this forever. I wanted to live a new life—with purpose, with happiness. But keeping it... isn’t helping me.”

He looked down, unable to meet my eyes. “It feels like she’s trapped inside these pages... so am I.”

He took a deep breath. “Please,” he whispered, “keep it with you. And... set me free.”

Before I could say anything—before my mind could even process what had just happened—he slung his bag over his shoulder and walked away toward his home. I stood there, frozen. I didn’t want to keep it. I wanted to run after him, shove the journal back into his hands, tell him this wasn’t right. I blamed myself—my anger, my words. I thought I had pushed him into this decision. I called after him, telling him it was okay, that he’d move on, that he should keep it. But he refused. He forced me to keep it. So I told myself it was temporary. When the right time came, I’d return it—to where it truly belonged. Until then, I would carry the weight... so he could feel lighter.

I never meant to read it. I knew it wasn’t mine. One day, though, curiosity made me open it just a little. I didn’t read—only noticed. Seven pages. Just seven. Headings. A few scattered words my eyes accidentally fell upon: love. Crush. Him. That was enough. The entire journal was written for Arya. And who was I to read something so sacred? I closed it immediately. One night... I missed her too much. The house was quiet. My heart wasn’t.

I opened it.
And I broke.

I cried—not because I missed her absence—but because of her presence. Her words were so pure. Her gentle thoughts. The way she wrote, the way she loved Arya... every line felt alive. Every word pulled memories back—laughs, moments, glances. I couldn’t stop myself. I felt guilty. I knew I shouldn’t read it. I wasn’t in control anymore. That night, my emotions held me hostage, and I surrendered.

Page One: What Is Love?

It is not a choice, nor a voice.
It doesn't wait for logic or permission,
It doesn't ask, *should I?* It sparks intuition.

It grows in silence, slow and small,
No one knows when it starts to call.
One moment, you are whole alone,
Next, your heart has learned a new tone.

A stranger turns familiar, step by step,
And then no stranger is left to forget.
When he smiles, the world slows down,
Time stretches, yet wears no crown.
A glance, a beat, a rhythm shared,
A silent conversation, souls bared.

He is ordinary to every eye,
Just one more face passing by.
But love turns ordinary into light,
It teaches eyes to see what's right.

Classrooms become paths to escape,
Lectures, doors to a secret landscape.

A little jealousy, a little fear,
Tears falling quietly, moments unclear.
Yet all of it feels soft and true,
For love is many, not just one hue.

If asked to define it, words fall apart,
Love is a feeling that lives in the heart.
It is a universe, unseen, immense,
Opening only when you let go of sense.

And somehow, without a single choice,
Love whispers softly and gives its voice.

Page 2 – Crush who makes me blush

Whenever I see my crush
I always start to blush
The way he owes my heart
He seems like a beautiful art

In day I stare at you
In night I dream of you
I'm trying to get near to you
But there is a large bridge between me and you

I hope to cross that bridge
Then it will be an ice cream and in a fridge
It seems like I try my best
But still it remains to be an empty nest

I always give you a sign
I'll try knowing you'll never be mine
Just like a mountain's big slope
I still hope

That one day you will be mine
That's the day I'll stop giving signs
But the only fact that left at last
The journey of ours is very vast

Page 3 – I deny, but it hurts

There was a time I thought things between us could grow. Maybe something good, something real. We were friends, but not just that. We were companions in laughter, conspirators in quiet jokes, two people who shared little moments that somehow felt larger than life. A laugh that lingered too long, a glance that said more than words ever could. I thought... Maybe those moments were seeds, waiting to grow into something more.

And now... everything feels wrong. Not because of a fight, not because anyone said something harsh. It's quieter than that, more unsettling. I try to cry, but the tears won't come. My chest tightens, my heart tumbles inside me. I stand still, pretending I'm fine, forcing my lips into a smile that doesn't reach my eyes. I'm breaking, and no one can see it. Your name lingers on my tongue, a whisper that refuses to leave. When I imagine you with someone else, laughing, talking, smiling... it feels like someone is slowly pressing on my ribs. My hands shake, my stomach twists. I know... maybe there's no future for us. Maybe I've been fooling myself all along. And yet, even in the quietest corners of my mind, hope clings stubbornly, foolishly, like a candle that refuses to go out. Maybe you'll always be my crush. There's so much inside me right now... so much feeling, so much ache, so many tiny fractures I can't piece together but I don't want this page to be filled with the idea that it's truly over. Because maybe... somehow... Maybe there's still a "us" I can't see yet. Maybe the story isn't finished.

Page 4 – we became ‘us’

At first, the world moved smooth and kind,
I dreamed one day you'll be mine.
But when our words began to die,
My heart went cold, I don't know why.

The clock stood still, time lost its role,
A wall grew tall between our souls.
Like something stolen deep from me,
A silence as loud as it could be.

Today,

I feared the quiet air,
The proof of distance we now share.
Afraid of what time could do
To broken me, to distant you.

But slowly slowly

When our eyes refused to lie,
The truth escaped—no place to hide.
Misunderstandings broke apart,
Leaving silence where love used to start.

When our eyes met, something slept inside,
I don't know when old wounds had died.
Somewhere between the truths we tried,
But our broken words chose love's side.

We confessed...unplanned, unaware,
Like fragile hearts that dared to care.
When you held my hand,
I stepped straight into a fairy tale.

The way you looked into my eyes,
My whole world softened...warm and kind.
For once, the chaos chose to end,
And time remembered how to begin.

The words you spoke, which I'd locked for years,
They fell like crowns, dissolving fears.

I felt like a queen in your gentle tone,
Every word you spoke felt like home.

I never knew such a simple truth,
Could lift me high, rewrite my youth.
Your words put wings on all my pain,
And I forgot the weight of chains.

Maybe you knew...somewhere deep....
In feelings I could never say,
Yet you spoke them all my way.

You named the things I never saw,
Turned my flaws into quiet art, in awe.
Words I couldn't speak aloud,
You spoke for me and I felt proud.

Your confessions kissed my heart,
Healed the places torn apart.
I never knew a few soft lines,
Could raise my soul to such a height.

And then you said...so pure, so true,
I'll never force my love on you.
But know this, no matter where you want to start,
You'll always live inside my heart."

A conversation built of souls,
Heart to heart...no borrowed roles.
Too deep for time, too real to part,
A moment written heart-built, heart.

Today, we decided to stay with each other forever and build a new world together.

Page 5 – Maybe you are the ‘world’

When I'm with you, the world feels light ,
Moments vanish in your sight.
Each goodbye feels incomplete,
My heart still searches for your beat.

I feel the luckiest girl alive,
Maybe all girls feel this dive.
I'm a girl too, and this love is mine,
Unmatched, untold, beyond design.

My eyes reach out,
To capture you, to make you stay.
But beauty like yours won't fit in sight,
It bends the world, it warps the light.

I love your flaws, I love them all,
In every rise, in every fall.
You're imperfect, yes, and yet,
My definition of perfect.

I guard you without meaning to,
My heart stands still when someone's near you.
I shake, I smile, I lose my air,
Just being close makes me aware.

I've read your face like sacred art,
Each silent line, each spoken part.
I wished you'd always only be,
Open, honest, mine with me.

Your voice flows soft, a steady rhyme,
A rhythm syncing heart and time.
Your face...a work I'd spend my years,
Tracing wonder, love, and fear.

The way you held my trembling hand,
Your gentle touch...like foreign land.
A home that breathes in worlds unknown,
A place where I'm not lost, but grown.

In your arms, I softly stand,
A fairy in a fairyland.
And if love asks for something true,
I'd turn to verse...and write of you.

Page 6 – our trio

There was a time we were three,
But I fell in love, forgot “we.”
Frustration flared when they came near,
And light would vanish when they weren’t here.

We tried, we failed, words left unsaid,
Our hearts were heavy, full of dread.
Afraid to own the mistakes we made,
Yet still inside, our hearts would ache.

Then destiny called, returned once more,
The trio as a whole, like before.
I missed their laughter, their talks, their jest,
The playful taunts that made us blessed.

Days without them felt like chains,
A silent prison of unseen pains.
But today we step on paths anew,
Promises kept, and friendship true.

Through storms we rose, hearts shining bright,
Together again, our bond alight.
Not every trio falls apart in two,
We learned the truth that we always knew.

Good bye

THE GOODBYE WE NEVER GOT TO SAY

Time is like a bowl of bitter soup life places in front of you. The first sip stings your tongue and makes you want to push it away. But slowly, sip by sip, you finish it—not because it tastes good, but because you learn that surviving sometimes means swallowing things you never asked for

They say time never stops for anyone, and that truth settles in slowly, painfully. Bad times pass, good times pass too, somewhere in between we grow up without asking for it.

By the time we reached college, our hearts were already heavier than our days.

We were in college then, and we did not come to meet Sam as often as before because distance had become real, journeys had become exhausting, and life had stopped waiting for us. Being day scholars and travelling every day, it was not easy to go there regularly. Forgetting, however, was never an option. Still carried Sam with me quietly through her journey. Maybe I was selfish, but I never wanted to give her away.. Until Arya himself asked me to, I would not let go of Sam—she was mine to remember, mine to protect, mine to hold when everything felt empty.

Sometimes, standing there in my own silence, I spoke to her as if she could hear me:

“Don’t you ever think we had forgotten you. Never. We will never forget you. I am sorry... we are sorry for not coming regularly. Stay strong and do not feel alone.”

Then the words broke inside me and turned into confessions I had never been ready to make.

“I wasn’t ready to let you go. I am still not, and I don’t think I ever would be. So please forgive Arya and me for not protecting you. I

know how to say goodbye, yet this time you haven't given us the chance to say goodbye.”

I would wait here, *outside that world*, with her memories, just to see her again. I hoped that if Sam were ever reborn, her life would be kinder than this one had been. I hoped she would live long, that love would find her easily that time—not late, not broken, not scarce like before. I hoped her life would be gentle, and that whoever she loved would love her back without fear.

I remembered standing by the river, crying until my chest hurt, promising myself and Sam that I would be strong, that I would not let grief swallow me, that I would live, and that I would do everything I could to pull Arya out of that darkness. Even if Arya shouted at me, even if he became angry, even if it hurt more than I could explain, I would keep trying—some promises were made with tears, and those were the ones you never broke.

She was gone, yet she lived inside us. In losing her, something within us had died while we kept breathing. If a genie had ever asked me what I wanted, I would not have asked for miracles—I would have asked for time, for that one day, to stop her.

Death is never a solution; it only freed the one who left and condemned the ones who stayed.

She might have thought she was ending pain, yet she had never seen the cost we would keep paying. Even knowing that, we had loved her so deeply that we still refused to blame her.

Some souls are not meant to be judged—only cherished. She had been one of them.

FROM THE CHAPTER WE LEFT BEHIND

Arya had changed since we lost Sam. The kind of change that doesn't announce itself, but settles in slowly, like dust on furniture. "He lost his shine." That's the only way I could describe it. The brightness that once followed him everywhere now felt misplaced, as it belonged to a different version of him. He had become quieter, more inward. An introvert not by nature, but by survival. Interest no longer reaches his eyes. Even joy feels like a foreign language he did not know.

In the evenings, he continued to play badminton. The same court. The same timing. The same movements. But there was no spark in it anymore—only routine, as if his body remembered a life his heart had forgotten.

He speaks only when necessary. His sentences were short, clipped, and distant. Every word felt measured, as though attachment itself had become something he feared. Sometimes I thought instead of moving on, he moved away from — his emotions, from people, from himself.

The last time I saw Arya laugh was when Sam was still alive. The last time he broke down after that was the day he placed that journal in my hands. I remembered that moment clearly. His fingers lingered on the cover for a second longer than necessary. His eyes didn't meet mine. When he let go, it felt as if he was letting go of something far heavier than a journal.

Since then, he had felt like a withered flower—still standing, still breathing, but no longer blooming.

I tried to make him smile. I tried jokes, distractions, silence, and presence. Nothing worked. Still, every day, I hoped. Quietly. Stubbornly. I hoped his sorrow would soften, that one day the

heaviness in his chest would loosen its grip, that one day he would smile without forcing it.

Whenever Arya smiles a little, I was always left with joy and no pain, even though his smile did not bloom because of my name. Still, happy. Watching him bloom—even briefly—was enough.

Arya was just a friend...Best friend. As a friend, I never wanted anything from him. I only wanted him to be happy, never wanted him to be sad. There was no expectation behind it, no desire waiting to be fulfilled. I don't even know what connects me to him so deeply. I only know that somewhere inside me, his happiness mattered more; sometimes *some things are pure only when they remain in friendship.*

Like the day he handed me the journal and said he was moving on. That was a lie. He never truly moved on. I tried to lift him up again and again. I was scolded. I was ignored. I was pushed away. Still, I didn't give up. Because I had made a promise to Sam I never lost hope. I wanted Arya to smile. I wanted him to do well in life. Because it hurts— When you have seen someone so full of life, so effortlessly cheerful, and suddenly everything about them changes. You feel pity for them. You fear that the person should not take a wrong step.

And it hurts even more when that person is someone you've known since childhood.

A year had passed in winter. Not on the calendar, but in us. And yet, that morning, it felt as if spring was finally considering a return.

Eric was joining college that day—Sam's younger sister. Junior. Precious. Carrying the same blood, the same past, and unknowingly, the weight of our future. Naturally, it felt like our responsibility to guide her through her first steps. What none of us realised was that her beginning would quietly become ours too.

It wasn't just about college. It was about moving forward. About finding life again after sorrow. About the arrival of spring. When she arrived, something shifted.

After so long, I saw a smile touch Arya's face for real. It surprised even him. Of course it did. She was Sam's sister. She looked like her. The resemblance was loud, undeniable. Seeing Eric stirred old flames—memories, thoughts had burned out. But this time, they didn't hurt. They warmed us.

From a distance, she waved at us. And in that single moment, I saw a wave pass through Arya—grief, love, memory, longing, all colliding at once. Somewhere deep inside, I felt it too. As if that wave hadn't come to drown us, but to return what we had lost—emotions, colours, breath. Like spring reclaiming land from winter. She ran toward us, waving wildly, the innocence of a child who had just spotted her favourite candy. There was no hesitation in her steps, no heaviness in her smile. She looked adorable—like a little doll.

Just like Sam. Just like our Sam.

And yet, unlike Sam, Eric was her opposite. Where Sam was quiet, Eric overflowed. She loved to talk. The moment she reached us, she burst out without pausing to breathe, as if the words had been waiting all day to escape. "Hi guys! You know what happened?" she said, eyes shining. "Today was the best! It was my first day, and there were several questions that nobody could answer. I stood up... and I did! The whole class clapped for me. The teacher praised me. Everyone wanted to be my friend. I felt like the girl of the class—the man of the match, lol! And now they're saying I might be the CR. Can you believe it? First day, and I already slayed it!" For a moment, it felt like even her words were smiling. And without realizing it, we smiled too. She stopped, catching her breath, then laughed and continued, "And you know what? When they heard about my grades, they were shocked. And when they found out I'm good at sports too, they were double shocked! They even called me an all-rounder. I didn't even tell them about my creative side—otherwise, they would've fainted!" She laughed freely, unapologetically. Eric didn't know it then. But in her laughter, she carried spring with her.

"Look at you," Arya said, folding her arms with a crooked smile. "You've barely walked in, and you've already started your blah-blah

marathon. I swear, you must've exhausted your classmates before even saying hello. And come on—admit it. At least half of what you're bragging about is completely exaggerated."

She scoffed dramatically and then turned toward me, as if seeking refuge. "I just can't believe you two are best friends. One of you is so grumpy, so useless," she said, throwing him a pointed look, "and then there's you—so sweet, so patient. Always listening to everything I say, like you actually care."

He didn't even flinch. He just smirked, calm and sure of himself. "Really, my best friend?" he said, raising an eyebrow. "You honestly think that person is going to take your side? Not a chance."

They kept arguing, voices overlapping, laughter hiding inside their mock insults. And I stood there, pretending to be neutral, pretending my chest didn't tighten at the word best friend. At least... he considered me one of his best friends. And for that moment, that small acknowledgement, I let myself feel something dangerously close to happiness. And again, as usual, the two of them began to argue. But this time, the argument felt different. The best part of this quarrel was that Arya had finally begun to show his emotions. For the first time in so long. He wasn't calculating every word before letting it escape. He was becoming the old Arya—the one I had almost lost.

He promised himself he would never fall apart in front of Eric. Never let his hands tremble. Never let his voice crack. Never let her see the hollow space Sam left behind. For her sake, he built a mask and was ready to wear it every single day like armour. He hid behind easy laughter, behind gentle teasing, behind a calm strength that didn't feel real but felt necessary. All he ever wanted was to keep her happy—because somewhere deep in his breaking heart, he believed that was Sam's last wish. So he stayed steady. He stayed warm. He stayed *Old Arya*. He treated her like his own little sister. Around her, he looked normal. Familiar. Unbroken. But I could see it—the way the smile lingered a second too long, the way his eyes dimmed when he thought no one was watching. He was pretending to be happy... and somehow, in protecting her, he slowly became Old Arya again.

But somehow, their sweet little moment was slowly turning sour, and it was beginning to get on my nerves, their constant back-and-forth—it felt too loud, too much. And before I could stop myself, I snapped. “Can you guys please stop?”

The words hung in the air. Both of them froze, shocked into silence, eyes wide as if I’d just broken some unspoken rule. I exhaled, softer this time, and said, “Come on. Let’s have something. It’s your first day. Let’s make it memorable.” Her expression changed instantly. She stepped forward and wrapped her arms around me, tight and warm. “You’re the best nee,” she whispered. To celebrate her first day, we went to the bookie café, my most comfortable place in the world. My safe corner. Whether I’m happy or broken, this place always holds me the same way. It’s where I go when emotions get too heavy to carry alone. My usual order is fixed—chocolate chai and a burger. Sometimes red sauce pasta, depending on the mood. Chocolate chai, especially. That’s non-negotiable. Chocolate chai is love. But today wasn’t about me. Today was about her. So instead of what I wanted, we ordered what she wanted. Pizza for everyone. I still held onto my chocolate chai, though—some habits are too close to the heart to let go. We laughed. We ate. The day slowly softened into evening. After that, we went home. And on the surface, it felt like the end of an ordinary day.

Somewhere deep down, I knew better. Because this wasn’t an ending at all. It was the beginning of something special.

Days passed, as they continued arguing—still bickering, still alive in their chaos—I realised that sometimes, beginnings don’t arrive quietly. They arrive disguised as noise, laughter, irritation... and moments you’ll someday wish you could live again. Each one sprinkled with little sweet memories. Every day, we rode together—Mercedes, BMW, Ferrari... mine was a Mercedes, Arya’s BMW, and Eric’s Ferrari. No, we weren’t rich; those were just the names of our scooty’s, but somehow it felt like we owned the world. We had lunch together, just like we used to back in school. Only now, Sam was replaced by Eric. Even though we had someone to fill that space, deep down, none of us wanted a

replacement. We still wished, quietly, that Sam was alive. And sometimes, we would just sit in silence, lost in her memory. Strangely, that silence was comforting—as if Sam was sitting right there beside us, smiling. After college, we would go on walks, play badminton, talk endlessly, and laugh endlessly. We were creating memories again, slowly stitching together a life that had been torn apart.

Sometimes, you don't need to regret the things you didn't do or the life you didn't live fully. Sometimes, all you need is to wake up and decide: today is the day to start over, to begin again.

That's exactly what we did. Arya and I—finally—we let go of holding onto the past too tightly. We remembered it, yes, but we didn't let it chain us anymore. We moved forward. We started a new journey, a life of our own making, and on this journey, we did some of the craziest things imaginable. One of them I remember clearly...

Once, we did the craziest thing—something that felt straight out of a movie.

With fake hostel cards tucked inside our pockets and too much confidence for our own good, we decided to sneak into our department after 8 p.m. The building stood tall and silent, almost intimidating in the dark. Its back gate—half hidden behind ongoing construction—became our target. It looked forgotten, ignored. Perfect. The first night, we tried. And failed.....because Security uncle was sitting right in front of the gate, sipping his tea like he owned the night. The moment we saw him, we froze. Our feet refused to move. Our hearts raced so loudly it felt like he could hear us. Without a word, we turned back.

The next day, we became planners. Observers. Conspirators. We watched carefully. Noted the exact time he left for his office.

For two nights, we planned every step in whispers and stolen glances, like we were preparing for something dangerous.

Finally, on the fourth night, we were ready.

We entered the university at 8 pm and ate our dinner [Goll gappe, malai Momo and aloo Tikki] at Backbenchers Café [the most famous one in our university]. At 9 p.m., we hid behind the trees near the department, melting into the shadows, barely breathing. At 10:15, when the security uncle disappeared inside, we looked at each other—this was it. Arya was the tallest, so he went first. He helped me climb over the gate. Then he helped Eric. And finally, he pulled himself over. We landed softly, hearts pounding, trying not to make a sound. Our plan wasn't serious. We just wanted the thrill—to feel alive, to break the rules for once, to laugh about it later. The corridors looked unfamiliar in the dark. Strange. Heavy. Silent. Every step echoed like a betrayal.

And then—
we froze.

From behind us came a thunderous voice:
“Kaun hai andar?”

The security uncle struck his stick hard against the floor. The sound echoed through the night. Each hit felt like it landed straight on our chests. For a moment, we were sure—it was over. Our harmless fun had suddenly turned into something terrifying. Slowly, carefully, we tried to move back toward the gate. But from a distance, he saw us. The second his eyes fell on us, Arya and Eric froze completely. Panic took over. I didn't think—I reacted.

“Bhago!”

And we ran. Footsteps pounding. Breath uneven. Hearts about to explode. We climbed the gate in a rush. In the chaos, Arya slipped and hurt his knee, but no one could stop. Pain didn't matter. Fear didn't care. Run. Escape. Survive. We thought we were safe—until the gate cracked open behind us. The security uncle stepped out, flashing his torch straight at us. For one terrifying second, the beam caught all three of our faces.

“Bhago!” I screamed again.

And we ran like absolute maniacs. We didn't dare to go towards the main gate—we were sure he'd alert the guards. Instead, we slipped

into the shadows near the library. The place was pitch dark. A few old, dusty benches stood there. Not comfortable. Not safe. But enough to hide. Exhausted. Shaking. Terrified. We collapsed there for the night. Mosquitoes attacked without mercy, buzzing and biting, but we didn't move. At least we were hidden. And that's how we survived our own stupid, silly, unforgettable adventure—sleeping inside the university like it was our secret camp. The next morning, as students started arriving, we slipped out quietly, hearts still racing from the night before. Right then, we decided we wouldn't show up for the next two or three days.

And we didn't.

When we finally returned, we made another plan—we wouldn't go together. First Eric. Then me. And finally, Arya. Slowly, everything went back to normal. Classes. Lunch. Walks. Life.

And now, when I think about it, I can't stop laughing. Because some memories are made of fear, chaos, and stupidity— and yet, they become the stories that remind you that you were alive.

We did so many things. Different things. Small things. Brave things. We laughed a lot. We stayed together. And without realizing it, a whole year passed. I don't know when it started slipping away, or when it decided to move so fast. We weren't counting days. We were just living inside them. We tried daring things. Stupid things. Weird little experiments that only made sense to us. Somehow, through all of it, we're still here. Still breathing. Still alive. If I tried to write everything down, this book would never end. One book wouldn't be enough. I don't know how many I'd need to explain every moment, every silence, every laugh that saved us without us noticing. So I didn't try to write everything. I just wanted to hold one sweet memory in my hands, and I did that.

A year passed. But somewhere in the quiet, I knew—if Sam were still here, the four of us. We'd be complete.

WHEN THE BAD DAYS WERE GONE

The bad days were gone. At least, that was what I believed. The good days had finally found their way back to me. For the first time in what felt like forever, happiness didn't feel borrowed or temporary. It didn't feel like something I had to hold carefully. It felt real. Warm. Mine. I remembered thinking—almost innocently—that maybe the storms were over. Maybe I had suffered enough. That nothing bad could reach me anymore.

I was sitting in the garden with my mother, sunlight resting softly on our faces. I was laughing—properly laughing—the kind where you forget how to stop, where your chest hurts, and your mind goes blank. I joked with her, laughing like a mad person, not thinking about tomorrow, not thinking about loss, not thinking at all.

Inside the house, my nani was in the kitchen, baking cupcakes for my birthday. She had magic in her hands. I still did not know how she did it. They were soft, sweet, perfect in a way no recipe could ever explain. And honestly, I'd never want to share her recipe with anyone. *Some things deserve to stay sacred.*

Everything felt light. Everything felt safe. My mother and I were still laughing when Arya and Eric suddenly appeared. Then—everything moved too fast. They said it was urgent. That we had to go somewhere immediately. That there was something we needed to deal with. No explanations. No pauses. I didn't even have time to ask why. That familiar heaviness crept in again. Not again, I thought—already tired of the chaos that always followed those two. They didn't wait. They grabbed my hand and pulled me along before I could say a word. As we walked, Eric started teasing me, laughing loudly. "Are you mad?" she asked. "Why are you laughing like this? I think you need a psychiatrist." I knew she was joking, but before I

could respond, Arya stopped her. His voice softened as he reminded her, gently, that it was my birthday.

Before I even understood what was happening, the three of us were on a scooty. Eric was driving—confident in that reckless way, not exactly experienced, but fearless enough to pretend she was. The three of us squeezed onto the seat-unbalanced, awkward, too close. I didn't know where we were going. I did not know why. Everything felt rushed, like I'd been pushed into a moment without warning, without choice. While we were still in the city, a policeman stopped us for tripling. For a second, time froze

Back then my heart had dropped straight into my stomach. Eric panicked—I could feel it in the way the scooty trembled beneath us. Somewhere deep inside, I knew it.. I had always known something bad would happen with these two. I just never had proof. Instead of answering properly, she started throwing excuses—one after another, words tumbling over themselves, desperate and unconvincing. The policeman's expression had not changed. Each second stretched unbearably long.

Then— after what felt like forever—Eric suddenly accelerated. The scooty shot forward. The air rushed past my face, my breath caught in my throat, fear slammed into my chest so hard it almost hurt. Laughter, warmth, sunlight, cupcakes—everything shattered in that instant. The city began to fall behind us. The noise, the lights, the people—everything slowly blurred and faded away. Busy roads turned into empty ones, and with every passing second, my heart was pounding harder. We weren't just leaving the city behind; we were slipping into something familiar yet unknown.

They had said we were misplaced. Maybe lost. All I felt was fear tightening its grip around my chest. The surroundings grew darker, quieter—almost jungle—like. The warmth from moments ago had vanished completely, as if it had never existed. Sitting there, trapped between them on the scooty, not knowing where I was or what waited ahead, I felt shaken to my core. It was terrifying how quickly a world could change. In just a few minutes, everything I had felt safe in seemed gone. And yet... I don't know why, but that jungle

felt different. It held something that felt like my own. Being there didn't feel lonely. It felt familiar. Like the trees remembered me. Like the silence knew my name.

Then in the distance, fairy lights began to glow. A small camp stood beneath the trees, soft and warm against the dark. The scooty stopped. Before my mind could catch up, voices rose together, gentle and smiling—"Happy birthday to you..."

At that moment, I saw my mother. I saw my nani. Standing there, holding cupcakes, smiling like they had been waiting for me all along. I broke down instantly. Not because I felt weak—but because I was finally safe enough to let go. Sometimes, you don't need to hold your tears. Crying isn't a sign of weakness; it's the way emotions learn how to breathe. You should let your feelings spill out in front of the people you love. Never waste your tears on those who don't care—but for the ones who understand how precious those tears are, cry openly. Let them see how deeply you love them.

Everything was already arranged. They moved around me, decorated the cake, placed the cupcakes carefully, and fixed the lights one by one.

It all felt unreal—like I had walked into a moment meant for someone else. Then they told me to change into the clothes they had bought for me. I went inside the tent, and my mother came with me. She sat beside me while I changed, watching silently. After a while, her voice came softly, almost apologetic. She said she had work at home and wouldn't be able to stay. She wasn't feeling well—and maybe this place held memories too heavy for her to sit with.

I wanted her to stay.

God, I wanted her to stay.

But I didn't say it out loud. I didn't force her. I knew she needed to leave. Some places hurt in ways words couldn't explain. So she left—quietly. After she was gone, I stood there for a moment, completely torn. Part of me wanted to follow her back home, to return to what was familiar and safe. But another part of me stayed because for the

first time in my life, someone had made such an effort for me. And I couldn't walk away from that kind of love.

That night, the tent, the lights, the soft glow around us—it all became our own small world. I stayed there with my nani, Eric, and Arya. We decided to spend the night together. We laughed. We talked. We shared moments that looked ordinary from the outside, but meant everything to me.

The rest of my birthday passed quietly. Deeply. No noise. No grand celebration. Just presence. And somehow, that was enough. No one had ever done something like this for me before. I didn't usually celebrate my birthday, so none of it felt real. It felt borrowed—like something meant for someone else that had accidentally found its way to me. Something I didn't even know I deserved.

Even when everything settled, when the lights dimmed, and the laughter softened, I still couldn't find words for how beautiful it was. It wasn't expensive. It wasn't grand. But it was rich in effort, in feeling, in heart. That's why it became unforgettable. That's why it stayed with me.

When the celebration finally ended, we lay down to sleep. But sleep never came to me. There was a weight on my chest, unbearable and unexplained, as if the night itself was pressing down on me. I kept changing positions, turning from one side to the other, trying to escape my own thoughts—but they followed me everywhere.

Arya and Eric noticed. Of course they did.

My nani, who could usually sense even the slightest change in my breathing, because of the medication, she was lost in a deep sleep that night. Maybe fate wanted this moment to belong only to us.

They asked me softly if I wanted to step outside for a while. I agreed. As staying inside felt suffocating. I didn't know how Arya always knew what's happening inside my mind—how he sensed the storm even when I was silent. As we sat outside, wrapped in darkness and the quiet breath of nature, he spoke softly, almost like he was afraid of breaking me.

“Say it out loud,” he said. “One last time.”

I shook my head immediately. “I don’t want to,” I whispered. “I don’t want to remember that part of my life.”

He didn’t push me harshly. He just looked at me—steady, calm, certain.

“Read it once,” he said. “Just once. Then tear that page out of your life. Let it leave you forever. Say it out loud. Say what you feel.”

Something inside me cracked. After that, I couldn’t hold myself together anymore. I began to speak. “That day was the worst day of my life. On this day a few years back, I was very excited, unaware of the storm. I was planning my day and hopping here and there in the house, but after some time, my parents started shouting at each other, and I found out my father was cheating on my mother. She had known for a long time. She carried it quietly, swallowing the pain, pretending everything was fine—for us. But that day, something broke inside her. She begged him to stop, and he decided to leave the house. Not alone. He decided to take my sister and me with him. I refused. My mother cried—truly cried—pleading him to stay. Her voice shook, her hands trembled. But he didn’t listen. When I refused again, he slapped me. Hard enough to make my ears ring. Hard enough to make the world tilt. Still, I refused. That’s when my mother grabbed me. Her hands were shaking as she pushed me into the room and locked the door from the outside. She wasn’t abandoning me. She was protecting me. Outside, everything exploded. My father started screaming. Harassing her. Threatening her. He said he would kill her. His voice wasn’t human anymore—it was sharp, cruel, full of something dark. My sister stood behind him. Silent. Brainwashed. Terrified. Too young to understand the monster he had become. My mother stood between them and me. I could hear everything. The shouting. The rage. The hatred is spilling out like poison. I screamed. I cried. I banged on the door until my hands hurt. I begged them to stop. I begged for us to be a family again. I begged to help my mother—but I couldn’t. The door was locked. And then— A sound I was never meant to hear. A gunshot. Then my mother screamed. And in that moment,

something inside my chest shattered forever. I didn't know if she was alive. I didn't know if she was breathing. I screamed until my throat burned. I banged on the door with everything I had, my hands stinging, my chest aching. I tried to force it open, but the door felt heavier than my entire body—like it was built to keep me powerless. Then I saw the window. It was too high. I was too small. But fear gives you a strength you don't know how to name. I climbed. I slipped. I fell. My knee screamed in pain as it hit the ground—but I didn't stop. I didn't even look at the blood. I ran. I ran to my mother. She was lying on the floor, holding her right arm. Blood soaked into her clothes, into the ground, into my memory. She was crying just quietly, like she was trying not to scare me. There he was. My father. The man who had just shot her. He stood there pretending to care. Acting shocked. Saying it was an accident. Nothing like that is an accident. My mother looked at me then. Her face was pale, her lips trembling. Through the pain, through the fear, she whispered the words that still echo inside me—"Run. Run as far as you can." That was the moment she stopped being just my mother. She became my shield. Shukla uncle—our driver, the man who stood closer to my mother than most family ever did—grabbed my hand. He didn't hesitate. He just moved. He took me deep into the jungle. Away from the house. Away from the noise. Away from the man who had destroyed everything. He told me to stay there. He promised he would come back. And I believed him. I stayed. I was terrified—alone, surrounded by darkness that felt alive. The jungle changed when night fell. Every sound felt closer. Every shadow felt like it was watching me. My body shook, not just from fear, but from the cold realisation that no one was coming back. The night stretched endlessly. Strange, unknown footsteps. A strange and unknown voice was calling my name. But no, Shukla uncle, not my mother, grandmother, you [Arya], I cried until my throat burned, until my voice dissolved into the trees and came back to me in silence. I hugged my knees, tried to make myself smaller, tried to disappear into the ground. I was sure I would die there—either from fear, or from the wild, or from simply being forgotten. For a moment, I believed my mother was gone. I believed Shukla uncle had left me behind. I believed the world had decided I was too small

to matter. And at that moment, I thought—maybe I should disappear too. But hope is strange. It survives even when everything else collapses. Somewhere between fear and exhaustion, something inside me refused to die. I wanted to live—not for myself, but for my mother. I needed to see her again. I needed to know she was breathing. That she had survived. I held onto that thought like a lifeline. Because as long as my mother was alive, I had a reason to be, too. The next day, in the afternoon, they found me. My mother. My grandmother. But not Shukla uncle. He broke the promise. My mother was in terrible condition. Her body was weak, wounded, barely holding itself together—and yet she came only for me. The moment I saw her, everything I had been holding back collapsed. I hugged her and cried like my heart would burst, like my chest couldn't contain the relief. She was alive. That was all that mattered. She was hospitalized again, for many days. I stayed close to her, afraid to sleep alone, afraid that if I closed my eyes, she would disappear again. But the saddest truth is that Shukla uncle was gone, forgot his promise. The devil killed him. I refuse to call that man my father. A father does not do this. My father did not kill him—the devil did. The same man who tried to destroy us took away the one who saved my life. Shukla uncle was more than a driver. He was courageous. He was loyal. He was that protection when the world turned violent. He saved me. He protected my mother. And for that, he paid with his life. This jungle still reminds me of him. The trees. The silence. The darkness. It was the safest place he ever kept me. And now, it holds his memory. I miss my saviour. I don't know how to describe this feeling—loss and victory tangled together, impossible to separate. I suffered. I lost more than I ever knew how to name. And yet... I survived. That itself feels like a kind of miracle. From that day on, the devil never entered my life again, and I will never allow him to. Not because I am fearless—but because I am protected. I have my mother, whose love stood between me and death. I have my grandmother, whose presence became my anchor when the world tried to pull me under. I have my Shukla uncle—my saviour—watching over me from heaven, where no violence can ever reach him again. They are my shields. They are my strength because of them, and I am still here.”

That night, I cried out loud, without filters, without shame. crying that doesn't ask to be comforted, only to be allowed. They didn't rush to stop me. They didn't offer words that might interrupt the storm breaking loose inside my chest. They stayed. They let me fall apart, because somewhere deep down, they understood—this was the night my heart needed to break open. So I cried. Until the weight I had been carrying for so long finally began to loosen its grip.

And then... I stopped because I had let it all out.

They looked at me then—with the quiet pride parents carry when they see their child take a step on their own. Just that look that said, You did this yourself. For the first time in a long while, I felt light—as if something I had been dragging behind me had finally been set down. I tore apart a chapter of my life that had once been mine, but I was never truly his. I folded that page, ripped it carefully from my story, and left it behind.

We finally went to sleep— with a softer heart, with lighter breaths, with the quiet courage of a new beginning.

OUR FIRST TRIP

I would like to share our first trip.

It was the best time of the year, thoseA few days after my birthday, when happiness still clung to me like a familiar scent. Everything felt lighter then. When the three of us decided to go on a trip, it didn't feel like a plan. It felt like a need. An urge to escape, to breathe freely, to exist somewhere beyond the weight of everyday life. Convincing our parents became a battle. Worry wrapped around every conversation and doubt hid behind every question. They saw risks; we saw life slipping past us. In the end it took begging, promising responsibility, and a little emotional blackmail. When permission finally came, it felt unreal, as if we had won something fragile and precious. After that there was no room for fear—only excitement, only us.

In college two people often organised group trips, chaotic and unstructured, full of strangers. We joined without much thought, the three of us stepping into uncertainty together. Himachal. Manali. The name itself felt like freedom rolling off the tongue.

We planned our seats like it mattered because somehow, it did. Eric and I loved window seats, but Eric's motion sickness always complicated things. So we decided Eric and Arya would sit together, and I'd take the window seat beside a stranger. Fate intervened quietly. The stranger never came. I ended up with two seats to myself. During the journey we began noticing the way people looked at them—the whispers, the smiles, the assumptions. Everyone believed Eric and Arya were a couple. They weren't, and the realization hit us so suddenly that we burst into uncontrollable laughter. The night passed like a gentle blur. Songs played—some loud, some nostalgic. Cards were shuffled, jokes repeated, stories shared with people who slowly stopped feeling like strangers. Under the dim lights of the traveller, surrounded by movement and noise, we built a temporary home. Fragile, fleeting, yet real—so real that

remembering it still hurts. When sleep finally found us, it came gently, as if it didn't want to interrupt anything. By the time our eyes opened again, the traveller had already delivered us to Manali. Cold air. Tired bodies. Full hearts. Standing there, half-asleep, bags in our hands, smiles refusing to fade, we didn't know it then, but something had already been sealed inside us. It wasn't just a trip. It was freedom we weren't allowed to name. It was friendship before life could fracture it. It was a memory settling quietly into a place it would never leave—no matter how much time passed. Even after barely two hours of sleep, we felt strangely alive. Maybe it was because it was our first trip. Or maybe first trips carried something sacred, something untouchable. No matter how tired the body was, excitement refused to slow down. On ordinary days, even twelve hours of sleep never felt enough. But that morning, two hours felt like abundance. Instead of resting, we rushed through quick baths, threw on clothes without overthinking, and stepped out. We told bhaiya to call us when everyone else was ready and walked off on our own—curious, careless, excited like children who had not yet known the weight of the world....It was tucked quietly between trees, almost swallowed by the woods. It didn't feel like a place meant to be discovered—it felt like a secret. Sitting there felt unreal, as if we had stepped into a pause the world had forgotten to remove. The air was clean in a way cities could never imitate, and the silence felt gentle rather than empty. The food tasted honest. The pasta felt freshly made, rich with the softness of tomatoes, as though it had come straight from the earth rather than a kitchen. The coffee was warm and strong, the kind that settled into your chest and stayed there. Everything tasted better simply because nothing was rushed.... *Some moments are meant to be felt and quietly carried long after they pass*Soon, the organiser bhaiya called us, still smiling, still glowing we boarded the traveller again, this time heading toward Jogni Waterfalls. By then we had already made a few friends from another department. We thought we would connect with them the most, and for a while we did. Laughter came easily and conversations flowed. What we didn't know then was that the strongest connection—the most unexpected energy—was sitting quietly in the back seats of the traveller, unseen and unnoticed,

waiting for the right moment to find us. Then came the trek. The moment our feet touched the path, reality didn't walk in—it collided with us. Within minutes we realised a simple truth: we were not built for trekking. Our lungs protested. Our legs burned. Every step felt heavier than the last. Exhaustion arrived early and uninvited. Yet somewhere beneath the discomfort something stubborn refused to fade. A small voice kept whispering that we hadn't come all this way to stop now. We had travelled too far—emotionally, physically, mentally to let weak stamina defeat us. So we kept moving, slowly and awkwardly, laughing through the pain and dragging ourselves forward with determination rather than strength. Among the three of us Arya, Eric, and me I reached the top first. Not first among everyone, only first within our little circle. The moment I reached the top, everything softened.. Cold water touched my face, and it felt like the mountain itself was blessing me. Every ache dissolved. Every breath steadied. I felt light, calm, deeply alive. We clicked a few pictures, but not many. We weren't there to live inside our phones. We sat there. We laughed. We breathed. We let silence sit with us. For fifteen, maybe twenty minutes, the world forgot to exist and we let it. Nothing else mattered. Nothing else intruded. Just us, the cold water, and a moment that asked for nothing but presence. , smiles glued to our faces like they had decided to stay. The organizers were still at the waterfall. We could've stayed. We probably should've stayed. But curiosity has never respected logic. So we wandered off again with a few others from our traveller , wanting to see just a little more. Somewhere along the way, the group split into two. One stayed safely with the organisers. The other—us—walked confidently into confusion. And that's when the problem arrived. As always, together, the three of us managed to do what we do best—get lost. Oddly, there was no panic. No screaming. No dramatic “we're-going-to-die-here” moment. Maybe because we weren't alone. Maybe because mountains have a calming effect. Or maybe because we were too tired to panic properly. At some point during the downhill walk, we put our complete faith in a stranger. He spoke with confidence, walked with purpose, and assured us he knew another route. Naturally, we believed him. Because when someone sounds sure, you don't ask questions—you

just follow and hope for the best. And surprisingly... It worked. Along the way, two boys started walking with us, helping whenever the path got tricky. They slowed down, checked in, and cracked jokes. That's when we realised, they were from our traveller too. The quiet ones from the very back seats. The ones we hadn't noticed before. Conversation flowed easily. Strangers turned into familiar faces. We learned they had three more friends who had gone the correct way with the organisers. There was calm. Somehow, despite being lost, everything felt... okay. As we kept walking, people began appearing one by one—like NPCs loading into the scene. And then, finally, we saw it. The road. The right road. Relief hit us all at once. We laughed, sighed, felt victorious—like we had survived something dramatic and meaningful. That's when the stranger cleared his throat and said, very casually, "By the way... this is my first time here too. I don't actually know the route." Silence. Then chaos. We stared at him. He stared back. Someone laughed. Someone almost lost their mind. We realised we hadn't followed a guide—we had followed a man powered entirely by confidence and vibes. By the time we reached the traveller, we weren't strangers anymore. We were a group bonded by bad navigation, blind trust, and the kind of memory that only becomes funny after you survive it. We waited together for the rest of our other traveller members to return—laughing, relieved, and secretly grateful that luck had been on our side. When everyone finally reunited, the organisers guided us toward Mall Road. The group scattered again, plans overlapping, paths crossing. The three of us were ready to head out when those two boys—and their three friends—walked up to us, almost casually, "Where are you going?" one of them asked. "Just hanging out at Mall Road," we replied, smiling. They hesitated for half a second before asking, "Can we join?" We said yes. Just like that. No second thoughts. Not knowing that this small, effortless yes would quietly turn into something worth remembering. We ended up in a cosy café, sitting close, wrapped in warmth and chatter. Hot chocolates in our hands, steam rising, laughter filling the space between sips. The cups warmed our palms. We talked about random things and laughed without trying. They were our juniors but that never mattered. What mattered was how easy it felt.

How comfortable. How unforced. That's also when I learned an important truth about myself. Two sips into my hot chocolate, reality hit me harder than the trek ever had—my sugar tolerance is tragically low. While everyone else was enjoying theirs like civilised humans, I was silently fighting for my life, smiling through regret, pretending I wasn't questioning every decision that led me to that cup. That evening, as we walked together through Mall Road—laughing too loudly, blending into the lights, the noise, the cold air of Manali—something beautiful began. Something unnamed. Something light, footsteps syncing without effort, memories being written without permission. Together, we went on without realising how important this moment would become. By the time we returned to the hotel, excitement was still running through us, but our bodies had completely surrendered. The good kind of tired—the kind that doesn't ache, only proves that the day was lived fully. We skipped dinner. Between the coffee, the hot chocolate, the walking, and the laughter, we were already full. All we wanted was rest. So we went to our rooms, collapsed onto our beds, and let silence finally catch up to us. That's when the hot chocolate came back for revenge. I tried to puke. First in the bathroom. Nothing. Then in the open place. Still nothing. Just me, leaning over, questioning my life choices, while my body refused to cooperate. Eventually, in a moment of pure wisdom, I grabbed lemons and started eating them like my life depended on it. Because honestly when life gives you bad moods, bad decisions, and extra sugar... just eat lemons. Lol. That night, I fell asleep with a smile still resting on my face—despite everything. It felt like I had lived an entire lifetime in one single day. I had felt fear, relief, warmth, happiness—every emotion crammed into a few hours. I wasn't even ready for the days that were yet to come—because that day alone had already carved out a permanent place in my heart.

DAY 2

The next morning the three of us woke up with impossible energy—the kind only a trip could create. It felt as if our bodies had forgotten what tiredness meant. Something electric ran through us, a strange

burst of energy that refused to fade no matter how little we had slept. With our new friends beside us, we stepped into the second day of the journey. Our destination was the Atal Tunnel. As we moved closer, the landscape slowly transformed. Snow appeared quietly at first—small patches resting on the ground—then suddenly it was everywhere, stretching farther than our eyes could follow. It felt like stepping into a different world. We completely lost our dignity there. We slipped too often and kept touching the snow as if it might disappear if we didn't. Our hands went numb, our cheeks burned, our shoes filled with cold, yet we refused to stop. We threw snow at each other, posed for pictures, and laughed at how badly most of them turned out. At that moment we were no longer students, friends, or strangers. We were simply children again—present and stupidly happy. Somewhere between the laughter and the frozen fingers, a quieter thought found me. I had always wondered how people spoke to strangers so easily, how they opened up without fear, how closeness could grow without history. That trip answered the question without saying a word. Sometimes all you need is a beginning. Someone has to speak first. Someone has to risk the awkwardness. The first step is always uncomfortable, but once it is taken, everything begins to flow naturally. The day disappeared faster than it should have. Time slipped away through shared jokes, random conversations, and long silences that never felt heavy. Some thoughts matched. Some didn't. Yet somehow we learned to coexist—to adjust, to stay, to choose presence over perfection. There were no expectations, only one rule: vibe and be happy. By the time we returned and gathered around the bonfire after dinner, the atmosphere had changed again. Flames danced in front of us, their warmth brushing against the cold night air. Once again we sat among people who had started the trip as strangers. Under the open sky, stories began to spill out—poems, half-written thoughts, fragments of lives usually kept hidden. No one interrupted. No one mocked. What tied us together in that circle was not similarity but *Apnapan*—that quiet sense of belonging that needs no explanation, the feeling of being allowed to exist exactly as you are. That night strangers stopped being strangers. We learned about each other's failures, insecurities, victories, and silent

battles. Somewhere between listening and being heard we realised something simple yet heavy: strangers are not so different from us. They carry the same worries, chase the same peace, and feel the same joy and pain in different forms. No one is truly alone in their struggles. And no one celebrates happiness alone either. Everyone faces similar storms. Only the paths differ. The process changes, but the emotions remain the same. No one is completely ordinary, and no one is entirely unique either. Because everyone is unique in their own way. That realization stayed with me long after the flames died and the night fell silent, settling gently inside me the way truths usually do.

DAY 3

On the third day our destination was Kasol. On the way the group was offered a choice—river rafting or paragliding for those who wanted adventure. Naturally the group split. Arya, Eric, our five new friends, and I chose neither. Instead we walked toward the river and sat beside it while rafting continued nearby. We weren't looking for a thrill. We wanted peace. The river moved calmly beside us, almost peaceful. Arya and Eric lasted only a few minutes before boredom claimed them. They ran around, laughed loudly, and jumped from stone to stone as if gravity had forgotten them. I warned them repeatedly. The rocks were slippery and the water wasn't something to test. My warnings were half serious, half routine—I never imagined they would actually matter. Then it happened. Eric's foot slipped and she fell straight into the water. At first it seemed harmless. The water was shallow and calm. Everyone laughed. Eric laughed too. Then we couldn't find her. She wasn't where she had fallen. She wasn't near the edge. She wasn't anywhere. My heart stopped. Arya and I looked at each other and in that instant something old and painful broke open inside us. Memories rushed back—memories of someone we had already lost, fears we thought we had buried. For five minutes the entire trip disappeared. Happiness vanished. Sounds blurred. We searched frantically, calling her name, scanning the water and rocks while our bodies moved and our minds froze. Then she appeared. From behind

a large stone. Completely drenched and laughing. Relief hit us like a wave. Then anger followed—sharp and trembling. We scolded her, our voices shaking with fear more than rage. She didn't understand at first. How could she? For her it had been a joke. For us it had been a nightmare returning. Our friends gently reminded us that accidents happen. It was a trip. We tried to move on, though fear lingered longer than we wanted. Nearby we found a small house stall. The aunt there kindly let Eric change her clothes. An hour later we boarded the traveller again and reached Kasol. Tents were arranged and a party was planned. The theme was black. I wore a black leather jacket, blue jeans, and black shoes. We shared a tent again. The space was small and slightly suffocating, but none of us cared. The party was chaotic in the best way. Loud music erased every lingering thought. We danced with friends, strangers, and shadows under dim lights. Eventually exhaustion caught up with me. After dinner Arya and Eric went to sleep—Eric drained from the incident and Arya was not feeling well. I stayed behind with the others and played games around the bonfire, losing every single one. That night quietly taught me something important. Sometimes you have to step outside your comfort zone. Sometimes you even have to step away from the people you love most to truly understand the world. Growth doesn't always happen where you feel safest. When I finally returned to my tent I believed the day was over. But Day 3 wasn't finished with me yet.... A knock came at my door. One of the people I had danced with earlier stood outside. A stranger, yet somehow familiar. "Are you asleep?" he asked. I shook my head. "Let's prank everyone," he said with a conspiratorial smile. And just like that, the night began again. Sleep disappeared. Logic vanished. We gathered more people. Someone found white gloves and stuffed them with cloth and sand, turning them into terrifying fake hands. Then we went from tent to tent. Knock. Door opens. Fake hand flies. Screams. One girl screamed so loudly we nearly got caught—mostly because I couldn't stop laughing. Instead of getting angry, the people we pranked joined us. Two became five. Five became many. Chaos quietly spread across the campsite as we played horror sounds, knocked on tents, and disappeared like badly trained ghosts. Some tents never reacted at all. We decided those people were either

fearless, deeply asleep, or simply too peaceful to care. By the time everything stopped, it was almost four in the morning. We sat in a loose circle, exhausted and smiling while conversations slowed and laughter softened. Stories slipped out naturally—the kind that only appear when the world is asleep. Eventually we drifted back to our tents. Exhausted. Happy. Fulfilled. And that was how another beautiful day ended—with people I had never expected to know and memories I had never planned to create. Sometimes the best moments arrive quietly, knocking on your door when you least expect them. And sometimes all it takes is one small decision....To say yes.

Day 4

It was finally our last day. I still did not understand how those three days had passed so quickly, like sand slipping through open fingers. One moment we were arriving as strangers with our hesitations and silences, and the next we were already standing at the edge of goodbye. Somewhere in between, something had shifted. I had spoken to people I had never imagined speaking to, listened to their stories, laughed freely, and learned about life, about people, and about myself. Without realising it, I had stepped far outside the comfort zone I had protected for years. I had always believed I was an introvert. Those three days proved me wrong. Early that morning, almost exactly at seven, someone knocked on my door. My body was tired and my eyes were heavy with lack of sleep, yet I opened it. A few people from the previous night stood there smiling. They asked if I wanted to see a hidden waterfall nearby—quiet, untouched, something most people never got to witness. I did not think twice. I could not say no. Before leaving, I asked Arya and Eric if they wanted to join. They refused, choosing to rest and let the morning pass gently. On normal days I would never have gone without them, but something had changed inside me. Those days had taught me to live in the moment, trust unfamiliar faces, step forward without overthinking, and say yes even when fear whispered no. So I went. Before we started walking, something else happened. A few tense, half-awake people were already gathered

outside, speaking in hushed voices. They looked disturbed, shaken even. I stood nearby and listened. They were talking about the night—about the strange sounds they had heard. They said they had been too terrified to open their doors or step outside. The fear in their voices felt raw and unfinished. Then one of them looked at me and asked, “It happened to you too, right?” I nodded. That was the moment my friends and I exchanged glances. Quietly, uncontrollably, we laughed—silently and knowingly. We knew exactly what had happened the night before. Some secrets are shared only by those who were there. After that, I called our five friends. Three joined us. Together—with old friends and new ones blended into one group—we walked toward the hidden waterfall....It was breathtaking. Silent, pure, untouched. Standing there, I felt something fragile in the air. Sometimes hidden things feel as though they are meant to remain hidden. Some beauty is so delicate that if the world reaches it, it might destroy it. Yet I felt grateful that for that brief moment I was allowed to witness it—to stand there without trying to own it, simply to exist within it. When we returned, we sat beside the river near our tents. The water moved gently, unhurried. Someone began singing. Another voice joined. Then mine followed. Somehow our music tastes matched perfectly, as if even that had been written into the trip. Our voices were not perfect, but the moment was. As the day slowly unfolded, quietly, I realized: I hadn’t merely gone on a trip. I had left one self behind and found another I never knew existed. Soon it was time for breakfast. Eric called me, and once again we gathered, instinctively finding our way back to one another. The food tasted incredible. Maybe it was exhaustion settling into my bones. Maybe it was the lingering happiness from the morning. Or maybe joy truly changes the taste of things. I ate until I could not anymore. After breakfast I got ready. When I stepped outside, the three of us stood together again—me, Arya, and Eric—side by side, just as we had since the trip began. But this time it felt heavier. It was the last day. I spoke like an elder sibling, half-serious and half-afraid. “Be careful. Don’t play around in the mountains. This was our first trip—we want many more after this.” For once, they didn’t roll their eyes. They simply listened. Our final destination was Manikaran Sahib and the

Kasol market. At Manikaran Sahib, we prayed. Standing there, hands folded, head bowed, then I noticed something else. Some people around us weren't religious. They stood casually, uninterested, detached. At first, it hurt. I felt disappointed. Even offended. I wondered why they couldn't respect my faith when I had always respected everyone else's. That thought stayed with me for a while. Then, slowly—without force—understanding arrived. It doesn't matter. Faith is personal. Belief is intimate. Everyone walks their own path, carries their own truths, their own doubts. It isn't my place to demand respect for my beliefs, just as it isn't my duty to judge someone else's lack of them. All I can do is my karma—quietly, sincerely—and let others live their truth. ...As I sat there, the warm steam from the hot water rising gently in front of my face, something inside me softened. It wasn't just physical comfort—it was emotional, spiritual. Peace comes when you stop expecting the world to think like you. And sitting there, surrounded by strangers, friends, beliefs, and differences, I felt still. Grounded. At ease. Maybe that was the real gift of this trip, the quiet lessons it left behind. After that, we headed toward Kasol market. Me, Arya, and Eric walked side by side through the narrow streets—shopping, laughing, deliberately getting lost as if we could confuse time by doing so. The market was alive in its own way: colors everywhere, voices overlapping, little shops pulling us in without asking. For a while, we forgot about departures. We forgot about tomorrow. When hunger finally struck, we stopped someone and asked for a lunch recommendation. And just like that, we ran into our five friends again. It felt unreal—like the universe was gently refusing to let us drift apart too soon. We looked at each other, smiled, and without overthinking, decided to eat together. Inside the restaurant, another surprise waited for us. Our entire traveller group was already there. Everyone. It felt like fate—persistent, almost stubborn holding us in the same frame, as if saying, *Not yet. You're not done with each other.* We took our seats, laughter filling the spaces between conversations, and then the music started. For a few moments, the noise of the restaurant dissolved. The people blurred. The world narrowed into sound and movement and feeling. And in that quiet moment, I forgot how close the end really was. Later, I

sat alone with a book. I don't know what changed. I don't know what broke me. But I started crying. I didn't want to. I didn't plan to. The book wasn't extraordinary—at least, not to everyone. Some might even call it boring. But to me, the words were painfully beautiful...words can describe everything. The problem had never been the words. It had been me. I did not know how to use them. And there was another reason I cried, simpler and heavier. That was the end....The next day I would return to my ordinary life. The trip would turn into a memory, neatly folded into a chapter of my past—beautiful and unforgettable, but closed. It felt like leaving a home I had built in only three days. Like walking away from a family that had not existed before, yet somehow felt permanent. That night I wanted time to stop. I wanted the night to stretch endlessly and hold us there a little longer. I wanted to stay forever, if it had been possible. But I knew it was not. As we began our journey back, I did not yet know that a few unexpected moments were waiting for us—moments that would make the ending even more unforgettable. On the way home I chose sleep over conversation because I was not well emotionally. The weight of knowing it was my last day with these people sat heavy in my chest. Every laugh and every voice already felt like a memory. So I closed my eyes and pretended the world did not exist. I did not want to talk to anyone. Because if I started talking, I knew I would not be able to stop. And if I did not stop, I would have to say goodbye. I was not ready for that. So I stayed silent and distant....Then life, as it often does, refused to let me sink too deeply into sadness. The road from Kasol was anything but straight—twists, turns and endless curves testing how much the human stomach could tolerate. Slowly, one by one, the people who had eaten peacefully earlier began to regret that meal. Nausea entered the traveller like an uninvited guest. One of our friends suffered the most. He stood up almost immediately and refused to sit, as if sitting itself would betray him. He clung to seats and rails, eyes wide and face pale, fighting a battle only he could feel....Then came the desperate requests. "Please stop the bus." , "Please, bhaiya, stop the bus." It had not even been that long since morning, when I had bought some sour candies. When I offered him one earlier, he looked at me as if I had personally offended his ancestors. "No," he

had said. “This is horrible. How do you even eat this?” I simply shrugged and put them away. Later that evening, in a softer and defeated voice, he asked, “Do you still have those candies?” I handed them to him without a word. Then Eric bought chocolate. Our suffering hero turned to her with sudden confidence and said, “Give me that. Chocolate helps with motion sickness.” She gave it to him. He ate it. Five minutes later— “Stop the bus. I’m feeling sick again.” He turned slowly toward Eric, looked her straight in the eye and said very seriously, “I think I’m feeling sick because of the chocolate you gave me.” We lost it. He smiled weakly, like a man aware of his own tragedy. By that point, the traveller had officially transformed into a moving hospital ward. People who were actually sick were vomiting. People who had been perfectly fine started feeling sick just by watching them. The rest of us were simply trying to survive the drama and the constant stopping. At one point, trying to lighten the mood, I joked, “Just vomit inside and stop making the traveller halt again and again.” Before anyone could respond, someone else said very seriously, “You know, if this traveller had a board that said ‘Vomiting charges: ₹1000’...” Our sick friend immediately added, “If there were no charges, I would’ve already done it. But I’m scared of the charges. I’m broke after this trip.” That was it. The entire traveller burst into laughter—the kind where logic disappears, where the joke is ridiculous but perfect, where everyone understands exactly why it is funny. Every time the bus stopped, I asked, “What happened now?” No one ever had a clear answer. Just vague gestures. “Something feels off.” “Stomach.” “Head.” “Everything.” Eventually, one by one, they gave up. I fell asleep too. The next morning, when I opened my eyes, what I saw was...

Day 5

I had convinced myself that this trip had gone surprisingly smoothly—just one small bump here and there. So the next morning, I expected to wake up at home. I thought the chapter had ended. I thought all that was left were goodbyes that would fade gently with time. I was wrong. A few paragraphs were still waiting to be written. I woke up to shouting—loud, sharp, angry. When I

opened my eyes, my heart dropped. The organizers were arguing fiercely with the driver uncle. Voices overlapped. Hands moved wildly. Suddenly, one of the organizers grabbed the driver by his collar. That moment erased sleep completely. Everything felt unstable. After the argument, we were told to get down from the traveller immediately. With our luggage. No explanation. Just urgency. We stepped out, dragging bags behind us, still half-asleep, fully confused. And then I looked around. We had no idea where we were. Nothing looked familiar. No buildings. No houses. Just jungle. The trees stood tall and silent. Thick woods stretched endlessly. A strange open ground surrounded by mountains, the air heavy and still. It felt unreal—like we had stepped into the opening scene of a horror movie. No network. People stood in small clusters, whispering, panic hiding behind. My mind raced with questions I didn't want answers to. What had happened? Where were we? Were we safe? The trip wasn't over yet. We didn't question anything. The organizer told us he had booked another traveller and that we would have to wait there, so we simply nodded. No arguments. No complaints. Just obedience born out of confusion and quiet terror. So we sat—bags around us, eyes scanning the unfamiliar land, hearts racing for reasons we couldn't name. And then... the monkeys arrived. Not one. Not two. Many. Too many. They appeared from the trees, from behind rocks, from places we hadn't even noticed before. Everywhere we looked, there were monkeys. Two baby monkeys were playing nearby—jumping, tumbling over each other. It should have been cute. In another life, maybe it would've been. But not there. Not then. Me and Arya were busy whispering about the fight we had witnessed earlier. Eric, meanwhile, had wandered a little ahead, curious, unaware. And then she came running back. "THE MONKEY ATTACKED ME."

"Where's your luggage?" I asked

"I threw it."

"Okay, fine—but where's your bag?"

"I threw that too."

We stared at her. Blank. Speechless.

“At this rate,” I said slowly, “the monkey will take your bag.”

She waved it off, completely confident.

“No, they’re babies.”

Spoiler alert: baby monkeys are still monkeys...Those same “cute babies” had taken her bag. And they were doing a full unboxing. Zips open. Items pulled out. Things examined. No hesitation. No shame. Like influencers reviewing a haul. I shouted for help. An elderly bhaiya nearby looked at us and said calmly, “Find a stick.” Immediately, we sent Eric to find one—because somehow, logic had left the group entirely. Before she could return, someone else found a stick. Using it, we cautiously waved it, shouting, stomping, scaring the monkeys away just enough to retrieve the bag. A few items she’d bought in Manali were gone—lost forever to monkey civilization. Sacrifices were made. Meanwhile, Eric was still searching.

I looked at her and said, “Bro, we got your bag. Why are you still looking?”

She replied, dead serious, “There are sticks... but they’re dirty. How can I touch them?”

...After that, we moved to a safer spot, far from the monkeys, and informed the organizer about everything. While waiting, someone—someone with absolutely no survival instinct—decided to narrate horror stories. We begged him to stop. He didn’t. Our surroundings already looked like a horror movie set. We didn’t need background narration. That moment—sitting in the middle of nowhere, scared, exhausted, joking through chaos—became one of my most special memories.... We struggled, yes. But we survived it together. And more importantly—we turned it into a story. After two to three painfully long hours, when patience was wearing thin and energy had almost disappeared, the new traveller finally arrived...That evening, once we finally reached safely, curiosity took over. The fear had settled, now we needed answers. We asked the organizer what the fight had really been about. He told us the truth. The driver had been under the influence of drugs. The organizer had caught him and told him to drop us safely first—and

then do whatever he wanted afterward. The driver refused. And in that moment, the organizer made a choice that mattered. He said he couldn't risk anyone's life—not ours, not his own. So he cancelled the journey on the spot and booked another vehicle. Suddenly, everything made sense. The shouting. The urgency. Being dropped in the middle of nowhere.... I didn't say goodbye to everyone properly. I couldn't. Something sat heavy in my chest. I had collected everyone's IDs, phone numbers, laughter, shared moments—but deep down, I knew I wouldn't meet all of them again. Maybe a few. Maybe none. That's how these journeys work. They bring people together intensely, briefly—and then let them drift apart without ceremony. This trip was never meant to last forever. It was a chapter. And now, it has ended.

Later, reality returned in its own familiar way. Our parents scolded us for getting late. For not informing them. For not picking up their calls. We listened. We nodded. We said okay. Because none of that mattered in front of what we had lived through. But later, I told every single story to my grandmother and my mother. I replayed it all like a favourite scene I wasn't ready to let go of. And then, finally, I went to sleep.

My chest still feels heavy, but a good kind of heavy. You've touched something beautiful, and it lingers within you.....

KNOWN WITHOUT KNOWING

After that trip, we had not stopped. We had kept moving, collecting moments the way some people collected postcards—carelessly at first, then with intention.

Life was never meant to be smooth. It was a rollercoaster. I had finally understood that the fear was not in the ride itself, but in how you chose to sit through it. You could shut your eyes and scream through the drops, or you could open them, feel the wind, watch the view blur past, let fear mix with excitement. Back then, I had chosen to open my eyes. That choice had changed me.

I was no longer afraid of strangers. I had begun stepping out of the small, safe circle I had built around myself. I had talked to people—random people, fleeting people, people I might never meet again. Strangely, it felt freeing. Every conversation carried a story. Every stranger carried a universe of their own. It had made me believe that this one life was too short to remain silent, too precious to stay closed off.

Whenever the feeling of missing them became too heavy, I picked up a pen. I wrote about them. About us. Pages turned into a notebook. That notebook became a quiet way of holding on. Writing felt like the only thing I could do when people could not stay. Words remembered what time could not. So whenever I was afraid of forgetting someone, I wrote them down. Because moments ended. People left. Words, however, remained.

Yet there was still one thing I could not touch without trembling—commitment. Friendship felt safe. Love did not. I had seen how deeply friendships could hurt. I remembered a time, long before, when Sam, Arya, and I barely spoke. That silence had crushed me. The pain no longer screamed the way it once had, yet its echo

remained. I kept asking myself a question. If friendship could wound me this deeply, what would commitment do?

During that journey, I felt attraction too. Toward many people. Soft pulls. Quiet curiosities. Moments when my heart paused for half a second longer than usual. Yet I never crossed that line. I chose distance. I chose safety. I told myself it was better to remain just friends. Perhaps I was afraid of giving my heart to someone. Too many what-ifs lived inside me.

Somewhere within all of this, I changed. I began accepting flaws—mine and others. I started working on them instead of hiding from them. I was not trying to be perfect anymore; I was trying to be better. Kinder. More human. I wanted to help, to understand, to grow without losing myself. For a while, life felt as if it was finally smoothing out. I felt lighter, braver, less afraid of people, less afraid of conversations. Unknowingly, that courage—born from talking to strangers and choosing experiences over fear—was quietly opening the door to a new chapter of my life. I did not know it then, but looking back, that was the moment everything began to shift.

A Familiar Stranger

Every evening, the sun waited for us. It rested lazily behind the college walls—soft, cold, unhurried—as if it was even tired of the day. The sky bled shades of orange and pink, brushing the edges of the world with a quiet sigh. Every evening felt the same: peaceful, calm, wrapped in silence.

Around Eric and Arya, it did not matter whether they spoke or remained silent. Just being near each other was enough. The noise of the day—the lectures, the rush of people, the small persistent worries—seemed to melt away in their presence. They were not family by blood but by heart, the kind of family that did not just exist in your life; it quietly settled in your soul.

There was a ground near the college , a quiet patch of earth surrounded by the fading chaos of campus life. Since classes ran late, it was always evening by the time we reached there. We would lie on the grass side by side, saying nothing, simply watching the sun sink slowly into itself. Somehow, in that simple act, everything felt lighter. Even on days when moods were heavy and words felt hollow, just being there made the day bearable—almost complete.

But that evening, everything felt different. Sometimes it felt as if it wasn't really you who decided to meet people. Sometimes it seemed as though God had already written certain names into your story long before you even realised it. That was exactly how it felt that day.

We noticed a stranger.

A girl.

She sat alone near the place where we always sat, watching the same sun yet wrapped in her own silence. She was beautiful in a quiet, unobtrusive way—brown eyes that caught the rays of light and seemed to hold them, glowing as if the sun recognised something familiar in her. We never spoke to her, never even tried. Yet day after day she was there, a silent witness to our routine. Something about her presence lingered in our minds, a small, stubborn curiosity that refused to fade.

That evening, we decided to play Truth or Dare. Maybe even games like these were scripted by fate. It was my turn. The dare was simple: go and talk to her. Ask if she needs anything. By then, I had become quite comfortable talking to strangers, so I didn't hesitate. I walked straight toward her and asked softly if she needed anything. She smiled. Then, without warning, she looked straight at me and said, "Can I hug you?"

Before I could process what was happening, she wrapped her arms around me. It was sudden and unexpected. For a moment, the world around me disappeared. Behind me, my friends were laughing like

madmen, oblivious to the shock that rooted me to the ground. I stood there—frozen, confused, my chest tight, my thoughts scattered like leaves in the wind. After a moment, she pulled back. Her eyes met mine, calm, almost serene.

“Now I’m okay,” she said.

I didn’t know what to say. Words failed me. I mumbled something awkward, walked back toward my friends, and tried to act normal.

“She’s kind of weird,” I said, forcing a laugh. “She hugged me... I don’t know why.”

They laughed it off and shrugged. “It was just a dare. Leave it. Let’s go home.”

But my mind did not. When something unusual brushed against your life, curiosity refused to let go. It clawed quietly at the edges of my thoughts, refusing to rest. I kept wondering what her story was. What had shaped her into someone who sat alone every evening, watching the sun. What went through her mind while the world moved around her. Where she belonged. So I made a decision—a quiet, unspoken vow. If she came the next day, I would ask her more. Even if she lied, even if she avoided the truth, that lie would still become a memory, another page in the book of my life.

With that thought, I waited. Waited for the next evening, never knowing that this simple choice, this fragile curiosity, would quietly change everything and rewrite the rhythm of my days.

But the next evening, she did not come. For a moment, my mind tried to make peace with her absence. I told myself that maybe it was a sign—maybe God was quietly reminding me that not every silence needed to be broken and not every story was meant to be asked about. I accepted that thought without resistance, even though curiosity still lingered somewhere in my chest.

After a few days, she came again. She sat in the same place as before—alone, facing the sun as it dipped lower, as if she was waiting for something to end rather than begin. My heart noticed her immediately, but my courage did not follow. I stayed where I was. I told myself I would go tomorrow. The next day, she was there again. And again, I watched. This continued for a few days. Finally, one day, something inside me grew tired of being afraid. After a few minutes of arguing with myself, I stood up. My legs felt heavy, and my thoughts were louder than my steps. I walked to her and asked the simplest thing I could think of, the only question that did not feel intrusive.

“Are you okay?”

She smiled softly and laughed a little, as if the question surprised her. I asked why she always came alone. She answered casually—almost too casually—that she did not have friends. My mind went somewhere it should not have. I thought of people who said they were alone but were actually the ones who had walked away first. I wondered if she was one of them. But something did not feel right. Her voice was not defensive. It was not bitter. It was gentle—too gentle. How could someone so soft be so dangerous? Carefully, I asked if she wanted to share anything. I told her I would listen—truly listen. She looked at me and asked, almost confused, “Why would anyone be interested in my story?”

I told her it was okay if she did not want to talk. I was only trying to help. She smiled again, but this time it did not reach her eyes.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “I have no one who cares about me. I’m just a loser.”

The word lingered in the air long after she said it. I told her gently that no one was a loser and that sometimes sharing things with a stranger could make your heart feel lighter. After a while, she slowly opened up. She told me she was from the engineering department and was drowning in stress, constantly feeling left behind. Her

friends were effortlessly good, and she was always trying to catch up—not because she wasn’t capable, but because life had already exhausted her before she even reached the starting line. She only had her grandparents, and they weren’t well. She carried responsibilities that did not match her age. She came from a rich family, but she said it quietly, almost ashamed. Money could not buy peace, she told me.

She spoke about friends she had once trusted deeply. They told her they hadn’t studied, so she didn’t study either, believing them completely. When the results came, they scored high, while she barely passed. Instead of holding her hand, they laughed. They told her she wasn’t good enough to stay with them. Some left because she was too quiet. Others drifted away because she wasn’t interesting anymore.

What hurt the most was that even while telling me all this, she spoke about them kindly. She defended them. She missed them. She still wanted them in her life. She still believed that if she changed herself enough, she might earn her place back in a space that had already rejected her. That broke something inside me. I wanted to hug her. I wanted to pull her into our small, imperfect world and tell her she belonged there. But I couldn’t make that decision alone.

So instead, I said, “Whenever you need someone to talk to, I’m here. We come here every evening. You can join us anytime.”

She smiled, hesitant and unsure. She said she didn’t want to be a burden.

I told her she wouldn’t be. I explained that my friends were kind and that she was welcome.

She looked away, her voice barely above a whisper. “I’ll try... maybe someday.”

And I didn't push. Sometimes all you can do is leave the door open and hope someone believes they deserve to walk through it. I went back to my two people and told them everything. I could never keep things from them. Some bonds did not allow silence. They just listened—the way people listen when they truly care. Then they surprised me. They said, “If she wants to join, we're open. If we get a chance to heal someone, we'll try.”

Something in my chest softened. It made me proud in a quiet way. We didn't want to drag her into our space or make her feel obligated. We decided we wouldn't force anything. We would simply sit there like always. If she came on her own, she would be welcome. That felt right. Respectful.

The next day, we returned. But she did not come. For a moment, I wondered if we had imagined the connection. If that evening had been nothing more than a brief crossing of two lonely timelines. The days after that slipped back into routine. She would come, sit at her usual spot, smile softly at us from a distance—and then remain where she was. Alone. Always alone. There were no conversations, no interruptions. Just a quiet acknowledgment that we all existed under the same sky, watching the same sun sink slowly into the evening.

Then one day, something shifted. She stood up and walked toward us. We were shocked, completely unprepared. She stopped in front of us and hesitated for a second, as if she was deciding whether to turn back. Then she asked, almost afraid of the answer, “If you don't mind... May I join you?”

We looked at each other—three clowns, suddenly serious, suddenly aware of the moment. No rehearsed response. No clever words. Just a nod.

“Yeah... you can.”

She rushed her words after that, as if she was afraid we might change our minds. “I’m not here to spoil your group,” she said. “I just... I want someone to talk to. Just be strangers and listen to me. Please don’t use my words against me. Don’t tell anyone what I say. I trust you.”

She paused, laughed nervously, then added something heavier than everything before it. “I don’t even know why I trust you. I don’t know where you’re from. I’ve never really talked to you properly. Still... I trust you. Please don’t break it.”

None of us spoke for a moment. We just sat, realizing she had placed something fragile in our hands—something that had probably been broken before. We nodded slowly and said, as gently as we could, “Okay. Tell us.”

Then she spoke, like someone who had been holding her breath for years. “I’m very stressed,” she said. “I don’t know how to cope with my studies. I don’t know how to do things properly.”

Her voice trembled. “Tell me—how do I fit into society? How do I talk so people will listen? How do I become interesting?”

Each question felt less like a sentence and more like a wound. “I don’t want to be alone anymore,” she continued. “I want to laugh like you people. I want to talk... but my talks don’t feel enough.”

She looked down, then back up. “I want to study well. I want to do good in my career. How do I meet the expectations of the people who love me?”

Her voice softened into something almost childlike. “Please... tell me.”

Silence followed.

We were stunned. No one teaches you how to respond when someone hands you their confusion, fear, and loneliness all at once—and trusts you not to drop it. She had spoken so much, unloading herself, that none of us had an answer. Not me. Not Arya. Words completely failed us. We just sat there, three people staring at the ground, feeling the weight of her questions pressed against our chests: how to live, how to belong, how to survive herself. Silence stretched between us—heavy, uncomfortable, honest.

Then Eric spoke, slowly, calmly. “Just go with the flow,” she said softly. “You don’t have to stress yourself so much. Be who you are.”

“For studies—first, stop taking stress and free your mind. Once you calmed your mind, attend lectures regularly. If you don’t understand, find solutions. Ask seniors. Take extra classes. Talk to teachers. Find your way,” she continued. “No one can help you completely. You have to help yourself. About responsibilities—once you stop worrying about everything at once and calm your mind, answers will come. Don’t sit alone and drown in your thoughts. Deadlines don’t define you. Responsibilities don’t diminish you. Loneliness doesn’t erase you. This is not your breaking point—it is your building season. You are not behind. You are under construction. The pressure you felt today is preparing the strength you will carry tomorrow.”

Her eyes stayed steady.

“Be around people. Think about solutions, not problems. Problems don’t get solved by replaying them again and again.”

The girl’s shoulders loosened—just a little. As if she had finally been allowed to breathe.

Then Eric spoke again. This time, her voice carried something heavier. Personal. “And friends...” she said, pausing, choosing her words carefully, “Friends aren’t just people who tell you it’s okay to stay the same.” We felt it before we understood it. “Real friends encourage you to grow in healthy ways. They don’t just embrace who you are today... they believe in who you want to become.”

Her voice cracked when she said, “Friendships aren’t built overnight. They’re built with love. With trust. With support. With respect. They’re built when someone stays—even when you’re hard to deal with. Even when you don’t have answers. Even when all you bring is silence.”

She looked at all of us then— “And sometimes,” she added quietly, “healing doesn’t come from fixing your life. It comes from knowing you don’t have to face it alone. People around you are fighting much bigger battles,”

Eric said quietly. “Some don’t have food. Some don’t have hands. You have a healthy body. You have strength. You can do anything. Your problems are small—not invalid, but solvable.”

Silence followed again.

But this time, it was light. Settling. Almost peaceful. Arya and I looked at Eric the way proud parents look at a child who has just found her voice. The answers we didn’t have, she offered with such grace, such clarity, that it felt unreal—as if she had been carrying these words inside her all along, waiting for the right moment to let them breathe.

The girl smiled. Her eyes filled with tears, but she didn’t wipe them away. She let them exist, just like her feelings, just like her truth. She said softly, “Someone who could tell me how to deal with the world... someone who could make me feel okay... someone who could give me solutions without judging me.”

At that moment, we understood—sometimes people don’t look for miracles. They are just looking for a voice that feels safe. She hugged Eric tightly and cried long, as if something locked inside her had finally been permitted to come out. When she pulled back, her hands still trembling, she looked at us and said something that cracked my heart just a little. “I’m begging you. I promise I won’t become a burden,” she whispered.

How broken must someone feel to apologize for needing help?

That's when we learned she lived in a hostel—alone in a place full of people. She carried her life in small spaces, learning how to survive without letting anyone see the weight she dragged behind her. We talked more—about her family, about life, about meaningless things and heavy ones. Some conversations were filled with laughter; others were filled with pauses that spoke louder than words ever could. Then we walked her back to her hostel. Slowly. Unhurried. Before we parted, Eric looked at her—really looked at her—and said gently, “If you trust us, we'll make you feel better. You're allowed to be with us. You're allowed to be in our group.”

The girl didn't respond. Her smile faltered, just paused. Then Eric spoke. Her voice was polite, soft, but her words were sharp enough to sting. “Please don't break our trio,” she said carefully. “You're welcome to be part of the squad.”

“If I ever feel like you are coming between us,” she continued, calm but firm, “then I'm sorry—but we'll have to forget each other.” She smiled awkwardly after saying it, trying to soften something she knew was heavy. “I promise I won't,” she added quickly. “And if you ever feel that I am... just tell me. I'll leave.” Her voice dropped, barely a whisper. “But please... don't abandon me.”

She wasn't afraid of being alone. She was afraid of being left. Sometimes, the bravest thing a person can say wasn't stay—it was tell me before you go.

On the way back, Arya and I couldn't stop praising Eric. We sounded ridiculous—like proud parents watching their child grow into someone wiser than them. At the end, with the entry of that new girl, I was afraid. I didn't even know why—I was the one who had been the reason our squad existed in the first place. Yet somewhere inside me, there was this strange mix of regret and relief, guilt and warmth. A feeling many people experienced but rarely knew how to explain. Like holding something precious and fragile at the same time, afraid your own hands might be the reason

it broke. I thought maybe this would bring problems into our group. Whenever Arya and Eric were involved, chaos was never far away.

Deeper than that, my fear came from somewhere else—my past. From friendships I didn't want to reread. Pages I couldn't tear out of my life, no matter how badly I wished I could. Pages that stayed closed, but heavy. Quiet, yet loud enough to echo when you least expected them. So yes, I was scared. I didn't trust it easily. I had learned what it felt like to lose people without warning—how groups changed, how bonds shifted, how suddenly you became optional in a story you thought you were central to.

I believed she wouldn't disrupt us.

Arya and Eric accepted her—not as an outsider, not as someone temporary, but as someone they had been waiting to adopt. As if she had always belonged there and was simply late to her own place. Slowly, she started vibing more with Arya than with Eric or me. Not because of any wrong intention—never that. Arya carried a quiet maturity about him. He motivated her without pressure, guided her without control, grounded her without making her feel small. From her side, he wasn't hope wrapped in expectations. He was a brother.

For the first time, I found myself genuinely happy seeing a girl purely drawn to Arya. Clean. Safe. With no hidden meanings. No future negotiations. It felt rare, healthy. Maybe that was enough to let my fear rest. Slowly—very slowly—I could see it happening. Trust. Bond. Laughter. It didn't arrive all at once. It grew in fragments—shared glances, inside jokes, comfortable silences, small arguments that never lasted long enough to turn into distance. We fought sometimes. We disagreed. But we always came back, like none of us wanted the gap to stay open for too long. It felt like we were all, unknowingly, making sure we got addicted to each other. Our squad wasn't perfect. Maybe that was exactly why it worked. We didn't try to act flawless. We enjoyed ourselves as imperfect people, carrying our messes openly and still choosing to stay. We

expected things from each other—not big promises or dramatic loyalty speeches, but presence. Showing up. Being there. Laughing when things felt heavy. Being honest when something hurts. We cracked cheap jokes in public. We laughed at double-meaning talks like kids who never really grew up. We embarrassed each other without mercy. We hit each other like siblings—playful, careless, familiar. Beneath all that noise, there was care. The kind that checked if everyone reached home. The kind that noticed silence and asked, “Are you okay?” without making it awkward. We were a family without the same blood, but somehow carrying the same amount of love. The kind of family you chose. The kind that grew not because it had to, but because it wanted to.

And yes, sometimes change walks uninvited. Sometimes it scares you. Sometimes it forces you to face old fears. But sometimes... Change is good.

SQUAD’S FIRST TRIP out of all those good memories—because with them, somehow, everything felt lighter—what made us special wasn’t the noise; it was the depth. The way we instinctively showed up when one of us was breaking. The way we clapped the loudest for the least progress. The way we studied together felt less like pressure and more like a partnership. Silence never scared us; it meant comfort. Our late-night conversations weren’t just talks—they were confessions, plans, and fears laid bare without judgment. We supported dreams that sounded crazy to everyone else because we saw potential no one else could see. And when misunderstandings came as they always did—we didn’t let them define us. We learned, we forgave, we stayed. That staying—choosing each other repeatedly was what made those memories unforgettable. There was one memory that stood taller than the rest. Our trip.

It wasn’t just about the place, the photos, or the change of scenery. It was about us—together, away from routine, away from rules, away from the versions of ourselves the world usually demanded. Maybe she really was our good-luck charm—because the next

destination was Dalhousie. This trip was different. This one was planned by us, for us. We travelled by bus, and even though a small part of me secretly hoped I would end up talking to strangers again, it didn't happen. And that was okay. Because every trip is beautiful in its own way. You're not meant to compare them. You're not supposed to. That time, it was just me and my three munchkins. For the first time, we felt grown up—like proper adults trying to act responsibly while still carrying the excitement of kids on their first school picnic. We planned everything—how we'd travel, where we'd stay, what our three-day itinerary would look like. We made lists, re-checked bookings, argued over timings, and laughed at how serious we suddenly sounded. We were scared at first. Scared that something would go wrong. Scared that plans would fall apart. But once you took that one step out, life slowly started unfolding on its own... as long as your intention was pure. And ours was. We weren't chasing perfection. We were chasing moments. And Dalhousie was about to give us plenty.

Day one was simple... We reached Dalhousie tired—yet our hearts were buzzing with excitement. So we kept the evening light. Mall Road. We walked without urgency. We judged—but harmlessly. The kind of judgment that later turned into inside jokes and laughter you couldn't explain to anyone else. **I saw very handsome boys. Yes, this deserved a proper mention—it was part of the trip.** We tried the food. Some of it was good. Some of it was... a lesson. A waffle stick worth ₹150 that absolutely wasn't worth it but would forever be remembered. Ice creams that healed the disappointment. Tiny gulab jamuns that disappeared too fast. Gajar ka halwa that felt warm in a way only winter food could. That night, we didn't push ourselves. There was no pressure to "make the most of it." Just comfort, warmth, and tired smiles. We slept early....Around one.

Day two began early ... We woke up at 8 a.m. and headed toward Khajjiar and the Dainkund Peak trek—sleepy, excited, still carrying yesterday's laughter in our bones. And, as expected,

nothing ever went smoothly. Midway through the journey, our taxi broke down. Instead of stressing, we stepped out and explored the jungle nearby. Tall trees. Quiet paths. The air was so clean it felt unreal. We soaked in a view we would have otherwise rushed past if everything had gone according to plan. The driver—sweet, humble, kind—eventually called us back when the car was fixed. We liked him so much that we booked him again for the next day’s trek: Ganj Pahadi (yes, that was really the name). Then came the moment that shook us. On the way back from Dainkund Peak, Eric fainted. At first, we thought she was just sleeping. Her head had leaned to one side, her body gone still. Then, suddenly, she opened her eyes and asked, confused, “Who am I? Where am I?” I almost laughed, thinking it was a joke. It wasn’t. Panic replaced humour within seconds. We splashed water on her face, called her name, and held her hands tightly. Five minutes later, she came back to herself, saying she had blanked out completely—no memory, no warning. We didn’t know what to do. So we did the only thing we could—we moved forward. We packed the fear away like a bad dream and kept going. Because survival wasn’t about understanding everything... it was about continuing anyway. Khajjiar felt like a picnic spot. Open land. Fresh air. We played frisbee like kids who had forgotten how serious life usually asked us to be. After that, we returned to Mall Road once more—Gandhi Chowk. Familiar paths. The comfort of repetition. Nature wrapped around us. That night, we played UNO till 4 a.m. Cards scattered. Accusations flying. Betrayals remembered. Alliances formed and broken in minutes. Laughter echoed in a room that felt less like a stay and more like home. *People are home by themselves*. For the first time, it truly hit us—we were doing it. Managing life, laughter, chaos, and responsibility—together.

Day three—the trek...It wasn’t as hard as we expected. Eric struggled. Her steps slowed. Her breath grew uneven. But leaving her behind was never an option. So we held her. We slowed ourselves down. Sometimes we dragged ourselves. Sometimes we dragged her. Sometimes we laughed through the exhaustion just to keep moving. Step by step, we climbed—not as four individuals, but

as one unit refusing to give up on anyone. And when we finally reached the top, it felt like victory. We made a small bonfire, played songs, and let the cold bite our skin while the mountains stood still in front of us. For twenty minutes, we didn't talk. We just existed—breathing, feeling small and strong at the same time. Then we descended. On the way back, reality returned—uninvited. The driver suddenly demanded ₹1,500 extra. We refused—calmly, politely, without aggression. And just like that, the sweet uncle we had trusted transformed into someone harsh, loud, and unrecognisable. His voice sharpened. His kindness disappeared. It felt like watching a mask fall—not slowly, but all at once. People don't show who they are until something goes against their favor. A good face isn't always a good heart. But we didn't let it ruin us. And maybe that's the point—not to avoid the bad, but to keep moving anyway. Together. And then came the hardest part—leaving. Leaving mountains hurts more than a breakup. It feels like leaving a home you didn't know you had. Like your eyes may never see that quiet beauty again. Only mountain lovers can understand this kind of pain—the peace, the silent love, the way the air feels like it's holding you. We returned home in a HRTC—the absolute worst ride of my life. The speed. The turns. The chaos. Everyone was vomiting around me. Somehow, I survived by listening to Karan Aujla and imagining the driver as him. Don't ask why—it worked.

THE QUITE SHIFT

Another chapter ended. And another was quietly beginning. It doesn't matter how tightly you try to hold on to a chapter, how badly you wish it would never end. Life doesn't pause for attachment. You are meant to move forward. That's the rule of books—and it's also the rule of life. If you refuse to turn the page, you will never finish the novel you started. And you will never complete the process of living either.

Oh no! I almost forgot to tell you the name of our new member.

Her name was Vanya.

Vanya Maheshwari.

Beautiful? Yes. But that wasn't what defined her. Beauty could be copied. Beauty could be faked. What made her real was something softer, rarer. She was innocent—too innocent for the world she lived in. Not clever. Not calculating. Not sharp with words or plans. She spoke whatever came to her mind—without filters, without shields.

Unlike us who thought before we spoke, she didn't know the language of cleverness. That was exactly why she had been deceived before. Even now, she trusted too easily. She would do whatever we said, follow wherever we led, and bend herself in ways that weren't truly hers, all in the desperate hope of being close to people.

I didn't want that for her. As someone older—someone who had learned from mistakes, scars, and betrayals—I wanted her to grow. Not to change herself for others, not to fit into someone else's world—but to change for her own good. To learn that being true to herself was stronger than being liked by everyone. To understand that she didn't have to sacrifice her voice, her heart, or her innocence to be loved. I wanted her to live by her own rules. To put herself first. To stop chasing perfection—because perfection doesn't exist.

I recommended books to her; however, books don't work unless you truly adopt them. Unless you let them become yours. Unless you

read them not just with your eyes, but with your heart as well. She read the books, yes—but she didn't feel them. She didn't claim them as hers. All she really wanted was people—someone near her, someone who would stay, someone who wouldn't leave when the world felt too heavy.

And I wanted to teach her something that sounds simple: take care of yourself before you take care of the world. Because if you can't be there for yourself, how can anyone else truly rely on you?

It's a lesson most of us learn far too late. I wanted her to learn it now—before life forced it on her.

The change happened slowly....

She started learning. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, she began putting herself first—not in a selfish way, but in the way a person finally understands their own worth. She began taking stands for herself, saying no when she wanted to say no, speaking her mind where once she would have stayed silent. Protecting her heart, her space, her limits. Loving herself the way she truly deserved.

And then... I saw it. Eric began to hate her. I never expected that. Once, she had agreed with everything Eric said. She had laughed at her jokes. She had bent herself to Eric's world. And Eric loved it—she thrived on it. Her compliance, her quiet devotion, made Eric feel... important, needed, in control. Now—now she was different. Now she was standing tall. Now she was choosing herself over Eric's approval. That made Eric angry.

She started trying to pull her down, subtly at first. Little remarks. Sarcastic comments. Questions disguised as jokes. Challenges that weren't meant to challenge, but to remind her of her "place." Sometimes she would say, "Miss 'I Know My Worth' has entered the chat," and throw taunts like:

"Oh sorry, I forgot you're in your 'healing era.'"

"Miss 'I choose myself' is feeling powerful today."

"Careful everyone, she has opinions now."

It broke something in me. She would say these things and then hide behind the excuse, “it’s just a joke,” whenever Vanya felt hurt.

“What, you can’t take a joke now?” she’d say, laughing it off as if accountability was optional.

And Vanya would go quiet. I saw it. I felt it. But I didn’t say anything either.

The irony—I was the one who once taught Vanya to stand up for herself. To not shrink. To speak clearly. To stop accepting disrespect. And when she finally did—when she actually put those lessons into practice—the same person I thought was her safe place started teasing her, belittling her, pulling her down for being “too much.”

And I stood there. Silent. Scared that if I spoke up, I might lose Eric. So I swallowed my words and watched the strength I helped build get mocked. It made me realise something painful: loving yourself isn’t always enough. Sometimes, it’s revolutionary. Sometimes, it makes others uncomfortable. Sometimes, it’s the hardest thing—not for you—but for the people who thought you were allowed to belong to them.

Yet apart from this, life then threw the biggest speed breaker in my path—one I never saw coming. Something my ears never wanted to hear. Once you hear something like that, you start connecting dots. Old dots. The ones you ignored before.

Even though Vanya was part of our group, Eric sometimes warned me, “Don’t get too close to her. She’s still a stranger.” Sometimes I agreed. We didn’t know her completely. Maybe she was acting. Maybe she was pretending. But how long can someone act? A week? Two? How do you fake yourself for months—through fights, through tears, through emotional breakdowns?

She was always the same. Still, Eric insisted so I kept her away from Arya. At times, I doubted Vanya’s intentions. At times, I doubted my own judgment. And sometimes, I even wondered if Eric loved Arya—Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I wasn’t.

I didn't know back then.

One night, Arya called me. He said there was something he had wanted to tell me for a long time. My heart started beating faster, but strangely, I had no expectations. Somewhere deep inside me, I already knew that whatever was coming wasn't something I wanted to hear. Still, I stayed silent. I listened.

He told me he loved Eric. And Eric loved him too. He said he wanted to confess to her properly—and he needed my help. Something inside me collapsed. It felt like someone had died again. And this time, it wasn't just Sam. How do we forget the dead so easily? How do we love again so fast—especially when the person looks like her sister, yet carries a completely different soul?

Even if you fall in love again... shouldn't you tell me first? When did this happen? How did this happen? My thoughts screamed louder than my voice ever could. I wanted to cry—but I didn't. Because who was I to cry? I finally gathered the courage to ask him when it started. He told me they used to meet after college. Quietly. Even after we all went back to our homes. Just the two of them. Slowly, they realised they had something between them. Mutual feelings. like Something growing.

Maybe love is real. Maybe love is uncontrollable.

But secrecy always feels like betrayal.

If something happens in front of your eyes, you learn—slowly—to accept it. You grow around it. You adapt. But when it happens behind your back, it breaks something deeper. Something personal.

I hated Arya then. He had forgotten Sam so easily. I had been there after her death. I had helped him survive the days when even breathing felt like a task. I had pulled him back into the world when he was drowning in her memories. I believed moving on would be painful for him. But I was wrong.

I asked him if he was sure. Because love isn't just four letters. It carries responsibility. Weight. Permanence. It asks for honesty, not convenience. He said he knew what he felt.

This time, it was real love.

So I asked him about Sam. Wouldn't she feel hurt? Didn't she deserve at least that much respect?

What he said next shattered something in me. He said he was young back then. That he didn't even know what love meant at the time. He said he hadn't spent much time with Sam anyway. And now she was dead—so it didn't matter.

I couldn't recognise him anymore. People say relationships change people. But how does someone change this much? But the thing that stung the most was that I only mattered when he needed something—to plan, to arrange, to confess. Otherwise, he would never have told me. Their story had already begun long before that call. Maybe from our first trip. Maybe even before that.

It hurts when you're not a priority. It hurts when you realise your presence is optional. It's okay—it's their life. But why didn't they tell me? Was I never meant to mean anything to them? The way I see them equally, they don't see me the same way. The questions screamed inside my head. But my mouth stayed silent. I just said—very softly, very calmly, like someone surrendering, "Okay. I'll help."

He sounded happy. So happy—as if a weight had finally lifted from his heart. I smiled. I didn't want to. But I did. Maybe that's the cruelest part of caring for someone. Sometimes you have to smile for someone else's happiness, even when it quietly breaks something inside you.

My mother asked me what had happened. I didn't answer. I just went to my room and sat on my bed, staring at nothing.

My phone was in my hand. I thought of calling Arya back—asking him everything, demanding clarity, forcing honesty out of the silence. I rehearsed the questions in my head. A hundred of them. And then I stopped. Because I didn't want to become the villain. The jealous one. The friend who ruins love stories just by asking questions.

So I stayed quiet.

That night, I hated Vanya. I hated the way she had entered our lives so softly. I hated how my time, my energy, my concern had gone into protecting her—while somewhere, in that very space, they found each other. I wondered if my absence had given them permission. If my kindness had made me invisible. Then the guilt hit me. She had done nothing wrong.

So I hated myself for thinking that. I hated myself even more for it. Why am I so disposable? Why do people think they can hide things from me—as if I’m fragile glass, or worse, a threat? As if knowing the truth would turn me cruel. As if honesty with me is dangerous. Every trio eventually becomes a duo. And the one left behind always feels foolish for believing otherwise.

I hated Eric, too. Not because she loved him—but because she hid it. Friendships create a sense of belonging, and then suddenly you feel unanchored—like you’ve been erased from a story you thought you were part of.

That night, I cried, hugging Sam’s journal to my chest like it could hold me together. It felt like both of us were crying—me and Sam—across time, across loss, across everything that never healed properly. Eventually, I fell asleep—not because the pain was gone, but because sleep was the only escape left.

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CONNECTING THE UNSEEN DOTS

When I learned certain truths, my mind did not stay quiet. It started moving backwards. Replaying moments I had once laughed at. Freezing frames I had never thought mattered. Zooming in on silences. On glances. On who had stood where. And when I did that—I knew. Every time Vanya got close to Arya, Eric was already there. I went back to the photos. Old videos. Random memories that had been stored without meaning back then. I watched them slowly, painfully, like evidence in a case I never wanted to solve. They were never far apart. Never. I was. I was the one slightly outside the frame. The one who had been holding the camera. I wasn't blind. I wasn't stupid. I just trusted too easily.

The truth was—I was not hurt anymore because they were in a relationship. That wound had closed, at least on the surface. I had accepted it. Love was a choice. And if they were happy, a part of me was truly happy too—because once someone lived inside your heart, you did not suddenly stop wishing them well. What hurt was something else. They had not told me. I knew it might irritate you or sound stupid, because it was their life, their rules. But still, if I had known earlier, I would have stood by them. Maybe I would have needed time to do so. Perhaps I would have been angry at first. But at the end of the day, I would have protected them from judgments, from whispers, from anything that could hurt them. I had never wished anything bad for them. Not once. Even in my anger. Even in my grief.

I was not the evil they had imagined in their heads. I was not the obstacle in their love story. I was not the villain who would have destroyed their happiness just by knowing the truth. I was just the friend who had deserved honesty.

And there was one important thing Vanya had once told me. She had said she got brotherly vibes from Arya. She had said it casually. Naturally. Without hesitation. And I had believed her. Because

innocence did not know how to lie convincingly. So Vanya had never been the obstacle. She never stood between anyone. She never crossed a line. She had not even known there was a line to cross. But Eric thought she was.

Later, when Arya told Eric that he had already told me everything—not because he needed help, but because I was their friend. What a liar. I remembered thinking, *So now I am your friend?* Arya smiled and said they were waiting for the right time.

The right time. What was the right time? A wedding invitation? A pregnancy announcement? A moment when it was too late to feel anything except acceptance?

But I smiled. Because smiling has always been my safest response. It keeps people comfortable.

Eric never wanted to tell Vanya the truth. She believed Vanya would try to break their relationship because she was close to Arya. As if closeness automatically meant intention. As if care always hid desire. I told her the truth — that Vanya saw Arya as a brother. Not *like* a brother. As a brother. But love never listens to logic. Love listens to fear. Vanya was beautiful. Arya gave her attention. And insecurity did not need proof — it survives on imagination. In relationships, even the word *sister* could sound like a threat. I did not know much about relationships. I had never been in one. But I knew this much: when someone loves, they often confuse protection with possession. And fear, once planted, rewrote reality.

There were many moments when Vanya felt left out. I could see it before she ever said it. The pauses in conversations. The way laughter continued without waiting for her. The way she smiled anyway—trying not to be a burden. I felt it too. But I stayed quiet. Because Arya and Eric were my people before her. And loyalty was a heavy thing, sometimes heavier than fairness.

I remembered we were at a high place — the kind where one wrong move could break bones, or worse. Climbing down was dangerous. Arya was the strongest, so he went first, helping us one by one. When it was Vanya's turn, I did not know what Eric said. I did not

even remember her exact words. But I remembered the sound. “Push her, lol.” Arya pushed her. Hard. She fell, but caught herself before it became worse. She stopped herself from reacting and pretended to smile, as if nothing had happened, as if it were a joke.

I had known Arya for years. I knew his anger. His jokes. His silences. But that time, I did not react either. I ignored it. Things often happened around us quietly, unnoticed. And then one day, awareness arrived and the dots began to connect. I knew the version of him who had loved Sam and that version had changed him, but softly, for the better.

This version? I did not recognize him. With Eric, he had become sharper. Colder. As if kindness was optional now. They were harsh with Vanya. Unnecessarily harsh. Cold in ways that left bruises you could not point to.

She wasn’t trying to interrupt them. She wasn’t trying to steal anyone. She was only trying to belong. I had already told them she was healing from her own wounds. Please don’t give her new ones. It hurt because the ones who welcomed her were the same ones who later doubted her. If there was a problem, it should have been spoken about at the beginning — not halfway through. They said she was acting, that she was pretending, that she knew exactly what she was doing. But I knew. She wasn’t acting. She never was.

I always ignored those things because they were my close friends. But this time, I realized something painful — I had never really been a close friend to them. I kept overlooking their harsh behavior in the name of friendship. When I started replaying and connecting the things that had happened, I realized how wrong I had been for not taking a stand for her. I understood my mistake and decided I would stop excusing their bad behavior toward Vanya. And here’s the truth I had been running from — I couldn’t always stand up for her because I was afraid. Afraid of losing them. Arya and Eric had been my people long before Vanya came into the picture, and somewhere inside me, I had made a cruel calculation: if someone had to be sacrificed, if someone had to bleed quietly so the rest of us could remain intact, I was ready for it to be Vanya. Not them. Never them.

Admitting that made me feel guilty, because it meant I wasn't just weak — I was selfish. Vanya kept getting hurt—small cuts, deep wounds, again and again. And still, every single night, she smiled. Just a soft, stubborn smile that she carried like a ritual. She believed that when the night ends, the pain should end too. That a new morning deserves a clean heart, no matter how badly the day before tried to break you. She once told me that I had taught her that. Watching me stay calm, stay kind, and keep moving forward made her believe that healing was possible.

But the truth is brutal—I didn't teach her anything. I didn't save her. All I did was pull her into another storm and stand still while she learned how to survive it. If she grew stronger, it wasn't because I protected her. It was because she had no other choice. So I made a decision that felt like tearing something out of my own chest. I would help Arya and Eric properly—give them space, give them peace, give them the clean beginning they deserved. And then I would step out. I chose to walk with Vanya—just the two of us. To be honest, I knew the trio would eventually break, and maybe that makes me selfish. But after choosing her, I made one promise to myself—I would never leave. I would stay loyal no matter what, until she found someone who truly cared for her. To stand beside her without excuses, without calculations.

FINALLY, THE DAY ARRIVED

Finally, the day had arrived—the day Arya was going to propose to Eric. The day their love would step out of shadows, silence, and secrecy, and become something spoken, claimed, and undeniable. The day he would offer her a promise he didn't see as temporary or fragile, but as something meant to last a lifetime. And I was happy for him. Truly, genuinely happy. Even if he never thought of me as his best friend, he was always mine. After my mother and my grandmother, if anyone ever held a permanent place in my heart, it was Arya. I could never forget what he did for me—the ways he stood by me when I had nothing to offer in return. That day, I felt it was finally my turn to give something back.

At one point, he said something that stayed lodged in my chest long after the words left his mouth. He said he wanted to erase all bad memories. All memories. For a second, my heart flinched—hard. Was Sam a bad memory to him? Did love now require forgetting? But then I tried to understand. Maybe this was his way of surviving. He chose a café near the river—the same river where Sam died. He said he wanted to strip that place of its sorrow, to rewrite it, to begin a new journey beside the very water that had once taken so much from us. A strange feeling settled in me. I warned him. Not once. Not twice. I told him the place wasn't safe at night, that drunk people gathered there, that the energy felt wrong—heavy, unsettled. Beyond logic, beyond reason, that river carried something dark, something that never really let go. I told him everything I knew, everything I felt. But he didn't listen. And for the first time, I didn't fight him on it.

It was his day. His moment. His love. At that moment, I convinced myself my fear mattered less than his happiness—who was I to interrupt something he believed would finally bring him peace? From morning till evening, we were caught in the chaos of preparation—arranging, planning, fixing, rechecking every small

detail. Arya was thoughtful, deeply so, lost in his own emotions. By evening, everything was ready—and God, it was beautiful in a way that made your heart feel too full. A small, intimate rooftop, nothing loud or extravagant, just enough. Fairy lights glowed softly against the dark, like they were afraid to shine too hard. Candles and lanterns flickered in the air. A floral arc stood gently at the centre, not demanding attention, just waiting. On a large piece of cardboard, in his own handwriting, were the words: *“Will you be mine, always?”* A candlelit path, scattered with rose petals, led the way—surrounded by photos, soft music, drinks, food—every detail was thought through, every corner touched by intention.

He spent all his pocket money on it. Every saved rupee. Every small sacrifice he never spoke about. And honestly, even if a girl didn’t love the person proposing, this setup alone could have made her say yes. Arya and I stood there together, looking at what we had created, and we smiled out loud, freely—like children who had somehow pulled off something impossible. But beneath that laughter, something inside me ached quietly. I wished Vanya was there. I asked Arya if he had invited her. He hadn’t. He asked me not to tell her. I already had, but I stayed quiet anyway, carrying that silence like a secret I didn’t know how to justify.

Before evening fell completely, I took Sam out of my bag—not physically, but her journal, her presence, her weight. I showed her everything—the lights, the setup, the river flowing nearby (where she rested in its lap), pretending she could see through my eyes. And something shifted. For the first time, I didn’t feel guilt. I felt acceptance. Maybe Sam would be happiest knowing her sister was happy. Maybe if Arya smiled again, Sam would too, wherever she was. Maybe—just maybe—it was Sam herself who had quietly changed my thoughts.

As evening drew closer, my heart began to race, restless and loud inside my chest. Questions crowded my mind—what would happen, how would Eric react, would everything go the way Arya hoped?

When I finally told him it was time, my voice surprised me with how steady it sounded. “Go,” I said. “Bring her.”

As he walked away, I stood there alone, surrounded by lights and silence. I was happy—genuinely so—because my best friend was about to step into a new chapter of his life. I was also unbearably sad, because I could already feel myself drifting to the edges of his story. The time we once shared would thin out. The trio would quietly dissolve into a duo. The weight of Vanya would rest on my shoulders alone. And yet, despite knowing all of that, I was ready.

Love doesn't always mean being chosen first. Sometimes, it means stepping back, staying silent, and letting someone else move forward. That night, under those soft lights, beside that heavy river, I stood exactly there—balanced between happiness and heartbreak, holding both at once, refusing to let either fall.

THE ENDLESS NIGHT

Time passed heavily, like something pressing down on my chest too much time. Arya didn't show up. Neither did Eric. At first, I forced myself to stay calm, repeating excuses: maybe there was a delay, maybe they had gotten caught up laughing and lost track of time. I tried to believe that. I needed to. But minutes stretched into an hour, and then into something worse waiting without answers. My calls rang endlessly. Messages stayed unread. And slowly, quietly, fear crept in. That place didn't feel like a city. It wasn't loud or alive. It felt isolated, wrapped in an unsettling stillness. The silence gave my mind too much space, and it betrayed me with thoughts I had never wanted — animals hiding in the dark, drunk strangers, shadows turning into threats.

I stood there, staring at the lights we had arranged with so much hope and excitement, and they no longer felt warm or beautiful. They felt useless, almost mocking — as if they were laughing at how naïve we had been to believe everything would go right.

I thought about calling their parents. The urge burned in my chest. But I couldn't. I wasn't allowed to. And that helplessness — knowing something might be wrong and having no right to act on it — wrapped around my throat and tightened. I had never felt so powerless and afraid, while time slipped mercilessly through my fingers. Then after more than an hour — Vanya appeared. I froze. I had been expecting her. Maybe I always had. But not like this. Not at that moment — not in that quiet, heavy night that already felt wrong. She walked in slowly, holding small bags in her hands. Gifts. She told me she had bought them for Arya and Eric. That she wanted to apologise. Her voice was calm. She said she only wanted to give them the gifts, say thank you for helping her, and then leave quietly — without disturbing anything, without demanding space. She said she understood now. That they didn't want her to ruin the trio anymore. And from that day on, she would step back. She would

let us begin a new journey without her. She smiled while saying all of this, like she was doing us a favour — like disappearing was her way of being kind. And that smile — God, that smile broke something inside me. I wanted to explain everything. I wanted to tell her that half of what I was doing was for her. That this night wasn't meant to erase her. I didn't have the strength. I didn't have the energy. Fear had already hollowed me out. So I told her the only truth I could manage.

"They haven't come yet," I said. "I've been calling. They're not picking up."

She tried calling too. Once. Twice. Again. No response. We waited again. Twenty minutes. Twenty-five. Every second felt louder than the last.

Then Arya came running. Running — breathless, panicked, already breaking apart. His emotions were heaving, his eyes wild, like he had been chasing something he couldn't catch. He said he couldn't find Eric anywhere. He had gone to her house. He had checked every place she could possibly go — every corner, every turn his mind could reach. Nothing. At first, he thought she was pranking him — that this was her way of messing with him. But this wasn't a prank. This was something else. Then his voice changed. Completely.

"I'm not getting good vibes," he said, his hands shaking. "I can't think. Please... help me find her." And then his eyes fell on Vanya.

Before I could even understand what was happening — before my body could react — he slapped her. That sound stayed in my head. Sharp. Sudden. I wanted to slap Arya back. I wanted to scream his name, grab him, stop him, shake sense into him. Every part of me wanted to move. But I didn't. I froze. And that moment — that single moment of doing nothing — became a guilt I carried with me.

He shouted at her, words spilling out like poison. "You ruined everything. You have an evil eye. You spoiled our day. Where is my girlfriend? What have you done to her?"

Vanya didn't even understand what was happening. One second she was standing there with gifts and apologies, and the next she was being punished for someone else's disappearance. She just sat there — stunned, silent, innocent — taking the blame for a disaster she had nothing to do with. No defence. No anger. Just shock. And still... She helped us search. For hours.

We went toward the jungle once. The darkness felt alive there. We checked around, calling her name, but nothing ever answered back. We asked a few people — strangers who shook their heads and moved on. Everywhere we went, we carried the same nothing back with us. And even after being hurt, even after being accused, even after being broken in front of us — she didn't leave. She stayed.

We didn't want to go home. Home felt wrong — too normal for something this broken. But I said it anyway, almost begging the idea to work. "Let's check once more. Maybe she's home." She wasn't. Her house was chaos. Lights on. Doors open. Her parents' faces were drained of colour, panic written into every line of their bodies. The moment they saw us, hope flickered — and then died. Arya collapsed again, right there, because the truth finally landed on him with full force: he was the one who had called her there. If she was missing, it started with him. That thought crushed him.

Then we went to the police station. The report was taken seriously. She wasn't dismissed as "just missing." That night — or maybe it was morning, or maybe time had simply stopped existing — we sat in the police station like broken clowns. Same place, same bench. Eyes hollow. Hands shaking. Hope dangling by a thread so thin it hurt to hold onto. Every sound echoed too loudly. Every door opening made our hearts jump — and then sink again. So I called my grandmother. My voice didn't sound like mine. I told her I wouldn't be coming home. She didn't argue. She didn't question me. She just understood. So did my mother. They were worried — they always are — but that night, they told me to stay, as if they knew leaving would shatter me even more.

And then morning came. Not with light or relief. It came heavy, cruel, dragging exhaustion with it. With tired eyes and trembling

hearts, we were told something. Something so devastating, so unimaginable, that it didn't register at first. Words were spoken, but they didn't make sense. It shattered every one of us — something no one was prepared for. Something beyond fear, beyond expectation. Something that changed everything forever.

SEVEN SPELLED RUIN

Morning came at seven. That number — the one people casually call lucky — became the most cursed number of my life. Around seven, we were told that what should never have happened... had happened.

Eric was in the hospital — not just admitted, but on a ventilator. Fighting. Not living, not dead. Just suspended between breaths, between machines, between the will to stay and a body that had been broken beyond mercy.

She had been gang-raped. Brutally. Inhumanly. By people who didn't deserve to be called human.

When we ran into the hospital, the machines were the first thing I noticed — beeping, rhythmic, mechanical like life had been reduced to numbers and sounds. I saw her through the glass. Wires tangled around her fragile body. Tubes stealing and returning breath. Destruction beyond imagination. Bandages hiding wounds I didn't want to imagine. And my mind kept circling one question — why? Why were some men so empty inside that they tried to fill that emptiness by destroying innocent souls? Why didn't they go where consent existed? Why didn't they seek what was willingly given? Why did they hunt innocence, softness, trust — as if purity itself offended them? Why did they choose to take what was never theirs? Why wasn't her "no" enough?

I wondered if they understood that what they had done did not end that night. That if she survived — and I prayed she would — it would linger in her sleep, in the way she startled at footsteps behind her, in the way trust now felt fragile and uncertain. I wondered if they felt any remorse, if they knew they hadn't just hurt her body,

but had fractured her sense of safety and self. To them, it may have been a moment. But to her, it would become a shadow she would have to fight for the rest of her life. No one could truly imagine how much she must have cried that night — the kind of crying that leaves your chest aching and your throat raw. How she must have screamed, even if the sound never fully escaped her lips. How her hands must have trembled so violently that she could barely hold herself together. There must have been a moment when the world felt distant, unreal, as if she had been pulled out of her own body. And the hardest part was knowing that while she was breaking, none of us were there to protect her, to wrap our arms around her, to save her.

Everyone cried. I cried. Arya broke down completely. He screamed like something had been torn out of him. He blamed himself because he was the one who had called her there. Because he was supposed to protect her. Guilt was cruel, logical, and merciless all at once. Somewhere, in his shattered state, he blamed Vanya. She had nothing — nothing to do with this. But shock made people cruel. Grief made people blind. And when pain had nowhere to go, it looked for the nearest innocent body to land on. That morning didn't just take Eric's safety. It took our belief that the world had limits it would not cross. Then we saw Eric's red dress and my chest collapsed. That dress — the one she must have stood in front of a mirror wearing, adjusting, smiling softly at herself. The one she chose, thinking the day would be good. Thinking she would make memories. Thinking she was safe. That red wasn't just a colour anymore — it was hope. It was excitement. And seeing it torn felt like watching her hope, her happiness, and a new journey being torn apart.

The cloth was ripped. Everything else was ripped too — her plans, her innocence, her belief that she would return home.

If animals had attacked her, maybe she could have lived. Maybe there would have been wounds, terror but survival. Because animals acted on instinct. They didn't plan cruelty. But humans did this. Humans with thoughts, choices, and awareness chose to destroy her.

And that realization made my stomach turn. It made my hands shake. It made me feel sick to my core. That was the moment something inside me broke beyond repair. I felt rage — blinding, violent rage — the kind that made you want to burn the world down and rebuild it from scratch.

By the time we understood the extent of the damage, Eric was already gone. Not breathing anymore. Not dreaming anymore. Not fighting anymore. She was dead. She was innocent. And the world kept spinning as if it hadn't just committed a crime by allowing this to happen. Everything that made life feel worth living was taken from her — without permission, without consequence. She didn't just lose her body that night. She lost her safety — forever. She lost her trust — in people, in places, in promises. She lost her tomorrow — all the mornings she never got to see, all the dreams that never got the chance to fail or succeed. Gone. And the men who did this? They had faces somewhere. Homes. Names. They had walked free. They had slept. They had eaten. They were still living — unknown, uncaught, unpunished — knowing that the world allowed monsters to blend in, to disappear, while girls in red dresses became photographs, memories, and unanswered questions. That night didn't just kill Eric. It killed my faith. It killed my belief that goodness was protected. It killed the illusion that being careful was enough.

Two sisters were gone. Sam. Eric. The words didn't feel real when I thought them together. They felt cursed, like saying them out loud might break something else too. I looked at their younger sister — so small, so unaware of how cruel the world had already been to her sisters and something inside me collapsed completely. My heart didn't pray politely that day. It begged. It pleaded like a desperate child. Please, God. If something bad had to happen again, take me instead. Take my breath, my body, my life — but not her. Not another innocent.

People talked about karma like it was a rule. Like it was fair. Like it kept the balance. That day, karma felt like the biggest lie ever told. What was Eric's fault? What was Sam's fault? What mistake had

they made that deserved this kind of ending? There was none. Just loss — random, brutal, irreversible.

I wanted revenge. I wanted those men to feel fear crawl under their skin the way it had under hers. I wanted them to know what it felt like to be powerless, to be violated, to have their lives ripped away without consent. I wanted pain to visit them and refuse to leave. But rage had no direction when the enemy had no face. No names. No bodies. No one to point at and say you did this. Justice suddenly felt hollow. Useless. Almost insulting. Because even if the world punished someone tomorrow — even if handcuffs clicked and courts spoke, and sentences were passed — Eric would not come back. Sam would not come back. No verdict could undo what had already been done. And I knew how this story would go. I had seen it before. After a few days, people would stop talking. News would fade. Anger would cool. Hashtags would disappear. Because she wasn't their daughter. Not their sister. Not their friend. For them, it would become "another case."

But this time, I had decided that I wouldn't be silent. Even if it cost me everything — my peace, my comfort, my safety — I was ready. Because silence was how injustice survived, and I had already seen enough of it. But that morning, standing in the wreckage of everything I believed in, I made myself a promise — fiercely.

Eric will not be forgotten.

WHEN JUSTICE REFUSE TO SHOW ITS FACE

After her funeral, grief didn't dissolve into tears like everyone said it would. It hardened inside us, settling in our bones, turning sorrow into something sharper, something restless. We stopped sitting in corners and crying until our eyes burned. We stood up. We walked into the police station again and again, the smell of files and indifference clinging to us, our voices growing hoarse from repeating the same story to different faces that all looked equally bored. Every visit ended the same way — with dates scribbled on paper, with rehearsed sympathy, with polite lies dressed up as procedure. *We are investigating. We are doing our best. Come next week.* And every time we walked out, the door felt heavier behind us, like justice itself was slamming shut. I knew the truth long before they admitted it without words. They didn't move without pressure. They didn't care without power. So we decided to become loud enough to be impossible to ignore. Me. Arya. Vanya. Three people already cracked open by loss, finally standing on the same side — awkward, bruised, unsure, but together.

We printed posters. Cut cardboard late into the night. Wrote slogans that felt like screams trapped in capital letters:

JUSTICE FOR ERIC. SILENCE IS COMPLICITY.

TODAY IT'S HER — TOMORROW YOUR DAUGHTER.

At first, it was only the three of us standing there under the sun, holding placards while strangers stared, whispered, or walked past as if our pain was contagious. And for the first time in a long time, I didn't lower my eyes. I didn't feel small. I wasn't ashamed of being broken in public. I felt proud — because maybe, just maybe, this was what the right thing looked like: messy, uncomfortable, and lonely.

Somewhere in between the shouting crowds and the long, silent walks back home, something shifted. Arya stopped looking at Vanya

like she was the reason everything had fallen apart. He stopped flinching at her presence. He began to really see her — not as an interruption, not as a risk, not as someone to blame, but as who she had always been: gentle to a fault, honest even when it hurt her, painfully kind in a world that kept punishing kindness. She never raised her voice. Never demanded space. Never tried to prove herself. She just showed up every single day and stood beside us with trembling hands, carrying grief. And slowly, quietly, that constancy did what arguments never could. It changed him.

The crowd grew in a way I hadn't dared to imagine — three of us became thirty, then hundreds, until more than three hundred people stood shoulder to shoulder with us. Strangers who didn't know Eric. Students who skipped classes. Women who clenched their fists in silent fury. Men who looked away and then came back anyway. For a fragile moment, I believed. I really did. I thought this time, justice would be forced to show its face.

We thought we had finally found a crack in the wall of silence. For weeks, the area had been heavy with grief, with whispers, with anger that tasted metallic in the air. When the investigation began, and names surfaced, hope flickered like a fragile candle in the wind. Maybe this time, we told ourselves. Maybe this time, the truth would not be buried. But power moved faster than justice.

Before warrants could be executed, before statements were finalised, before the ink had dried on official documents — they were gone. Private flights. Sudden “academic transfers.” Emergency departures framed as family matters. By the time authorities knocked on empty doors, the accused had already crossed borders. Different countries. Different jurisdictions. Safe behind distance and diplomatic complications. The explanation came in polished words: “extradition complexities,” “bilateral tensions,” “procedural limitations.” It sounded professional. It sounded lawful. It sounded helpless. The case did not officially close. It simply slowed. Then slowed more. Then faded into the background of newer headlines. It wasn't just the crime that broke something inside us. It was the realization that influence could buy time and time could buy

freedom. That justice could be delayed long enough to become unreachable. And the cruellest part? We believed in the system. The silence returned — heavier this time because the truth had been outrun. “Inactive” felt too gentle a word. Too merciful.

We realised then they didn’t escape because they were clever. They escaped because the people meant to stop him were slow, cautious, and willing to wait. We had thought the fight was over when they would go to jail. It wasn’t. I stared at the officers, my hands shaking so badly. For one terrifying second, I wanted to pick up a stone and throw it at their head just to see if pain would finally make someone react.

Are you serious? Someone was raped. Someone died. And this is your conclusion? This is the system that claims to protect us? This is what justice looks like when money speaks louder than blood?

Everything we had done suddenly felt insignificant — our voices, our marches, our posters screaming into the wind. Powerless in front of wealth, influence, and faceless monsters who could erase themselves with new passports and borrowed names. I could almost hear the chapter closing again, slow and cruel. People stopped showing up. Posters were ripped down or peeled away by the rain. The chants faded. The world did what it always did — it moved on, neatly and efficiently, as if nothing had happened. But I couldn’t. I was still burning. Still ready to fight, even though I no longer knew who the real enemy was or where to find them.

That was when Arya stopped me. He looked exhausted — just... changed, like someone who had finally understood the cost of endless war. “Let it go,” he said softly. “Not her memory. Not her. But this fight — it will eat us alive.”

Then he said something I never expected. “Let’s do something that will keep her soul at peace. Something good. Something she would have wanted. Something quiet. Something lasting.”

I had to agree with him, so I said, “If you believe it will make her happy, then do it.”

That day wasn't ending. It was the beginning of something else ,not justice as the law defined it, but a kind of justice no court could ever recognise., but justice the way Arya's defined.

A BEGINNING FORGED IN PAIN

Vanya and I started spending more hours together than before. It just happened the way breathing did when you were no longer counting. We sat in the same rooms for longer. Walked farther without checking the clock. Shared silences that didn't need filling. Earlier, Arya was always the centre, we called him first, invited him everywhere, waited for him to show up. We didn't stop calling him. We still invited him. We still waited. He never came. "I'm preparing for something," he would say. His voice sounded distant. We didn't push. We told ourselves grief looked different for everyone. So we let him heal the way he wanted to. But as his best friend, I never stopped asking.

One evening, the phone rang. He didn't waste time with small talk. "Come to my house. I can't do this alone. I need you both." That night, grief shifted shape. We sat there, three people held together by loss. The air felt sharp. Awake. We didn't talk about revenge. We didn't talk about anger. There was no hunger to destroy. There was only one purpose—raw and trembling, but real.

We spoke about charity. About building something that wouldn't disappear. Something that would stay with us. Something that could help people. Something that could intervene early, loudly, before another Eric had to become a name on a placard. Words poured out faster than we could organise them. Ideas collided. Fears surfaced. Hope felt dangerous, but we let it live anyway. We planned until the night felt too small to contain what we were trying to build. Until exhaustion blurred our voices and silence finally returned. Around four in the morning, sleep took us the way surrender did—sudden and complete. The next day wasn't meant for mourning. It was meant for action. So we began the new day with a strange kind of energy—something steadier. Purpose did that. We took quick baths, ate breakfast, and Vanya and I headed toward our homes to

arrange some money, already rehearsing conversations in our heads, already thinking ten steps ahead just like before.

Halfway there, my phone rang. Arya again. “There’s a change in plan,” he said. His voice was heavy. Final. “We’ll delay it a little.” We didn’t question him. We didn’t argue. We didn’t ask why. He was closest to Eric. He carried a kind of grief the rest of us could never match. What he wanted, we respected. After that, time stretched—slow and watchful.

And in that waiting, Vanya changed. She simply began to take up space without apologising for it. Her voice steadied. Her eyes stopped dropping to the floor. Strength settled into her like something she had finally stopped resisting. She was becoming exactly what I had always encouraged her to be.

But a week later, she stopped coming to me. Stopped sitting beside me. Stopped talking the way she used to—the way words once spilled out of her without fear. Messages became brief, careful. Calls felt formal. There was no fight. No accusation. Just distance quietly taking root, growing where closeness once lived. Once, I thought maybe I had praised her too much, maybe it was my own evil eye, casted without intention.

So one evening, when the weight became unbearable, I called her. My hands were shaking. I didn’t hide behind jokes or distance. I told her everything—every assumption, every boundary, every intention I had never known how to explain before. I stripped the truth down until there was nothing left to misunderstand. She listened. Didn’t interrupt. Didn’t defend herself. Then, very softly, she said,

“I’m going home.”

“I need to manage a few things alone. When the right time comes, I’ll tell you. But please understand—this is not the right time.”

Then she added, almost like a reminder to both of us, “You taught me to be independent. So let me be.”

I had no answer to that. Because she was right. I had to agree. She promised she would come back when she was ready. I believed her but belief didn’t make waiting easier. I asked for one thing. Just one.

“Talk to me every day.” And she did. For two weeks, without fail. Every day a message, a call. Proof that she was still there, even if she was fighting something she refused to name. She never told me what it was. And I never forced her. Eventually, the days without her began to feel wrong. Empty in a way that couldn’t be ignored. I asked her to return to the hostel. I told her I missed her—just the truth, laid bare.

She replied after a pause, “Come take me from home.”

So I travelled for four hours. Four hours of restless thoughts. Four hours just to bring her back. It was the 18th. When I reached her house, I expected warmth. Familiar noise. Grandparents like mine—voices calling from inside, doors open, the comfort of being expected. Instead, something felt off the moment I stepped inside. The air was quiet in a way that didn’t feel peaceful. The house swallowed me whole. It was huge. Too huge. The kind of wealth that didn’t speak loudly, but pressed in on you from every side—wide halls, polished floors, walls that echoed when you walked. It was richer than I had ever imagined. Her grandfather and grandmother looked at me, along with a few others she had never told me about.

They looked at me with pity—too stunned to speak and my smile faded. I felt it instantly, the sense that something was about to go wrong. That look froze me. Anger, I could have faced. Questions, I could have answered. But pity—pity meant they already knew something I didn’t. They didn’t say much. They just led me down the corridor, past doors that were closed too neatly, my chest tightening, my breath shortening, a warning screaming inside me that I wasn’t ready for what waited ahead. They opened her door. That was where the world ended.

She was hanging there.

For a second, my mind refused to accept it. It tried to make it something else—an angle, a shadow, a cruel misunderstanding. But the stillness was undeniable. The room felt wrong. Her feet didn’t touch the ground. Her hair hid part of her face. The air was

unbearably quiet. I don't remember screaming. I don't remember falling. I only remember the sound of my own heart pounding, so loud it drowned out everything else and the sudden, violent understanding that I had come four hours too late. The girl I had promised to bring back was already gone.

And then her grandparents broke.

I could feel their grief—but mine swallowed everything else. The ground disappeared beneath my feet. My body started shaking uncontrollably. My mind detached, like it had cut the cord to survive. I couldn't feel anything. Not the air. Not even my own name when someone said it. Only questions.

What did I teach her? Why did I tell her to fight alone? What was she carrying that she couldn't tell me? Was I a curse? Why did death keep circling me, taking people I loved, one by one?

I wanted to scream. Something crushed my throat. I wanted to cry. Something burned my eyes dry. She didn't just hang herself. She took my soul with her. Her last "love you" kept echoing inside my skull—soft and cruel, looping without mercy. Her last goodbye didn't end. It stabbed again and again, reopening a wound that would never learn how to close. Knowing her made losing her unbearable. Loss hurts—but memory destroys. Every word she had ever said, every smile, every ordinary moment became a weapon turned inward. I sat there for hours. Maybe longer. Time stopped behaving normally. Food lost meaning. Hunger felt irrelevant. Sleep never came because someone had fallen into a sleep that never ends, and took mine with her. The world kept moving, but I stayed pinned to that moment, replaying it until it felt carved into my body. And still no tears. Because maybe my mind thought crying would make it real. Crying would mean accepting that she wasn't coming back. My body refused. My heart froze in defence. Shock wrapped around me like glass—clear, hard, suffocating. Hours later, I was still sitting there. I touched my face, almost confused.

Why am I not crying?

But the truth was heavier than tears: Sometimes the pain is so deep, it doesn't break you loudly. It silences you.

Even today, that memory drags me back to a place that is hard to escape—a place where air feels heavy and light feels distant. A place where logic doesn't survive. I blamed myself. Again. And again. And again. If I hadn't asked her questions. If I hadn't introduced her to Arya and Eric. If I hadn't entered her life at all—Eric would be alive. She would be alive. This all happened because of me. Grief sounded convincing because it knew my weak points. It knew how badly I wanted there to be a reason, a pattern, a cause I could punish. So it made me the answer.

Her family had the kind of wealth that made things disappear quietly. No questions that lingered too long. No headlines. No cameras. Because grief, when you can afford it, is wrapped in silence.

After everything ended, after the smoke, the rituals, the prayers that felt rehearsed and hollow—I was sitting in her house. Her grandparents called me closer. Their voices were tired, scraped empty by too much knowing.

They told me about the letter. How she had written that her body should remain hanging until someone arrived. She had written the date. The time. With terrifying certainty.

I know that person will come, she had written. That person was me.

They didn't give me the letter—they kept it, like a wound they chose to carry themselves but they handed me her diary. "This is for you," they said. "She wrote in that letter to give it to you."

A clean division of grief: truth with them, memory with me.

My hands shook when I opened it. The first line wasn't dramatic or desperate. It was soft, almost shy.

Please keep me in this diary, like the others you've kept. But keep me close to your heart. I feel lonely out there.

She asked me to write to her. To motivate her. To let her live through my words. Between the pages were pictures—only ours—

proof that once we were real, that we smiled without knowing how expensive that joy would become.

And then that line: *I'll be with you through this diary.*

PERHAPS, I LOST

That incident didn't just hurt me—it shattered something inside me. It felt like glass breaking in my chest, like everything I believed in cracked all at once. I didn't dare to look for answers. I didn't dare fight for her, even though every part of me wanted to. Deep down, I already knew how it would end. I knew the outcome wouldn't be kind. It wouldn't be fair. It wouldn't be the ending I hoped for. And I was terrified of watching that final piece of hope die in front of me.

So I did what I've always been best at—I survived quietly.

I chose to ignore the pain, burying it and convincing myself it was just a fleeting bad dream that would pass. Each day, I carried on with routine—going through the motions, smiling out of obligation, laughing when necessary. I tried to live a “normal” life, but it never truly felt normal. The silence was deafening, and the memories refused to fade. They clung to the smallest details—a song, a place, a random moment when my thoughts would suddenly turn back to her, catching me off guard.

I told myself I had to live. I had responsibilities. I had a future that wouldn't wait for me to fix the past. So I kept moving forward, even when my heart felt stuck behind. Even when part of me was still out there, somewhere in her memories. For a long time, I pretended it didn't matter. But it did. It always did. Yet somehow, I was still here. Still breathing. Still carrying it quietly. Because even when something breaks you, life doesn't stop. And neither did I.

Even when your world ends, time does not stop to mourn with you. It keeps ticking with an almost offensive normalcy. I stopped talking to Arya—not out of anger, not even distance, but sheer exhaustion. Words felt heavy. Explaining pain felt like reopening a wound that never closed. He didn't ask either. He was drowning in his own silence, carrying his own losses, his own ghosts.

So we existed apart—two people who once understood each other without speaking, now surviving in parallel lines, each holding private wreckage that couldn't be shared without collapsing. Time passed—I know it did, because days kept changing—but I never counted it. Counting would have meant acknowledging that the world was still moving without her.

One day, he told me something. “I’ve done it,” he said. “I’ve accomplished what I wanted.” I didn’t ask what. I didn’t have the strength to hold another story, another weight. But later, I did—because I didn’t want him to feel the way I had felt: invisible inside pain. He smiled then, just gently. “First, heal from Vanya,” he said. “Then I’ll tell you. You’ll feel happy.”

That sentence mattered more than any act of charity ever could. Because it meant he saw me. He didn’t demand recovery. He named my fracture without pressing on it. He gave me space without abandoning me.

Later, he told me everything. He started donating to poor children—giving, he said, felt like breathing again. He had built a small tree house near his home, something fragile and intentional. Placed Eric’s belongings there. A place to sit. A place to talk. A place to remember without breaking. “She’s there,” he said. “Not physically. But as love.” Then he told me that one of her relatives was a psychiatrist. Every Saturday, she would sit in that tree house, and people could come and speak—free of cost. It sounded right, and for the first time in a long while, hope began to rise. Now people could come—not to hide their pain, but to face it, to speak it, to begin healing from their trauma, anxiety, fear, or guilt.

I made a decision—quietly, without telling anyone. No more entry passes into my life. No new friendships. No attachments. No joy that could later be torn away and turned into another scar. I reduced my world to things that don’t abandon you: numbers, routine, responsibility, success, and family. Manageable. Contained. Because every time I let myself feel happy, someone left. And after a point, patterns stop feeling like coincidence and start feeling like punishment. So maybe my role was never to be happy. Living a life,

I learned, is not the same as living happily. Somewhere deep inside me, where logic has no jurisdiction, I still believe I am guilty—emotionally. I failed my friends in ways no apology can reach. And maybe—this is the thought that keeps me up at night—no one deserves a friend like me. So if you're reading this, don't become what I became. Be the friend who checks in, even when it's uncomfortable. Who stays when it's easier to leave. Who asks twice, because the first "I'm fine" is usually a lie. Don't let silence settle. If you want to fight—fight for the living, before they turn into memories you'd trade anything to have back.

BURIED TRUTH

Life was already falling apart when summer arrived—a season meant for lightness, for heat and laughter and careless days. But everything felt unbearably dense, like the air itself was pressing down on my chest.

One day, Arya asked me for help. Some files had been deleted, he said, and he wanted to recover them. I had always been good at recovering what was lost—photos, data, fragments erased but never truly destroyed. Once, I took pride in that skill. That day, it felt like a curse branded into my hands. I wish I had never agreed. I wish he had stopped me. I wish fate had shown even a fraction of mercy. But it didn't. It was accidental—an awful kind of miracle. Files that weren't supposed to exist anymore. Files even he believed were gone. What I saw shattered something fundamental inside me. A video. One that should never have existed. One that didn't just invade privacy—it violated a soul. My fingers went numb. My breath collapsed somewhere between my chest and my throat. I stared at the screen as if disbelief could unsee it, as if refusing to blink might undo reality. And yet, for one brief, cowardly moment, I chose denial. I told myself maybe it wasn't what it looked like. Maybe there was context. Maybe there was an explanation. Maybe Arya wasn't capable of this. I clung to “maybe” like it was oxygen. Because the alternative—accepting what it truly meant—would have demanded action. Confrontation. Courage. And I didn't have it. I wrapped that lie around myself and carried it home, letting it rot quietly inside my silence.

But lies don't sleep. They wait.

The next morning, I packed my bag and went to Vanya's house. Nothing had changed—and that was the most brutal part. Her room still held her breath. Her belongings stood exactly where they had been left, suspended in the moment she died. The walls felt heavier than before, swollen with questions no one had dared to answer. I

asked her grandparents for her phone. They didn't hesitate. They trusted me completely. Trust—pure, unguarded. The truth exploded like something that wanted me to suffer every second of knowing. Messages. Threats. Fear stitched into sentences that still trembled on the screen—as if her hands were shaking even now.

After that, everything blurred. I didn't remember the specifics clearly, only fragments—Arya had been in jail, trapped physically. Within my own mind, doing the right thing didn't feel right, where truth didn't feel clean, and where survival came wrapped in shame. I kept replaying that moment again and again, haunted by a question that was never found: *Was there ever a way to save him without losing her too?*

I wouldn't have wished that circle on anyone—not even my enemy. where every choice felt wrong and every “right” decision misled. Days passed like distorted scenes from a nightmare I couldn't wake from. I wished it had been a novel—something tragic but distant, something I could close and escape. But I wasn't the reader. I was the character, and characters don't get to walk away when it hurts.

In my country, where money often speaks louder than truth, where silence can be purchased and justice negotiated, things changed quietly. Weeks passed—maybe more. Time lost its meaning. And somehow, the matter was resolved. *The case ended.* I still didn't know how it ended. Everything had been compromised—but how?

The day I heard he was out, I felt like a clown standing in a burning circus. Two days later, he came to my house. I didn't know how to look at him. Even then, I couldn't tell whether it was guilt that lowered my eyes or rage. Maybe both. Maybe love, twisted into something unrecognisable. He stood there quietly, like someone already halfway gone, and said goodbye. He said he was leaving. He said maybe we would meet again someday. He thanked me for everything—and then he apologised. Just a simple sorry. And goodbye.

Those were his last words to me. I couldn't look into his eyes then. I knew I never would be able to. That was the last day I saw Arya.

The day I understood I hadn't just lost him—I had lost everyone. Friendships didn't end with fights or goodbyes; they loosened quietly and slipped away, leaving behind a distance that never closed.

My story didn't end with answers. It ended with a pattern I couldn't ignore—that everyone I loved seemed to walk closer to death than to life. I didn't know if it was a curse or something else entirely. But I knew one thing for certain: there were still things left unsaid, still truths waiting to be confessed.

AN ENDING FOR THE WORLD, BUT BEGINNING FOR HER

Then I learned about my sister. Her heart—fragile, struggling, fighting quietly where no one else could see. And suddenly, everything aligned into a terrible kind of clarity.

If a heart must be given, let it be given with meaning.
If love must cost something, let it save someone.

I didn't want to hand over a heart bloated with anger, heavy with guilt, and clogged with unfinished grief. I wanted it purified first—cleansed of hatred, freed from revenge, washed in truth.

This story—every word you've read—wasn't that purification... Each sentence bled something out of me that didn't deserve to live inside my heart any longer.

*This story was for the world.
The next one is only for her.*

I love my sister and my mother more than sacrifice, more than fear, more than the instinct to survive.

Today, if you ask me, yes—I am settled. Life looks ordinary from the outside. I was about to begin a new chapter that looked safe, acceptable, and normal.

I know myself well enough: when I love someone, I am willing to lose everything—except their life. So if a heart must be given, let it be given so that someone I love can continue to live.

So this ends here.

The next story will not be about pain.
It will not be about loss.

It will be dedicated to my sister.

*About my life.
About a heart given—not because it was empty,
but because it was finally pure.*

“A heart that gives, truly lives.”

UNSAID TRUTH OF SAM!

I was never the kind of person who hated people without a reason. I praised others easily. But Sam was different. Everyone in school admired her, but I never did. I just pretended to like her in front of everyone, just to fit in. I was her friend. I listened to her, walked beside her, and laughed with her. But I always hated her.

Sam was beautiful, there was no denying that. Her eyes were deep and glowing, the kind that made people stop and stare. She knew it. When she looked at someone, she held her gaze just long enough to make them feel special. Boys often mistook that for love. Some male teachers mistook it too—you know what I mean. Female teachers mistook it for respect. But I saw it for what it was: her skill.

She always tried a little too hard to stand out. Like standing under the sun so her skin shone like honey in the light. She kept her hair short and wavy, falling perfectly into place. Beauty followed her, and she knew exactly how to use it.

People called her kind and gentle. I watched closely and saw something else. Her smiles were timed. Her softness appeared only when eyes were on her. She spoke sweetly, laughed lightly, and knew exactly when to stay quiet so others would speak for her. She never begged for attention—she let people offer it willingly. Almost every boy in school liked her. Not because she asked them to, but because she allowed them to. She listened, leaned in, and made them feel important. Then she stepped back, leaving them wanting more.

They said Sam came from a broken home. Her parents were cruel and selfish, always fighting, always hurting each other. Both of them cheated. People felt sorry for her and used that pity to explain her goodness. They called her a lotus growing in mud. I didn't believe that story. When others spoke sadly about her family, I pretended to care. But to me, she had simply learned early to survive. Her pain didn't make her pure. It made her clever. She learned how to hide behind beauty and softness so no one would question her.

She topped the class, too. Teachers adored her—especially the male ones. She asked questions sweetly, thanked them politely, and carried herself like someone who could never be wrong. Her success felt earned but through the attention she knew how to attract.

Then there was Arya. He was tall and strong, with a gummy smile that had become his trademark charm. His eyes were a shade of blue that could sweep you away with a single glance—like a lone leaf pulled into the tide, helpless to resist, unable to turn back. His skin carried a soft golden tone that glowed whenever light touched it. His hair, soft and slightly messy, fell over his forehead in gentle waves. A sharp jawline cast a quiet shadow over his face, and the veins on his hands ran beneath his skin like delicate streams. My personal favourite was his Adam's apple, rising and falling with every word he spoke, like a rhythmic pulse that gave his voice depth. His voice was deep and strong, yet soothing—the kind you'd want to hear again and again. His nose was sharp, like the peak of a small hill, and his lips, thin and soft, reminded me of rose petals. His eyebrows were perfectly shaped, as if painted by an artist's careful hand. Arya was the superstar of our school—Mr. Perfect himself. My best friend.

She didn't chase him. She didn't need to. She simply let him fall—slowly, willingly. Watching that made something inside me ache—love, jealousy, frustration. She won again, without lifting a finger. I knew that once she grew bored, Arya would be the one left standing alone

She wasn't innocent.

She was aware.

Officially, they were “just good friends.” Unofficially, she curated that closeness carefully—laughing a little louder at his jokes, standing a little closer than necessary, reminding everyone how comfortable she was with him. The kind of girl who said, “I just get along better with boys,” as if it were a badge of honour.

The school loved her for it. People whispered, smiled, and shipped them relentlessly, convinced they were witnessing something pure.

Something inevitable. Sam never stopped it. She soaked it in. She pretended embarrassment but fed on the attention—her eyes flicking around to see who was watching, who was noticing, who was comparing. I hated that. I saw Sam more clearly than they did.

Everyone compared them to the moon and the sea—romantic, tragic, poetic. Like the moon that craves the world's attention, and the sea that rises in restless tides just to reach her. She shines, untouched by the effort, while he keeps proving his love in waves. I wanted to see what would happen if the moon vanished.

Sam loved attention the way some people love oxygen. She wanted to be chosen constantly by boys, by whispers, by rooms without ever fully choosing back. Her beauty worked best from afar. Up close, it fractured. She wanted Arya's loyalty, not his depth. His presence, not his cost. Arya deserved more than someone who needed an audience to feel real.

I never shipped them because I wanted the illusion exposed. I wanted the fairytale to collapse under its own expectations. I wanted them frozen in almost—far enough to never become real. Let the promise rot before it could bloom.

fate listened.

Sam was never meant to survive the story intact.

They chose each other for the performance at school; they had already decided to belong together. Arya hadn't chosen me, even though I was his best friend—never really part of the performance, never truly invited into their rhythm—yet i was always there.

I walked around them during practice, lingered a little too long, and interrupted conversations with casual excuses. They might have thought I was just being annoying, just roaming without reason. But I had a plan.

The day of the performance arrived like a festival. The stage, once dusty and forgotten, transformed into something electric. Arya was ready. Sam was not because I made sure she wouldn't be. Betrayal—that's what he must have thought.

Sam was gone
Vanished.

No texts. No calls. No casual “Hey, I’ll be late.” Nothing. She wasn’t picking up. Not even rejecting the calls. Just... gone. Suddenly Arya—the undeniable superstar of our school—stood there with his heart pounding, not to the rhythm of music, but to the terrifying realization that something was terribly wrong.

I stood beside him, ready to be his partner as Sam—his dance partner—hadn’t shown up.

Did I try to replace her
Was I the villain of this story?

Yes.

Honestly, I wasn’t as tense as he was, because I knew the truth. I joked around, trying to lighten the mood, hoping—maybe foolishly—that he would forget Sam for just a few minutes. He didn’t shout at me. He didn’t snap. He barely even reacted. That silence scared me more than anger ever could. Still, I kept trying to lift his mood, throwing words into the air like lifelines.

I knew the dance. When they thought I was just roaming, just standing there for no reason, they didn’t realize I had been learning every move in silence.

The stage was alive—applause echoing, laughter spilling through the curtains, excitement crashing in waves. But behind all that noise, Arya stood unnervingly still.

Cold anger rose inside him like a slow, dangerous tide. I was worried, deeply so—but I’d be lying if I said I didn’t love that anger too. It made him sharper. Real. They had rehearsed for weeks. They had promised each other they’d shine together, no matter what. Now... She was gone.
Oops. I had made sure she was.

The music started. Arya took a deep breath and stepped forward. He danced with me. For one brief, electric moment—I was on cloud nine. The dance wasn’t perfect, but it was far better than anyone

expected. The applause came down like thunder. During that brief moment, I saw Arya's face light up .He smiled. A real smile. The storm inside him—the loneliness, the betrayal, the confusion—melted away under the spotlight, if only for a few seconds.

When the water I had gulped down earlier demanded release, I didn't curse it. I smiled. It gave me the perfect excuse to return to the common washroom—the place I had pretended to forget. The place where silence had been screaming for the last thirty minutes. The place where Sam was still waiting.

I opened the door.

She was there. Faint—but there.

I loved it.

I lifted her and screamed for help, but the panic in my voice was measured, shaped, controlled. Teachers came rushing in, their shoes slapping hard against the tiles, their faces full of alarm. I let my hands shake. I let my breathing look uneven. I made sure I looked like someone who had just discovered a tragedy instead of someone who had authored it. We carried her out together, and I kept my grip firm—protective, careful—the perfect image of devotion. No one questioned me.

Why would they?

I was the one who found her. I was the one who shouted first. Meanwhile, the teachers hovered around us, whispering, praising me for finding her.

In the medical room, under harsh white lights, everything smelled clean and false. I sat beside her bed, my fingers laced tightly together, my head slightly bowed as if I were silently praying. Inside, I wasn't praying. I was calculating. Watching. Waiting. Her chest rose and fell steadily, stubbornly.

Alive.

Good.

Alive meant safe. Alive meant controllable.

For a brief second in that bathroom, I had wondered if I had pushed the silence too far, if fear had been stronger than I anticipated. That

would have ruined everything. But she breathed. Again. And again. Each breath stabilized the story I would tell.

When her eyelids finally fluttered open, she looked straight at me—not around the room in confusion. At me. What I felt in that instant was relief.

Then she broke. Her sobs weren't delicate. They were violent, torn straight from her chest—ugly and desperate. She cried like someone who had stared at their own loneliness and believed it. Her hands gripped me as if I were the only solid thing in the room. I held her tightly—too tightly. My hand moved through her hair, rough despite my attempt to be gentle.

she was breathing. So I became careful. Calculated.

I let guilt dress itself up as concern. I softened my voice, slowed my breathing, and performed the role she needed. I told her I had danced in her place. That I never meant to replace her. That it had just... happened. I let the words fall heavily, as if they hurt me to say them.

The truth sat quietly between us.

I had meant to replace her.

I framed it as my betrayal. I let her see the weight on my face—the pause before every sentence, the hesitation that looked like remorse. I told her it felt wrong, no matter how pure my intentions had been. I let her believe I was suffering alongside her. Everything I could afford to do made me look human, and that made me look good. I became exactly what she needed in that moment—not because I cared, but because pretending was the easiest way to stay close. I knew she would pity me. She looked at me with that soft, infuriating calm—just quiet understanding, exactly what I had counted on.

“If someone else had been in your place,” she whispered, her voice fragile but steady, “they would have done the same.” I nodded slowly. I let my eyes fall. I let the guilt look believable.

Then she told me everything. While we had been at the stage—wrapped in noise and applause, laughter bouncing off the walls,

lights warm and forgiving—she had been trapped somewhere else entirely. A forgotten bathroom. Dim. Abandoned. Cut off from the world. The cracked mirrors had thrown her fear back at her, multiplying it. Scribbled drawings crawled across the walls, staring at her like things that had been there longer than she had. The hallway outside had been empty, silent in a way that screamed.

She rubbed her arms as she spoke, as if the cold were still clinging to her skin. “The floor was filthy,” she said. “Wet. I remember thinking I shouldn’t sit down—but my legs felt too weak to keep standing. And the drawings...”

Her voice dipped. “They felt like they were watching me. Like I wasn’t supposed to be there.”

Her voice trembled, just slightly. “I started shouting for help. I really did. I screamed your names. The teachers’ names. Anyone’s name.” She stopped. Tears slid down her cheeks unchecked. “Again. And again. And again.”

Her breathing sped up, shallow and sharp. “My throat started hurting. My voice cracked. I banged on the door until my hands were red—until they burned. I cried so hard I couldn’t see properly anymore.”

She shook her head slowly, as if disbelief still lived there. “But no one came. Not even once.” Her eyes dropped to her lap. “It was so quiet outside. Too quiet. That’s when it hit me—maybe no one even knew I was missing. Maybe everyone had just... moved on.”

She took a sharp breath, the memory cutting into her again. “I pushed the door with everything I had. I screamed until my chest hurt. But it didn’t move. It never moved.”

Her voice broke completely. “And I realised...” she whispered, barely audible now, “that I’d been forgotten.”

Yes, I thought.

You were.

I had hoped you would be—for years.

She looked up at me then. Pain sat openly in her eyes—raw, exposed, almost beautiful. I held her gaze, mirrored concern across my face, and nodded at the right moments. Inside, I was watching closely, cataloguing every crack, every weakness.

“And while I was there,” she continued, “crying, begging, panicking... I kept thinking about the stage. About Arya. About the performance.” Her lips quivered. “I thought you all were standing under those bright lights...” Her voice fell. “And someone else was standing where I was supposed to be.”

Yes.

It was me.

I had meant to be there.

I hadn’t won completely—not yet—but I wasn’t invisible anymore. Half a victory was still a victory. And as she sat there, breaking herself open for me, all I could think about was how perfectly everything had aligned. She had been forgotten. I had been seen.

She pressed her palm against her chest, as if she could physically hold her heart in place, as though it were trying to tear itself apart.

“That thought destroyed me,” she said. “The performance. Our moment. Gone.”

A laugh almost escaped me, but I forced it back before it could surface.

“I felt so guilty,” she whispered. “So helpless. Like... like I didn’t matter anymore.” The words began tumbling over one another, spilling out too fast, as if she were afraid silence might trap her again. “My heart was racing. I couldn’t breathe properly. Everything started spinning. The walls felt like they were closing in, like they wanted me gone.” Her eyes fluttered, as though the memory were physically pulling her backward. She blinked rapidly, fighting it—and failing. “My vision blurred,” she said. “And I remember thinking, this is how it ends.”

She looked at me then.

Really looked.

Tears streamed freely now—unfiltered, uncontained.

“And then—” Her voice dropped, thinning into something fragile. “Everything went black.”

When she finally calmed, I leaned closer, careful with my tone, rehearsed softness coating every word. “Sam...” My voice barely existed. “Do you have any idea who could’ve locked you in? Was it someone you know?”

I watched her face closely, a sick knot tightening in my chest. *Please*, I thought. *Please don’t remember me*. She shook her head slowly, exhaustion dragging every movement down.

“No one locked me in,” she said. “The lock was already broken.”

Relief washed over me so suddenly that it almost made me dizzy.

“It had happened before,” she continued. “During practice. I got stuck once or twice. But I didn’t think it was a big deal.”

She tried to smile. It never reached her eyes. In that moment, something ugly inside me loosened. The universe, it seemed, had provided a scapegoat—a broken lock. A dead object to take the blame instead of me.

“I didn’t even bother telling the teachers,” she added quietly. “It just felt like... nothing.” There was a long pause. Her gaze drifted away, unfocused, trapped somewhere behind her own eyes. “But I was wrong,” she whispered finally. Her voice trembled. “What I thought was nothing... became everything.” She inhaled shakily. “That same broken lock. That same empty space I kept ignoring—it came back for me right before our performance.”

A laugh bubbled up inside me—sharp, inappropriate, almost hysterical. I bit it back, forcing my face into concern. Still, the corners of my mouth twitched. She didn’t notice. She looked down instead, her fingers curling tightly into the bedsheet.

“The silence in that room,” she murmured. “The shadows. The door that wouldn’t open.” Her voice thinned until it was barely audible. “It felt like everything I had brushed aside suddenly came alive and swallowed me whole.” Her voice cracked. “It felt like a coffin,” she said, tears pooling again. “Like that bathroom was ready to be my coffin. Like it was waiting for me.”

I nodded.

I held her hand.

I played my role perfectly.

But inside, a thought rose quietly—venomous, uninvited.

Then why didn’t you die?

It amazed me how naturally the thought came.

I stayed silent when I should have spoken. Silence was easy when it suited me. I wore it with restraint, like concern. Inside, I was too pleased to risk letting fake sympathy slip through the cracks.

I let her lie there with her fear, her darkness, while I walked away to collect something far brighter. My moment. The stage roared. Applause swallowed everything else. The trophy felt cold and solid in my hands—proof that the night had chosen me. I smiled for the cameras, bowed to the applause. She was nowhere in that noise. She didn’t exist there. This was what I had always wanted. But someone—some self-righteous bastard with a conscience—told Arya everything. The lock. The bathroom. The timing. I watched his face change as the truth settled over him, heavy and ugly. I played dumb flawlessly. Wide eyes. Shock. Disbelief. As if I hadn’t known all along.

Later, I confessed to him that if he realized I had known earlier, it would ruin everything. I explained myself gently, strategically. I told him I hadn’t said anything because I wanted him to enjoy his win—because I didn’t want to taint the moment. He was angry. Hurt. Conflicted. He didn’t look convinced—but he didn’t expose me either.

Then he said it.

“Give the trophy to Sam.”

I agreed instantly, but inside, something snarled. *Why should I?* She hadn't performed. She hadn't stood on that stage. She hadn't earned the applause. Why should she touch what I had won? She hadn't even been there when it mattered. But I didn't protest. Protesting would have looked suspicious.

So I went back to her. The room was quieter now. Dim. She looked fragile in that stillness, like someone returned from the edge but not fully back yet. I sat beside her. When I had finally decided what to say, I reached into my bag and pulled out the trophy. It caught the light, gleaming faintly.

Slowly, deliberately, I placed it into her hands.

"This was always yours," I said softly.

She looked up immediately, panic flashing across her face. "No," she said, shaking her head. "I can't take it. You performed. You earned it."

I closed her fingers around it anyway—firm, gentle, convincing. "I can't keep what never belonged to me."

Her grip tightened. Tears spilled freely. Release. Relief. The feeling of being seen—of being restored to the place she thought she had lost in that quiet room, watching her hold my victory like something sacred, jealousy twisted inside me. For a moment, I even imagined wrapping my hands around her neck and squeezing. Instead, I cried with her. I let my shoulders shake. I let my eyes burn. I made it real enough that even I almost believed it. But the reason for my tears was different.

Loss. The loss of the trophy. Almost. Because at the end of it all—after the tears dried, after the gratitude, after the soft thank-yous—I reminded myself of the truth.

It was still my win. The trophy didn't matter. It never truly had. What mattered was that I walked away untouched. Applauded. Remembered. she became the shadow no one would remember. No one would remember who let her fall.

I gave her the trophy. I kept the win.

After everything that happened, they stopped speaking. Just a quiet, mutual separation. A clear cut. It was perfect. Misunderstandings are beautiful that way. Sam never told him about the incident. Arya never asked. I didn't have to interfere much. Silence did exactly what I needed it to do. Silence was obedient. They turned into strangers almost overnight. He avoided Sam as if she were something he was allergic to. Clean. Precise. Controlled. I admired that discipline—the way he could erase a person from his daily habits without hesitation. I watched them pass each other in the hallway once—shoulders squared, eyes straight ahead. I felt something close to satisfaction. Because if they never spoke, nothing could grow between them again. I never wanted closure between them.

Closure is dangerous.

Closure clears the fog.

And in clarity, people realise things. They forgive. They understand. They try again. I couldn't risk that. I wanted hatred instead. Hatred burns fast and leaves ash.

But the worst part wasn't the silence. It was the way they both still looked. Not openly. Never openly. When the other turned away—there it was. That small, involuntary glance. That half-second check. As if they were making sure the other was still there. I told myself it was something simpler. Sam's desire. Arya's restless teenage longing. Physical tension with nowhere to go. Something shallow. Replaceable. Breakable. But in front of Arya, I remained transparent.

I liked to think I was calculated. That I understood people. I was playing chess while they were stuck in checkers.

I knew that if he ever stopped and really examined the pattern, he would see it. He would see how I positioned myself. How I redirected conversations. How I reinforced silence under the guise of "protecting his peace." I was scared. Scared that if they ever got five uninterrupted minutes alone, the whole structure I relied on would collapse. Scared that one honest conversation could undo months of carefully maintained distance. I used to relax only when

they left the room separately. But I couldn't control what managed to survive.

Then my birthday arrived.

He asked me to celebrate it. To call people. To make noise. To enjoy the day. So I told him the truth—plainly. I told him I had never really celebrated my birthday. That the date never felt like a beginning. It felt like proof. Every year, the day arrived like a stamped reminder: he had chosen someone else. I said it because it still hurts. Because it still sat in my throat every time candles were mentioned. Then he said he wanted to talk to Sam. That my birthday was the only excuse he had.

I think that was when something shifted inside me. It was compressed. Like someone pressing down on a bruise. It felt like my scars were background noise—but his were urgent. Like my pain was something I was expected to manage quietly, while his was something that needed immediate rescue.

And then he said it. Soft. Almost tender. “If you can't heal the scars of your own past,” he said quietly, “please help mine.”

I still heard it. It wrapped around my ribs and tightened. Because what was I supposed to say to that? That I hated her? That I was already carrying too much? That I didn't even know how to heal my own wound? He was ready to give me another one. I don't know which hurt more—his request, or the fact that I didn't hesitate. Because I didn't. In front of Arya, my grief shrank. It became negotiable. Adjustable. Secondary. As long as he stayed with me, I could make room for anything. So I threw a birthday party. Not for me. For him.

It was small. Painfully small.

Sam. Her little sisters—Eric and Enaya. And Arya. That was it. No loud music. No decorations that meant anything. Just a table, a cake I didn't even taste.

At some point, Enaya clung to me. I don't even know when it happened, but I had grown attached to her in a way that scared me. She laughed easily. Trusted easily.

More than anything, I did the one thing I had sworn I would never do again. I created space. Not because I wanted to. Because someone asked me to. On my birthday. But even then, some sick part of me hoped they wouldn't fix it. I hoped the conversation would be awkward. Hoped pride would get in the way. Hoped they would tear each other out like unfinished chapters instead of rewriting themselves together. I was doing the very thing I hated. The very thing I had promised I would never do again—stepping aside. Facilitating something that might cost me everything. But I couldn't say no. Because saying no would have hurt Arya, and I had always chosen his comfort over my own. So I laughed with Eric. I let Enaya ramble about school and cartoons and things that still made sense in her world.

I nodded. I smiled. I pretended. And I didn't look at the table where Sam and Arya sat. But I felt them. I felt the way their posture changed. The way the silence between them slowly turned into conversation. The kind of talking that rebuilds bridges quietly. Something slipped from my eyes before I could stop it. Warm. Suddenly. I wiped it away quickly. No one noticed. For the first time in a long time, sadness didn't wait for permission.

I wanted to interrupt. God, I wanted to walk over and break it. Spill a drink. Make a joke. Change the energy. Remind him that I was still there. But I didn't. Because if I interfered, I would become the villain. So I waited. And eventually, they came back. They sat beside me. Close—but not too close. Then they exchanged a look. That look. The kind that holds shared relief. Shared understanding. The kind that says, we chose each other again.

“We're together now.”

That was all. But it was enough. It extinguished something small and essential inside me. Somewhere in the back of my mind, a quiet thought surfaced: Sam had won again. I cried—but only inside. My

face smiled. My voice congratulated them. I even hugged them. I said the right words. Played the part perfectly.

All my effort. All my calculations. All the distance I had so carefully maintained— gone in one evening. On my birthday. The day that was already about absence. And now a new grief has arrived. There I was, at my own birthday party—still the third wheel, still sitting slightly to the side, sadder than I had ever been. Because sometimes the best way to ruin your life is to celebrate your birthday for someone else. By fixing a small piece of their pain. And honestly—it does more damage than an accident. Maybe I didn't need my father to ruin my birthday anymore. Now Sam could do it too.

I returned home that evening carrying a weight I could no longer hold together. The moment I saw my mother, something inside me collapsed. My legs gave way before I could stop them. I sank to the floor beside her, the same way I used to when I was a child, seeking comfort without asking for it. A second later I leaned forward and buried my face in her lap. I cried.

That day had quietly turned into mourning. We both had been abandoned on the same date—first my father, now this loss that had no clear name. Words poured out of me as I told her everything. I told her how I stepped aside, how I made space for someone else, how I forced smiles while watching them choose each other. It felt as if I had given myself away on my own birthday.

She said nothing for a long time. Her arms simply wrapped around me, steady and warm, holding the pieces I could not gather myself. When she finally spoke, her voice carried quiet certainty. She told me it was temporary. One moment did not decide a lifetime. I only needed patience. Life shifts, she said, even when it seemed frozen.

Life, however, had never moved gently for me. It never followed straight lines. It lifted me just high enough to offer hope, then dropped without warning. Like a roller coaster that had forgotten how to climb. After a few days, sadness returned—patient, familiar, loyal in the cruelest way. It always found its way back.

I kept telling myself things were not going well. Still, I had no idea something worse was already waiting ahead. When I first heard about them—about Arya and Sam—I was already hurting. Seeing them together made it worse.

The way his eyes softened around her. The way his voice changed without effort. The way the world seemed to fade whenever she stood close to him. Watching it happen felt like hearing something inside me crack. Perhaps something had happened to him. Perhaps someone had influenced him. I searched for explanations, for reasons that could soften the truth. Nothing had happened to me. That absence of change hurt the most.

In my story everything slowly turned grey. In his story, I never understood when I stopped being important. I never knew whether he noticed the distance growing between us. I never knew whether he ever looked back. People used to say that everything changes when a best friend falls in love.

I had never believed them Until I felt it myself.

Arya no longer looked at me the same way. The quiet details he once shared disappeared. The small moments he used to choose with me faded into distance. His attention moved somewhere else, somewhere brighter than where I stood. When Sam was not there, he missed her openly. Minutes stretched like something he counted, waiting until he could see her again. When it was only the two of us, the air between us felt temporary, as if he expected something better to arrive at any moment.

Questions began to follow me everywhere. Had I become the space between her messages? The pause before she appeared? A placeholder in a story that had quietly learned how to continue without me?

Whenever someone spoke about her, he defended her immediately, without a moment of doubt. When I tried to speak about something that hurt me, he laughed. He laughed. The sound stayed in my mind long after the moment passed. It carried a message I never wanted to hear. My feelings seemed small. I seemed small.

The most painful part was not the change in him. It was the stillness in me. Sometimes I thought about that moment—the moment I stepped back instead of speaking. Silence felt easier than conflict. I could have refused to fade quietly. I could have interrupted their happiness. I could have been the villain in their love story. Maybe then I would have been the protagonist in my own.

That night ended in tears. The kind that tightened the chest and refused to stop. My pillow absorbed every quiet sob until the fabric grew damp beneath my face. Shame followed each breath, embarrassment over how something so small could break me so completely. Morning arrived without mercy. My eyes burned, swollen and red. The mirror reflected a truth I tried to avoid. I was not okay. Still, hope remained. At school I stood in the hallway and waited. No miracle expected. Only a small acknowledgement. A smile. A simple “hey.” A look that might say I still mattered. He walked past me. Laughter surrounded him. His attention stayed fixed on her, completely absorbed. The distance between us felt impossible, even though he passed only a few steps away. Someone could stand directly in front of another person and still remain invisible. My vision blurred. My throat tightened. Tears returned before I could hold them back.

That was one of my heartbreaks. That was my first heartbreak. Not the kind written in love letters or sealed with dramatic goodbyes. Not the kind where two people clearly say the words *it's over*. This was quieter. The kind where you slowly realise you are no longer someone's priority. The kind where nothing is announced, nothing is explained. You simply feel yourself fading from a place where you once mattered. People surrounded me that day. Voices filled the hallway. Footsteps echoed against the floor. Laughter floated through the air in careless waves. None of it belonged to me. For the first time in my life, I felt truly alone.

A few days passed after I convinced myself I could handle the distance. I repeated the same lie in my mind again and again until it almost sounded believable.

Then one evening I realised I could not handle it at all. Something inside me felt restless, unsettled, like a storm waiting for permission to break. Without thinking too much, I texted Arya and asked him to come outside. I do not even remember the excuse I used. Perhaps there was none. Perhaps he already sensed something was wrong. When he stepped out of his house, he looked exactly the same as always. Normal. Calm. Unaware. That sight shattered something in me.

How could he stand there so untouched when I felt like I was slowly unravelling?

The moment he asked, “What happened?” my throat closed. Words refused to form. I had not planned to cry. I had promised myself I would stay composed. The tears arrived anyway. Sudden. Sharp. Impossible to control. My vision blurred. My chest tightened painfully. I stood in front of him, sobbing in a way that felt humiliating, like a child who had forgotten how to hide their pain. For a moment I almost stopped myself. Almost. The tears slowed. My breathing struggled to steady. Pride whispered that I should pull myself together. I failed. The words spilled out before I could filter them. I told him he was my only best friend. I told him I did not know who I was without him. I told him I felt replaced. Forgotten. Invisible. I admitted that I had been waiting for him to notice my silence, to ask why I seemed different, to see the hurt I kept trying to hide. I told him I could not keep pretending everything was fine. Every word I spoke was true. Yet the way I said them changed everything. My voice cracked at the right moments. Silence lingered long enough to make the air heavy. I allowed him to feel the weight of guilt settling between us. Then I told him something that sounded final. I said this was the last day I would keep waiting. If nothing changed after tonight, I would step away completely. I would stop talking to him. The sentence was half truth, half warning.

I saw the shift in his expression immediately. His eyes changed in a way I had not seen for weeks. Fear flickered across his face—the quiet fear of losing someone he assumed would always remain. For

the first time since he started that relationship, Arya looked afraid. Something inside me stirred at that sight. Power.

The next day at school I watched everything carefully. Arya walked straight to the teacher and asked to be paired with me for the competition. The decision came without hesitation, spoken loudly enough for others to hear. Such a small action. Yet it felt enormous. Public. Intentional. During the project, Sam came over a few times, offering help and suggestions. Arya listened politely, yet he stayed beside me. He did not dismiss her, yet he did not choose her either. He chose me. The feeling settled slowly in my chest. Warm. Satisfying. Dangerous. I did not hate myself for enjoying it. For too long I had felt invisible. It felt good to be seen again.

When the results were announced, victory arrived quietly. A thought surfaced in my mind—dangerous, patient. *What if I pushed this further?*

I asked him casually, “Did we win because Sam helped us?”

He refused the idea immediately. Reassurance failed to satisfy me. Security mattered more. A lie formed easily. I told him I had overheard Sam telling her friend I had done nothing. The victory belonged entirely to her. My voice stayed soft, wounded. The moment he said he would confront her, panic rushed through me. My heart pounded. If he asked her directly, everything would collapse. I shifted quickly. I told him silence would be better. I said she would think I was trying to break them apart. I said drama would destroy everything. He promised not to mention my name. That promise sealed the damage.

Soon afterward, tension appeared between them. I never learned the exact beginning. It revealed itself through small things—avoided eye contact, quieter conversations, pauses that stretched too long. I liked it. For once, she no longer controlled his emotions alone. My presence created a ripple again. I mattered. Attention returned. Importance returned. I felt necessary again.

Still, I knew Sam and Arya rarely stayed apart forever. They always found their way back to each other. Perhaps Sam used her quiet

strategies again. Perhaps fate favored her. Fear grew inside me. Fear of fading into background noise. Fear of standing in hallways, waiting for someone who no longer noticed my presence.

One afternoon Sam approached me. She said she needed to speak to Arya urgently. Her parents were fighting again. I listened carefully. My face softened. My voice lowered. The role fit perfectly.

She explained that Arya refused to reply. Distance surrounded him. Hurt lingered over things she never intended. I assured her I understood. I promised help. I went to Arya first. Or perhaps I didn't. Memory often blurs when intention already exists. What mattered was the answer I carried back. "He isn't ready," I told her gently. "Not now. Maybe later." The words sounded fragile, protective—like I shielded her from something sharper.

She believed me. She needed to believe me..

That night I told my mother everything. She listened quietly. Then she offered a thought—never a command, merely an observation. "Sometimes parents fail to see the damage they cause until they fear losing their child."

The sentence lingered. It was enough. Perhaps the idea had already existed within me, waiting patiently. I convinced myself fate arranged the pieces. The universe had begun leaning in my direction.

Sam carried too much weight. Her home lived in constant chaos. Sadness spilled from her life into everything around her, into Arya as well. I told myself I never interfered. I simply corrected what was already broken. The next day at school, I spoke carefully, framing everything as concern, as empowerment. I told her that sometimes parents only woke up when they feared losing something. I suggested something dramatic—not dangerous—telling her to write a page with "goodbye," step out for a few hours, let them feel the absence. I wrapped it in bravery, told her she wouldn't actually leave, only scare them enough to listen. Then she could tell them everything—the fear, the exhaustion, the way their fights were cracking her from the inside. Casually, too casually, I added, "Tell

them if nothing changes, one day you really will leave.” I said I would be there, every step. She didn’t hesitate. like —how desperate she was, or how convincing I could be.

The night came quickly. Around three in the morning, the world felt suspended, like time itself was holding its breath. The streets were empty. The sky was heavy. Silence made everything feel irreversible. A river ran nearby, beautiful in daylight, gentle, almost innocent. At that hour, it looked different—still, dark, watching. We sat for a while. I asked her what she wanted to say to her parents, and what she wished for. I was generous, giving her space on a night I had orchestrated. She said she wanted peace. Peace. Such a small word for such a large ache. She talked about the shouting, the slammed doors, the way she stayed awake pretending not to hear them. I remembered thinking how ironic that word “peace” was. Everyone wanted it, but no one agreed on the price. After that, things blurred. When something was already decided, details stopped mattering. What mattered was the result. Her noise stopped. The struggle she carried for years finally went quiet, the way she had wished for it. I told myself I hadn’t taken anything from her—I only helped Arya and the other boys. When her chapter closed, it felt like a tidy conclusion, necessary. I didn’t look back. I went home with my mother, calm and composed, like someone who had finished a difficult task and done it well. On my way, I thought by morning the world would be moving again. Parents would read things they weren’t meant to find. Arya would be going to school, unaware of how much lighter his life had become. My mother didn’t ask questions. She never did . I told myself I had saved everyone. The chapter ended.

Someone had to turn the page. Someone had to be strong enough to do what others wouldn’t even think. I was happy then, happier than I expected. I remembered thinking the river had helped me. Some places didn’t ask questions. They just accepted what they were given. When we reached home, my mother spoke softly, the way people do after something important has been handled. She said she would make sure everything was clear, that nothing unnecessary lingered, that no one would connect dots that didn’t need

connecting. She said sometimes saviors never disclosed their identities, and I believed her because she said it like a rule the world already knew. I trusted her. I always had. I went to sleep feeling earned exhaustion, the kind that comes after finishing something that had weighed on you for too long. My mind was quiet. No arguments. No faces interrupting my thoughts. When I woke up, my mother sat beside me, watching, waiting maybe. I didn't ask anything. I just lay there, calm, hoping for a call, for confirmation that everything had settled into place, that the world had accepted what we had done.

And then—the thing I had been waiting for finally came. Everything ended. Slowly. Gently. Forever. One phone call created a new world for me. I was still standing in it when the words arrived: “She’s gone.” They didn’t stop at my ears. They settled into my bones, vibrating deep and permanent. I felt overwhelmed, strangely light, almost floating, as if relief had tangled with grief. They said she had jumped into the river, exactly what I had hoped for. By morning, people had seen her body drifting, swollen with water, touched by things or fish that didn’t care who she had been. They took her out before the sun was fully awake, too fast. So fast, they didn’t even let us go to school. But it was okay—maybe, for me, good things came fast. Life paused, but only for her; for me, it had started again.

When I reached her house, I wore the face I had practiced—shock, silence, hollow eyes. I watched everyone ask the same useless question over and over: how could someone so alive, so warm, disappear without a goodbye? I let them believe I was concerned. Then I did what I did best. I whispered just enough into Arya’s ears—soft, careful words—until blame found a home in his family. Arya understood. I stood beside him, pretending to burn with the same anger, talking about fighting back, about justice. He stopped me. Said there were two other kids. Said we couldn’t ruin more lives. In that moment, I felt it again—that quiet, shameful happiness. The matter was closed. No questions. No revenge. No noise. The river had done what I couldn’t. It carried her away, and with her, every question that might have exposed me.

Time passed, and I truly believed the worst chapter had ended with her—that death had drawn a clean, merciful line and we could finally move forward. But I was wrong. Some chapters don't end; they slip into scars. Not on me—never on me—but on the one I loved. They stayed etched into the living, and Arya bled quietly from that scar every single day. I watched it in the pauses between his words, in the way his laughter tried but never reached its old heights again. I knew, deep down, uncomfortably, that I was the reason he stood where he stood now, yet I convinced myself it was for his own good. He didn't know that, and maybe that was mercy. I told myself it was fine, that this was healing, that I was saving him. I promised myself I would pull him out of this darkness, because if he did, we could finally live, laugh, spend time together, and reclaim the life I had imagined for us. That had always been the motive. Everything that had happened traced back to that single desire. But the motive wasn't being fulfilled, and even I felt the sting of disappointment. Still, I promised myself I wouldn't stop.

Near the river, Arya would sit every day. At first, he never wanted to go, but I convinced him. I told him it was Sam's last memory, the last place that held her. I regretted saying that. After school, same time, same spot, we would sit for thirty minutes in silence. He called it a ritual. I called it torture. We sat like fools, staring at the water, as if it could ever give anything back.

One day, maybe ordinary for me, it was Sam's birthday for him. He cried. He broke beside the river, as if something inside him had finally given up pretending to be strong. His shoulders shook, his voice cracked open. Tears slid down his face, unhidden. Something twisted inside me. After some time, he told me that a few nights back, Eric had come over and handed him a journal—Sam's journal. The word alone tightened my chest. A journal wasn't just paper. It was a vault, a confession booth, a place where people buried truths they couldn't say out loud. If Arya read it—truly read it—he would drown in her all over again. I couldn't let that happen. He sat near the river, staring at the water as if it might answer him. He talked about her memories following him everywhere—into classrooms, into songs, into crowds. He called them sweet. Bitter. Beautiful. I

felt none of that sweetness. I felt erased. Even dead, she owned him. There was no room left. Not for healing. Not for moving forward. Not for me. He clutched his bag, saying the journal was too heavy—not in weight, but in meaning. Sam was trapped inside those pages, and if he opened it, he would find her in every word and drown again. He carried it like it was holy. I wanted to shake him, break the illusion, stop worshipping paper.

So I said it. “Then leave it. Throw it away.” His head snapped toward me, eyes blazing. “How could you say that?” he shouted. “This is the last thing I have of Sam.” Silence sliced between us. And I did what I always did. I turned myself into the wounded one. I told him I was trying to help, that I cared more than anyone. Somehow, I was always the villain. I reminded him of the times he chose her over me. I asked if he secretly blamed me for her death. I asked him whether he really believed that I was the only one who didn’t want them to be together. I admitted I might have been wrong to say anything at all, that perhaps I should have stayed out of it. I reminded him I had always supported him, shared everything honestly, even when it hurt me and made me feel left out. In the end, I made it clear that I never asked him to choose me over anyone else—I just did not want to lose him too.

I watched guilt flood his face. He apologized. Once he did, I pushed further—soft voice, careful tone. “If you keep holding this,” I asked gently, “how will you ever move on? Would Sam want you like this? Drowning? Ruining yourself?” I spoke of heaven while thinking of hell. I told him real love wanted the best version of the one left behind.

He went quiet. Then I stood to leave, pretending indifference. I froze when I saw my mother waiting in the distance. Before turning away, I added one last line: “If you can’t handle the weight, give it to someone who can.” I didn’t expect him to take it literally. But he did. He grabbed my bag, stood in front of me, the journal in his hand. “I’ve decided,” he said softly, “keeping it isn’t helping me. It feels like she’s trapped inside... and so am I. Please. Keep it. Set me free.” The weight of it in my hands felt electric. This was it. Everything. I tried

to look reluctant, burdened. Inside, I burned with something dangerously close to joy.

He walked away. For a second, just a second, I imagined tearing it apart, throwing it into the river, letting the water swallow her twice. But curiosity was stronger. Seven pages. Just seven. Love. Crush. Him. Him. Every sentence was about him. Her handwriting curved softly across the page. Devotion in ink. Gentle. Honest. Entirely his. I hated it. I hated how alive she felt between those lines, how she still breathed in his name, how even gone, she belonged to him completely. I cried because she was still there. In ink. In memory. In him. Yet—beneath the jealousy, beneath the rage—there was relief. He would never read this, never feel those words wrap around him again. I closed the journal slowly and promised myself something ugly and absolute: I would never give it back.

I convinced myself that if I took her journal away, he would slowly forget Sam. I thought grief worked like objects—remove the reminder, reduce the pain. It didn't disappear just because you hid the evidence. He didn't forget her. He smiled more after that. He laughed at the right moments. He spoke as if life were moving forward. Anyone watching from the outside would have thought he was healing. But when you have truly loved someone—when you have studied the way their eyes change with emotion—you don't need dramatic breakdowns to understand the truth. I saw it in the pauses after his jokes, in the quiet that lingered too long, in the way his gaze sometimes drifted somewhere I could never follow. He wasn't okay. He was surviving.

Time kept moving, indifferent and merciless. It never stopped for the shattered. It didn't slow down out of pity. Whether someone collapsed inside or stood tall, time treated them the same. Days turned into months, and I kept waiting—waiting for grief to loosen its grip on him. I told myself patience was love. That if I stayed long enough, if I was steady enough, if I made myself indispensable enough, he would eventually choose happiness with me. Deep down, I knew it was never possible, maybe not in this life. I still waited for a version of our future with no ghosts between us, no silent loyalty

to someone no longer there. I waited for the day he would look at me without that faraway ache in his eyes. Every time he almost did, hope rose—fragile and desperate. I kept believing that one day he would wake up and realize I was the one who stayed, the one who endured, the one who wanted him in the present. So I waited.

THE WEIGHT OF UNSPOKEN THINGS.

Then Eric came as our junior. It was an ordinary day—he smiled properly. A real smile, and for a second, it reminded me of Arya. The old Arya, the one who used to laugh without holding back. I saw it in the way his shoulders relaxed, in the warmth in his eyes. And I was happy. Truly happy. Because when you love someone, their happiness becomes your own—even when you are not the reason behind it. You don't ask why they're smiling. You don't ask who made them smile. You don't ask whether you were part of that moment. You just feel relief. Relief that they finally smiled again. A genuine smile. Maybe I even knew the reason. Eric looked so much like Sam—same eyes, same quiet expressions. Maybe seeing her brought back something familiar. Eric entered our lives quietly, like a page slipped into a book. I didn't resent her for it. Why would I? They didn't love each other.

I ignored the small things that tugged at my chest late at night when the world grew silent and my thoughts grew louder. I told myself he saw her as a sister, that's why he cared. He noticed. I told myself I didn't care. I told myself I was above jealousy, above insecurity. I denied it so convincingly that I even started believing it. But the truth was—I did care. I cared more than I ever wanted to admit. It wasn't that he said he loved her—he never did. Not once. There were no confessions. But love doesn't always need words. It lives in actions. His actions spoke in a language that didn't need translation, and that silent language hurt me in ways I couldn't explain without sounding insecure... or foolish.

Some nights, lying awake, staring at the ceiling, I would wonder if I was the only one pretending not to see it. And the hardest part? I was still happy when he smiled. Even if I wasn't the reason. Even if I never would be. Even though I wanted to be.

Once, he said he wouldn't talk about Sam in front of Eric. He said she had already lost something big. He said he would pretend to be

happy around her—because he wanted her to be happy and forget about Sam. I remember standing there, silently asking myself: Did he never want me to be happy? Why was my sadness acceptable, but hers required protection? I was drowning quietly right in front of him. He saw it. He always did. But he never pretended for me. He never softened himself so I could breathe for five minutes. Around me, he was just himself—raw, unfiltered, careless. I had wanted him to move on from that topic for so long. Every time it came up, I would wait—for him to steer us away from it. I thought he was trying. But he was never trying. Not for me. Not even for himself. He stayed there, in that worst, unfinished chapter.

And now he was changing. Not because he had healed. Not because he finally decided to let go. He was changing for her. For his dead girlfriend's sister. I asked him so many times—Do you love her? Have you started loving her because she looks like Sam, because she stands where Sam once stood? He always denied it. Always. He called me foolish for thinking that. But when actions contradicted words, words lost their power. Anyone watching us would have thought the same. Anyone would have seen it.

I don't like dark coffee. He forgot that. Always. But once Eric casually mentioned she liked her tea less sweet. The next time, without asking, he brought it exactly that way. I asked how he remembered. He shrugged and said it was nothing—said Sam liked it that way too. But Sam always liked tea sweet. I knew that. And that lie, disguised, stayed with me. When she said she was tired, he kept asking if she was okay, over and over. Even when she said yes, he pushed gently—"How are you really? What's wrong?" But when I was sad, when I said I was fine even though my voice shook, he stepped back. He gave me space I never asked for. He never insisted. Never noticed the cracks. I disappeared quietly, and he let me.

He joked with her, but never about her insecurities. He protected her without making it obvious. If someone teased Eric about her insecurities, he would change the topic or shut it down smoothly, instinctively. But when they joked about my insecurities, he laughed

with them. Maybe he forgot. Or maybe he never learned that mine mattered.

He asked her everything—"Did you reach home? Did you finish your assignment? Do you need help?" He never asked me those things. Not once. And yes, I know—I would have denied needing help. I always do. But being asked mattered. Being considered mattered. He celebrated her small wins—good marks, praise from a teacher, a good day. I remembered standing there, invisible, holding my own victories. The poetry competitions I won. The stories that earned applause. He once told me I had too much free time—that's why I could write. That he didn't. It hurt. God, it hurts. But I loved him anyway.

He listened to her. Truly listened. When he was with me, he talked—about everything, about nothing, about himself. And when Eric wasn't around, he said there was no joy when she wasn't there. I wondered—had he ever said that about me? Even once? I doubted it.

He was the kind of person who never let go of a point in badminton. If someone miscounted, he corrected it instantly. If a shuttle landed close to the line, he argued until it was clear. He kept track of every score like it was something precious, something earned. Winning mattered. But when Eric played with her, it was different. It didn't matter what the scoreboard said. It didn't matter that everyone saw the shuttle land on her side. If she smiled and said, "I'm 5, and you're 4"—even when she hadn't scored a single real point—he just laughed softly and said, "Okay, you won."

And that's what hurts. Even when I was winning, he never let me win. People watching would probably smile and say, "Oh, he's just being sweet." Or worse—"Someone's in love."

The way his gaze lingered on her a second too long after she laughed. The way his voice dropped into something softer when he said her name. The way he noticed things no one else did. "She changed her earrings." "That dress looks new." "You cut your hair, right?" Tiny details. Details you only notice when you're paying

attention, when someone lives somewhere in your mind long enough for you to memorize them.

I stood there, pretending I didn't see it. Pretending it didn't feel like a quiet bruise forming inside my chest. Maybe I was overthinking. Maybe I was reading too much into simple gestures. What hurt the most was that I didn't want to feel this way. I didn't want to be the jealous one. But I was. He loved someone else. He didn't think I was enough to be chosen. That I was the place he rested, not the place he longed for. I knew this friendship was toxic. I knew it was slowly hollowing me out. I knew I deserved more than borrowed affection and half-seen pain. And yet—I didn't know how to exist without him. I knew all of this. And still, I stayed.

In the beginning, there had been that one moment when he called me his best friend. I had felt chosen. I had felt seen. But words are warmth. Actions are reality. Slowly, I began to notice that his actions never carried the same comfort his words once gave me. He said I was his best friend—but he didn't always choose me first. He didn't always look for me in a room. He didn't always make space for me the way someone does for the person who truly matters most. Maybe I was his best friend in words.

That night—when we escaped into the department—something shifted, even before we crossed the wall. I noticed it in the way his body angled toward her, like instinct knew where to stand before thought could intervene. When it was time to climb, he didn't even glance at me. His hands were already reaching for her, steadying her, guiding every step. I made space for myself. I told him to help me first, and he did. He saw me. He responded. He was there when I asked. But with Eric, he was different. Gentler. More careful. More patient. His voice softened only for her. I told myself it was nothing—that he was just naturally careful. But the care wasn't equal, and imbalance always makes noise, even when no one speaks.

When we ran back, breathless, fearful, laughing, everything happened too fast. Somewhere in the chaos, he got hurt. I saw the scrape, the way he flinched. But before I could register concern, he was already asking her, “Are you okay?” over and over. His injury

didn't seem to exist to him. His pain didn't matter. I remember thinking—not why didn't he ask me—but why didn't he stop for himself? Why didn't he protect his own body the way he protected her presence? Caring for someone else so much that you forget yourself—it frightened me.

I helped him with his wound. It wasn't dramatic—just a small cut, a little blood—but to me it felt important. I took out my handkerchief. My favorite one, the one I never let anyone use, carefully folded in my pocket. Without thinking twice, I used it to clean his wound. I was gentle, careful, wiping the blood slowly so I wouldn't hurt him more. I asked softly, “Does it hurt?” I was fully there in that moment. But he wasn't. He didn't really notice. He didn't really look at me. He didn't really care. His mind was somewhere else, his attention elsewhere. And suddenly, I felt foolish.

The night stretched on. Mosquitoes swarmed, relentlessly, biting everyone without discrimination. Still, his attention orbited her. He waved them away from her face, brushed them off her hands, adjusted her so she could be comfortable. He moved closer, unconsciously, creating a small circle where discomfort couldn't enter. I lay there, pretending to sleep, watching everything through stillness. Those gestures—small, quiet—weren't romantic, but they weren't innocent either. They were intimate in a way that didn't need language. Care had its own vocabulary, and he spoke it fluently—with her.

I asked myself again and again: Why her? Not why not me—that question felt too selfish. But why did he place her above even himself?

The next day, I couldn't carry it anymore. I asked him directly. If I were truly his best friend, I needed honesty more than comfort. I asked if he loved her. He said no. He said she was just a friend. He said he showed affection like an elder would, because she didn't have someone steady, protective in her life. I wanted to believe him. I did, at least a little. The explanation eased something inside me, but

thoughts don't disappear just because logic knocks. Actions linger longer than words ever do.

There were other days—days we didn't go to college out of fear, uncertainty. One evening, we met anyway. He spent most of it consoling her, convincing her that things would be okay, that she should return to the university. I stood there too—just as afraid, just as uncertain—but unseen. Helpless. Days passed in the same routine, but apart from everything, Eric always made me feel included—unlike her sister. She made my days better. I had a few good memories with her too. There were days when jealousy and insecurity hit me hard, when I overthought everything and questioned my place. But even on those days, I felt loved and included. Not by Arya. But by Eric.

Then my birthday came. They celebrated it. For a moment, I felt included again. I felt like I mattered, like maybe I wasn't invisible after all. But that night, I told them a small lie. I smiled when something inside me was still unfinished. Some truths don't come easily. They need courage. They need preparation. They need the right ending. I will share it—maybe when I have courage

Finally, after everything, the trip came. Our first one. The three of us moved away from familiar streets and familiar pain. I was excited in a fragile way—the kind of excitement that carried hope but was afraid to speak it aloud. I thought maybe the trip would change something. Maybe I would meet new people, make new friends, and feel lighter. Or maybe—quietly, selfishly—Arya would finally see me. Maybe. I didn't expect miracles. Just attention. Just presence. Just something.

We joined the trip with organisers—strangers all around us, unfamiliar faces filling the travellers' seats. I liked window seats. Eric did too. We decided that we would both take window seats, and Arya would sit with one of us. I told myself not to assume anything. Still, somewhere deep inside, I hoped he would choose me. He was comfortable around me. He never had to pretend. I knew his silence. I knew his moods. Sitting with me would have been easy. But he chose her. He said it was because she had motion sickness—that he

should sit with her, just in case. I nodded. I always nodded. I agreed because arguing felt heavier than swallowing it. I told myself not to overthink. I told myself that maybe I was imagining things again. Maybe I was the problem.

The traveller started moving. People laughed, played music, and shared snacks. At some point, someone jokingly asked if Eric and Arya were a couple. The words landed like glass. I looked at them—how naturally they sat together, how unbothered they seemed—and something inside me cracked. It felt impossible that others could see them that way, yet in that moment, the ease between them made the assumption seem almost believable, and that thought unsettled me more than I wanted to admit.

I wanted to feel offended. I wanted to defend the truth loudly. Instead, I smiled and said, “No, you’re wrong. They’re like brother and sister.” People laughed, said it didn’t seem like that. I kept insisting, repeating it like a prayer, as if saying it enough times would make it true. And then Arya interrupted me. “She’s my friend,” he said. “She’s my good friend.” He introduced me as his best friend. But somehow, a good friend sounded warmer, kinder, and chosen. Best friend sounded like history. Habit.

Morning came quietly that day. When I woke up, the traveller was still moving, sunlight slipping through the windows. That was when I noticed it—Eric’s head resting on Arya’s shoulder, as if it naturally belonged there. He didn’t seem uncomfortable; somewhere deep inside, I knew if it were me, he might have felt awkward.

A little later, when she woke up, I asked softly if she was feeling motion sickness. She said no, then casually mentioned she usually did. Before I could respond, Arya cut in with a smile—“I’m with you.” They laughed. They laughed... I sat there, staring ahead, watching the road blur past the window. I remember wondering when something so small started meaning so much. Questions kept rising in my mind—questions I felt too tired to face. Was it care? A habit? Or love, hiding behind something it didn’t want to admit? I stayed silent, beside an empty window seat, slowly realizing

something—trips don't always take you away from pain; sometimes they show you exactly where you stand.

By the time we reached the destination, Arya looked exhausted. His eyes were heavy, his movements slower. Despite everything I felt—the hurt, the silence, the confusion—I still wanted him to be okay. I wanted him healthy throughout the trip. That feeling came naturally, without asking my pride. Eric, on the other hand, was full of energy. She insisted we shouldn't waste time, said we didn't leave home just to sleep...we came to enjoy ourselves. Arya listened to her, like always. He nodded, smiled faintly, teased her, agreed. I wasn't convinced. I wanted him to rest, to sleep properly, to take care of himself first. Then he looked at me... somehow, he convinced me. He always did. My resistance faded. I couldn't say no to him. I never really could.

We got ready, then stepped out. The air felt new, lighter. A small café stood nearby—warm, quiet, welcoming. We sat there for a while, sipping drinks, laughing softly, pretending everything felt normal. For a moment, it seemed like we were simply three friends on a trip, nothing more, nothing broken.

Soon, the organisers called us back. We returned, boarded the traveller again, then headed toward our first destination—Jogini Waterfall. The trek looked simple at first glance, though it turned out tougher than expected. Uneven paths, steep climbs, breath slipping away too quickly. Arya showed better stamina than most of us—or maybe he only made it seem that way. Either way, he stayed close to Eric the entire time, guiding her over rocks, slowing his steps, asking if she felt tired. I noticed something when I wasn't walking beside him. Strangers, people I had met that very morning, offered me help instead. The feeling was strange, almost unreal. My closest friend, the one who knew me so well, didn't look back. No concern, no extended hand. Yet he stayed there for her. At one point, I almost slipped. Instead of encouragement...the kind he gave Eric his words came simple, almost detached: "If you can't go up, just stay here."...With her, his tone changed. He encouraged, cheered, reassured. He told her she could do it. His voice stayed soft, patient,

supportive. With me, none of that existed. No encouragement. No reassurance. Just a quiet suggestion to stop trying. I wanted to speak. I wanted to ask why he didn't care, why he didn't notice me struggling. The words never left. Silence felt easier. I let things remain as they were. I didn't want to ruin the trip—not after the morning had already hollowed so much inside me.

When we finally reached the waterfall, something shifted. The sound of water crashing down filled the space between thoughts. It softened everything. We clicked pictures, smiling at the camera. I told myself it was enough—at least we were together. Arya and I took a few pictures separately, just the two of us. For a second, it felt like old times. The air near the waterfall felt cool, damp. Tiny droplets brushed against my face, washing away sweat, exhaustion, even the heaviness I carried all day. In that moment, I found peace. Real peace. The climb no longer mattered. The ache inside me grew quiet, calmed by nothing more than the presence of nature itself.

On the way back, we took a wrong turn and got lost for a while. Strangely, that was when something good unfolded. I met new people—ones who noticed when my steps slowed, who offered help without waiting, who made space for me. They saw me. In their presence, I felt visible again. I mattered. I wasn't invisible. Walking beside them felt lighter. Laughter came easily, without effort. I felt acknowledged in a way I hadn't all day. A thought stayed with me—maybe this was what I needed all along. The day hadn't begun well. It carried more ache than I expected. Still, the ending arrived gently. Sometimes, that kind of ending is enough to keep moving forward.

The day didn't stop there. It rarely does when emotions stay awake. After some time, we reached Mall Road—the second stop, maybe the last for the day. The two boys who helped me during the trek stood there too, along with three others. They hesitated, exchanged glances, then finally asked if they could join us. When they did, something inside me lifted. I said yes, though inside, a quiet smile formed—the kind I hadn't felt all day. For the first time, I felt chosen. Not out of habit. Not out of obligation. Simply since someone wanted me there. I hoped, quietly, that around them, my

thoughts would stay still for a while. They did. We found a cosy café tucked between the noise of the road and the softness of warm lights. Conversations flowed easily. Laughter carried no weight. Stories felt light, untouched by anything heavy. I ordered hot chocolate...the best I had ever tasted, rich, warm, comforting. Halfway through, something shifted. My head grew heavy, my stomach uneasy. One of them noticed immediately and asked if I felt okay. I said yes. I always said yes. Arya noticed too. He teased me lightly, said I had chosen it myself, that something else might have suited me better. I shrugged, said I didn't know earlier I was only realizing it then. Still, somewhere deep inside, a small feeling stayed. He noticed. And that mattered more than I ever admitted to myself. For a moment, I believed the presence of those new people might change things—at least a little. A shift toward something better. A quiet sense of balance. Time felt different in that café—the kind that refuses to pause, only returns later as a soft memory when life grows loud again. With tired smiles and full hearts, we made our way back to the hotel. Exhaustion settled in; our bodies finally gave in after pretending to stay energetic all day. Dinner didn't happen. I felt too full from the hot chocolate, too drained to think about food.

Then, the moment I reached the room, something went wrong. My stomach twisted sharply. Breathing felt difficult. I rushed to the balcony, then to the bathroom, trying to stay quiet, trying not to draw attention. Everything felt out of control, as if my own body had turned against me. Arya didn't notice. Or maybe he chose to give space—the kind I never asked for, yet the kind he always seemed to give. No questions came. No checking in. No sign of concern. Maybe silence hid it. Maybe it didn't exist. Either way, I stood there alone. I grabbed lemons and started eating them. Sour, sharp, grounding. The only thing that helped that night. The only thing that brought me back to myself. Later, lying there, after everything—the hurt, the confusion, the warmth, the invisibility I understood something. Negativity exists everywhere. Constant. Loud. Easy to find. Positivity feels different. It asks to be searched for. It asks to be chosen.

That night, my thoughts shifted in a way they never had before. Not around feeling unwanted, not around absence—but around presence. Around being seen. Seen by strangers. Seen by new friends. Seen by the world. And even... in the smallest way... seen by Arya. Sometimes, a single moment is enough.

DAY 2

We went to the Atal Tunnel, but I was scared. Not of the cold, not of the height of being alone. I kept telling myself I wasn't alone anymore. I had people. New friends. Voices around me. Laughter. And I did enjoy it. I really did. Even when my head felt like it would split, when the cold bit my cheeks until they burned, when my shoes were wet and freezing, and my fingers had gone completely numb. My body hurt, but my heart didn't. We kept talking nonstop, as if warmth could be created simply by staying awake inside each other's words.

We played. Snow everywhere on our clothes, in our hair, melting into our laughter. Somewhere in that chaos, I forgot the hurt. That day, he didn't ignore me. He was there. Fully there. Like before. Like we used to be. For a moment, it felt like time had made a mistake and given me my past back. We played in the snow the way we did when we were younger, when seeing snow together for the first time felt like a promise. Like something sacred. That feeling came back not the location, but the us that existed without distance, without silence. My Arya. The one who felt like he belonged to me. And I was happy. Happiness that made me afraid, since I knew it was temporary.

When we reached the hotel, exhaustion sat heavy in my bones, but I didn't want the day to end. He talked to me about how the world looks when it is covered in snow, how everything becomes quieter, cleaner, softer. We replayed the entire day like we were afraid it would disappear if we stopped naming it. And then it hit me: we count seconds in suffering, but lose track of time in happiness. Later, we sat around a bonfire. The air changed. Strangers sat close, but it didn't feel strange. Tea was poured, but what really spilled were

lives—unfinished poems, handwritten thoughts, confessions people usually swallow back. Things hidden behind closed mouths finally breathed. For the first time, I didn't feel odd for living in my head, for writing poems, for feeling too much. I wasn't "too sensitive" here. I wasn't "too quiet" or "too emotional." I was just... normal. Accepted. No one laughed. No one interrupted. They listened. And I spoke. Without fear. Without shrinking myself. Without apologising for existing. Sometimes strangers see you more clearly than the people who have known you forever.

But that night, something rare happened. He spoke to me. Strangers listened. And everything aligned so perfectly it felt unreal, like I was trespassing inside someone else's life. It didn't feel like my own life. It felt borrowed. Like I had been given a better version of living for just one day. I wanted it to stay. I wanted this to be my life—this warmth, this honesty, this feeling of being seen. But deep down, I knew. This day would end too. It would quietly sink into memory, and I would be left holding it alone. So I held it tightly. Day two of my trip. It was still breathing. Still mine. Still not gone yet.

DAY 3

It was day three, and before the day even started, I was already praying. Quietly. I hoped—no, I begged that it would feel like day two. Our next destination was Kasol. On the traveller, I noticed something that would have broken me on any other day—my seat next to me wasn't empty. A stranger sat there. Strangely, I didn't feel strange. I didn't feel alone. I wasn't staring at the window, pretending I was fine. I was just... there. Talking.

On the way, we had two options: paragliding or river rafting. Instead of chasing thrill, we chose peace. We sat by the river while others went ahead, clicking pictures, letting the water do what it had done forever—flowing, indifferent to who watched. Maybe people thought—maybe they would think—sitting and watching a river is pointless. But in that moment, when I was quiet—not sad, not happy, just quiet—something shifted. My mind settled. I didn't replay conversations. I didn't miss anyone. For once, I didn't even

think about myself. It felt like that peace didn't come from happiness. It simply arrived.

Then everything jolted. Eric slipped while clicking pictures and fell into the water. My heart jumped. Fear rushed in. And for a horrible, ugly second, a thought crossed my mind: what if another sister disappears in the same water? Not by my hands. Not because of me. That thought scared me. I didn't want anything bad to happen to her. She wasn't like Sam. She carried light, not shadows. She respected me. She cared. She included me. She was part of my tribe. When I scolded her, it wasn't drama. It was care. Real care.

Later, we ate momos nearby, and something small...so small it shouldn't have mattered—did.. Arya remembered I don't like mayonnaise. I know it sounds silly. But he remembered. When he served me, he didn't add it and said, "I know you don't like it." My heart did that stupid thing again—hoping, overthinking, imagining good things from small gestures even though life rarely followed through.. At that moment, I was happy. Childishly happy.

Night came. Arya and Eric slept. I went back to the bonfire, to strangers who no longer felt like strangers. We played games, laughed, talked—just like the previous night. I thought the day had ended on a good note. Not magical like day two, but good enough. I went to sleep. Then there was a knock. I opened the door. Strangers stood there, smiling, mischievous. Suddenly, we were planning chaos...scaring everyone. And we did. Laughter again. Noise again. Life again. Somewhere between jokes and shared silences, strangers became family. They called me. They wanted me there. They made me feel important. Interesting. For the first time, I realized I wasn't boring. I talked well. I made people laugh. I mattered in rooms I never thought I would belong to. I felt... blessed. Genuinely.

But the day had ended, and then something hurt me again. At first, when I left, they slept on different beds. When I returned, I saw Arya and Eric sleeping together. My first thought wasn't calm or kind. It was sharp. Why? Why did they need to sleep together...a boy and a girl? Questions came fast, uninvited, like they always did..

But I didn't let them stay. There had been too much light inside me that day. So I softened the thought. I told myself gentler stories. Maybe she needed comfort. Maybe she just needed someone beside her. Maybe the water incident had shaken her. Maybe she didn't want to be alone. And that was okay. I kept repeating that word to myself—okay. Sometimes what we see is nothing, but our minds turn it into everything. I didn't want to do that again. I didn't want to bleed over something that might not even be real.

So I said nothing. I didn't react. I simply went to my side of the room, lay down on the single bed, and chose to remember the good instead...the laughter, the words people had said about me, the way I had been seen, the warmth of belonging. I didn't want to open my eyes on the last day. Just hearing those words—*the last day*—hurt. Last days meant endings. Life going back to how it had been before. And that scared me. What if everything went back to being the same after the trip? The same distance. The same silence. The same loneliness wearing a familiar face.

I lay there with my eyes closed, afraid of morning, afraid of losing this version of life. Yet somewhere deep inside—quiet, almost fragile—hope still lived. I hoped the trip had shifted something. That maybe it had changed us, or at least someone. That maybe, for once, the good things wouldn't disappear the moment I believed in them. So I slept with fear resting in my chest, and hope tangled softly around it.

DAY 4

It was finally day four, and from the moment I opened my eyes, I couldn't breathe properly. Fear had settled inside me. Not fear of the journey ahead, but fear of losing everything the trip had given me. The laughter. The warmth. The strangers who had quietly become family. I already knew the truth...everything was temporary. People came, people left. No matter how tightly I tried to hold a moment, it slipped through my fingers eventually. That knowledge stayed with me all day, heavy and unavoidable. I knew I couldn't

keep them. I couldn't freeze time. I would have to let everyone go, whether I was ready or not.

Our destination was Manikaran Sahib and the Kasol market. We enjoyed ourselves, yes—but the joy felt thin that day, fragile, like it could tear apart at any second. There was a moment at the temple when Arya bowed his head with Eric, as if they were fulfilling a wish together. Standing there beside them, I felt the loneliness return sharp and familiar. But I swallowed it. I refused to let it ruin the day. I told myself to ignore it. And I tried.

Later, at the Kasol market, he bought the little things she had asked for—small, thoughtful things. I stood there too. He didn't buy anything for me. When I asked for one thing, he laughed, thinking I was joking. But I wasn't. I didn't want the object. I wanted the gesture. Even the strangers noticed something Arya had missed and quietly brought it for me. Maybe the object itself didn't matter. But it would have mattered if it had come from him. I'm writing this because I don't want to be dishonest in this story. I felt bad. I felt small. And I'm allowed to say that. Even in the middle of everything good, I felt small. The feeling of neglect crept in slowly—the kind that appears when you're standing right next to someone and still feel invisible. I kept telling myself maybe I was overthinking, maybe I was just being too sensitive. But it kept happening. The little exclusions. Conversations flowing around me, but never truly with me.

When I finally gathered the courage to confront him, my voice wasn't angry. It was shaky. I wasn't accusing him. I was simply asking, *"Why do I feel left out?"* I was asking to be seen. But he looked at me as if I were the problem. He said I was being childish. That I just wanted attention. That I never enjoyed anything. That I was always complaining. *"Don't ruin the trip,"* he said. As if my feelings were an inconvenience. As if my sadness had simply arrived at the wrong time. And then he scolded me. Not once did he say, *"I'm sorry you felt that way."* Not once did he pause and ask why I felt that way. There was only blame. Dismissal. A wall between us. And what hurt even more was what came after. Later, he acted as if nothing had

happened. He talked normally. Laughed normally. As if I hadn't just stood there, exposed and embarrassed for even speaking up. As if my tears, my trembling voice, that entire moment had simply evaporated. There was also that comment from earlier. "*Are you jealous of Eric?*" Jealous? Of what? Of friendship? I wasn't jealous. I didn't hate her. I didn't want to take her place. I just wanted my space. My place. If I came with you, why did I feel like I was tagging along instead of belonging? Why did I feel like I had to fight for something as basic as inclusion? I wasn't asking him to drop anyone. I wasn't asking him to choose me over someone else. I was simply asking not to feel invisible while standing beside him. And every time he pretended everything was normal, it made me question myself. Was it really that small? Was I too much? Too sensitive? Or was it simply easier for him to act like nothing had happened than to admit he had hurt me? It was exhausting—feeling hurt and then feeling guilty for being hurt. Feeling dismissed and then being told I was dramatic. I didn't want attention. I wanted consideration. I didn't want to ruin anything. I just wanted to feel included. I didn't hate anyone. I just didn't want to feel alone while standing next to the person I had come with.

That night at dinner, to distract myself from the incident, I didn't sit beside Arya. I moved quietly and chose a seat next to my other friends instead, as if physically shifting away from the ache. When I started talking to them, something unexpected happened—I felt light. There was no tension. No overthinking. No measuring of my words. I wasn't asking for reassurance. I wasn't waiting to be included. I wasn't hoping someone would look at me and choose me. I was simply there—laughing, talking, existing. And it felt so easy. I kept wondering why it felt so natural with others and so heavy with him. For a moment, a terrifying, brutally honest moment, I thought maybe he wasn't right for me. Maybe I was knocking on the wrong door. Maybe I was asking the wrong person for the right things. But I pushed that thought away. I told myself I was overreacting. I distracted myself harder. I laughed louder. I stayed busy.

And then, somehow, I ended up holding a book. I didn't even remember how it had gotten into my hands. I just remember the tears. They came quietly at first, the way rain begins before anyone notices. But then they wouldn't stop. In moments like that, I didn't want anyone to ask what was wrong, because I knew I wouldn't be able to explain it without falling apart completely. Deep down, I knew exactly why I was crying. The most painful part was also the most ordinary thing: everyone noticed. My friends asked if I was okay. They looked at me with concern, noticing the way I held the book like a shield, like something to hide behind. But he didn't notice. Or maybe he did—and chose not to. He didn't come over. He didn't ask. He didn't even look closely enough to see that I was breaking right there, in the same space as him. Later, when everything had calmed and my tears had finally dried, we were walking toward the traveller. The air felt heavy but quiet. I was still fragile inside, but I had composed myself the way people do when they're tired of breaking in public.

And then he walked toward me. For a second—just a second—hope rose in my chest. I thought, this was it.. He noticed. He's going to ask what happened. He's going to say he's sorry. He's going to tell me he didn't mean to hurt me. My heart softened before he even spoke. But that's not what he said. Instead, he looked at me and said, "Don't stay too close to those strangers. Don't get close to them. They're strangers, and they'll stay strangers. In the end, you have to stay with us only. So be within your limits." Then he added, "I know you want attention, but don't ask for attention from everybody. If you want it, I'll give it to you. Don't stay with strangers. I've been watching you for many days. Take this as my warning—maybe the last warning. Otherwise, the consequences will be very bad." *Be in your limits.* He didn't acknowledge anything that had happened. Not my tears. Not my pain. Not the conversation from earlier. Instead of comfort, there was a warning. I stood there, stunned. Was that jealousy? Was that possessiveness? Or was it something darker—something that said *you don't get to be happy with anyone else?* I couldn't even process it properly at that moment. My mind went blank. I felt as if I had been caught doing something

wrong, when all I had done was try to breathe... try to survive the hurt. It confused me deeply. There was no warmth in his words. Only boundaries I hadn't even known I had crossed. At that moment, something inside me shifted. Because what I felt didn't resemble love. It felt like ownership. That realization frightened me—because love is supposed to feel like being chosen, not confined

.My heart was too heavy to talk. I didn't want to get attached anymore. I didn't want to laugh too loudly or look too closely at people's faces. Night came, and I went to sleep carrying that weight inside me. I didn't want to sleep—I wanted to stay awake a little longer, just to watch everyone exist around me. That night, people in our travel group started getting sick. We stopped again and again along the road, helping them, waiting for them to feel better. Even that moment became part of the memory—sore, sweet, harsh, and soft all at once. Eventually, with tears still lingering in my eyes, I fell asleep. I thought the next day would be the end. But it wasn't.

Day five arrived like destiny, refusing to let go of us so easily. A quarrel broke out between the organiser and the traveller driver. We were told to leave the traveller, go somewhere nearby, and wait. No explanations. No questions. So we waited. At one point, monkeys snatched Eric's bag, and for a brief moment everyone burst into laughter. It sounded so normal—like nothing was ending, like nothing was quietly breaking. I tried to laugh too.

But my body had already given up. I had a fever. I told Arya. He told me to ask someone for medicine. So I did. When I told him again that I wasn't feeling well, he simply said, "You have to bear it. It's normal. Don't overreact." He didn't console me. He didn't sit beside me.

When the traveller finally arrived, he picked up Eric's luggage. Not mine. I was visibly unwell. People noticed. Strangers helped me. And this time, I let them—because I didn't have the strength to refuse anymore. But I wasn't expecting help from them. I was expecting it from him.

Expectation ruins everything. But why?

Then it hit me—. Life was going back to its normal track. The cruel one. The one where Arya returned to who he had always been. When we finally reached the destination, I didn't want to face those people...the strangers who had begun to feel like family. Because I knew the truth. We would probably never meet again. I would never fully step into their circle. I was stuck somewhere outside it, in a half-formed space, unfinished. Because my heart was still holding on to someone who would never hold me back. And even knowing that, I couldn't leave him. Because I loved him. Truly. Silently. Hopelessly.

I went home with a shaking voice and tears I couldn't stop. And I told my mother everything—every feeling, every hurt, every hope. Because she listens. She never judges. She consoles me. She fills the spaces he leaves empty. *Some loves are never meant to be completed. They remain unfinished, unfulfilled—and yet you carry them with you forever.*

AGAIN, THE WORST PART

After we came back, everything slipped back into its old rhythm—exactly as I had feared. It was as if the trip had never happened, as if those days were only a pause in reality, not a turning point. The distance returned. The silence returned. I was ignored again. Eric tried—she truly did. She pulled me into conversations, checked on me, and made space for me whenever she could. I noticed it. I appreciated it more than she probably realised. But Arya... Arya never looked at me the way I needed him to look. Maybe he did glance my way sometimes. Maybe he noticed more than I thought. But it was never in the way my heart kept waiting for—in the way that carried attention, reassurance, or care. And still, I expected. I always do. Sometimes I hate that part of myself—the part that keeps waiting for people to become something they have already shown me they will never be.

At times, I tried to convince myself that maybe I deserved it. That it was karma returning to collect its debt. I told myself that somewhere along the way, I had crossed a line. That I had once sought attention the wrong way, hurt someone in the process, and now life was answering back in its own quiet way. I remember thinking back then that I was satisfied, that if I could silence that chapter—erase it completely—my life would finally settle into peace. But nothing settled. Nothing became calm. Instead, it felt as though my mistakes followed me home, sat quietly beside me, watched me hope, and then slowly took everything away again. As if the punishment wasn't meant to be loud or dramatic, but quiet and persistent—like neglect. As if I was being taught a strange lesson: that attention taken the wrong way eventually disappears altogether.

That regret stayed with me, heavy and undeniable. I told my mother everything—every ugly thought, every moment of shame, every realization that made me uncomfortable with myself. And she did

what only she could do. She held my hand and told me she would keep holding it, no matter what. Even if one day I became someone the world refused to forgive, she said she would still stand beside me. She would never let me face it alone. That kind of love saves you, but it also breaks something inside you—because sometimes you begin to wonder if you even deserve that much grace.

One thing Sam left behind in me, whether I wanted it or not, was writing. Writing became survival. Words, once written, don't disappear the way people do. They stay. So I wrote. I wrote everything I couldn't say out loud. I wrote about Arya. I wrote the questions I had swallowed, the anger I pretended I didn't feel, the conversations that never happened. I wrote about him again and again—about the strange way his name still felt like a bruise beneath my skin, something tender that never fully healed.

After the trip, I wanted to detach. God, I wanted to detach. I wanted to peel him off my heart like a stubborn label, something that had clung for too long and refused to come away cleanly. I wanted to stop loving him in that helpless, aching way that made me feel small. I wanted to live freely—selfishly, even. Peacefully. I wanted to wake up without checking my heart first, without scanning my chest for damage. I wanted mornings that didn't begin with the quiet weight of his memory.

I longed for silence that didn't feel like abandonment. I wanted to exist without overthinking every pause, every unread message, every slight shift in tone. I wanted to stop rereading conversations as if they were sacred texts, searching for meanings that might not even exist. I wanted to stop translating distance into disaster, to stop turning absence into proof that something inside me had already been lost.

But I couldn't. No matter how hard I tried to reason with myself, my heart kept choosing him. So again, I wrote....

They said, distract yourself from beauty,
but,

My pen would start, my thoughts would roam,
But every road led back to you, my home.

I waited for sunrise, wrote till it was done,
till every warm word confessed - you were the sun.

I stood in a garden, blooms in view,
But every petal whispered you.
Among the colours, wide and true,
My pen once again returned to you.

Again, I sat where the river ran, free,
But my pen chose you, not the scenery.

I tried to write about the rain's soft touch,
But my heart wrote your name too much.
The rain blurred the world; you do the same,
familiar as rain, impossible to explain.

I even watched the waves, distance-wise,
Yet my pen drowned into your eyes.

I have watched the sunset glowing anew,
it left me warm and aching too,
the way you do,
So again, my pen wrote you.

I chose the night to finally begin again,
to unwrite your name from my trembling pen.
Yet the moonlight lingered, gentle and true...
and in the hush of sleep, my pen returned to you.

I returned once more to rewrite my world's role,
yet my pen made you, the loss and the goal.

And again, I said,

My pen would start, my thoughts would roam,
But every road led back to you, my home.

And maybe that's my truth—
I don't know how to love without losing myself,
And I don't know how to leave, even when staying hurts.

SOFTLY, A NEW START

Then, without warning, a new chapter slipped quietly into our lives. There was a girl who started coming to the ground near the university—the same place where we spent our evenings. She arrived every day at almost the same hour as we did, always alone, as if she belonged to the silence that settled over that field at dusk. I don't know when I first started noticing her, but somehow I did. And somewhere between noticing and wondering, something shifted inside me. I realised I liked looking at her—quietly, secretly. She was very pretty, yes, but it wasn't only that. There was something about her presence that unsettled me in a way I couldn't explain. It left me with questions I had never asked myself before. Was this admiration? Was it an attraction? Was I bisexual? Or was it something else entirely—some unnamed feeling brushing against parts of myself I had never explored? The confusion lingered, restless and unresolved.

A few days later, destiny—because it always disguises itself as coincidence—found its way in. We were playing truth and dare, laughing carelessly, when Arya and Eric dared me to walk over and ask her if she was okay. It was meant to be teasing, nothing serious. But they didn't know I had already wanted to talk to her. I walked toward her slowly, reminding myself that strangers aren't always dangerous—that sometimes they are simply people waiting to be noticed. I asked her softly if she needed anything. She didn't respond the way I expected. Instead, she looked straight at me, her eyes steady and calm, and said without hesitation, “Can I hug you?”

Before my mind could catch up, her arms were already around me.

The moment arrived too suddenly to understand. My body froze. My chest felt heavy, my heart began to race in a way that felt unfamiliar and disorienting, and my thoughts scattered. I didn't know what I was feeling. Was it a surprise? Shock? Comfort? Recognition? Or something deeper—something unnamed that I

didn't yet have language for? For a few seconds, I stood there numb and speechless, suspended inside the moment. Then I gently pulled away, walked back to my friends, and pretended nothing had happened. I laughed and called it strange. They laughed too, brushing it off as just part of the dare. Nothing serious, they said, and soon the evening moved on and we went home.

But the feeling didn't leave. It stayed with me, quiet but persistent, settling somewhere deep in my chest. No matter how much I tried to dismiss it, it refused to disappear. And the question followed me long after that moment had ended.

Was *I* *bisexual?*
Or was I simply standing at the edge of a part of myself I had never truly explored before?

Curiosity kept me awake that night. I told myself I would speak to her again. The next evening, I waited—restless, alert, pretending not to look for her while my eyes searched the ground every few minutes. But she didn't come. One day passed, then another, each one stretching my thoughts thinner with questions I couldn't quiet. When she finally returned, she sat in the same place as before, as if time itself had paused and resumed only for her. Every time I thought about walking up to her, my mind filled with a thousand fears. *What if she thinks I'm strange? What if I misunderstood that moment completely?* So I stayed where I was. I smiled from a distance. I pretended I wasn't overthinking every small movement, every glance. But the silence began to feel heavier than the fear.

One day, I finally gathered the courage. I walked toward her slowly and asked if she was okay. She smiled—softly, briefly—almost amused by the question. I asked why she always came there alone. She answered casually that she didn't really have friends, as if it were the most ordinary detail in the world. For a moment, an unkind thought crossed my mind. *Maybe she is the reason.* But when I looked at her properly—at the gentleness in her expression, at the quiet grace she carried—I felt ashamed for even thinking about it. Carefully, I asked if she wanted to share anything with me. I told her I would listen. Truly listen. She looked at me with a kind of quiet

surprise, almost confusion, as though the idea itself was unfamiliar. Her eyes seemed to ask a question she didn't say out loud: *Why would anyone care about my story?* I didn't know the answer either. I only knew that I did.

She smiled again, but this time the smile didn't reach her eyes. She said it didn't matter. That no one cared about her anyway. That she was just a loser. The word lingered in the air between us. It didn't pass—it stayed, echoing inside me. How could someone so gentle call herself that? Slowly, hesitantly, she began to open up. She told me she was from the engineering department and constantly drowning in stress. While everyone else seemed to move forward effortlessly, she always felt as if she were running behind. Not because she lacked ability, but because life had already exhausted her long before she reached the starting line. She spoke about responsibilities that felt too heavy for someone her age—about grandparents who depended on her, about a family that had money but no peace. Her voice was quiet, almost apologetic, as if she felt guilty for even telling her own story.

Then she spoke about her friends. The ones she had trusted. They had told her they hadn't studied for exams, so she believed them and didn't study either. When the results came out, they had scored high. She had barely passed. Instead of comfort, they laughed and told her she wasn't good enough to stay with them. Some drifted away because she was too quiet. Others left because she stopped forcing herself to fit into their noise. What hurt me the most wasn't what they had done—it was the way she spoke about them. She spoke with kindness. She defended them. She said she missed them. She still wanted them in her life. She believed that if she changed herself enough, if she tried hard enough, she could somehow earn her way back into a space that had already rejected her. Listening to her, I couldn't help wondering how someone so soft, so harmless, could be treated so cruelly by the world.

I told her that if she ever needed anything, she could come to me—or to us. That she could join our group anytime. She smiled, hesitant and unsure, as if the idea itself felt too generous to believe. She said

she didn't want to be a burden. I told her she wouldn't be, that my friends were kind, that she was welcome. She looked away then, her voice barely a whisper. "I'll try... maybe someday." I didn't push. Because sometimes, the most you can do for someone is leave the door open and hope they eventually believe they deserve to walk through it.

Later, I told my friends her story. They reacted the way I had hoped they would. They said if she wanted to come, she could. But we wouldn't force her. I agreed. I had already learned something important: forcing someone to stay never teaches them that they are wanted. It only teaches them that they are trapped.

Days passed. Each evening I found myself glancing toward the place where she usually sat, half expecting her to gather the courage and walk toward us. But with every passing day, my hope thinned a little more. I began to think maybe she never would.

And then, a few days later, something close to a small miracle happened...She came.

She walked toward our group slowly, her steps uncertain, her shoulders slightly folded inward, like someone already bracing for rejection. Her eyes looked tired in a way that suggested she had been carrying too much alone for too long. She stopped in front of us for a moment, gathered what courage she had left, and said softly—almost apologetically, "If you don't mind... May I join you?"

We looked at each other for a second and exchanged a quiet glance before saying yes.

The relief on her face was immediate. She began speaking quickly, rushing her words as if she feared we might change our minds if she paused for too long. She said she didn't want to ruin our group or disturb our dynamic. She only wanted someone to talk to—just strangers who might listen. Then her voice grew more serious. She asked us not to use her words against her, not to repeat her story to anyone else.

"Please," she said, "don't break my trust." She laughed nervously after saying it, the kind of laugh people use when they're trying to

hide fear. Then she added, almost shyly, “I don’t even know why I trust you. I don’t know where you’re from. I’ve never really talked to you properly. Still... Please don’t break it.”

For a moment, none of us spoke. We just sat there, quietly realising that she had handed us something fragile—something that had probably been broken before. Slowly, gently, we nodded and told her it was okay. She could talk.

And then she did. She spoke about the stress that never seemed to leave her chest, about not knowing how to cope with her studies, about the constant feeling that she was doing everything wrong no matter how hard she tried. Her voice trembled as she asked questions that felt too heavy for someone her age—how to fit into society, how to speak in a way that people would actually listen, how to become interesting enough to be noticed, how to live up to the expectations of the people she loved. She said she didn’t want to be alone anymore. She wanted to laugh like us, talk like us, belong somewhere.

But there was a bitter truth she didn’t know yet. Sometimes what looks like a happy group from the outside isn’t happy at all. From a distance, we might seem loud and effortless. We laugh together. We click pictures. We look close, unbreakable even. But inside, there are silences between us—unsaid things, forced smiles, moments of standing side by side and still feeling completely alone.

She said she wanted to study well, to build something meaningful out of her life, and to make the people who cared about her proud. Then she looked at us with a kind of quiet desperation and said, almost pleading, “Please tell me how.”

I wanted to answer her. I wanted to say something—anything—that might make things feel lighter for her. But instead, I fell silent, caught in a strange stillness inside myself. I began choosing my words carefully, turning each sentence over in my mind before letting it exist. I softened the sharp edges of what I might say. I rewrote thoughts that hadn’t even reached my lips yet. I didn’t want to sound too eager, or too distant, or too honest. Every word

suddenly felt important, as though one wrong syllable might change the way she saw me. So I measured everything. Before I could finally speak, Eric did. Her voice was gentle and steady, the kind that tries to fix things without making them feel broken. She said the right things—the comforting things. The kind of words people say when they want to help.

When Eric finished, the girl leaned forward and hugged her. For a brief moment, a selfish thought slipped into my mind. I wished it had been me. I wished I had been the one to comfort her, the one she hugged. But I brushed the thought away quickly, telling myself there would be time. If she stayed. If she became part of us. And then she smiled. Not the careful, polite smile she had worn earlier, but something real—something that finally reached her eyes.

Eric joked lightly after that, warning her not to break our trio and welcoming her into the group. But inside my head, a quiet thought formed: *Does Eric know?* That sometimes a trio doesn't feel like three people. Sometimes it feels like two... and one. Still, I knew Eric wasn't at fault. So I swallowed the thought before it could grow bitter. I smiled too. Now it wasn't a trio anymore. It was a squad. And for a moment, I allowed myself to believe that maybe this was the beginning of something better.

Later that day, we learned that she lived in a hostel—alone in a place full of people. She carried her life inside small rooms and narrow hallways, learning how to survive without letting anyone see the weight she dragged behind her every day. I kept thinking about something that wouldn't leave my mind: *How broken must someone be to apologise for needing help?*

Quietly, I made a decision inside myself. I would help her. No matter what. Slowly, she became my friend. Or maybe something else entirely—something unnamed that I didn't yet have the courage to define out loud. Even then, I couldn't tell if what I felt was love or simply the desperate relief of finally being seen. Maybe it was the comfort of sharing silence with someone who understood brokenness without needing explanations.

With her, I didn't have to pretend I was okay. She could read the tiredness in my eyes before I spoke a single word. Our bond grew quietly. There was no announcement, no dramatic turning point. Just small, ordinary moments stitching us together. We started going on walks every evening—the same uneven road, the same little corner shop, the same stray dog that followed us halfway before giving up. She would nudge my shoulder when I said something overly dramatic. I would roll my eyes at her terrible jokes—the cheap ones that weren't even funny, yet somehow still made me laugh.

We talked about nothing. And about everything. About childhood fears. About strange dreams. About the future in vague, uncertain pieces. About people we didn't understand. Sometimes she would fall silent in the middle of a conversation, staring ahead as if something far away had caught her attention. And I would simply wait. Eventually she would speak again, when she was ready. There was no pressure to fill the silence. Our quiet moments weren't awkward. They were warm. They felt earned. She was completely herself around me—messy, honest, unfiltered. And that mattered more than anything. I enjoyed her company in a way that felt peaceful rather than loud. And I could tell she enjoyed mine too—in the way she lingered before leaving, in the small updates she sent about her day, and in the way her voice softened whenever it was just the two of us.

Then Arya began to show interest in her. I noticed it almost immediately—the way his gaze lingered on her a little longer than necessary, the slight change in his voice when he spoke to her, the careful attention he suddenly paid to the things she said. One day he asked me directly if he should take a step toward her, if he should try to become something more in her life. I told him no. I told him she didn't feel that way. That she saw him more like a brother. I had heard it in her tone before, in the way she spoke about him. He stepped back after that.

But whatever happened around us didn't change what existed between Vanya and me. Yes—her name was Vanya. Even when

Arya and Eric said no to plans, the two of us still went out. We shared cheap street food from the same plate. She would steal the last bite and grin at me like she had won some small victory. We talked until our phones died. Sometimes we laughed so hard she would wipe tears from the corners of her eyes. And sometimes she cried for real, and I simply sat beside her.

With her, my emotional honesty felt real in a way it rarely had before. Her fears became familiar to me—the tremor in her voice when she spoke about disappointing people, the way she carefully avoided certain topics but lingered near them as if they were too heavy to step around completely. I noticed when she was pretending to be strong. I noticed when she needed distraction. I noticed when she needed silence.

Somewhere along the way, she stopped being just someone who had joined our group. She became part of my routine. Part of the thoughts that arrived just before sleep. Part of the small things I wanted to share first. Slowly, quietly, she began living inside my days—in the pauses between conversations, in the laughter that caught me off guard, in the quiet spaces between breaths.

I don't even remember when that shift happened. It came gradually—so gradually that I almost missed the moment it began. I only realised it later, the way you suddenly notice the season has changed. Around her, I felt different. My words felt fragile, as if they mattered more than usual. I chose them with intention. I spoke more honestly than I was used to. The sharp sarcasm I once wore like armour began to soften. The guarded edges of my personality slowly smoothed out. I found myself being sincere in ways I hadn't rehearsed, in ways that felt strangely unfiltered.

I started noticing everything about her. The way her tired eyes still tried to look brave, as if she refused to let the world see how heavy life felt for her. The half-smile she gave when she didn't want to explain herself—a quiet signal asking me to let the subject go. The careful way she held a cup, fingers curved gently around it as if even warmth might break something delicate. The way she walked beside me without rushing, matching my pace without a word. The way

she sat beside me in complete silence without making it uncomfortable, however her presence filled the space rather than straining it.

It was happening again. Just like it once had with Arya.

Only now, it was her who occupied that sacred space inside my awareness. Or maybe she had created an entirely new one, because somewhere deep inside me, I still couldn't keep Arya completely out of my mind. His presence lingered like an unfinished thought—quiet, suspended, never fully gone.

And yet, I found myself remembering things about Vanya that she had probably forgotten she had ever told me. The name of her childhood pet. The way she hummed softly when she thought no one was listening. Tiny, almost insignificant details that somehow rooted themselves inside me and refused to fade. And that terrified me. Because the feeling was familiar—too familiar. The same quiet pull. The same devotion. The same way my world began to reorganise itself around one person's existence without asking my permission.

Confusion swallowed me slowly. I kept asking myself the same questions over and over. *What was wrong with me?* Why did my heart keep rewriting a story I thought I already understood? Was I bisexual? Was I broken? I couldn't fit into the neat explanations people seemed so certain about. And while my mind tried to categorise everything, my heart refused to wait for clarity.

With her, the simplest moments felt strangely complete. We could sit beside each other doing absolutely nothing, and somehow it felt like everything. Our shoulders almost touching. Our knees brushing in that accidental-on-purpose way that neither of us addressed. We walked at the same pace without ever discussing it. Sometimes we mirrored each other's expressions without even noticing. I caught myself repeating her phrases. Picking up her small habits. Sitting beside her instinctively, as if there were no other place that felt as natural. She became the first person I texted

whenever something happened—good or bad. My reflex. My comfort.

And slowly, the person who once occupied every corner of my awareness—the one whose presence dictated my mood, whose silence could ruin my entire day—began to blur into the background. Not gone. Just quieter. Earlier, every step I took was measured by whether he was there, whether he would notice me, whether he might hurt me. Now I barely looked. But sometimes, I still looked.

Instead, my attention began searching for her reactions—her smile, her approval. I sat closer than necessary. Once, my hand brushed against her hair and I didn't immediately pull away. When we talked, I leaned in slightly, as if distance itself was an error our bodies were unconsciously correcting.

When she was feeling sensitive, my voice softened without me thinking about it. When someone criticised her, I defended her—even when she wasn't there to hear it. I never joked about the things that hurt her. Never used her vulnerabilities as weapons.

And then came the jealousy. It wasn't loud or dramatic. Just a quiet tightening in my chest when someone else made her laugh a little too easily. A dull ache when she leaned toward someone else the way she leaned toward me. I kept telling myself I was overthinking. That it meant nothing. That it was harmless. But every night I replayed small moments in my head like scenes from a film. The brush of her fingers against mine. The way she sometimes held eye contact half a second longer than necessary. I imagined a version of myself who felt safe with her. A version of me that didn't flinch at the word *love*. I wondered if she felt it too. If she noticed the quiet gravity forming between us that I was too afraid to name. I was terrified that saying it aloud would destroy everything. That love, once spoken, might fracture the fragile beauty silence had been protecting.

So instead, I stretched our goodbyes. Invented small excuses to stay five minutes longer. We built inside jokes that made no sense to anyone else. We exchanged glances that carried entire

conversations. I learned to recognise the subtle shift in her breathing that meant something was wrong. And when it was, I adjusted myself instinctively—softer tone, lighter jokes, quieter presence. Anything to protect her peace. But I never told her that I loved her.

Carrying all of that—the fear, the tenderness, the confusion, the undeniable truth of my own heart—eventually became too heavy. One night, I broke down and told my mother that I didn’t know who I was anymore. The words felt dangerous just existing in the open air. Maybe I was bisexual. Maybe I had always been. Maybe people would hate me for it. Maybe they already did—for loving Arya, for loving her, for existing somewhere outside the lines everyone else seemed so certain about. I expected hesitation. Instead, my mother listened. She didn’t interrupt. She didn’t flinch. She didn’t rush to correct anything. She held my trembling truth gently, as if it were something sacred. And then she told me that whoever I was—whatever my heart chose to love—she would be happiest if I was happy. That my happiness was her greatest gift. That living honestly mattered more than fitting into anyone else’s expectations. There was no disappointment in her eyes. No fear. Only warmth. Only certainty. She accepted me without hesitation, without condition, without making me earn it. In that moment, something inside me finally loosened—something I had been bracing for my entire life.

Once again, she proved she was my safest place. My steady ground. The one person in front of whom I never had to shrink, never had to apologise, never had to explain why my heart loved the way it did.

THE SILENCE I CHOOSE

After finally facing my identity, after peeling myself layer by layer and stripping away denial and fear to understand who I was and who I had become, I found myself drowning all over again. Clarity did not bring peace. My mother stood beside me like an unmoving pillar, steady and unshaken. She supported every decision, every hesitation, every silence. She never rushed me toward an answer. She never treated my confusion as an inconvenience. Even with that unconditional acceptance, my mind refused to rest. Support had removed the fear of rejection; it had not removed the fear of truth.

I kept asking myself questions I was too afraid to answer honestly. Did I love her for the attention she gave me? For the care she offered in ways I had always wanted someone to care? Was I trying to replace Arya, somewhere deep inside, after he never fulfilled what I needed, never loved me in the way I longed for? Was I attempting to rewrite a story that had already broken me?

Perhaps I had misunderstood my feelings again. I had never truly been close to anyone except Arya. He had been my first intensity, my first attachment, my first emotional home. When a person grows up hearing only one rhythm, accepting a different song becomes difficult. I could not tell whether it was love, or only relief at finally being seen.

Somewhere deep inside, I already knew the truth I never spoke aloud: I could never win him over. Not with him. Not against him. Whatever existed between us—whatever name it carried—was never meant to survive in the real world. It lived in longing, in imagination, in the quiet space between almost and never.

I kept questioning myself. Was I spoiling something pure? Was I about to ruin another friendship simply because someone showed kindness? Was I mistaking comfort for love, attention for attachment, safety for desire?

From childhood until then, Arya had lived inside me like a constant rhythm—steady, familiar, impossible to ignore. His presence shaped the way I understood affection. Through shared laughter, quiet understanding, soft glances, unspoken care, the thought of feeling something for someone else felt unreal.

Those thoughts crowded my mind—restless, loud, relentless. They followed me into sleep. They waited for me when I woke up.

So I chose silence. I decided not to confess—to her, to him, to anyone. Confession felt like destruction on both sides. Nothing good could come from tearing open something fragile. One truth would shatter another. I believed those two loves could never exist at the same time without collapsing everything.

So I convinced myself to wait. I told myself to enjoy life, to enjoy the process. Just remain friends. Love could wait for some future version of me—someone settled, wiser, braver. Someone who understood the difference between longing and reality. For that moment, I only wanted to cherish what existed. I lived inside each moment and let life unfold in ways I could not control.

We lived together in that space for a while. We laughed, shared stories, and filled rooms with noise. At times we felt like a complete squad—loud, chaotic, inseparable. At other times something subtle shifted. The unity felt fragmented. Two and two. Invisible lines formed between people who once felt united.

Somewhere along the way, Eric and Arya began growing closer. Too close to ignore. They exchanged glances that lingered longer than they should have. Inside jokes existed that never included me. Half-spoken sentences needed no ending since they already understood each other. Their gestures remained subtle enough to deny, yet obvious enough to feel.

Sometimes it almost seemed they felt uneasy about my friendship with Vanya. Their expressions tightened whenever we laughed too freely. Conversations shifted whenever we sat together. There was nothing hidden between us. Nothing secret, nothing coded. Everything remained transparent.

With them, it felt different. Code words appeared in ordinary conversations. Silences carried intention. Discussions stopped the moment we entered a room. Glances dissolved into casualness too quickly.

Still, I remained silent.

Slowly, a strange feeling settled inside me. I felt as if I did not belong with them anymore

but I kept telling myself I was overreacting.....

A TRIP INTO CLARITY

To distract myself—perhaps to save us—I suggested a trip. A fresh start. Our squad's first trip together.

Dalhousie.

A budget trip. A simple trip. A hopeful trip. I told myself the mountains might fix what we never managed to name. Distance from routine might loosen the quiet tension growing between us. Shared memories might stitch us back together.

When we arrived, the air felt cleaner than my thoughts. The sky stretched wide and indifferent above us, reminding me how small our complications were. On the first day we walked along Mall Road, laughter bouncing between shopfronts and glowing streetlights. We stopped for overpriced coffee, argued over souvenirs we did not need, clicked blurry group photos but we insisted it looked aesthetic. For a few hours, everything felt light. Manageable. Almost healed.

The second day brought us to Khajjiar. Green silence spread across endless meadows under an open sky. At Dainkund, the temple stood ancient and patient, as if it had witnessed centuries of complicated hearts without ever changing.

Somewhere within those peaceful landscapes, Eric fell ill. For a short time she lost her memory, her mind going blank before slowly returning. The moment shifted everything. Plans slowed. Voices softened. Walks became shorter. Arya carried her bag. I brought water. Arya stayed close to her—closer than necessary. Too attentive. Too instinctive.

I watched.

On the last day, we trekked. Breathless. Tired. Alive. The climb burned my legs, though it felt lighter than the weight inside my chest. At the top, the wind struck our faces—sharp, freeing. We

shouted into the valley, took dramatic photos, pretended fear did not exist.

Even there, with clouds drifting below us, I noticed how naturally they moved toward each other.

The path back twisted along the mountainside—narrow, uneven. One wrong step could send someone slipping before they managed to steady themselves. The mountains were beautiful, never gentle. At certain turns, the edge felt dangerously close. The valley stretched wide below. The drop felt real.

That was when I saw it most clearly. He stayed close to Eric. Intentionally. Whenever the path tightened, his hand hovered near her back—never touching, always ready. When she hesitated at a steep turn, he reached out first. “Careful,” he said softly, as if she were made of glass.

When she slipped slightly on the gravel, he pulled her toward him instinctively. His grip felt firm. Protective. It looked natural. Too natural. He adjusted his pace to match hers. Slowed whenever she slowed. Asked if she felt tired. Offered water before she even asked. His attention wrapped around her like a shield—quiet, constant, impossible to ignore. I walked behind them, pretending not to notice how my chest tightened with every small act of care.

Then came that moment. The path grew particularly dangerous—narrow, uneven. The kind that forced everyone into careful steps. We walked in a line. Vanya laughed about something, distracted, standing a little too close to the edge. Suddenly, in what he later called a “joke,” he pushed her lightly from the side. The push was not strong enough to make her fall but strong enough to make her stumble. Strong enough to pull a gasp from her throat. Strong enough for my heart to stop for a second. She caught herself. Arya laughed. Eric laughed. He laughed the loudest.

“Relax. It was just a joke,” he said. Yet something about it never felt like a joke.

Minutes earlier, he had been careful with Sam—guiding her, protecting her, watching every step she took. Here, with Vanya, on

the same dangerous path, he acted differently. Careless. Playful in a way that ignored the risk.

The contrast hurt more than the action itself. I saw Vanya smile it off, pretending nothing had shaken her. A brief flicker appeared in her eyes—a flash of surprise, a moment of uncertainty.

The most painful part was my silence.

On the way back, we boarded an HRTC bus that shook and swayed as if it wanted to throw us off the mountainside. The driver took sharp curves as though gravity were optional. Nervous laughter escaped us whenever the bus tilted too far. Outwardly, the trip looked perfect. Inside me, it felt anything but.

This time, I stayed close to Eric and Arya deliberately. I told myself it looked casual, accidental. It was not. I observed them. What I noticed unsettled me. Their closeness felt too intimate for “just friends.” Shoulders brushed without retreat. Conversations remained quiet, almost whispered, yet fully understood. Shared glances carried unspoken meaning. Small gestures—a steadying hand on a steep path, a lingering touch while passing something—lasted slightly longer than necessary.

I asked Arya casually, pretending indifference while my heart prepared for impact. He smiled, calm, unreadable. “No. We were just friends.” Two words that should have comforted me unsettled me instead. Sometimes “just friends” felt like the safest lie people told when they are not ready to face the truth.

I tried convincing myself that I was overthinking. Their friendship required no explanation. They owed me nothing. I held no claim, no confession, no defined place in their story. Yet questions remained. Conversations often ended when I approached. Arya’s attention shifted whenever Eric entered the room. Eric searched for Arya first in every crowd.

Something inside me cracked quietly. It was not obvious jealousy. It felt more like displacement, as though I had been gently—almost politely—replaced again.

The mountains offered beautiful views. They also offered a clarity I was not ready to face. During that trip, I realized that Eric hated Vanya—enough for it to show. She painted Vanya as the villain of the group, the one who ruined everything. Warnings followed: stay distant, stay careful, remember who came first. Living beside Vanya, witnessing her honesty, calmness, warmth, I saw something different. The hostility did not come from Vanya. It came from insecurity. Attention no longer belonged to them. For the first time, someone felt replaceable. I had grown emotionally close to Vanya. I listened, noticed, prioritized her presence. That quiet shift threatened older bonds. Sometimes I wondered if they wanted me back—not as myself, only as a role. A familiar position. A comfortable third wheel.

The irony felt cruel. When I finally found someone who saw me, who cared, who listened, it unsettled them. Especially her. Sometimes even him. The one who had never noticed me before suddenly showed traces of jealousy. A feeling I had never wanted him to experience—least of all because of me.

Jokes followed too. Sharp ones. Words disguised as humor, yet heavy enough to cut.

During the trip, Vanya once spoke to strangers casually, laughing freely. When she returned, Eric mocked her. Accusations followed—flirting, seeking attention, behaving inappropriately. I felt something twist inside me. Still, I said nothing.

I hated the kind of friend I appeared to be.

Speaking up might have ruined the trip. Confrontation felt like betrayal. Arya and Eric had been there first. Choosing words felt like choosing sides.

That moment revealed something terrifying. Maybe I had been ready to lose Vanya. But not them. The thought haunted me. If I truly cared for her, how had I allowed those insults? How had silence remained easier than defense? Silence had always been my habit. So I watched. I remembered. I absorbed.

The trip ended. The questions remained. Their teasing lingered. Their jealousy lingered. Their quiet cruelty lingered.

For a long time I believed my silence was maturity. Eventually I understood it had been cowardice. Loving someone meant speaking—even with a shaking voice...., even when it stripped away all comfort. So , I promised myself I would learn to speak, not only for others, but for myself as well.

The major highlight of the trip came when Vanya told me something that shifted my heart completely. She said that on the very first day, Arya had tried to confess his feelings to her. She refused him. Later, he confessed again—perhaps after realizing something—but she refused him once more. After that moment, nothing remained the same. He stopped speaking to her the way he once had.

“The warmth in his voice faded. His behaviour changed. A quiet distance appeared—painful to witness,” she said.

Maybe it was the sting of rejection. Maybe pride. I never truly understood. Something broke that day, and it never returned to what it had been before.

ERIC'S JEALOUSY

After the trip, something shifted. Not loudly. Not suddenly. The air between us grew tight, heavy—like a room left closed for days. Eric's jealousy no longer hid behind jokes or silence. It carried weight now. It followed us, settled into conversations, and watched quietly.

While something inside her darkened, something inside Vanya began to glow. Beautiful, perhaps—but beauty was never the point. Beauty can be cheap. Borrowed. Rehearsed. Edited. Performed. What made her real was something softer, something the world rarely valued. She was innocent—not the naïve kind untouched by pain, but the kind that still believed despite it. Too innocent for the people she trusted. Too open for a world that rarely returns honesty.

She was not clever in the way we were. Words did not pass through calculation before leaving her mouth. She never measured impact or built strategies inside silence. Thoughts moved directly from mind to speech. No filters. Unlike us

We had learned restraint early—when to speak, when to hide, when to twist truth into something safer. She never learned that language. Perhaps that's why someone had deceived her once before. Deeply.

Even then, she trusted too easily. She followed wherever we went, agreed with whatever we said, bent herself into shapes that were never truly hers—smaller, quieter, easier—only to feel included, only to remain close, only to avoid loneliness. She mistook proximity for love, compliance for belonging. People took advantage of that again and again.

I never wanted that future for her. I wanted her to grow—not into cruelty, not into coldness, but into truth. I wanted her to understand that love never required shrinking. Being liked by everyone only led to disappearance. I wanted her to live by her own rules, to place

herself first without guilt, to stop chasing perfection—perfection was nothing more than a lie.

I gave her books—pages carrying lessons of boundaries, dignity, and quiet strength. But books matter only when someone lets them wound a little, when stories begin to reflect the life we try not to see. She read every page, yet the words never settled within her. They stayed where they were written—ink on paper, not truth in her bones.

What she truly wanted was simpler: people. Someone nearby. Someone constant. Someone who would not leave when the world became unbearable.

Care for yourself before you try to care for the world. The moment you abandon yourself, the world slowly learns to abandon you too. Most people learn this lesson only after breaking.

I wanted her to learn it earlier.

The change arrived slowly, almost invisibly, like dawn or quiet healing. One day she said no with firmness. Another day she disagreed without apology. And the day after she refused to laugh at a joke that hurt her. She began protecting her time, her space, her heart. Not selfishly, intentionally. She started choosing herself. That was the moment I saw it.

Eric began to hate her openly. Her opinions received no validation. Conversations carried a constant need to appear superior. Vanya no longer bent. She stood straight. She stopped waiting for approval. Resentment followed. A comment here, a joke there. Questions designed not to understand, only to humiliate. Challenges meant to remind her of her place. Something inside me broke. Someone who once stood beside her now tried to pull her back into darkness. I never expected that from Eric. I never imagined happiness could invite cruelty. I never believed growth could feel like betrayal to someone else. The moment a person stopped belonging to others, they tried to break what that person became.

Self-love is not always soft. Sometimes it is rebellion. Sometimes it feels dangerous. And sometimes it exposes those who loved your obedience more than they ever loved you.

She was not asking for more attention. She was discovering her worth. She was claiming the space she deserved. To someone who believed that space belonged to them, it felt like loss.

THE COST OF STAYING SILENCE

One night Arya called me.

His name lit up my screen with the special ringtone I had set only for him. The sound once made me smile without thinking. That night, even before answering, something inside my chest tightened. A warning. My body seemed to know something was about to be lost.

He said he had wanted to tell me something for a long time. My heart began racing, yet there were butterflies, but no hope. Only dread. A quiet sinking feeling spread through my stomach. Somewhere deep inside, a voice whispered that this was not meant for me, that it would hurt. So I listened. Then he said it. He told me he loved Eric. Eric loved him too.

The world folded inward like a building collapsing into itself, dust filling the air, suffocating everything slowly. His voice continued in the background, almost relieved. He said he wanted to confess properly this time. He wanted to do it right. He needed my help.

My help.

Something inside me turned cold. My body went numb. My mind spiralled. From Sam to Vanya to Eric. Love seemed to change faces easily while I still bled from the one.

I had asked him many times. I gave him space. I swallowed jealousy. I trusted him when he smiled and said she was just a friend. Just a friend. I repeated the words to myself like a prayer. Believing him hurt less than doubt.

Deep inside, I already knew. The way their eyes lingered. The way they found each other in crowded rooms without effort. The quiet understanding between them. I saw it. I simply refused to name it. While he spoke about his plans, my thoughts screamed. My throat tightened as if my voice had been buried alive. My eyes burned, yet

I refused to cry. I would not give him the sound of my breaking. I was the one in love. I was not the one chosen. Only a witness. Standing at the edge of something I believed was mine, watching it become someone else's.

I asked him when it started. He answered too easily. They used to meet after college. Quietly. When everyone else had gone home. Just the two of them. That's when it truly hit me—not like a slap, but like something sinking deep into bone. Secrecy always feels like betrayal.

If something had grown in front of me, I would not have accepted it quietly. I would have tried to stop it. I would have created problems, asked more questions, picked fights over small things just to shake the truth loose. I would have forced conversations, demanded clarity, even sabotaged it before it had the chance to bloom. At least then I would have been fighting for something I could see.

Maybe I had tried to protect what I believed was mine. But when something grows behind your back, even that choice disappears. My greatest mistake was trusting my love. What hurt the most was not just that it happened, but that I was never given the chance to stand before it and say no.

I hated Arya then. I truly did. I had been there after Sam's death. I watched him fall apart in slow motion. I stayed on calls when he could not breathe under the weight of it. I listened to long silences when memories swallowed him whole. I remembered nights after midnight, whispering reassurances into the dark while my own chest ached. I believed healing would be slow, careful, honest.

I asked him if he was sure. Not for clarity. I needed hesitation. Love was never casual. It was not a word spoken for convenience. It carried responsibility. Consequence.

He said he knew what he felt. This time, he said, it was real love. So had he never seen mine? I wondered. All the love I carried for him—steady, loyal, patient—never reached his eyes. Perhaps it had reached them. He simply did not value it.

Then he said something that hollowed me out. He said he did not even know what love meant back then. He had not spent much time with Sam anyway. Now she was dead, so it did not matter.

At that moment I could not recognise him. The boy who once drowned in her memory had reduced her to something convenient, something erasable. A strange thought crossed my mind. I felt relief hearing him speak like that, yet the relief came with bitterness. Why had he not felt this way earlier?

That night, during the call, I stepped outside. I stood alone under the open sky while he continued speaking in my ear. The air felt suffocating. Stars scattered across the darkness. One of them felt like Sam, watching. Watching as if she knew. Watching as if she mocked me. Laughing at how I still stood there—loyal, available, foolish.

It felt as if the universe itself questioned me. Why had I ever expected fairness. Why I believed patience and kindness would protect me from being replaced.

I hated myself at that moment. I hated myself for giving them space, for ignoring boundaries when my instincts warned me. I chose understanding over self-respect. I believed calmness, support, maturity would protect me from losing him. Once again, I stood as the third wheel.

I mattered when he needed something to plan, arrange, confess. I served as the safe place, the emotional assistant, the bridge between his fear and his desire. Outside that role, I faded into background noise.

If he had not needed my help that night, he would never have told me. Their story had already begun long before that call. Perhaps during our first trip. Perhaps in the glances I pretended not to notice. Perhaps in silence I convinced myself it was harmless. The memory hurt. I remembered the times he ignored my messages while claiming he was busy. The moment he needed something, he returned to me. Suddenly I mattered. Not when I felt ignored. Not when I questioned my worth. Not when I broke quietly. Only when I became useful.

It hurt back then, and it still hurts now to realize that I was never a priority. It hurt even more to understand that my presence was optional—convenient when needed, replaceable when not, and easily accessible.

It was his life. I understood that. Yet I knew him more than he knew himself. I knew the way he overthought. The way he pretended certainty while fear hid underneath. I knew the pauses in his breathing before he admitted something vulnerable.

So why had he not told me. Why did I have to hear it like that?

My chest felt tight, as if something pressed against it. My throat burned from holding back tears. My mouth stayed silent while my mind screamed. I said only one thing, softly, almost like surrender. I told him I would help.

He sounded happy. Relieved. Light, as if a weight had lifted from his heart. Perhaps that is the cruelest part of loving someone. Sometimes you choose their happiness over your own dignity. I stood beneath a sky that seemed to laugh at me, yet I still said I would help, even as something inside me quietly broke.

My mother asked what had happened. For once, I did not protect anyone. I told her everything. Every moment that felt like a lie I had willingly lived inside. She listened without interruption, her face calm, her hands warm around mine. When I finished, she did not rush to fix anything. She only said she was there and that we would get through it together. I leaned into that promise the way a drowning person clung to driftwood. She had never disappointed me.

Later I went to my room and closed the door gently, as if a loud sound might shatter the little composure left. I sat on the bed with my phone in my hand. Arya's name glowed in the call log.

For a moment I imagined calling him back. Demanding answers. Forcing honesty. Tearing open every silence he had carefully wrapped around me. I wanted to ask him why. Why he had not told me? When did it start? Whether I had been the only one who did not know? Whether he looked at me with guilt or with relief. I even

imagined confessing everything I had swallowed for so long. The loyalty. The quiet love. The way I had chosen him in a thousand invisible ways. I rehearsed a hundred questions. Then I stopped. I trusted my mother.

That night, my anger had searched for somewhere to land. It found Vanya. I had hated the way she had entered our lives so softly, as if she belonged there. Guilt had followed immediately. She had been innocent. She had done nothing wrong.

I had hated myself even more for not being stronger. Why had I been so disposable? Why had people hidden things from me, as if truth would make me dangerous, as if honesty with me carried consequences they had not wanted to face? Maybe they had been right but telling me would have made them suffer less.

Somehow, a trio always became a duo, and the one left behind always felt foolish for believing otherwise. I had not just lost him; I had lost the version of myself that had believed in him. I had felt unanchored, as if erased from a story I had thought I belonged to, as if someone had quietly edited me out and no one had noticed the missing paragraphs.

Then there was Eric. How could she have fallen in love with her sister's lover? And even if she did. How could she have crossed a line so carelessly? It felt reckless, cruel, deliberate. In my anger, I had painted her as a villain—a devil wrapped in charm.

That night, I cried out loud, my body folding in on itself as if it could control the ache. I had clutched Sam's journal, my fingers digging into the pages, wanting to tear it apart—wanting to destroy. Fate always wins. We have no control on chapters. We only have to survive them.

Sleep refused to come. Breathing felt shallow, as if the air itself betrayed its purpose. Memories dragged back to moments once laughed through, now stained with quiet betrayal. Closer glimpses revealed the truth: every time Vanya and Arya drew near, Eric had already appeared. Old photos, videos, forgotten snippets of memory

resurfaced, each frame a silent witness to what had always been. They had never been apart.

Denial had masked it, justified by Arya's explanations, a hope clung to more than the truth.

Standing at the edge of every moment, the camera in hand, jokes ready to fill the silence, the pretense of normalcy hid the ache beneath. Awareness lingered with every smile, knowing too well what unfolded, yet pretending otherwise. Trust had come too easily—its cost now endless.

Later, Arya revealed to Eric that he had confessed everything, not for assistance, but out of friendship. Friendship—mocked by past denials when questions were asked plainly, repeatedly dismissed. Waiting for the right moment, Arya had said.

The right moment. Was it a wedding? A pregnancy announcement?

A smile appeared. Smiling has always been the safest response. It kept people comfortable. Eric avoided telling Vanya the truth. She believed she might try to break their relationship, drawn to Arya, unaware that Arya had been the one to approach her first.

HER SILENCE BEGAN

Finally, the day arrived. The day Arya was going to propose to Eric. The day he would make permanent what I had already lost. I told myself I was ready. I told myself I had accepted it. But acceptance was a quiet lie. The truth was uglier—I had a plan. Not to stop him. Not to confess. Just... to protect myself from disappearing completely.

I told myself I was happy for him. I even practiced smiling. Deep down, I knew the fight had ended before it began. Arya had never cared for my emotions the way I cared for his. He never claimed me the way he claimed her. But I had claimed him long ago—silently, completely, with a loyalty that felt almost sacred. After my mother and grandmother, he had been the only constant I had chosen for myself. That was the problem. He never chose me back. Still, I stayed. I always stayed. I told myself it was loyalty.

From morning till evening, I buried myself in the preparations. If I couldn't own his heart, I could at least own the process. I measured distances, adjusted lights, corrected angles, and tied ribbons tighter than necessary. I checked everything twice. Then again. I made myself indispensable. Arya moved through it all, distracted, glowing. His mind was somewhere else—somewhere that didn't include me. At one point, he laughed nervously and said he wanted to erase all bad memories. "All memories," he added quietly. Was I one of them? I didn't ask. I never asked questions I was afraid to hear the answers to. I swallowed them whole and let them rot inside me instead. If memories could be erased so easily, then maybe I had never mattered at all. Maybe I was just a placeholder until something better arrived.

At first, I had insisted on choosing a café near the river—the same river where Sam had died. That he could cleanse the place. Overwrite grief with joy. Replace tragedy with love. I made it sound beautiful. But later, just to be safe—to ensure the blame would never

sit entirely on me—I warned him. Repeatedly. About the drunk crowds at night. About the slippery stones. About the heaviness that clung to that river after dark. I told him it felt wrong. Cursed. Unsettled. I layered my intentions carefully. Advice. Then caution.

I already knew he wouldn't listen. I didn't push harder either. I told myself it was respect. That this was his moment. His happiness. But that wasn't the whole truth. A part of me wanted him to walk into something he didn't fully understand. To feel even a fraction of the instability I had been living in for months. If something went wrong... well, maybe some places weren't meant to be redeemed.

By evening, everything was ready. And it was beautiful. Painfully so. Fairy lights glowed softly against the darkening sky, trembling in the river breeze. Candles flickered like nervous witnesses. A floral arch stood at the centre, delicate and deliberate, framing a future that didn't include me. The cardboard sign read, "Will you be mine, always?"

He had spent all his pocket money. Every saved rupee. Every small sacrifice. I noticed it all. The carefully chosen flowers. The slightly uneven ribbon he tied himself. The way he kept checking the ring box, as if it might disappear. I noticed everything. I hated Eric for receiving what I never even asked for—because I never believed I was allowed to.

Arya and I stood there together, laughing like children proud of what we had created. Or maybe I was pretending. Anyone watching would think I was part of this love story—the supportive best friend, the loyal one, the safe one. But my laughter was thin. Beneath it, something sour lingered then with a heavy heart I told Arya it was time, I said, "Go. Bring her."

I had invited Vanya too, even though he had told me not to.

Before the evening fully fell, I slipped Sam's journal out of my bag. My fingers traced the worn edges, the familiar creases. I stepped closer to the river and whispered, barely audible over the water, "See? I hope you remember this place. Just wait... your sister will come to you in a few minutes."

As the hour drew closer, my heart raced—not with excitement, but with curiosity. What if Eric didn't die? What if she survived? What if they both learned the truth? What if the universe refused to play along with the darkness I had carefully folded inside my good intentions?

I wanted to see the result of my plan. I wanted proof that I wasn't powerless. So I stood there, waiting. The river moved steadily in the dark, carrying secrets the way I carried mine.

When he went back to find her, deep down I already knew she would never come—or that he would never be able to find her. Everything had been arranged in advance, with my mother's guidance.

A while back, as I pretended to plan harmless things with Arya, I had already set other forces in motion for Eric.

There were a few friends I had spoken to—men my mother had once helped, men who carried weight in political circles, the kind of weight that made doors open and questions disappear. At first, my intentions had felt almost harmless in my own head. I only wanted them to speak to her, to intimidate her just enough to make her step back quietly. I told myself it was strategy, not cruelty. But the moment they saw her, something shifted. I saw it in the way their eyes lingered a second too long, the way their smiles changed. They didn't say anything outright, but I understood. I always understood. I warned them once. Calmly. Carefully. I told them that whatever they chose to do would be entirely at their own risk. I insisted I wanted no trace left behind, no whisper of my involvement. I knew exactly how this would end. And after seeing the way they looked at her, something in me shifted too. I began feeding the fire. I pretended I wasn't lighting it. I just planted ideas—carefully, indirectly. Casual remarks about Eric. Comments about how Arya would be lucky to enjoy that beautiful body. I framed it as bitterness, as wounded pride. I knew the kind of boys they were—boys who believed consequences were negotiable, who grew up watching power bend rules and erase evidence. Boys who thought money could buy innocence. I had chosen them deliberately. When I agreed to share everything I knew about Eric—where she went, whom she

met, the small habits that made her predictable—I did so on one condition: my name would never surface. Not in rumours, not in accusations, not even in private speculation. I took a promise from them, that if anything ever unraveled, I would remain invisible—like I had never existed between them.

I convinced myself everything could be controlled. That distance would protect me. That influence would bury any mistake. I repeated these thoughts like a mantra, soothing the unease curling in my stomach

.Late at night, when the noise had gone and I was alone with my thoughts, doubt crept in like a cold shadow. The weight of what I had started pressed down on me. It wasn't just fear of being caught. It was the sick realization that I had crossed a line I could never go back from. I had pushed something dark into the world and stepped back, pretending my hands were clean. A part of me had wanted it, had wanted the chaos.

Earlier while we worked carefully, she was somewhere else, falling apart. We spoke quietly, adjusting small details as if it was just a simple task. She was breaking. I imagined her confusion first—the slow horror as she realized something was wrong. The excitement fading, replaced by fear. She must have called names—his first, then others—but silence answered her. Every second we spent planning stole something from her—her verginity, her breath, her hope, her trust.

She had believed the night would be special, a memory to treasure. I pictured her in front of the mirror, fixing her hair, choosing clothes, practicing what she would say. The night was special, only not in the way she imagined. Everything she had brought—trust, hope, openness—was used against her. Her world flipped. The future she thought she was walking into... disappeared.

Her mind had built dreams; reality tore them apart. We moved with steady hands, calm faces, while she lost everything in a cruel order—her strength first, then her breath, and finally the belief that anyone would help her. I imagined the moment her voice stopped

working, when screaming didn't help. Fear took over her body, leaving only survival. Silence fell like a tomb. No one was coming. The night had claimed her, and I had given it willingly.

The most disturbing truth wasn't what was happening to her. It was what was happening inside me. I imagined it. Not once, not by accident. I replayed it over and over with shocking clarity. I see chaos. I saw the order. I didn't feel panic. I felt in control. There was no urge to stop it, no impulse to interfere. Only a stillness—a cold, creeping satisfaction that spread quietly in my chest. In my twisted sense of justice, she was paying—not for anything she had done, but for something she had dared to feel. For loving what I believed belonged to me. For stepping into a space I had silently, irrationally marked as mine. I told myself it wasn't cruelty. It was a consequence.

That was the lie I fed myself.

The scariest part was how normal I felt. I could think these things and still stand there calm. Speak normally. Breathe evenly. I could watch destruction play out in my mind and remain untouched on the outside. Maybe that was my hidden skill—the ability to separate the inside from the outside.

After a while, when Arya was gone, Vanya came with gifts, as a well-wisher. Arya returned soon after. He was shouting her name, panic cracking his voice. After hearing her name I wanted to slap him, but I stayed still. He said he couldn't find Eric anywhere. I almost laughed at the irony—how could he find someone who had already crossed into another life entirely?

Then, his panicked eyes landed on Vanya, he went to her and slapped her. I stepped in between them, stopping him before he could hurt her more. She stood frozen, shocked.

I suggested we should go to the police, playing the worried friend. Innocence was a costume I wore, a sheep's skin over the wolf waiting inside. Then we got a call—she had been found and was in the hospital. We reached the hospital. The white walls. The smell. That red dress.

She lay there, unmoving. I knew her end was near. A small part of me feared she might survive—because if she did, everything would unravel. But when I saw that dress, something inside me settled. A strange, quiet happiness rose. The dress was torn perfectly, as if her survival was impossible.

Through it all, my mother had told me to stay calm, to remain neutral, to act only when necessary, to never let suspicion touch me. I followed her guidance perfectly.

When I finally heard she was dead, I cried—not from sadness, but from relief. Another chapter closed, heavy but complete. She had paid with her life for loving someone she was never meant to have. And I walked away untouched.

That night, I slept as if a weight had been lifted from my chest, as if my body had become lighter. The sleep I took after Sam died, and the sleep I took after her death—they were sisters. Both, unknowingly, had given me the same gift: sleep without heaviness. Those two nights became the best of my life. No dreams. No noise. Just rest. Beneath that rest was a quiet certainty. I had won. The game was over. I had taken back what I believed was mine. What belonged to me. I slept like a victor—calm, satisfied, complete.

For many days, I made sure I was never alone. I stayed close to Arya and Vanya, weaving myself into their presence so no shadow could point toward me. At the police station, I wandered the corridors with them, pretending to search for answers, delaying wherever I could—lingering near notice boards, asking unnecessary questions, rehearsing concerns until I almost believed it myself. Every movement was planned, every sigh measured.

A few days later, my mother quietly told me the police were losing interest. They would only review the case, not investigate it seriously, since the accused had fled. Relief washed over me. That was when I began my next act. I designed posters, organized searches, spoke to strangers with trembling lips and determined eyes. It took courage to perform grief so convincingly, to sacrifice pieces of myself just to remain untouched by suspicion.

Yet, in the quiet of the night, doubt crept in like a thin draft under a locked door. Had I shaken something loose inside me? Had I pretended so well that I had created my own loss? The questions circled endlessly, but by morning I buried them beneath another layer of performance.

Time softened everything. I kept playing the role of the exhausted, loyal friend—the one who would never give up. I let my shoulders droop, let my voice crack, let Arya see how “tired” I was of fighting. Deep down, I knew he would be the one to stop me. One evening, he finally did. He told me to rest, that I had done enough. Just like that, the search faded, the noise quieted, and the chapter closed.

I still remember the day of her burial. As prayers floated through the heavy air above her coffin, I carried something to lay to rest. Hidden beneath my coat was Sam’s journal—the last fragile thread tying me to both of them. When no one was watching, I buried it too, pressing the soil down firmly with my hands. Two sisters. Two endings.

A soft wind blew through the cemetery, moving the trees slightly and brushing my face. People whispering prayers and condolences slowly grew quiet, one by one leaving. As I stood there, a strange kind of peace settled inside me. All the tension I had carried for days seemed to loosen. The story that had caused so much pain ended in silence.

THE DAYS THAT FELT NORMAL BUT

After her death, life slowly returned to its routine. People went back to their schedules, laughter returned to conversations, and the world did not stop the way I had imagined. I kept calling Arya, but he rarely came to see me. His replies were short, distant. I told myself I would give him time. I had already done more than enough for him. If he wanted to come back, he would. I wasn't going to chase him. Still, I couldn't keep him out of my heart.. He felt like a part of me—at least in my mind. Whenever I asked, he said he was preparing for something. I didn't push. I had learned that forcing someone only pushed them further away.

Then, one evening, my phone rang. It was Arya. No greetings, no small talk. "Come to my house," he said. "I can't do this alone. I need you both." That night, grief shifted. It became something we tried to turn into purpose. The three of us sat together while he spoke about what he wanted to do for Eric—donating her things, building a small treehouse, keeping her belongings there like memories frozen in wood and leaves.

I didn't really want to help, but he was my friend—my love—and I had to stand by him. We made plans late into the night and eventually fell asleep under the weight of unfinished thoughts. The next morning, he said it was time to act. We woke quickly, showered at his place, moving in silence. After I finished bathing, he stepped into the washroom, saying he needed to check something. At that time, it didn't feel strange.

Later, Vanya and I left his house to go back to ours to arrange money and materials. Halfway there, he called again. His voice was heavy, final. "Change of plan. We'll delay it." We didn't question him. He had lost her. We let him decide. We weren't interested at all.

After that, something quietly changed between us. At first, it was small things—her replies taking longer than usual, her words becoming shorter, the warmth in her tone slowly fading. The late-night calls we once stretched for hours turned into five-minute conversations filled with awkward pauses. Then even those began to disappear. Soon, there was mostly silence. And that silence was loud. It followed me everywhere—into my room, into my sleep, into the spaces between my thoughts. I hadn't realised how deeply she had become part of my daily life. She was the person I told everything to, the one whose name I searched for first on my phone screen. She had quietly become my routine, my comfort, my safe place. When she pulled away, it felt like something inside me was being slowly peeled off. The distance was sharp. I replayed our old chats, reread her messages, trying to find the exact moment things began to change. Finally, I couldn't take the confusion anymore. I asked her directly what was happening. My hands were shaking when I typed. She told me she was going through something personal, something heavy, and she needed time. She said I had taught her to be strong, to face problems instead of running from them, and now she wanted to do that on her own. Hearing that should have made me proud. Instead, it made me feel sad. Still, I told myself to trust her. Love, or whatever this was, needed patience. But I couldn't help but think that the very things I had taught her were now the reasons I felt distant from her.

A few days later, she told me she was going home. The word *home* felt like a wall rising between us. After that, for two weeks, we kept talking regularly. Not because she wanted to—but because I asked her to. I begged her to. I told her her distance was hurting me, and she agreed to talk just for my sake. I held on to every call as if it proved nothing between us was truly breaking. I counted the minutes she stayed on the line. I listened closely to her breathing, searching for comfort in the smallest sounds.

She never told me what she was going through. She always acted fine when she spoke to me, even though I could see something was wrong. Something heavy sat behind her voice. She asked me not to

question her if I truly cared about her. So I stopped asking. I convinced myself that respecting her silence was a form of love.

It was enough for me to believe that she still valued me. That my words mattered to her. That she cared about me in her own quiet way.

Every day we talked for hours. Slowly, those conversations became the center of my life. The most important part of my routine. Slowly, desperation began to grow inside me. The fear of losing her, of never seeing her again, felt stronger than my pride. One night I begged her to come back. I didn't try to sound strong. I didn't pretend to be calm. I simply asked her to return. She stayed silent for a long moment. Then she said that if I came to bring her myself, she would come.

The next day I left early. I still remember the date clearly. The 18th.

It took four long hours to reach her house. The journey felt endless. I stared out of the window while the roads blurred past. My thoughts moved faster than the vehicle. With every kilometre, my chest felt lighter. A strange excitement grew inside me. I imagined different moments—her running toward me, her hugging me, her smiling when she saw me. My heart refused to slow down.

By the time I reached her house, my palms were sweating. My breathing felt uneven. I had expected warmth. I imagined her opening the door with a smile. Her grandmother welcomed me. Her grandfather asked about the long journey. I replayed that moment in my head for four hours.

But when the door opened, her grandparents did not smile. They looked at me with pity. Not confusion. Not anger. Pity.

There were other people inside the house. Faces I didn't recognize. Relatives she had never mentioned. The air felt heavy, as if something had already been decided before I arrived. That look—pity—froze me in place. I could have faced anger. I could have defended myself against accusations. But pity meant the ending had already happened.

They didn't explain anything. They simply turned and walked down the corridor. I followed them without feeling my own feet. The hallway felt too long. Too quiet. The house looked unnaturally neat, as if it had been cleaned for something important. My chest tightened with every step. Somewhere deep inside, something begged me to stop walking.

Then they opened her door.

And my world split open.

She was hanging there.

For a second—just one second—my mind refused to accept it. I thought maybe it was a shadow. Maybe I was dizzy from the long journey. Maybe if I blinked hard enough, the image would change.

But it didn't.

Her feet didn't touch the ground. Her body didn't move. Her hair covered part of her face.

I don't remember if I screamed. I don't remember if I fell. I only remember the sound of my heartbeat crashing inside my ears. Then the realization struck me like something solid. I was four hours too late.

The girl I came to bring home was already gone.

Her grandparents collapsed into grief. Not quiet tears. Not controlled sobs. It was the kind of crying that rises from somewhere deep and ancient. The kind that shakes the whole body and forgets who is watching. Their pain filled the room.

But my pain felt different.

For me, it felt like the ground had disappeared beneath my feet. My body trembled so badly I could not control it. My thoughts began to drift away from me, as if my mind was trying to escape what my eyes had seen.

Questions attacked me all at once.

What had I taught her?

Why had I told her to fight alone?

What was she carrying that she never shared with me?

Was I the common thread to her loss?

Why did death come for someone so pure?

I wanted to scream, yet my throat felt crushed. I wanted to cry, yet my tears felt trapped somewhere inside. All I wanted was a moment of silence. One second where my chest did not feel like it was tearing apart. Even that felt impossible.

Her last words echoed inside my head.

Love you.

Soft. Gentle. Cruel.

They repeated again and again until they began to sound like a goodbye I had never agreed to

I don't know how many hours I sat there in that room. Time stopped making sense. I remember begging her grandparents again and again not to take her down. I kept telling them she would come down by herself. That she would wake up. That she would answer me. I spoke to her as if she could still hear me. My voice kept breaking. At first, nothing came out. The tears stayed trapped, my chest tight, my throat closed. And then something inside me snapped. The reality hit, and my body gave up trying to hold it in. I broke down, crying harder than I ever had in my life. I begged her. I asked what she wanted from me. I told her I would do anything. I didn't care what it was. I would change. I would fix everything. I would even destroy myself if that was the price.

"I could even die for you," I whispered.

I reminded her that she had always told me not to cry in front of her. And yet, there I was...unable to stop, crying right in front of her.

"VANU, are you happy seeing me like this?" I asked, my voice breaking. "Is this what you wanted?"

I kept asking questions, waiting for answers. But she never answered. She never moved. She never came down. She had

promised she would come with me. She had promised she would return.

But she didn't. She broke her promise

When her grandfather finally laid her down, something inside me shattered. I rushed forward and pulled her into my arms. I cried against her shoulder and tried to wake her up.

“Vanu... please... wake up... plea...please... I’m begging you...”

“Vanu... please... wake up... please... don’t leave me... please...”

“VANYA! Wake up! Do you hear me?! Wake up... please...”

PLEASE!”

But she didn’t wake up. She lay there, still and distant, as if sleep had pulled her somewhere far beyond my reach, so deep that even my voice couldn’t find her. I kept calling her name, again and again, my words breaking apart before they could fully leave my lips.

My tears fell on her face, warm against her cold, unchanging skin. I wiped them away quickly, almost apologetically, as if she might complain but she didn’t move. She didn’t flinch. She didn’t even breathe differently. It was as if the world had stopped at her, and I was the only one left still moving.

I shook her shoulders gently at first, then harder, desperation creeping into my hands. “Vanu... please... wake up...” My voice cracked, the last word barely a whisper, as though even sound had started giving up on me.

And in that moment, something inside me twisted into a feeling I hated myself for because it felt like she had become selfish. Like she had chosen this silence. Like she had closed her eyes and walked away without turning back, leaving me here to carry everything alone. “I’m here... I’m right here...” I kept saying, as if reminding her would bring her back. I cried harder, my chest tightening with every breath, each one more painful than the last. I begged in broken words, in silence, in everything I had left. I hoped—desperately, stupidly that she would hear me somehow. That her fingers would twitch. That her eyes would open, even just once.

But they didn't.

She stayed still, untouched by my voice, my tears, my breaking. And slowly, the truth settled in, not all at once, but like something sinking, heavy and unbearable. She had gone somewhere I could not follow. And no matter how loudly I called her... she wasn't coming back.

She went home. Just not the home I had imagined. God had made a different plan than the one I carried in my heart. It feels as if fate envies my happiness. Everything I love, it slowly takes away, until I am left alone again.

Later, during her funeral rites, when her soul finally separated from her body, it did not leave alone. It carried a part of my soul with it.

Her grandparents told me about the letter she had left behind. She had written that her body should remain hanging until someone arrived. She had written the exact date. The exact time.

"I know that person will come," she had written. That person was me. They did not give me the letter. Instead, they handed me her diary.

My hands trembled when I opened it.

Please keep me in this diary like others. But keep me close to your heart. I wanted to live through your words.

I will love you through the pages of this diary. Please never think that I have forgotten you. You were the person I loved the most. I hope that in the next life we will be together, bound by something that can never be separated. I am going home now, and when I reach there, I will beg God that my next life will be about us—only about us—with no one else in between. And please, do not blame yourself. I know you will try to blame yourself, but you must never do that. You were the reason I had those extra days of happiness. Otherwise, I would have taken this step much earlier if you had not approached me that day. Because you did, one day turned into many days filled with happiness. But I failed. Everything you taught me—to fight, to stand for myself—I could not do it. I feel like a loser. Still, please don't blame yourself. You did so much for me. I have a humble request.

Please do not try to find justice for me. Do not try to investigate or do anything after this. It is better for all of us. What happened was because of my situation, not because of anyone else. I know that what belongs to me also belongs to you, but if you truly loved me or cared for me, please do not search for answers behind my death. Do not judge the things I have left behind as evidence.

This is my request, for the sake of my love.

—your loving vanu

When someone leaves like that, forgiveness feels heavier than blame. I walked out of that house carrying her diary, yet it felt as if I was carrying her unfinished life.

Since that day, I have moved through the world differently. I woke up. I eat. I speak to people. But part of me is still standing in that doorway. Still staring at that silent room. Still understanding something terrible.

Sometimes love does not save people. Sometimes arriving four hours late is enough to change you forever.

And the truth that hurts the most is this: I never told her how deeply I loved her. I never made her see how precious she was to me—how much light she brought into my life.

When she disappeared, I didn't just lose her. I lost the part of me that only existed when she was there.

The reason for her death? The answers were probably there. In her phone. In old messages. In small details I could have followed and understood. But I never searched. It felt safer not to know. Safer to live with questions than with a truth that might break me completely. I thought If I never saw the full picture, maybe a small part of me could still believe it wasn't as painful as it seemed. Maybe I could keep one fragile illusion alive.

I fulfilled her last request.

I kept her in my words. I kept her in my diary, just as she had asked. Page after page, I wrote about her so that she would not disappear

completely. So that somewhere, in some quiet way, she could continue to exist.

I hope wherever she is now, the air feels lighter for her. I hope there are no shadows there. No heavy thoughts. No silent battles she has to fight alone. I hope she wakes up in a place where her heart no longer aches, where happiness comes easily and stays without fear of leaving.

She deserved a life that felt gentle.

She deserved a life that felt easy.

FELT, EVERYTHING GONE

I had made the decision the way people made vows at funerals, quietly, with no one watching, as if whispering it would make it stronger. No more entry passes into my life. No attachments allowed to learn the map of my weaknesses. I had shrunk my world on purpose. Reduced it to numbers, routine, measurable success, responsibility. Family remained the only exception.. Not betrayal.

I chose things that never smiled at me only to disappear later. Things that never promised forever, then slowly withdrew it. Every time happiness had begun to settle inside me, someone had left.

A thought lived inside me like a parasite. Maybe I was never meant to be happy. Maybe my purpose had only been a careful existence. To stay small. Living, I learned, had never meant living happily.

Deep inside, beneath logic, beneath reason, a quiet conviction existed. I was guilty. Not in court. Not on paper. Emotionally—completely. Perhaps no one deserved a friend like me. Perhaps standing too close to me had always been its own slow disaster.

By the time summer arrived, a season meant for warmth and laughter, my life had already begun rotting underneath. Even the air felt heavy. Breathing had turned into a task rather than something natural. My lungs worked, yet something inside me had stopped participating.

That day he called me over. A few files had been misplaced. He asked for help finding them. I had always been good at recovering deleted data. Once, that skill had filled me with pride—the ability to restore what others believed was gone.

That day, I regretted it.

The files he believed were erased had remained there. I had never meant to see them. I wished I had not. There had been no warning. Only a folder that should never have existed. When I opened the

folder's video, my body reacted before my mind could understand. My stomach twisted. My hands turned cold. The feeling resembled walking into something private and violent at the same time. He had hidden a camera in bathroom. He recorded her without permission. Later he used it to threaten her. There was no way to soften that truth. I kept staring at the screen as if enough staring might change its meaning. For a brief moment, a weak and shameful moment, denial appeared.

Maybe I had misunderstood.

Maybe context existed.

Maybe it was not what it seemed.

Maybe he was not capable of such cruelty.

I wrapped that lie around myself and carried it home. It remained inside me, heavy and silent. Lies never disappear. They only wait.

The next morning I went to Vanya's house. Nothing had changed. That became the most disturbing part. Her room remained exactly the same. The bedsheet still folded. The curtain slightly opened. Her belongings arranged as if she might return at any moment and complain about the heat. The air still carried a faint trace of her perfume. Her grandparents greeted me with kindness. Their faces looked tired, yet warm. When I asked for her phone, they handed it to me without hesitation. They trusted me. That trust hurt more than any accusation could. In their eyes I was safe. I was good. Yet I stood there preparing to confirm the worst truth about someone they once allowed near their granddaughter.

The truth did not explode. It unfolded slowly.

Message by message.

Threat by threat.

Fear hidden between ordinary words.

He pressured her. He cornered her. He made her feel trapped. The video wasn't just a recording — it was a weapon. Every text tightened the space around her. Every delay in her replies felt like panic trying to stay polite.

I kept scrolling. Something inside me didn't break. It went silent. I gave the phone to the police. Not because I felt brave. Not because I believed justice would fix anything. But because it was the last thing I could do for her. I knew it was against her wish but I couldn't control myself so I did what I wanted to . Justice required someone to speak. I did.

The last way to stand beside her after I failed to stand beside her while she was alive. The shame was suffocating. Ashamed that I called him my closest friend. Ashamed that the person I trusted most had done this. Ashamed that I searched for danger in strangers while it sat next to me every day.

If I had pushed sooner.

If I had questioned harder.

If I had looked closely enough.

Maybe she would still be here. That “maybe” does not leave me.

When they took him away, he didn't fight. He didn't shout. He smiled. Softly. Almost calmly. He said “she deserved it. She killed Eric. And I deserved this too... for what I did to her. So thank you. Now I don't have to carry the guilt anymore”

That sentence stayed with me. She had been innocent. I had been the guilty one. If he deserved punishment, then i do too

later, I don't know how but I also helped his parents apologize. I stood beside them while they asked for forgiveness from Vanya's grandparents. I said things like, “It's about his future.” “Please think about his life.” Her grandparents trusted me. The same person who had been an indirect reason for their granddaughter's death. They trusted me completely. It was their faith in me. It felt undeserved... heavy... almost suffocating. Like I was carrying something fragile in my hands while knowing I was the one who had already broken it. I wanted to tell them. I wanted to shatter that trust before it grew any deeper. But the words never came out. They stayed stuck somewhere between my guilt and my fear, turning into nothing but quiet, unbearable weight. Because the person they believed me to be... wasn't the person I knew I was.

Money moved quietly. Conversations happened behind closed doors. Two weeks later, he was out. Resolved. Such a small word for something so ugly. Something as ugly as what lived inside me.

When I heard he was free, anger appeared. Not loud anger. A tired anger. A heavy one. The worst part remained something I hated to admit—a small part of me still missed him. Missed the person I once believed he was.

Two days later, he came to my house.

He said goodbye.

He said sorry.

He said thank you.

Thank you.

I could not look at him. I could not confess what I had done. If I had spoken, I might have screamed. I might have broken down. I stayed quiet again. That was the last time I saw him. But losing him wasn't the only loss.

Friends slowly stepped back. No confrontation. No drama. Just distance. Shorter replies. Fewer invitations. My name became something uncomfortable in conversations.

Routine replaced warmth. Success replaced connection. I built a life that could not betray me. That is how I survived... though I knew survival was never what I truly wanted

A TRUTH TOO HARD TO BEAR

Apart from everything else—the finales, the heartbreak, the most painful story of all, there was one truth about my birthday that I had never told anyone. That day Arya and Eric celebrated with me. They asked about the incident, about the past I always avoided. I smiled, spoke calmly, told them a story that was easy to believe. Every word was a lie. I carried that lie quietly, the way people carry wounds hidden beneath their clothes.

The truth had never been my father's affair. The truth had belonged to my mother. She had been with Shukla uncle. My father discovered it. Rage filled the house that evening, heavy and suffocating. He threatened to take us away from her forever. I remember the terror that gripped my chest when I heard those words. The thought of leaving my mother felt worse than anything. She had been my entire world. Losing her felt like losing the ground beneath my feet.

I screamed until my throat burned. I begged with everything inside me. Tears blurred my vision, yet I refused to stop.

My father's anger erupted, sudden and violent. His hand struck my face so hard my head snapped to the side, a sharp ringing flooding my ears. The sound didn't just echo—it stayed, loud and hollow, vibrating inside my skull. For a second, everything stilled. But I didn't. Even as the sting spread across my cheek, even as my body trembled, I kept shouting—desperate, broken, refusing to give in. "I don't want to go with you," I cried again and again, my voice cracking, collapsing under its own weight. "I don't want to go... please... just listen to me..." The words turned into sobs, into breaths I could barely hold together.

My mother rushed forward, panic in her eyes. She tried to stop him, and tried to shield me from the storm swallowing the room. For a moment everything moved too fast to understand. Then suddenly she pushed me into a room and locked the door. The click of the lock sounded final, cold, merciless.

I pounded on the door. My fists hurt, my voice cracked, yet no one opened it.

Outside the walls chaos continued. I heard my father shouting. My mother was crying. Voices breaking, rising, collapsing into silence before erupting again. Somewhere in the middle of it all my sister stood near my father, small, frightened, unable to understand the disaster unfolding around her.

Inside the locked room time stretched painfully slow. My heart hammered against my ribs. Every sound from outside carved deeper into my chest.

Then it happened.
A gunshot.

One sharp, deafening sound tore through the house and through my life. Everything after that moment fell into a silence so heavy it felt like the world itself had stopped breathing.

I pounded against the door, screamed for her, and begged for someone to open it. The door stayed closed. My voice broke against the wood. My chest felt as if something inside it had shattered into pieces too small to gather again. Panic swallowed every thought. I searched the room for escape, for air, for anything that could reach her. The window stood open. I climbed out without thinking. The fall hurt. Pain shot through my legs, scraped my skin, knocked the breath from my lungs. None of it mattered. I forced myself up and ran.

My mother stood there, a gun in her hand. Her body looked strangely still, as if the world around her had frozen. For one fragile second I thought everything might stop, that someone would take the weapon away, that the moment would undo itself. Instead another sound shattered the silence of the house. Her body collapsed. She was gone. In that instant a truth settled inside me with terrifying certainty. I would never see her again.

After that moment something inside me learned how to pretend. I pretended the pain did not exist. I pretended life had not split into before and after. People spoke to me, moved around me, asked

questions. I answered calmly. I behaved like a child who had simply lost something small, not someone who had watched his entire world disappear in a single second.

Shukla uncle took me away soon after. He kept me far from everyone, deep inside that jungle where silence lived heavier than people. Days passed slowly there. Trees replaced streets. Shadows replaced voices. My father arrived later, searching, trying to reach me again. I refused him. Hatred lived inside me like a permanent fire. I blamed him for everything, even for things that had never belonged to him. Because I had already begun to lose myself in a world of my own making.

Eventually my grandmother brought me home. She adopted me, gave me a roof, warmth, food, a place to sleep. Yet the loneliness remained. A house filled with rooms could not replace the one person whose absence hollowed everything. I felt alone in a way words cannot measure. No mother. No father. Only silence that followed me everywhere.

Then my mind found a way to survive.
I began to see her again.

Sometimes she stood near the door. Sometimes she sat beside me quietly while I studied. Sometimes she appeared in dreams so vivid they felt real enough to touch. I knew what it was. Hallucination. Memory. Grief refusing to leave. I did not care. I needed her presence more than I needed truth. In my mind she remained beside me, watching, guiding, questioning. When I made choices I should not have made, I imagined her eyes on me. She became a witness, companion, and conscience. A ghost I created simply to avoid complete emptiness.

My father never married again. Still, life moved around him. He began living with another woman, the mother of Eric and Sam. Their family formed around him while mine had already collapsed. Enaya remained my real sister, my blood. Even that truth twisted inside my mind until I barely knew which parts of my life were real and which parts were survival.

So I learned to deceive myself. I built a version of reality where I was not entirely wrong, where abandonment had purpose, where loneliness carried meaning. In that imagined world, there was no absence—my mother was still there. In that imagined world I was not a child left standing in the echo of a gunshot.

Shukla uncle disappeared after everything happened. He ran away from the wreckage he had helped create.

For years I buried the truth beneath silence.

But this story—this book—belongs to you. I do not want to hide behind lies anymore. Every part of it belongs here. The truth I avoided. The screams trapped behind a locked door. The silence that followed. The blood. The gunshot. The life that changed forever in a single moment.

All of it belongs here.

And now, it belongs to you.

CONFESSION OF A GUILTY HEART.

So yes... I had been a villain too. Not just a victim. Not just the abandoned child. Not just the broken *son* left standing in the echo of a gunshot. I hurt people. I damaged bonds that once trusted me.

I bent moments toward my own pain, twisted love into something selfish, something heavy... something that suffocated instead of healed. And I knew it. I didn't run from it anymore. I couldn't.

There were nights—too many to count—when I lay awake, staring into the dark, feeling like my existence itself had stained everything it touched. Even now, that feeling hasn't completely left me. A quiet voice still lingers sometimes, whispering that the world might have been lighter... softer... if I had never been par of it.

Maybe that is what led me here. Or maybe... This moment was always waiting for me. It feels like redemption. Not the kind people write about. Not something pure or heroic. Just the only kind I understand.

A chance to give my heart to you. Not to escape guilt. Not to turn my ending into something beautiful or worthy of sympathy. This... is a confession. Not written in words alone—but carved into what I am. This heart... It has carried things I am ashamed of. Anger. Cruelty. Jealousy. Bitterness that grew quietly in the loneliest corners of my life. But beneath all of that... there was something else. Something quieter. Something that never left. Loneliness. A loneliness so deep that it shaped me... shaped my choices... shaped the way I loved, the way I lost, the way I became someone I no longer recognize.

Before I offer this heart to you, I have emptied it. I went back—into every dark corner I once hid from. I dragged every ugly truth into the light. Every selfish desire. Every thought I was too afraid to name. And I stayed there. I didn't turn away this time. I let it break me until those things lost their power over me.

What remains now... is not perfect. It never will be. But it is honest. For the first time... it is completely, painfully honest. So don't take this as the heart of a villain. Don't see it as something ruined beyond repair. Take it... as the heart of someone who finally stopped lying to himself. A heart that has been washed slowly, painfully—by regret, by tears, by sleepless nights that refused to let me forget who I had become. I didn't purify it with redemption. I purified it with truth. I stopped hiding.

And still... I know this— I could never become the brother you deserved. Some failures don't fade. Some wounds don't close just because we finally understand them.

I don't deserve your forgiveness. I can't ask for it.

But if... somewhere inside you... there is even the smallest space left— a quiet corner untouched by anger— let my heart live there. Don't silence it when you take it. Let it beat. Let it become something kinder inside you than it ever was inside me. Let it learn what I could not— to love without jealousy, to protect without possession, to care... without control.

And if forgiveness still feels too heavy... too distant... then don't force it. Just keep this heart anyway. Let it remain with you—not as an apology, not as redemption— but as proof... that even the most broken heart... can still learn to tell the truth.

Before I Die ... I KNOW

I have done terrible things in my life. And I am not going to hide behind excuses anymore. I am not going to blame my childhood, my loneliness, my trauma, or the ghosts I kept alive in my own mind. What I did was wrong—completely and undeniably wrong. For the first time, I am ready to say that without defending myself, without softening the truth to make it easier to hear.

Before I die... before I place this heart in your hands... There is something I must do. I need to say sorry. Not the shallow kind of apology people offer when they want forgiveness quickly, but the kind that comes from a place where shame and regret have been

living for far too long. I am sorry for everything. Sorry for the darkness I carried inside me, the chaos I created, the lives I stepped into and shattered without mercy. I know my apology cannot undo what I have done. It cannot bring back what was lost. It cannot erase the pain I caused or restore the warmth I stole from people who never deserved to suffer because of me.

Still... the apology sits inside my chest like a weight that refuses to disappear. Every heartbeat reminds me of it. Regret has become something alive inside me, something that moves with my pulse, something that breathes every time I do. And before I give you this heart, it must carry the truth with it—the whole truth. Every jagged corner of my past. Every shadow I tried to ignore. Every twisted thought that grew inside my mind. Every wrong step that led me to become someone I barely recognise now.

Sam was innocent. Pure in a way the world rarely allows people to remain. There was a softness in her, a fragile warmth that made people trust her without hesitation. And yet... I broke that. I broke something beautiful because I could not control the ugliness growing inside me. She loved Arya. And Arya loved her back. It should have been something simple, something happy, something I could accept. But instead, it became something unbearable to me.

I hated it.

Not because they had done anything wrong, but because I could not bear the feeling of losing something I believed was mine. Looking back now, the thought feels childish... cruel... even pathetic. Love is not something that belongs to anyone. It cannot be claimed like property. But jealousy does not listen to logic. It whispers lies until they sound like the truth. There was no plan at first. No intention to destroy anyone. Not in the beginning. But when they slowly stopped speaking to me, when I began to see them laughing together, sharing moments I was no longer part of, something inside me started to fracture. Their happiness became a reminder of my absence. Their love became proof that I had been replaced. My insecurities began to scream louder and louder until they drowned out every rational thought I had. I felt invisible, forgotten,

unwanted. I wanted to be chosen... desperately, painfully, foolishly. And in that desperation, I chose the ugliest way to make myself seen. I forced emotions where they did not belong. I clung to something that was never meant for me. And when you try to grab something that was never yours, it slips away from your hands—and takes your dignity with it. Jealousy is poison. It does not arrive all at once. It grows slowly, quietly, until it spreads through every corner of your mind. It blinds you. You stop seeing the light in others. You stop recognising kindness or innocence. All you see is what you do not have. All you feel is the hollow space inside you that refuses to be filled. And I let that poison grow. I let it turn me into someone cruel, someone bitter, someone capable of things I once believed I could never do. I took a step... a single step that cannot be taken back. A step that carved a wound into my soul that I will carry for the rest of my life.

Then there was Eric. I never wanted to hurt her either. I never imagined I would become the reason for her suffering. But when she fell for Arya... and when Arya returned that love... the same darkness returned. Jealousy wrapped around my chest like a tightening grip. It felt as if my lungs were filling with fire, burning away every piece of reason left inside me. I could not breathe without feeling anger. I could not think without feeling the bitterness of being left behind again. And I hurt her. I hurt her because somewhere deep inside my twisted mind, I believed that if I could not have him, then no one else should either. If I was drowning in misery, why should anyone else breathe freely? If I was burning in loneliness, why should they feel warmth? That thought... that cruel, selfish thought... is the kind of thought that creates monsters. And I allowed it to live inside me.

Yes, I was the villain too. Not just the victim of abandonment. Not just the lonely child who felt forgotten. I hurt people. I destroyed bonds that once held trust. I manipulated moments and twisted love into something selfish and ugly. And I accept that truth now.

I killed with a heart that was heavy with envy, desperation, and the darkest corners of obsession. At that moment, I could not see the

humanity in anyone else. I could only see my own pain, my own anger, my own broken desire to be loved. Now, when I look back, it feels monstrous. Unforgivable. Something that should never have existed in the first place. But at the time... I was blind to everything except my own suffering.

And then there was Vanya. Oh, Vanya. If there was anyone in this world I truly loved without selfishness, it was her. Our love was not the kind that demands possession or control. It was quiet, fierce, protective. The kind of love that asks for nothing in return. She was never mine by blood, yet she felt like family in a way that blood itself sometimes cannot explain. It was as if my soul recognised hers long before my mind could understand why. She felt like someone I was meant to protect, someone who existed in my life for a reason I never fully understood. And yet... even with that love, I failed her. When she needed someone to stand up, to act, to protect her, I remained silent. I buried my love beneath fear, I told myself it was safer that way. I told myself silence would protect everyone. But silence is not protection. Sometimes silence is simply another form of cowardice. And by the time I realised that, she was already gone. I could not save her. I could not undo what had happened. The love I carried for her remained locked inside my chest—unspoken, unfinished, broken by the weight of everything I had already done.

That failure haunts me in ways words cannot fully describe. Not the crimes, not the hatred, not even the guilt... but the knowledge that when it mattered most, I did nothing.

So before I give you this heart... before my story ends... I needed you to know the truth. Not the version where I pretend to be innocent. Not the version where I hide behind tragedy. The real one. The one where I admit that I was capable of darkness... and that I allowed that darkness to destroy the people who deserved light.

Arya... he never gave me what I wanted. He never saw me the way I had always longed to be seen. For so long I carried that emptiness inside me, that quiet ache of hoping he would turn toward me one day and finally understand what lived in my heart. Sometimes I wonder... if he had noticed, even for a moment... if he had

understood the depth of what I felt... maybe none of this would have happened. Maybe the darkness inside me would never have grown the way it did. But even as that thought crosses my mind, I know I cannot blame him. Love was never something he owed me. True love does not demand, it does not force itself into someone's life. And yet the love I carried was restless, desperate, unfinished. Perhaps it was never meant to exist in this life, not in this world where timing and fate and *gender* seem to stand against certain hearts. But somewhere, beyond time and beyond all the mistakes I made here, I still hold a quiet hope... That my heart will find yours again, and that somewhere in this vast, uncertain world, yours will begin to beat for mine too.

And lastly... there is something even heavier I must admit. I used my mother. I used *our* mother. I used her presence—her love, even the memory of her—as a refuge from the darkness inside me. Whenever the voices in my mind grew too loud, whenever jealousy and obsession began clawing at my thoughts like wild animals trapped inside a cage, I would hide behind her. I would pull her into places she never belonged, just to quiet the storm inside me. I clung to her love... not just for comfort, but as proof. Proof that I was not completely lost. Proof that I was not alone—even while I was doing things I knew were wrong. I kept convincing myself of lies. I told myself that if she loved me when she was alive... then she must still love me now. And if she still loved me, then she would understand me. She would stand by me. She would forgive everything—no matter what I became. But the truth is... she wouldn't have supported any of it. And somewhere deep down, I have always known that. I know she would have been hurt. Not just by what I did... but by what I allowed myself to become. I know there would have been pain in her eyes—pain I was too afraid to face, so I chose to imagine a version of her that never judged me. I twisted her love into something it was never meant to be. I turned it into a shield for my guilt. And that is something I can never undo. But even then... even after all of this... I know her heart would still not abandon me. Because a mother's heart does not work that way. A mother remains a mother—even when her child loses their way,

even when that child becomes someone the world no longer recognises. She protects. She forgives. She waits. She holds on to hope... long after everyone else has let go. And that is what breaks me the most. Because I know... she would still love me. Even now. Even like this.

But I am not hiding behind her anymore. I don't call her into my darkness to justify what I do. I don't turn her memory into something that excuses me. I let her rest. I respect her now—not as a voice in my head, not as a presence I can summon when I feel weak... but as someone who has left this world, someone who deserves peace. Someone who deserved a better son than the one I became. And maybe... this is the first honest thing I have done for her. *Letting her go.*

And now... I have nothing left to say except the truth. No excuses remain. No defenses stand between me and the reality of what I have done. I do not deserve forgiveness. I do not deserve mercy. I do not deserve the comfort of being understood. All I can do now... all I can ask for... is that you accept this heart.

Your brother loves you to the moon and back.

THE LETTER I NEVER SENT

I don't know how to justify what you did. I don't know how to hold the truth of you without feeling my hands tremble. Some nights I sit in the dark with no lights on, no sounds around me, just the quiet hum of my own breathing, and I press my palm flat against my chest. I wait for the beat. I count it. I listen to it. And I wonder — if I had known everything... every shadow, every secret, every fracture in your mind... would I have still said yes? Would I have signed the consent papers? Would I have let them cut me open and place you inside me?

This heart... this same heart... once carried love so intense it frightened people. It carried longing, jealousy, and obsession. It carried storms that no one else could see. It carried darkness. and that same heart now rests beneath my ribs, beating faithfully, keeping me alive, keeping me here. Sometimes that thought suffocates me. I am alive because of the same heart that destroyed lives once trembled with dangerous desire.

If I had known the full truth — the hallucinations, the voices you argued with in empty rooms, the way you mistook possession for love and obsession for destiny, maybe I would have refused. Maybe I would have chosen to die untouched, innocent, unaware. Maybe I would have preferred a clean ending over this complicated survival.

I am still trying to understand you. God knows I am trying. I replay your conversations in my mind. The way your eyes would drift as if you were listening to something no one else could hear. The way you would whisper to yourself, argue with yourself, and defend yourself against invisible accusations. Your mind was not steady. It was cracked glass, reflecting reality in broken angles. You weren't evil in the simple way people want villains to be. You were fractured. You were sick. You were drowning in thoughts that convinced you love meant ownership, that losing meant annihilation.

And yet... this broken, complicated, haunted heart inside me beats.
Steady. Loyal. Alive.

Do you understand how terrifying that is? To wake up every morning and feel gratitude and horror living side by side in the same body? I am grateful — deeply, painfully grateful — because I am still here. I can see the sky. I can hear laughter. I can hold someone's hand. I can plan a future. And every single one of those things exists because you chose to die. Because in your final act, whatever else you were, you were my brother. Gratitude and grief have become roommates inside me. They do not fight anymore. They sit together quietly.

Every beat of this heart is a reminder: I am alive because of you *Neeshant bhaiya*. Because you, in all your brokenness, gave me the one thing your life could still offer — time.

Now I have made a promise to myself. I will purify this heart. I will force it to unlearn the darkness it once carried. I will flood it with kindness until cruelty has no memory left. I will make it softer every year. I will be patient. I will be gentle. Every good deed I do will be a rebellion against what it once fueled. Every time I will choose compassion over control, forgiveness over pride, protection over possession — it will be my way of rewriting you.

And fate... fate has a cruel sense of poetry.

You loved what could never be yours,
A flame imprisoned behind unyielding doors.
Impossible, untouchable—yet painfully real,
A presence every heartbeat is forced to feel.

And now... this heart, once shattered by him,
Thrums quietly beneath the woman he will wed.
I will walk down the aisle with Arya,
While your echoes rise with every step I tread.

Do you see the cruel symmetry?
This quiet, merciless poetry?

A love that ruined—yet refuses to leave,
A wound that still remembers how to breathe.

A story written without mercy or plea,
Etched in irony... and left inside me.

Aryaa regrets what he did to Vanya and you. I see it in his silence. I see it in the way his jaw tightens when certain names are mentioned. Guilt follows him like a shadow that refuses to detach. He is trying to change. He is trying to become better than the worst thing he has done. But we both know some mistakes don't disappear. They settle into the ground. They become part of the foundation of who you are. She can't come back. None of them can. No apology rebuilds a grave. No regret rewrites the past. Maybe this is how justice works. Not through courtrooms. Not through revenge. But through consequences that linger. Through irony that wraps itself around the people you loved most. Through living long enough to understand what you broke. I will never let Arya know what you did with his true loves.

You once said love makes people immortal. I used to think that was romantic nonsense. Now I am not so sure. You are gone —ashes, memories, whispers and yet your heart is here. It beats. It pushes blood through my veins. It trembles when I cry. It races when I am afraid. It softens when I am held. If that isn't a strange form of immortality, what is?

You are or were my brother.
And I am your last unfinished story.

your heart is still beating.

Inside me.

And I will spend the rest of my life teaching it how to be human.

— your lil one
Enaya