



Every bloom begins with a little light

*The Sun
&
The Sunflower*

HIMANSHI YADAV



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Stories Matter

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For permissions requests or inquiries regarding this publication,
please contact:

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

www.BlueRoseONE.com

info@bluerosepublishers.com

+91 8882 898 898

+4407342408967

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Dedication

To the ones who thought love had forgotten them-
May this story remind you the right chapter is always worth
waiting for.

Acknowledgement

Every story begins with an idea, but no story reaches its readers without the support, encouragement, and belief of many people.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my family for always believing in me, encouraging my dreams, and standing by me throughout this journey. Your love and support have meant more than words can express.

To my friends, thank you for listening to my endless ideas, celebrating every small milestone, and reminding me to keep going, even when I doubted myself.

To my special person, thank you for being my constant source of strength and encouragement. This dream wouldn't have felt the same without you.

To every reader holding this book in their hands thank you for giving a debut author a place in your heart. Your time is the greatest gift you could give a writer, and I hope these pages leave you with emotions you'll carry long after the story ends.

Finally, thank you to everyone who played a part in bringing *The Sun & The Sunflower* to life. This book is the beginning of a dream, and I'm grateful that you're a part of it.

With love,

Himanshi Yadav 

A Note to My Readers

This story is an emotional roller coaster, and I'm so grateful you've chosen to take the ride.

Within these pages, you'll laugh, smile, blush, cry, and maybe even pause to reflect on your own journey. Some moments will warm your heart, while others may quietly break it. Above all, I hope this story reminds you that even after the darkest chapters, love, hope, and healing always find a way back.

Happy reading. 🌻

— Himanshi Yadav

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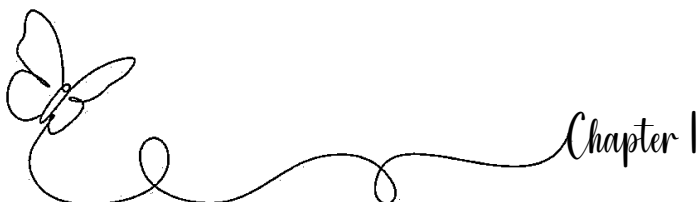


Before You Begin...

May these pages make you smile, laugh, cry, and believe a
little more in love.

If this story finds a place in your heart, then every word was
worth writing.

Take a deep breath, turn the page, and let the journey
begin. 



Chapter 1

The Girl Who Still Believed in Forever



The hardest part wasn't that he left.

The hardest part was waking up every single morning with the same fragile hope still alive inside me.

For a few seconds after opening my eyes, everything felt normal. I would reach for my phone almost instinctively, my heart already preparing itself for the possibility that maybe there was a message waiting for me. Maybe he had texted during the night. Maybe he had called. Maybe he had finally realized that what we had was worth fighting for.

And then I would unlock my phone.

Nothing.

No message.

No missed call.

No explanation.

Just the same silence that had greeted me the day before. And somehow, that silence hurts more every morning.

Because heartbreak isn't always loud. Sometimes it is simply the disappointment of finding nothing where you desperately hoped to find something.

The rest of the day would pass in a blur of questions that never seemed to have answers. I kept replaying everything in my head, searching for the moment where things went wrong. What happened to us? How did we go from talking about wedding venues and future careers to becoming strangers overnight? How did two people who once spent hours planning a life together suddenly end up with nothing left to say?

We had planned everything, the city we wanted to live in, the dreams we wanted to chase, the children we joked about having one day, the names we laughed about, the future felt so real that I had stopped calling it a dream. I had started calling it my life. And then one day it was gone.

Not slowly.

Not gradually.

Just gone.

What hurt the most was that I never got an answer that could justify the emptiness he left behind. No explanation ever felt big enough to explain how something so important could disappear so suddenly.

And in the middle of all that confusion, one question haunted me more than any other.

Was I the only one grieving us?

Because while I was losing sleep, replaying old conversations, checking my phone a hundred times a day and carrying this ache into every part of my life, I couldn't help wondering if he was hurting too.

Did he wake up looking for my message?

Did he miss me when something good happened?

Did he ever reach for his phone before remembering that I was gone?

Or was I the only one standing in the ruins of a future we built together?

Maybe that's what heartbreak really is.

Not losing the person you loved.

But never knowing whether losing you broke them too. If someone had met Naina Sharma a month ago, they would have found it impossible to believe that this was the same girl who now sat quietly in the last row of her classroom, answering only when someone called her name.

A month ago, silence didn't suit her.

She had grown up in a small town in Uttar Pradesh, in a house where mornings began with the sound of her grandmother humming old bhajans, her mother shouting from the kitchen because breakfast was getting cold, and her father pretending to be annoyed every time Naina stole the first bite from his plate before he could even sit down.

She was the only child, but no one in the family ever used that phrase with pity. To them, Naina wasn't "the only daughter." She was enough for the entire house. She was the laughter that echoed through the rooms, the reason the television volume was always higher than necessary because she insisted on singing along to every song, and the one person who could convince her father to stop checking office emails on Sundays. Her father worked at a government bank. He was a quiet man, disciplined in almost everything, but his rules somehow disappeared whenever it came to his daughter. Every evening, before entering the house, he would stop at the sweet shop near the corner. Some days it was jalebi, some days samosas, and on days when Naina had exams, he always brought her favourite kaju katli because he believed sugar somehow made difficult chapters easier.

Her mother often complained, "Aapne isse itna sir pe chadha rakha hai ki kal ko sasural wale humein hi phone karenge."

Her father would laugh without even looking up from the newspaper. "Jo meri beti ko samajh na paaye, problem uski hogi... meri beti ki nahi."

Naina never forgot those words.

Not because they were extraordinary.

Because they made her feel safe.

Her mother loved differently. She wasn't the kind who said *I love you* every day. She remembered it in smaller ways. By ironing Naina's favourite kurta before she asked. By packing extra parathas because she knew her daughter would share them with friends and come back hungry. By waking up before sunrise whenever Naina had to catch an early train, even if she hadn't slept the whole night.

And then there was Dadi.

If love could take the shape of a person, it would probably look like her grandmother sitting on the veranda every evening, waiting for Naina to come back from tuition with two cups of chai already prepared.

"Meri gudiya aa gayi," she would say every single time, as though she hadn't seen her in years instead of two hours.

Home was never quiet.

It couldn't be.

Not with Naina around.

She had a habit of talking to everyone. The vegetable vendor knew about her semester exams. The neighbour's little daughter had declared Naina her best friend. Even the stray dog outside their gate waited every evening because he knew she would sneak out with a biscuit in her hand despite her mother's daily warning that one day she would bring the entire street's dog home.

She was loud.

Carefree.

A little dramatic.

Hopelessly emotional.

The kind of girl who cried when a plant in the balcony dried because she forgot to water it, then spent the next week apologising to it as if it could still hear her.

Delhi had always been a dream.

Not because she wanted to leave home.

Because she wanted to become someone her home could be proud of.

The day her admission letter arrived for post-graduation, the entire house celebrated. Her father distributed sweets to neighbours. Her mother immediately started making lists of everything she would need in Delhi. Dadi complained for three straight days that the capital was too far away and then secretly knitted her a sweater because "Delhi ki sardi zyada lagti hai."

When the train finally left the platform, Naina stood near the door, waving until her family became nothing more than blurred figures.

She cried for exactly twenty-three minutes.

That was Naina.

"GOOD MORNING, DELHI!"

Ira Tyagi's voice echoed through the entire apartment before she even entered the room.

Naina closed her eyes.

Of course.

Only one person in the world could sound this energetic at eight in the morning.

"You know," Naina said without turning around,
"Normal people use doors. They don't attack them."
"Normal people are boring."

Ira dropped her bag dramatically onto the sofa before walking into the room carrying two cups of coffee and the confidence of someone who genuinely believed she was the main character of every story.

At twenty-three, Ira Tyagi possessed a dangerous combination of beauty, confidence, and absolutely no filter. She spoke before thinking, laughed before understanding the joke, and somehow managed to make friends everywhere she went.

Most importantly, she had spent the last month trying to save Naina from drowning in her own sadness.

The morning at the college campus had a different kind of noise today: louder laughter, rushed footsteps, and that restless excitement that always came when something new was about to begin.

Naina and Ira walked in together, side by side like they always did, though their moods were slightly different. Naina had that quiet heaviness around her, the kind she had been carrying ever since the breakup, her eyes softer, a little distant, as if she was physically present but still stuck somewhere in the past. Ira, on the other hand, was her constant chaos in human form talking non-stop, teasing her, trying to pull her back into the present with every possible joke and dramatic observation about college life. She kept bumping her shoulder into Naina's, making her smile faintly even when she didn't want to.

"Bas aaj serious mat rehna," Ira whispered, adjusting her bag. "College hai, courtroom nahi." Naina didn't answer properly, just gave a small nod as they entered the corridor.

By the time their last lecture finally ended, both girls looked as though they had survived a battlefield rather than a three-hour Psychology class.

Naina lazily dropped her notebook into her bag before stretching her arms above her head. "I swear," she sighed

dramatically, "if Professor Malhotra says *'let's quickly discuss one more concept'* one more time, I'm dropping out and opening a flower shop in the mountains."

Ira gasped in horror. "A flower shop? That's your backup plan? After paying lakhs for a Master's degree?"

Naina shrugged. "Flowers don't give assignments."

"They also don't pay rent."

"They don't judge me either."

"They'll die in three days."

"So will I if I attend another lecture without food."

Ira placed a hand over her heart as though she had just heard the most heartbreaking confession of her life. "Ladies and gentlemen," she announced loudly enough for a few students to turn around, "our patient is not emotionally hungry anymore. She is physically hungry. This is progress." Naina buried her face in her hands.

"Ira..."

"What?"

"One day you're going to embarrass me so badly that I'll have to transfer universities." "Impossible."

"Why?"

"Because wherever you transfer..."

Ira slung an arm around her shoulders with a smug grin.

"...I'll transfer too."

Naina rolled her eyes, but she couldn't stop smiling. "You're unbelievably annoying."

"I prefer to be emotionally supportive with extra personality."

"No."

"*Extremely charming?*"

"No."

"*God's favourite?*"

"No."

Ira sighed dramatically.

"I can't believe I do so much charity work."

"Charity?"

"Yes."

She pointed at Naina.

"I've spent one month fixing your broken heart. At this point I deserve an honorary psychology degree." Naina laughed.

"You were the reason I needed therapy half the time."

"And yet..." Ira winked.

"...here you are, laughing again."

For a brief moment, neither of them said anything.

There it was.

A laugh.

Not forced.

Not borrowed.

Not hiding pain.

Just... a laugh.

Ira noticed it immediately, but this time she didn't point it out. She simply smiled to herself.

Some victories were too precious to interrupt.

"Now," Ira clapped her hands together, rubbing them dramatically, "can we please go eat before I start hallucinating butter chicken?"

Naina raised an eyebrow.

"You hallucinate food?"

"I haven't eaten since breakfast."

"It's one in the afternoon."

"Exactly."

"You make it sound like you've survived a famine." "I have."

"You literally had two cheese sandwiches before class."

"That was breakfast."

"You also stole half my chocolate."

"That was emotional support."

"My chips?"

"Therapy."

"My cold coffee?"

"Self-care."

Naina stopped walking and stared at her. "So Basically, everything I buy belongs to you?" Ira smiled proudly.

"That's what friendship means."

Naina couldn't help laughing again as she shook her head.

"You are impossible."

"And you're buying coffee."

"Absolutely not."

"Fine."

Ira folded her arms dramatically.

"I guess I'll just collapse dramatically in the middle of the cafeteria."

"You won't."

"Try me."

"I know you."

"You do."

"And you're too hungry to faint." Ira blinked.

"...Okay, that's actually a fair point." The cafeteria had never been this loud.

Or maybe...

it had never felt this quiet.

Laughter echoed from every corner. Someone argued over whose turn it was to pay for coffee. A group of freshers clicked endless pictures near the glass windows while someone in the back played an old Bollywood song from their phone.

Life was happening everywhere.

Except at Table Seven.

Naina sat frozen, her fingers wrapped around a paper cup that had gone cold nearly twenty minutes ago.
She wasn't looking at the coffee anymore.
She was looking beyond it.
Beyond the crowded café.
Beyond the walls.
Beyond the present.
Her eyes had stopped at a boy who absentmindedly tucked a loose strand of hair behind his girlfriend's ear before sliding a brownie toward her.
Such a small gesture. So ordinary.
So painfully familiar.
Aarav used to do that.
He never liked when her hair covered her face while she ate.
"You'll choke one day because you're too busy talking," he would laugh, brushing her hair behind her ear.
She had rolled her eyes every single time.
She would give anything...
to hear that sentence once more.
"Naina?"
Ira's voice reached her like a sound underwater.
She didn't answer.
She couldn't.
Because memories don't ask permission before returning.
They simply arrive... sit beside you... and remind you of everything you've spent months trying to forget.
One tear escaped before she even realized she was crying.
She quickly wiped it away.
Another followed.
Then another.
Soon, she wasn't wiping them anymore.
She was only watching them fall.

Ira's heart clenched.

No. Please... not again.

She had watched Naina survive the last one month one day at a time.

She had watched her force herself to wake up after nights spent staring at a ceiling that never answered her prayers.

She had watched her carry books she couldn't read because every page somehow became him.

She had watched her smile at people while secretly wondering whether heartbreak ever had an expiry date.

No one knew strength sometimes looked exactly like exhaustion.

Healing had become another performance.

If someone is meant for you, they'll stay."

"But what about the people who spend years making you feel like home..."

"...only to leave you standing outside their own heart?" Silence.

"Ira..."

Her voice was so small it almost disappeared.

"If he was never mine..."

"...then why did he spend years making me believe I was his?"

No answer came.

Only tears.

"Why did he hold my hand if he knew one day he'd let it go?"

"Why did he teach my heart how to trust..." "...if he was never going to protect it?" She laughed through tears.

"You know what's funny?"

"I still remember the exact day he said..."

'I'll never leave you.'

She looked away.

"I didn't know promises could die before people do." A painful silence settled between them. "I keep asking God the same question every night."

Another tear rolled down.

"If You knew he wasn't mine forever..." "...why did you let him become my favourite hello?" She closed her eyes.

"Why did you write such beautiful memories..."

"...if they were only meant to become reasons for me to cry?"

Her breathing became uneven again.

"I wasn't asking for forever."

"I would've settled for honesty."

"I would've survived the truth."

She pressed her hand against her chest.

"But this..."

Her voice cracked.

"This slow death of remembering someone who forgot me..."

"I don't know how to survive this." She looked at Ira with swollen eyes.

"Do you know what hurts the most?"

"I don't even hate him."

"I keep trying."

"I remember every tear."

"Every broken promise."

"Every night he made me cry." "I collect reasons to stop loving him."

She smiled sadly.

"But my heart..."

"It always remembers the way he looked at me before everything fell apart."

"And suddenly..."

"I'm in love with him all over again." Another silence.

"I keep wondering..."

"If he ever loved me the way I loved him..." "...how did he learn to live without me so easily?" She swallowed hard.

"Because I'm trying..."

"God knows I'm trying..."

"But every morning I wake up..."

"...and the first heartbreak of my day is remembering that he isn't mine anymore."

She wiped her tears with the sleeve of her hoodie.

"Ira..."

"Do you know what grief feels like?"

"It feels like reaching for your phone because something funny happened..."

"...and remembering halfway through..."

"...that the one person you wanted to tell doesn't belong to your life anymore."

She looked down.

"It feels like surviving every day..."

"...without ever really living it." Her lips trembled.

"I don't cry because he left."

"I cry because some part of me is still waiting for him to come back."

"And I'm terrified..."

"...that it'll wait forever." She closed her eyes.

"I don't miss the relationship anymore." She smiled through tears.

"I miss the girl who believed she was loved." Another tear escaped.

"I want my old self back."

"The girl who wasn't afraid of tomorrow."

"The girl who didn't overthink every goodbye." "The girl who believed promises meant something." She looked at Ira.

"I don't think she survived the breakup." A long silence followed.

Then she whispered the sentence that had lived inside her heart for months.

"If I was only going to become a chapter in his life..." "...why did he become my whole story?" Neither of them spoke for a long time.

The world around them had returned to normal.

Someone laughed.

Someone complained that their coffee had gone cold.

Someone was making plans for the weekend.

It was strange.

The world never stopped just because one heart had shattered.

Ira slowly helped Naina stand.

"Come."

Naina didn't ask where.

She didn't have the strength to.

They walked out of the café in silence.

The afternoon sky had turned grey.

A cool breeze brushed against Naina's face, carrying the smell of rain.

A few drops fell.

Then another.

Within moments, a soft drizzle covered the city.

Neither of them ran for shelter.

Naina simply stood there.

The rain mixed with the tears on her face until even she couldn't tell which was which.

"I used to love the rain," she whispered. Ira looked at her. "It reminded me of him." She smiled faintly.

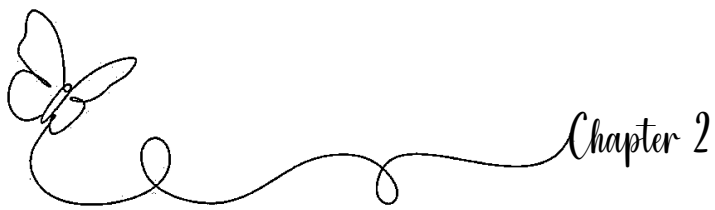
"Now it reminds me of everything I lost." Silence settled between them again.

Naina closed her eyes and let the rain fall.

Maybe this was what heartbreak looked like after a month.
Not loud.
Not dramatic.
Just... tired.
So unbearably tired.
After a while, she spoke again.
"So many people tell me that time heals everything." A tear
escaped despite the rain.
"Then why does every tomorrow still wake up carrying
yesterday?"
Ira had no answer.
Some questions weren't meant to be answered.
They were simply meant to survive.
She gently slipped her fingers into Naina's hand.
Not to pull her forward.
Not to tell her to move on.
Just to remind her...
"You don't have to walk through this alone." Naina held her
hand a little tighter.
For the first time in months...
She didn't wish for Aarav's hand.
She simply accepted the one that was already holding hers.
It wasn't healing.
Not yet.
But perhaps...
Healing never begins with forgetting.
Perhaps it begins with realizing that even after someone
leaves... love still exists.
Sometimes...
it just wears a different face.
The rain continued to fall.

And somewhere between the silence... the tears... and the
sound of water against the empty streets...
Naina made herself one promise.
She wouldn't force herself to forget him.
She would stop punishing herself for remembering him.
Maybe memories didn't disappear.
Maybe...
they simply stopped hurting one day.
Not today.
Not tomorrow.
But someday.
And for now...
'Someday' was enough.
Without another word, the two girls began walking to the
hostel.
One carrying heartbreak.
The other carried the girl who was trying to survive it.
Behind them, the café lights slowly faded into the rain.
Ahead of them...
The road was still uncertain.
But for the first time in a very long time, Naina took one step
forward.
Then another and somehow...
That felt like the bravest thing she had done in a month.
**“Some people spend months mourning the chapters they've
lost, never realizing that the next one is about to begin.”**





Chapter 2

Where It All Began



Naina and Ira walked in together, side by side outside the administrative block. There was a small crowd of teachers, a few senior students, even some curious girls pretending not to stare too obviously. A black government SUV had just stopped, and for a second everything felt unusually still.

The door opened.

Someone stepped out.

Tall, composed, effortlessly sharp in a crisp formal shirt with sleeves rolled slightly up, a watch glinting under the sunlight. There was something unsettlingly calm about him like he didn't belong to the noise of college life, but could silence it just by walking through it.

"Income Tax Department," someone whispered in the crowd, like it was a headline.

Ved Sharma, twenty-eight, a young officer already known for his reputation as strict when needed, unshakably intelligent,

and dangerously focused when it came to his work. His presence wasn't loud, but it stayed in the room longer than the person himself.

Ira's eyes widened instantly. "Okay... who is that?" she muttered, half amused, half impressed.

Naina didn't answer at first. She was about to look away until her gaze accidentally met him.

Just a moment. Nothing dramatic.

But enough for something unfamiliar to shift in her chest.

Ved's expression didn't change, but his eyes lingered for a fraction longer than necessary, as if registering her face without intention.

Then he turned away and walked inside with the officials, leaving behind a strange silence that didn't belong to the campus anymore.

Ira leaned closer to Naina, grinning now. "College mein aaj kuch interesting hone wala hai, I can feel it."

Naina finally looked away, swallowing the strange feeling she couldn't name.

And somewhere behind her calm face, her life had already taken a small, invisible turn.

The crowd outside the administrative block was still buzzing when Ved Sharma walked in with the college authorities.

This time he wasn't just a visitor.

He was there on official work.

The moment he entered the principal's office corridor, the energy shifted, no noise, no chaos, just a controlled silence that followed him like a shadow. The teachers straightened a little, students peeking from corners quickly stepped back, and even the guards seemed more alert than usual.

Ira noticed it first. "Yeh normal visit nahi lag raha..." she whispered, her earlier excitement fading into curiosity.

Naina didn't respond, but her gaze stayed fixed ahead.

Ved Sharma was now standing near the principal's office, speaking briefly with the college administration. A file was in his hand thin, but heavy in implication. His expression was unreadable, professional to the point of intimidation. Every word he spoke was calm, measured, and final.

Then the principal nodded and gestured toward the inside.

"Students are waiting," someone said softly.

That was the moment the air changed again.

Ved adjusted his sleeves slightly and stepped forward, his footsteps steady against the marble floor. Ira instinctively grabbed Naina's wrist and pulled her slightly aside to let him pass.

He walked past them.

And for just a second his eyes flicked toward Naina again.

No pause this time.

No expression.

But something like recognition... or awareness.

Then he went into the room.

Inside, a student sat waiting nervously, hands folded tightly, eyes down, the kind of fear that comes when consequences finally arrive. Ved took the chair opposite them without rushing, placing the file on the table.

"I'm not here to create drama," he said, voice calm but firm.

"I'm here to understand what happened. And why did it happen?"

The student swallowed hard.

Outside the room, Ira leaned closer to Naina again, whispering, "Whatever this case is... it's serious."

Naina finally spoke, almost absent-mindedly. "Haan..." But her attention wasn't fully on the case.

It kept drifting back to the man behind that closed door.

Because something about Ved Sharma didn't feel like just an officer doing his job.

It felt like the beginning of a story that had already started without asking anyone's permission.

The meeting inside the principal's office didn't last very long, but it left a heaviness in the air that stayed even after Ved Sharma walked out.

He didn't speak much while leaving. Just a few formal words with the administration, a brief nod, and that same controlled expression—like nothing ever really unsettled him. The file was closed, the matter was noted, and his job there was done. Outside, the campus felt normal again. Students started moving, voices returned, life resumed its usual pace.

Ved adjusted his watch, ready to leave.

And at the exact same moment

Naina and Ira were coming from the cafeteria.

Ira was talking nonstop, holding two coffees carefully in both hands like she was carrying something extremely precious. "I'm telling you, Naina, tujhe overthink kam karna chahiye warna

She didn't finish.

Because Naina, lost in her own thoughts, wasn't looking properly either. She was half-listening, eyes down, still stuck somewhere between Ira's words and her own silence. And then

Collision.

It happened so suddenly that there was no time to react.

Ira's elbow slightly bumped Naina's arm, Naina stepped forward instinctively, and the next second the coffee in her hand tilted sharply.

Hot coffee splashed forward.

Right onto Ved Sharma's crisp white shirt.

For a split second, everything froze.

Ira's eyes went wide. "OH MY GOD—!"

Naina stood still, completely shocked, staring at the mess she had just created. The brown stain spread quickly across his shirt, impossible to ignore. The silence that followed was heavier than the spill itself.

Ved slowly looked down at his shirt.

Then at the girl in front of him.

His expression didn't change immediately but something in his eyes tightened. Not anger exactly. More like controlled irritation mixed with disbelief.

"Are you serious?" he said finally, voice calm but sharp enough to cut through the air.

Naina blinked, words getting stuck. "I... I'm really sorry... I didn't see"

Ira quickly jumped in, panicking. "Sir, it was an accident, we weren't looking, please coffee was hot, she" Ved raised a hand slightly.

Not aggressive. Just enough to stop the chaos.

"I can see it was an accident," he said, wiping his sleeve once, slowly. "But accidents don't change the fact that this is a government official's shirt."

Naina's face dropped further. "I'll clean it or I'll pay for it, I really didn't mean"

There was a pause.

Ved finally looked at her properly.

A second longer this time.

Then, slightly exhaling through his nose, he spoke in a lower tone.

"Next time... look where you're going."

It wasn't loud. Not insulting. But it carried that authority that made people go quiet without arguing back.

Ira opened her mouth again, but Naina gently stopped her with a small touch on her arm.

"I'm sorry," Naina said again, softer this time.

Ved adjusted his shirt sleeve once more, clearly deciding the conversation was over.

"It's fine," he said flatly. "Just be careful." And then he walked past them.

But as he passed, there was a fraction of a pause in his step so small no one else noticed.

Except maybe Naina.

Who stood there still, holding an empty cup, wondering why that small accident suddenly felt like it mattered more than it should have.

Ved Sharma had already left the campus, but the moment still hadn't left them.

Naina and Ira sat in the library corner, away from the usual noise, both unusually quiet for a few seconds like their brains were still replaying the same scene on loop. The spilled coffee. The white shirt turned brown. That calm, sharp voice.

And the way everything had frozen in that moment.

Ira finally broke the silence first.

"Okay... honestly," she leaned back in her chair, eyes still a little wide, "that officer was... hot."

Naina blinked at her. "Ira."

"What?" Ira immediately sat forward, defensive but smiling.

"I'm just saying facts. Strict, tall, that attitude, that voice he literally looked like he walked out of some serious government thriller."

Naina shook her head, trying not to smile despite herself.

"You just met him for two seconds and he insulted us."

"He didn't insult us," Ira corrected quickly. "He just... scolded us with style."

Naina let out a small breath, still staring at the table. "You're unbelievable."

Ira leaned closer now, lowering her voice like she was sharing a secret. "But did you notice one thing?"

Naina didn't answer, but her eyes lifted slightly.

Ira grinned. "He didn't actually shout. Even when he was annoyed... he was controlled. Like he chooses every word carefully. That's dangerous."

Naina frowned slightly. "Dangerous?"

Ira nodded dramatically. "That kind of man doesn't react easily. And when he does... it matters."

For a second, Naina didn't respond.

Her mind, against her will, replayed the exact moment again, his eyes looking at her, the pause before "be careful," the way his voice didn't rise even once.

She quickly looked away. "You're overthinking again."

"I'm observing," Ira corrected. Then she smirked. "And I'm also saying... you're acting like you didn't notice anything."

Naina finally looked at her. "Notice what?" Ira raised an eyebrow.

"The way he looked at you."

Silence dropped between them again.

Naina's expression changed slightly to confusion first, then denial. "He didn't look at me."

Ira leaned back, smiling like she didn't believe a word.

"Haan haan, sure."

Naina shut her notebook a little too quickly. "Ira, stop." But Ira wasn't stopping.

"Fine," she said, still grinning, "don't admit it. But I'm telling you this is exactly how stories start."

Naina stood up abruptly, grabbing her bag. "It's not a story. It's an accident. And he's just an officer who probably forgot about it already."

Ira followed her, still amused. "Hmm. Let's see."

As they walked out of the library, Ira added one last thing under her breath

"But I don't think he forgot."

And for the first time that day, Naina didn't have a quick reply.

On the other side of the city, Ved Sharma was sitting in the backseat of his government car, the AC running low, files placed neatly beside him.

Outside, traffic moved lazily under the evening sun.

Inside the car, the atmosphere was very different.

His colleague and close friend, Raghav, was sitting in the front passenger seat, turned halfway around, still trying not to laugh.

"You know what I can't get over?" Raghav said, finally giving up and laughing. "Income Tax Officer Ved Sharma targeted by... coffee." Ved didn't look up from his file.

"Stop talking," he said flatly.

That only made Raghav laugh harder.

"Bro, it's not even the coffee part," he continued, wiping his smile. "It's the fact that you stood there... full serious face... while a girl practically baptized your shirt with cappuccino." Ved turned a page.

"Accident," he said simply.

Raghav leaned back, still amused. "Yeah yeah, accident. But I swear, I've never seen you that patient. If it was anyone else, you would've made a report out of it." Ved finally looked up at him.

Just a calm, warning glance.

Raghav immediately raised his hands. "Okay okay, I'm not saying anything. Relax."

Silence filled the car for a few seconds, broken only by the sound of traffic outside.

Raghav, however, couldn't stay quiet for long.

"But seriously," he said again, softer now but still teasing,

"Who was she?"

Ved's gaze shifted to the window.

For a moment, he didn't answer.

Then, in a controlled tone: "A student."

Raghav smirked. "Just a student?"

Ved closed the file slightly. "Yes."

Raghav nodded slowly, clearly not convinced.

"Interesting. Because you are just a student' managed to spill hot coffee on an Income Tax Officer and still survive the conversation."

That finally got a reaction.

Ved exhaled lightly through

his nose, not quite a smile, not quite irritation.

"Drive straight," he said to the driver, ignoring him completely.

But Raghav wasn't done yet.

"I'm telling you," he added, grinning again, "you're going to remember that girl."

Ved didn't respond this time.

He just looked back at the passing road, expression steady as always.

But somewhere in the quiet of his mind, the image replayed anyway

A shocked face, trembling apology... and coffee staining a white shirt.

And for reasons he didn't care to name, it stayed a little longer than it should have.

Ved Sharma was back in his office now.

The city outside had already slipped into evening lights switching on one by one, traffic softening into a steady hum. Inside his cabin, everything was exactly how he liked it: clean desk, stacked files, disciplined silence.

He was working.

Pen moving across papers, eyes scanning reports, phone placed face down like it didn't matter. Everything about him looked controlled, unchanged as if nothing had happened in the day worth revisiting.

And yet...

Every few minutes, his focus would slightly drift.

Not enough to break his work.

Just enough to interrupt it for a second.

That one moment kept replaying.

A sudden collision.

Hot coffee spilling across a white shirt.

And then,

A face.

Wide eyes. Shock. Panic. Apology repeating too fast.

And something else.

That one second of eye contact.

Longer than it should have been.

Ved paused mid-signature.

His pen stopped.

He frowned slightly, almost irritated with himself.

"Focus," he muttered under his breath, and continued writing.

But the memory didn't leave.

On the other side of the city, Naina had already reached home.

Her bag was thrown on the bed, curtains slightly drawn, room quiet in that familiar evening way. She was lying on her side, one arm over her forehead, trying to rest.

But her mind wasn't resting.

It kept going back to the same scene again and again.

The café corridor.

Ira's voice is panicking.

The sudden bump.

The coffee slipped.

And then Him.

Ved Sharma.

That calm face. That controlled voice.

And that moment.

The eye contact.

Naina closed her eyes tighter like it would erase it.

"It was just an accident," she whispered to herself, trying to convince herself.

But her brain didn't agree.

Instead, it replayed it again slower this time.

His expression when he looked at her. Not angry. Not soft either. Just... unreadable. Like he noticed more than he said.

Naina opened her eyes suddenly and sat up.

"Why am I even thinking about this so much?" she muttered, frustrated with herself.

She grabbed her pillow and hugged it, trying to distract herself.

But Ira's words from earlier came back too.

"He looked at you."

Naina shut her eyes again immediately.

"No," she said firmly to herself. "He didn't. It was nothing."

But even as she said it, her mind betrayed her.
Because the truth was simple and annoying.
She had already remembered him more times in one evening
than she should have. A few days passed after the coffee
incident.
Campus life went back to its usual rhythm: classes,
assignments, cafeteria noise, Ira's nonstop talking, Naina's
quiet overthinking that she tried very hard to ignore.
And slowly, even they convinced themselves that it was
nothing.
Just a random accident.
Just a stranger.
Just a moment that didn't mean anything.
Or at least, that's what they told themselves.
On the other hand, Ved Sharma was back to his routine too.
Meetings, files, office calls, everything structured, everything
under control. The kind of life where nothing was supposed
to linger.
But memory doesn't always follow rules.
Sometimes it just stays in the background... quietly.
Uninvited.
That afternoon, Ved stepped into a café near his office. Not a
special place. Just a regular stop between work.
He sat near the counter, laptop closed beside him, waiting for
his coffee. His expression was the same as always: composed,
slightly distant, eyes occasionally checking his phone.
Normal.
Routine.
Until
He looked up.
And everything paused.
Near the corner table sat Naina.

With Ira.

They were laughing about something, probably something stupid, because Ira was laughing the hardest, leaning forward dramatically while Naina tried to stop smiling but failed.

Naina's hair was slightly loose, soft around her face. Her eyes were bright in a way that didn't match the seriousness Ved had unconsciously associated with her before. She was talking with her hands, animated, alive in a way that made the space around her feel lighter.

Ved didn't even realize when he stopped noticing anything else.

The café noise didn't matter.

The phone in his hand didn't matter.

Even the coffee he was waiting for didn't matter.

His gaze stayed there.

Fixed.

For a second... then another.

Something in his expression shifted without permission. The usual control didn't break, but it softened in a way even he wouldn't have been able to explain if asked.

The memory of the coffee spill came back.

But this time, it didn't feel important.

What stayed was her.

The way she smiled mid-sentence.

The way she leaned slightly toward her friend when she laughed.

The way she looked... unaware that someone was watching.

Ved's grip on his phone loosened slightly.

He didn't look away.

Not immediately.

And for the first time since that day, the accident wasn't what came first to his mind.

It was her.

He wasn't looking for her.

It was strange how one person could change the atmosphere without saying a single word. The noise around him faded into the background as his eyes found her almost instinctively. Before he could stop himself, the corner of his lips lifted into the faintest smile.

It wasn't dramatic.

It wasn't love.

It was simply the quiet happiness of seeing someone you didn't realize you had been hoping to see.

Naina Sharma.

Sitting across the café like she had always belonged somewhere in his line of sight without even knowing it.

The café door opened and closed a few times, but Ved didn't move.

He was still sitting there, coffee untouched, eyes occasionally drifting back to the same corner table.

Naina was still there.

Still laughing sometimes at Ira's exaggerated expressions, still listening, still existing in that effortless way that somehow made the entire café feel less noisy.

And then Ira's eyes shifted.

She noticed him.

A small pause... then her face lit up instantly.

She leaned closer to Naina and whispered loudly, "See... ye wahi officer hai. Aaj bhi hot lag raha hai."

Naina's head snapped toward her. "Ira please," she said immediately, half embarrassed, half warning.

But Ira was already smiling like she'd won something.

"What? I'm just stating facts.

Government officer hai, aur abhi bhi same intensity"

“Stop it,” Naina cut her off, trying to pull her attention back to her coffee. “Mujhe nahi sunna ye sab.”

Ira rolled her eyes but finally stayed quiet at least for a moment.

Ved, meanwhile, had already looked away.

Not because he didn’t notice them.

But because he did.

Too clearly.

And that was exactly the problem.

A while later, Naina and Ira stepped out of the café.

The sky had changed.

Grey clouds had rolled in without warning, and within minutes, light rain turned into a steady downpour. The street outside was suddenly messy with water, traffic slowing, people rushing for cover.

Naina pulled her dupatta tighter. “Great... ab yeh bhi hona tha.”

Ira looked around. “Auto mil jaayega na?” But there wasn’t one.

Not a single empty auto in sight.

They stood near the edge of the road, trying to wait it out, but the rain only got heavier. Ira tried calling someone, Naina just sighed, looking at the road.

And that’s when Ved saw them.

From inside the café, through the glass.

Two girls standing in the rain, clearly struggling, Ira trying to shield her phone, Naina just quietly waiting, not complaining but visibly stuck.

He didn’t think for long.

He just stood up.

Outside, a black car slowed down near them.

Naina and Ira both looked up. The window rolled down.

Ved Sharma was sitting inside.

Rain traced lines across the glass, but his expression was still the same calm, composed.

"Need a lift?" he asked simply.

Ira blinked like she had been waiting for this exact cinematic moment her whole life.

"Yes," she said immediately, before Naina could even react.

Naina turned toward her sharply. "Ira!"

But Ira had already leaned forward, smiling. "Haan sir, please... humare flat drop kar dijiye." Silence.

For a second, only the sound of rain filled the space between them.

Naina looked at Ira, then at the car, then at Ved.

Her expression was controlled but clearly not approving.

Ved's eyes briefly shifted to Naina.

Just for a second longer than necessary.

Then he spoke.

"Get in."

Naina stood there for a second longer than she needed to.

Rain was getting heavier, droplets sliding down her hair, sleeves slightly damp, and Ira was already half excited, half impatient in the backseat like she had won a lottery.

Naina sighed softly and finally opened the front door.

She sat down carefully, adjusting her wet hair and bag, trying to ignore the fact that the space felt... too close. Too aware.

The door closed.

For a moment, only the sound of rain and engine filled the car.

Then Ved started driving.

"Flat kahan hai?" Ved asked calmly after a minute.

Ira immediately leaned forward between the seats. Rose Apartments."

Ved nodded slightly.

After three minutes ved asked “name?”

She is Naina Sharma and I’m Ira Tyagi.”

“Naina Sharma,” he repeated once, like confirming it. Naina looked at him. “Yes.” A small silence followed.

Ira, of course, filled it instantly. “Sir aap Income Tax department mein ho na?” “Yes.”

“Wah... must be a very serious job,” she said dramatically. “Daily raids, files, stress”

“It’s manageable,” Ved replied simply.

Naina finally spoke softly, almost under her breath.

“Must be tiring.”

Ved’s eyes shifted to her again.

Just briefly.

“Yes,” he said. “Sometimes.”

That one word lingered a little longer than the rest.

Ira continued talking, asking random questions—how long he’s been in the department, how stressful it is, whether he likes the job, half teasing, half genuinely curious.

Ved answered politely. Short. Controlled.

But most of his attention... wasn’t in the conversation.

It kept drifting.

To the girl sitting beside him.

Naina was quieter than Ira. She looked outside most of the time, watching rain slide over the window, fingers lightly resting on her bag strap. Occasionally she’d tuck a loose strand of hair behind her ear, unaware of the way it kept pulling attention without trying.

At one point, Ira laughed at something she said and nudged Naina.

“Naina, say something.” Naina blinked. “What?”

Ved’s eyes shifted toward her instantly at her voice.

“Anything,” Ira said. “You’re being too silent.”

Naina sighed softly. “I’m just tired.”

Ved didn’t respond, but his gaze stayed on her for a fraction longer than it should have.

Then he looked back at the road.

But something had already settled in the space quietly.

Unnoticed.

Except for him.

And maybe... not even fully understood yet.

The car slowed down near Rose Apartments as the rain finally turned into a light drizzle.

Streetlights reflected on wet roads, soft yellow streaks stretching across the pavement.

Ved pulled over smoothly.

For a moment, nobody moved.

Ira immediately grabbed her bag, already half out of the car.

Naina opened the door more slowly, stepping out carefully.

She turned slightly toward Ved. “Thank you,” she said softly.

Ved nodded once. “It’s fine.”

A small pause followed one of those pauses that didn’t really belong to the situation.

Naina adjusted her dupatta and added, more politely,

“Bye.”

Ved looked at her then.

Just a second longer.

“Bye, Naina,” he said.

Her name, coming from him, landed differently.

Naina blinked slightly, as if she wasn’t expecting it, but she didn’t question it. She just gave a small nod. “Bye... Ved.”

That was it.

No big moments. No dramatic ending.

Just rain, a car, and two people stepping out of a shared silence.

Ved watched them for a brief second through the mirror as they walked toward the building.

Then he drove forward.

Inside the car, after a few minutes of silence, Ira suddenly turned toward Naina with wide eyes.

“Accha sun,” she said slowly, like a realization hit her mid-air. Naina looked at her. “Kya?”

Ira leaned back dramatically. “Humne uska number to liya hi nahi.”

Naina blinked. “Kiska?”

Ira stared at her. “Arey Ved Sharma ka!”

Naina frowned slightly. “Aur hum kyu lenge?”

Ira groaned. “Emergency contact hota hai, Naina. Life mein kab kaam aa jaye kya pata.”

Naina shook her head, unlocking the apartment gate. “Ira, woh koi delivery guy nahi tha.” Ira smirked. “Haan, woh toh aur bhi interesting tha.” Naina didn’t reply.

But as she walked upstairs, she couldn’t help but replay one thing again.

“Bye, Naina.”

And somewhere, far away, Ved was also driving back... with the same word echoing a little longer than it should have.

Days passed, but Ved couldn’t really explain why his routine had quietly started adjusting itself around places he never used to care about.

It wasn’t planned. It wasn’t intentional.

But sometimes, his car would slow down near that same café without any real reason. Other times, after office hours, he would find himself taking a slightly longer route that passed close to Naina’s college.

He never went inside.

He never tried to create an excuse.

He just... noticed.

And that was enough to disturb the usual order of his controlled life.

One afternoon, he was parked near the café again.

Rain had stopped, leaving the streets washed clean. People moved in and out casually, laughing, talking, living their normal lives.

Ved sat in his car, files untouched beside him, phone forgotten in his hand.

And then he saw her.

Naina.

This time she wasn't alone; she was with Ira, standing outside the college gate near a small golgappa stall. Ira was talking excitedly, clearly arguing over something ridiculous, while Naina stood there laughing softly, shaking her head.

There was no seriousness on her face.

No heaviness.

Just that lightness he had seen once before... and somehow remembered more than he should have.

Naina took a plate of golgappas, eating them like she was genuinely enjoying the moment, occasionally reacting dramatically when Ira teased her. At one point, she laughed so hard she had to turn away slightly, wiping her fingers quickly.

Ved didn't even realize when he stopped looking at anything else.

The world outside the car faded into background noise.

His attention stayed fixed on her.

Not in a way he could easily explain.

Just... still.

A small smile formed on his face without permission.
He leaned back slightly in his seat, watching her like she was part of a scene he didn't want to end.
For a few minutes, he didn't check his phone.
I didn't think about work.
Didn't think about anything else.
Just her.
And then, as suddenly as it started, the moment passed.
Naina and Ira moved away from the stall, still talking, still laughing, disappearing into the crowd near the college gate.
Ved stayed in the car a little longer.
Silent.
Then he exhaled slowly, almost like coming back to himself.
"Strange," he muttered under his breath, closing the file finally.
And then he drove away.
At the office later that day, Raghav had been watching him for a while.
Ved was sitting at his desk, but not really working. His pen moved across paper, stopped, moved again... without much focus.
Raghav finally leaned against the doorframe, smirking.
"Bro," he said casually, "you've been sitting on the same page for fifteen minutes."
Ved didn't look up. "I'm working."
Raghav chuckled. "No, you're not. You're staring at the same paragraph like it offended you personally." Ved finally looked at him.
Calm. Controlled.
But I was distracted.
Raghav raised an eyebrow. "So... whose thoughts are you lost in?"

Ved didn't answer immediately.

A pause.

Then he went back to writing, as if ignoring the question would erase it.

Raghav laughed under his breath. "Got it. It's that girl again, isn't it?"

Ved's pen stopped for half a second.

Just half.

But Raghav noticed.

He always did.

"Dude," Raghav said, stepping inside now, "you don't even deny it properly. That's dangerous."

Ved finally spoke, voice steady. "There's nothing to deny."

Raghav smirked. "Yeah? Then why are you smiling like an idiot while doing government paperwork?"

Ved immediately looked down, expression tightening slightly as if correcting himself.

But it was too late.

Raghav had already seen it.

And Ved...

for the first time in a long while... didn't have a logical answer for his own silence.

Ved had never been the kind of man who admitted things easily.

Everything in his life had always been controlled by his words, his expressions, even his silences. Feelings were something he kept buried under routine, under discipline, under work that never really paused.

But lately, something had changed in a way he didn't fully accept out loud.

He noticed it in small moments.

The way his day felt slightly better when he passed near Naina's college.

The way his gaze automatically searched for her in a crowd without permission. The way, when he saw her laughing or even just existing peacefully, something in him softened without reason.

And one evening, sitting alone in his car outside the café, he finally admitted it to himself in the quietest way possible. "She has something..."

He didn't finish the sentence.

But even in his mind, there was no need to.

Because the next part was already understood.

"...that makes me smile without trying."

And that scared him a little more than it should have.

On the other side of the city, Naina's world was breaking in a completely different way.

Her phone lit up late at night.

A message.

From him.

For a moment, her heart reacted before her mind did. A sudden skip, a sharp inhale, fingers slightly trembling as she unlocked the screen.

This was it.

The message she had been waiting for. The message she had convinced herself would eventually come, fixing everything that had been left hanging in silence.

Her eyes softened instantly.

And then she read it.

"Hey... I need to tell you something. I've found someone else.

Please don't wait for me anymore."

For a few seconds, Naina didn't move.

The words didn't feel real. Like her brain refused to process them properly, as if delaying acceptance could change their meaning.

Her eyes filled slowly, almost unwillingly.

And then the next message came.

A blank profile. Grey screen.

No DP.

No emotion.

Just absence.

That was what broke her completely.

Her hand fell slightly as the phone slipped onto the bed. Her chest tightened in a way that made it hard to breathe properly. The silence of her room suddenly felt too loud. Not just because of what was said... but because of everything she had believed until that moment.

Ira found her a few minutes later.

Naina was sitting still, staring at nothing, like her body was present but her thoughts had collapsed somewhere far away.

"Naina?" Ira's voice softened immediately when she saw her face. "What happened?" No answer.

She took the phone gently from her hand, and within seconds she saw the message.

Her expression changed instantly.

"Oh my God..."

And without another word, she sat beside Naina and pulled her into a tight hug.

That broke her.

Naina finally cried.

Not softly. Not controlled.

But something inside her had been holding on for too long and finally gave up.

Ira held her tighter, not saying anything anymore, just letting her fall apart in silence while the room filled with the kind of grief that doesn't need explanation.

That night, Naina didn't sleep.

Not even for a minute.

Every time she closed her eyes, the message came back. Every time she opened them, the emptiness stayed the same.

And somewhere far away in the same city, life kept moving like nothing had changed.

Ved was sitting in his apartment that night, the city lights reflecting faintly on the glass window.

He was smiling.

Not because something big had happened.

But because small thoughts kept coming back to him.

Her face when she laughed.

The way she got annoyed at Ira.

The way she existed in his memory without even trying.

He leaned back slightly, exhaling slowly, unaware of the storm happening in a completely different room, in a completely different life.

Two people. Same city.

Same night.

But completely different realities.

One breaking quietly in the dark.

The other smiled without knowing why.

And that was the cruellest part of it all

Sometimes, the same moment in life becomes someone's beginning... and someone else's ending.

And maybe that's what life really is: two hearts crossing the same road, but never walking it at the same time.





Chapter 3

Choosing Herself



People think healing begins the day you stop crying. It doesn't. Healing begins the day you get out of bed even when every part of you wants to stay there.

The morning after Aarav's message, Naina didn't wake up stronger. She woke up tired. Her eyes were swollen, her head ached from crying through most of the night, and the silence in her room felt heavier than it ever had before. For a few minutes she simply stared at the ceiling, wondering how one text message could quietly erase years of memories without asking permission first.

Across the room, Ira was already awake. She placed a cup of coffee beside Naina's bed without a word and sat down next to her.

"You don't have to pretend you're okay," she said softly. Naina smiled faintly. "I'm not."
"I know."

Another silence passed between them before Ira reached over and gently took her hand. "But promise me one thing." Naina looked at her. "Don't let one person become the reason you stop living."

Those words stayed with her long after Ira had gone to shower and get dressed not because they healed her, not really, but because they gave her something small and solid to hold onto when everything else felt like it was slipping.

That day, Naina got ready for college. Not because she wanted to. Because she refused to let heartbreak decide what the rest of her life would look like. She sat through lectures without absorbing a word of them, wrote notes she knew she'd never remember reading, smiled when someone cracked a joke even though the smile never quite reached her eyes. It wasn't happiness. It was an effort. And sometimes, effort is the bravest form of healing there is.

After college, she and Ira stopped rushing straight home the way they used to. They started exploring Delhi instead some evenings walking aimlessly through crowded streets with paper cups of coffee warming their hands, some days arguing over which café served the worst coffee and somehow ending up ordering two more cups each just to prove the other one wrong. They laughed loudly enough that strangers turned to look. And for the first time in weeks, Naina found she didn't mind being looked at.

On weekends they rented bicycles near India Gate, the roads wide and open, the wind tangling their hair, and for an hour at a time they forgot about deadlines and heartbreak and everything else waiting for them back home. Ira raced ahead every single time.

"You cheat!" Naina shouted after her. "I call it talent!"
"You almost hit a policeman!"

"He should've moved."

Naina laughed so hard she nearly lost her balance on the bike. It wasn't a perfect laugh it still carried traces of old pain buried underneath it but it was real, and real was enough for now.

They ate golgappas from the same street vendor until Ira finally admitted defeat after the seventh one. "You win," she groaned dramatically. "My stomach has officially resigned."

Naina grinned. "Told you." "You've changed."

"I know."

"You smile more."

Naina looked up at the sky for a moment before answering. "I think... I'm trying."

Ira smiled quietly. "That's all I wanted."

The first rain of the season arrived unexpectedly one evening while they were still out. Instead of running for shelter like everyone else around her, Naina simply stopped where she was. She stretched her hands out and let the raindrops fall against her skin.

"What are you doing?" Ira shouted from under a shop awning.

Naina laughed. "Living."

"You're insane!"

"Probably." She closed her eyes and let the rain keep falling. For months she had cried because of rain. Today, she danced in it. Not because life had suddenly become perfect but because she had finally decided it deserved another chance.

Across the city, another routine had quietly begun without anyone officially noticing it.

Ved's office sat only twenty minutes from her university. Most people, given the choice, would have taken the faster route home each evening. Ved never did. Almost without meaning to, he found himself driving past the same café every single day. Sometimes she was there. Sometimes she wasn't.

On the days she was, he never once stepped out of the car. He simply watched from a distance Naina laughing over coffee, Naina arguing with Ira over a plate of fries, Naina wiping rainwater off her face while pretending, badly, not to be cold. He didn't fully understand why those small, ordinary moments stayed with him the way they did. He only knew that they made his exhausting days feel a little lighter than they had any right to.

His friend Karan noticed first. "You've been staring out of that windshield for five minutes."

Ved looked away immediately. "I was thinking."

"No." Karan smirked. "You were smiling."

"Was I?"

"You don't even realize it anymore, do you?"

Ved glanced back out the window despite himself. Naina had just burst into laughter at something Ira said. And there it was again he found himself smiling too, without permission, without reason, without ever having spoken a single word to her.

Two months passed like that. Naina wasn't completely healed; some scars simply don't disappear that quickly, no matter how much sunlight you give them. But they had, at least, stopped bleeding. She no longer waited for a message from Aarav that would never come. She no longer scrolled through old photographs before falling asleep. She no longer measured her own worth by someone else's decision to walk away. She was slowly learning a truth that heartbreak had kept carefully hidden from her all along that the person she had been searching for, this whole time, was herself.

And somewhere, just a few streets away, a man who barely knew her name beyond a passing glance was quietly,

unknowingly, falling in love with the girl who was learning how to choose herself again.

Because sometimes the most beautiful version of a person is the one they become after deciding, quietly and without an audience, to live again.

There comes a point where admiration begins to feel unfair. Not because you love someone. But because you're only ever loving them from a distance.

For almost two months, Ved had unknowingly memorized Naina's entire routine without ever intending to. She always left college around four. She never skipped coffee after submitting an assignment. She always ordered the same cold coffee, no exceptions. And if Ira was with her which she almost always was, their table would be filled with laughter loud enough to carry across half the café.

He knew all of this. And yet he knew almost nothing about her. He didn't know her favourite colour. He didn't know what made her cry when no one was watching. He didn't know why, despite smiling so much more often now, there was still a sadness tucked somewhere behind her eyes that never quite left. But he wanted to know. More than he was entirely willing to admit, even to himself.

"Sir..."

Ved looked up from the file lying open, untouched, on his desk.

Karan folded his arms, smirking. "I am reading," Ved said.

"No."

"You're thinking."

Ved closed the file with more force than necessary.

"What do you want?"

"The truth."

"What truth?"

"The girl."

Ved frowned, feigning ignorance. "What girl?"

"The one because of whom my extremely serious Income Tax Officer suddenly takes the longest possible route home every single evening."

Ved looked away. Karan's smile only widened. "I knew it."

"You're imagining things."

"Am I?"

"You are."

Karan reached over and picked up Ved's car keys off the desk.

"Fine. Today we'll take another route."

Ved was on his feet immediately. "Give me the keys."

Karan didn't hand them over. He studied his friend carefully for a moment. "If you don't even have the courage to say hello to her..." he paused, "...why are you giving your heart permission to fall?"

The room went unusually quiet after that. Because for the first time in longer than either of them could remember, Ved had no answer ready.

That evening, he drove to the café anyway. Only this time, he didn't park across the road the way he always had. He parked right outside, directly in front, his heart beating far faster than any tax raid or criminal interrogation had ever managed to make it beat. It struck him as almost laughable he had faced down businessmen worth crores, handled investigations that spanned months, sat across from hardened men without flinching once. But saying a simple hello to one girl in a café felt, somehow, entirely impossible.

He laughed quietly at himself. Then stepped out of the car.

Inside, nothing had changed. The familiar smell of coffee filled the air. Students sat hunched over laptops and half

finished, assignments. Someone in one corner was laughing too loudly at their own joke. Someone near the window was crying quietly into a phone call, trying not to be noticed. Life, ordinary and unremarkable, was simply happening all around him, the way it always did.

And then he saw her.

Naina laughed at something Ira had just said, completely unaware that someone standing a few feet away had spent two entire months quietly hoping for exactly that smile every single evening without ever once saying so out loud.

Ved stood there for a few seconds. Watching. Not because he wanted to stand frozen in a doorway like a stranger. Because, at that moment, he

simply forgot how to move.

Ira looked up first. Her eyes found him instantly, and a slow, knowing smile spread across her face. She leaned toward Naina. "Don't look now."

Naina raised an eyebrow. "Then why would you even tell me?"

"Because the coffee officer is here."

Naina sighed. "You're never going to stop calling him that, are you?"

"No."

Curiosity won anyway. She turned.

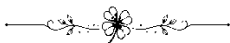
Their eyes met. Again. Only this time, neither of them looked away right away.

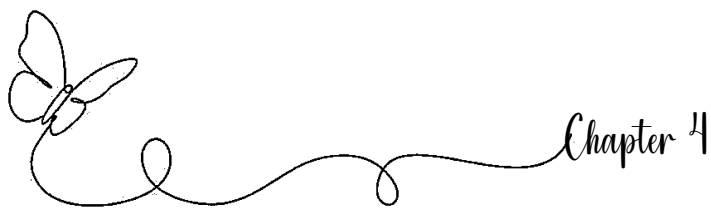
Ved smiled small, but real, the kind that actually reaches a person's eyes. And for the first time since they'd known each other, it was Naina who smiled first. Not out of politeness, not because the silence felt awkward simply because seeing him standing there, unexpectedly, felt strangely, quietly familiar.

Ved took a breath. One. Two. Three. And then he finally started walking toward their table.

Not because destiny had arranged it. Not because coincidence had pushed him there. But because sometimes the bravest thing a person can do is walk toward the beginning of a story, they've only ever dared to watch from a distance.

Some people spend months waiting for the right moment to say hello, not realizing that courage was never about finding the perfect moment; it was always about choosing to move anyway, heart pounding, straight toward the one person who had already, quietly, become worth the risk.





Chapter 4

The Seat Across Her



Some conversations don't begin with extraordinary words. They begin with ordinary courage.

Ved stood beside their table for a few seconds, quietly rehearsing a sentence that should have been the easiest thing in the world to say. He had questioned businessmen worth crores without breaking a sweat. He had handled investigations that stretched across months. He had spoken in rooms full of senior officers without a trace of nervousness in his voice. And yet today, one girl sitting in a café had somehow managed to make an Income Tax Officer forget how conversations worked. He smiled quietly at the irony of it, and finally spoke.

"Hi... mind if I join you?"

Naina looked up. Before she could answer, Ira grinned.

"Only if you promise not to arrest us."

Ved kept a perfectly straight face. "Depends."

Ira's smile faltered. "On what?"

"Whether you've paid taxes on all these fries."

For a second, silence. Then Naina laughed a real, genuine laugh, the kind that escapes before you can stop it. Ved smiled to himself. Mission accomplished.

"Please, have a seat," Naina said, pulling the empty chair slightly toward him.

"Thank you."

The waiter arrived almost immediately. "The usual, sir?"

Ved nodded. "One black coffee."

Ira made a face. "Black coffee? Without sugar?"

"Yes."

"That sounds like punishment."

"It tastes better."

"No."

"It does."

"No."

Naina sipped her cold coffee quietly, watching the two of them argue over something completely pointless, and realized she hadn't laughed this much in weeks. Maybe months. "So," Ved finally turned to her. "How's college?" "Surviving," she said with a small smile.

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only honest one."

He chuckled. "What are you studying?"

"Post-graduation in psychology."

His expression shifted, genuine interest replacing casual small talk. "Psychology?"

She nodded. "I like understanding people." "Then I should be careful," he said.

"Why?"

"You'll start analysing me."

She tilted her head, playful. "I already am." "Oh?"

"Hmm."

"And?"

She pretended to think it over. "You look serious."

"I am."

"But only until someone says something stupid."

Ira immediately pointed at herself. "That's my department."

All three of them laughed, and time moved strangely around that table after that. Coffee turned cold. Fries disappeared. The café emptied out slowly as students filtered home for the evening, and none of them noticed. They talked about professors who assigned impossible workloads, about Delhi traffic, about roadside momos versus café food, and with complete and unanimous agreement about the fact that pineapple did not belong on pizza.

For the first time, Ved wasn't looking at Naina because she was beautiful. He was looking because she was interesting. She listened before she spoke. She laughed with her whole heart, unguarded. She made the people around her feel lighter without even trying. And somewhere between those small, meandering conversations, he realized something faintly dangerous.

He wanted another one.

As evening settled in, Naina glanced at the time. "We should leave."

"We have class tomorrow," Ira agreed.

They stood together, and Ved rose instinctively with them. "It was nice talking to both of you."

"It was," Naina replied, with a soft smile.

There was a small pause, the kind where both people want to keep talking but don't quite know how to justify staying any

longer. Ved cleared his throat. "Can I ask you something?" "Sure."

"If... if you don't mind..." He hesitated, for the first time all evening. "...can I have your number?"

Naina looked at him for a second not out of discomfort, but surprise. She unlocked her phone and handed it over. "I think friends should have each other's numbers."

Friends. The word stayed with Ved a beat longer than it should have. He typed his number in and handed the phone back. "Done." At the same moment, his own phone buzzed.

New Contact: Naina Sharma.

He looked at the screen for a moment. A name. Just two words. And somehow, they already felt like the beginning of something much bigger than a saved contact.

As they walked out of the café, Ira leaned toward Naina and whispered, deliberately loud enough for Ved to catch. "I still think he's hotter than your coffee." "Ira!" Naina nudged her hard.

Ved couldn't help it. He laughed a full, effortless laugh. And for the first time since the three of them had met, none of them felt like strangers anymore.

Sometimes love doesn't begin with a confession. Sometimes it begins with someone simply asking, *Can I have your number?*

The first message is always the hardest. Not because you don't know what to say, but because you don't want to sound too interested.

That night, Ved stared at Naina's contact for almost ten minutes. Open. Close. Open. Close. Type. Delete. Type again. Delete again. Karan walked into the room, took one look at him, and sighed. "Are you investigating tax fraud or writing your wedding vows?"

Ved locked the phone immediately. "I'm working."

Karan glanced at the completely untouched file on the desk.
"Clearly."

Finally, he gathered enough nerve.

Ved: Reached home?

No reply. One minute. Two. Five. He put the phone facedown. "Forget it." It buzzed.

He picked it up so fast he laughed at his own eagerness.

Naina: Yes. Then, almost immediately and yes, before you ask, I didn't spill coffee on anyone today.

He actually smiled. *Good. My shirts thank you.*

The three dots appeared. Disappeared. Appeared again.

Then *Can't promise tomorrow.*

Ved laughed out loud. Karan glanced up from across the room. "There it is."

"What?"

"The smile."

The conversation didn't stop after that. It simply wandered, the way they did.

Ved: So... psychology? Naina: Yes. Professional overthinker. Ved: That explains why you looked at me like I was hiding state secrets.

Naina: You looked suspicious. Ved: I was ordering coffee. Naina:

Exactly. Ved: Should I be offended? Naina: Depends. Ved: On?

Naina: How good your coffee recommendation is.

He stared at the screen for a second before typing back
Challenge accepted.

The next morning, he sent her a photo of his coffee. *Best coffee in Delhi.* Five seconds later, a photo arrived back of the exact same coffee, same café, different table. *Wrong. This one wins.* He laughed out loud at his desk.

Soon the conversations became effortless not because they were particularly interesting, but because they were honest.

Ved: Long day. Naina: Professor? Ved: Income tax raid. Naina: Okay... you win.

One night, at exactly 11:47 PM, Naina texted: *Random question.*

Ved: Go ahead.

Naina: Do officers ever get scared?

He looked at the message for a few seconds before replying.
Every Monday morning.

Naina burst out laughing in her room. Ira looked up from her laptop. "What?"

"He actually replied that."

"Show me."

Naina hugged the phone to her chest dramatically. "No."

"Oho so now the phone is private?"

"It's not private."

"Then let me read it."

"No."

Ira narrowed her eyes. "You smiled before you even opened the message."

"I did not."

"You absolutely did."

Naina threw a pillow at her. "Go study."

The next morning, Ved's phone buzzed during a meeting. He ignored it. Five minutes later, again. Again. Again. When the meeting finally ended, he checked three messages, all from Naina.

Important question. Very important. Does pineapple belong on pizza?
He blinked, then called her immediately.

She picked up, already laughing. "You called?"

"You interrupted an official meeting for pineapple?"

"It's important."

"It absolutely is not."

"It absolutely is."

He rubbed his forehead. "I'm hanging up."

"So yes or no?"

"No."

"Correct answer." She laughed. "So, you called just to agree with me?"

"I called because if I'd texted, you'd probably start another debate."

"I would."

"I know."

A small silence settled between them. Neither of them disconnected. Neither of them noticed how long it stretched. Then Naina said, softly, "I like talking to you."

Ved smiled without realizing it. "I was just thinking the same thing."

Days slowly turned into weeks. Good mornings became a habit. Good nights became expected. Random pictures, bad jokes, voice notes when typing felt like too much effort, small arguments over food, memes that made no sense to anyone but the two of them. And one day, without either of them ever planning for it, Ved's name became the very first notification Naina looked for every morning and Naina's laughter became the favourite sound in Ved's day.

Because love doesn't always

begin with *I love you*. Sometimes it begins with *Reached home?* and before you even realize what's happening, you're smiling at your phone for absolutely no reason at all.

One afternoon, Naina and Ira walked out of college after submitting yet another assignment, both of them thoroughly exhausted. Ira dropped her bag dramatically onto the nearest bench and groaned. "If one more professor tells me this assignment will 'hardly take an hour,' I'm filing a complaint."

Naina laughed, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

"You've been saying that since last semester."

"And one day I'll actually do it."

"You won't."

"I won't," Ira admitted with a sigh, before brightening instantly. "Coffee?"

"You ask like there's ever another answer."

Within minutes they were seated at their usual corner table. Naina stirred her cold coffee absentmindedly, scrolling through her phone, and without much thought, opened Ved's chat.

Coffee?

She hit send and immediately regretted it. *He's probably working. Why would I text him during office hours?*

Before she could even lock the screen, it buzzed.

Ten minutes.

She frowned. *You're in the office.*

Still ten minutes.

She couldn't stop the smile that followed. Ira noticed instantly. "There it is again."

"What?" Naina asked, all false innocence.

"That smile."

"What smile?"

"The one that magically appears every time a certain Income Tax Officer replies."

Naina rolled her eyes, fighting the blush rising in her cheeks.

"You're impossible."

"I'm observant."

"No, you're unemployed."

"I have a degree to finish."

"Then focus on that."

"I am focusing," Ira grinned, "on your face."

Before Naina could think of a comeback, the café door swung open. Almost on instinct, she looked up. Ved walked in wearing a neatly ironed light blue shirt, his office ID still hanging around his neck, sleeves folded up to his elbows exactly like someone who had abandoned his desk mid-task without stopping to think twice. His eyes scanned the café once before landing on their table, and the moment he saw her, an unconscious smile crossed his face. He hadn't planned it. It simply happened.

He shook his head as he walked over. "You know, I Actually, left an important file open on my desk for this coffee." "Seriously?" Naina looked surprised.

"I remembered halfway here."

"And you still came?"

He pulled out the chair opposite her and sat down. "Well turning back would've wasted more time."

Ira folded her arms. "Government officers have become very irresponsible these days."

"Please don't report me," Ved said, with complete seriousness.

"I might."

"I'll bring fries next time."

She pretended to consider it. "Bribery accepted."

All three of them burst out laughing. When the waiter arrived, he recognized Ved immediately. "The usual, sir?"

"Yes." Then, before the waiter could turn to Naina, Ved added casually, "And one cold coffee, no whipped cream." Naina blinked at him. "I didn't even order yet."

He froze for half a second, scratching the back of his neck awkwardly. "You... always order that."

For the first time since they'd met, she looked at him a little differently. "You remembered?"

Realizing what he'd just given away, he backpedalled. "I just... noticed."

A soft silence settled over the table. Not uncomfortable. Just warm. Naina lowered her eyes, unable to fully hide her smile. "Thank you," she said quietly.

He wasn't entirely sure what she was thanking him for. But somehow, being someone who noticed felt nice in a way he hadn't expected.

The days grew lighter after that not because life had suddenly turned beautiful, but because Naina had slowly learned how to carry her sadness without letting it stop her mid-step. She met Ved almost every evening now. Sometimes at the café. Sometimes just outside college. Sometimes they walked for fifteen minutes before heading home, sometimes they talked for hours, and sometimes they barely spoke at all and strangely, those quiet stretches never once felt awkward. Ved had become easy. Like someone she didn't have to perform for.

One evening they were walking near India Gate after grabbing ice cream from a roadside cart, Ira a few steps ahead on a call with her mother, leaving the two of them trailing behind.

"So," Ved said, glancing at her. "What's your dream?" "Psychologist," she said, smiling.

"I knew you'd say that."

"You?"

He shrugged. "I just want peace."

She laughed softly. "That's a very formal answer."

"It's a very tired officer's answer."

She laughed again, and Ved quietly decided he could spend an entire lifetime collecting moments exactly like this one.

As they crossed the road, a couple walked past them, the boy gently adjusting the girl's dupatta before they continued on,

such a small, ordinary gesture that most people wouldn't even register it. Naina did. And suddenly, without warning, she remembered. Aarav used to do that. He used to walk on the traffic side of the road without being asked. He used to steal fries off her plate. He used to complain that she drank her coffee too fast.

The smile slipped off her face almost instantly.

Ved noticed. He always noticed. "Are you okay?"

She looked back at him and forced a smile. "Yeah." But this time, even she knew it wasn't convincing. The rest of the walk grew quieter. Ved didn't ask again not because he wasn't curious, but because he had already understood something important. Some silences don't need questions. They need space.

That night, Naina sat alone on the balcony with a cup of coffee that had long since gone cold. Her phone buzzed.

Ved: Reached home?

She stared at the message, her fingers hovering over the keyboard. Instead of replying, she opened her gallery instead of old pictures, old videos, trips, birthdays, conversations that had once felt permanent. She wasn't smiling. She wasn't crying either. She was simply remembering.

Sometimes healing isn't about missing a person. It's about grieving the future you once imagined with them.

She closed the gallery without deleting a single thing not because she wanted any of it back, but because she wasn't ready yet to erase a chapter that had once been her entire story.

Only then did she reply.

Yes. Reached.

Ved read it, and something about it felt different. She usually added a joke, an emoji, something sarcastic. Tonight, just two

words. He looked at the screen for a long moment before typing, *long day?*

The dots appeared. Disappeared. Appeared again. *Just one of those days.*

He read it twice. He wanted to ask what happened. He wanted to tell her she could tell him anything. He wanted, more than anything, to make her laugh. Instead, he simply typed:

I'm here if you ever need someone to listen. No pressure. No questions. Just a place to come back to.

Naina looked at that message for a long time. A small smile finally found its way onto her face not because the sadness had disappeared, but because for the first time in longer than she could remember, someone wasn't trying to fix it.

He was simply sitting beside it.

Sometimes people don't tell you their story. Sometimes they only accidentally leave pieces of it behind.

The evening had begun like any other. Naina, Ira, and Ved met at the café after college, but it was unusually crowded, so they took their coffees and walked toward the nearby park instead. Delhi had finally begun cooling after weeks of unbearable heat, and the breeze made even an ordinary evening feel a little lighter than it should have.

Ira walked a few steps ahead, on the phone with her mother, while Ved and Naina followed slowly behind, coffee cups in hand. For a while neither of them said much. The silence wasn't awkward anymore; it had become familiar, the kind that doesn't demand conversation, the kind that only exists between two people who are quietly starting to enjoy each other's company.

Ved broke it first. "So, what made you choose psychology?"

"I like listening to people," she said, smiling faintly.

He looked at her. "And who listens to you?"

The question caught her off guard. She looked ahead instead of answering, and after a few moments laughed softly. "I don't know."

Ved noticed the laugh didn't quite reach her eyes. He didn't push. Instead, he took a sip of his coffee and changed the subject, telling her about a man in his office who somehow managed to lose official files every single week without fail.

Naina laughed so hard she nearly choked on her coffee.

"You work with interesting people."

"I work with disasters."

"I'm starting to believe that."

"And yet," he said with a grin, "they still think I'm the serious one."

"You are."

"I smile."

"You smile at me."

He looked at her for a second before answering. "That's because you give me reasons to."

Naina looked away immediately not because she disliked the compliment, but because she wasn't used to hearing gentle things said to her anymore.

They passed a small roadside stall selling keychains, bright colours strung from thin metal hooks, tiny words carved into wood on each one. One of them read: *Forever*.

Naina stopped walking. Only for a second. But Ved noticed. She stared at the word quietly before looking away, and it carried her instantly back to another evening, another promise, another person. *Forever isn't a promise, it's a choice*, Aarav had told her once, buying matching keychains during college. She had believed him completely. She remembered keeping that keychain for years. She didn't know where it was now maybe in some old drawer, maybe hidden away with

everything else she wasn't ready to throw out. Maybe exactly where that relationship belonged. In the past.

But memories don't ask permission before they return.

They simply arrive.

"You okay?" Ved's voice gently pulled her back.

She blinked. "Hm?"

"You disappeared for a minute."

She forced a small smile. "Just remembered something."

"Good memory?"

She thought about it honestly before answering. "It used to be."

He didn't ask anything further. Some answers deserve respect more than curiosity.

A few minutes later they reached India Gate, where families sat scattered across the grass, children chased glowing balloons through the dark, and the smell of roasted corn drifted through the evening air. Ira immediately pointed toward the golgappa stall. "I'm hungry."

"Weren't you hungry twenty minutes ago too?" Naina asked.

"I've accepted that food is my personality."

Ved laughed. "I believe that."

They stood at the stall arguing over who could handle the spiciest golgappa, and Naina won obviously though halfway through she started coughing violently, the pani far spicier than she'd bargained for. Ved handed her his water bottle before she even had the chance to ask. She looked at him, surprised. "You carry water everywhere?"

"I work outside a lot."

She took it gratefully. "Thank you."

"Anytime."

The word left him naturally, without thought, without any particular weight behind it. But Naina heard it differently.

Anytime. Someone else had said that to her once, too. Her smile faded for the briefest moment, there and gone.

Ved saw it. Again. That same invisible sadness, drifting in and out like a passing cloud, always unexpected, always leaving before he could fully understand where it came from.

On the drive back, after dropping both girls home, he sat alone in his parked car for a few extra minutes, engine idling, streetlights reflecting faintly off the windshield. He wasn't trying to solve her. He wasn't trying to rescue her from whatever it was she carried. He simply found himself wondering, quietly, in the stillness of his own car

Who had taught a girl who laughed this beautifully to go so quiet in between?

Falling in love rarely happens in a single moment. It happens in the small, unremarkable ones: a saved contact, a remembered coffee order, a bottle of water handed over before it's even asked for. And somewhere in between all those ordinary gestures, without either of them noticing the exact second it happened, two strangers had quietly become each other's favourite habit.





Chapter 5

Seven Unanswered Mornings



There are days that change your life. And then there are days that look completely ordinary until years later, they quietly become your favourite memory.

Saturday mornings were usually lazy for Naina and Ira. No lectures, no assignments due, and for once, no professor sending reminders about deadlines. After nearly an hour of deciding what to do with the day, Ira suddenly remembered she had promised her cousin she'd help with some shopping.

"You two go," she said, stuffing random things into her bag. "I'll join later."

Naina frowned. "You literally made the plan."

"I know."

"And now you're cancelling."

"I'm postponing."

"That's called cancelling."

Ira laughed, hugged her quickly, and was almost out the door before Naina could object further. Just before leaving, she turned back with the most suspicious smile she could manage.

"Oh, and if a certain Income Tax Officer asks where I am, tell him I'm sacrificing myself for your social life."

"Ira!"

The door shut before Naina could grab a cushion to throw at her.

Around noon, Ved's message appeared.

Ved: Coffee?

She smiled without meaning to. *Naina: Ira ditched me.*

His reply came almost instantly. *Then I'll compensate.*

She stared at the screen for a second before typing back.

Deal.

The café was quieter than usual that afternoon. Ved had already arrived by the time she walked in, and he stood up almost instinctively.

"You came early."

"You came five minutes late," she pointed out, surprised.

"You counted?"

He smiled, a little awkward. "I reached early."

"Liar."

"I am an officer."

"Exactly."

He laughed. "You don't trust government officers?"

"I trust coffee more."

"That's offensive."

"It was supposed to be."

After coffee, they had no real plan, so they simply started walking from one street to the next, stopping wherever something caught their attention. A roadside bookstore. An old music shop tucked between two bigger stores. A man

selling handmade bookmarks laid out on a cloth on the pavement. Ved picked one up and read the quote printed on it aloud: "*Some stories find you.*" He looked at Naina. "I think this one's yours."

She smiled. "I haven't even written my story yet."

"No." He looked at the bookmark again, thoughtful. "I think you're living it."

For some reason, that sentence stayed with her far longer than it should have.

Later, they stopped at a roadside momo stall. The owner glanced up. "Spicy?"

Before Naina could answer, Ved said confidently, "Extra spicy."

She looked at him. "You remembered?"

"You always choose extra spicy."

"And cry afterwards."

"I don't cry."

"You absolutely do."

"My eyes water."

"Same thing."

"It is not."

They argued like children over something that didn't matter at all, until the stall owner looked between the two of them and smiled to himself. "You two fight like an old married couple." Silence. Both of them froze at the same moment.

Naina immediately looked away. Ved coughed awkwardly, suddenly very interested in the plate of momos in front of him. The stall owner, realizing what he'd just said, burst out laughing. "My mistake."

Ved paid quickly. "We should leave."

The moment they'd walked far enough away, Naina started laughing.

"You're laughing at me," Ved said.

"I'm laughing at your face."

"I've handled tax raids better than that."

"I could tell."

As evening approached, they reached India Gate, where children ran shrieking after bubbles drifting through the air. A little girl, no older than six, walked up to Ved holding a basket of flowers. "Bhaiya..."

Ved smiled politely. "No, thank you."

The girl looked at Naina, then back at him. "Didi ko de do."

Naina's cheeks turned instantly pink. "It's okay..."

But the girl refused to budge. "Please."

Ved glanced at the basket, then at Naina, and without saying a word, bought a single sunflower. Not a red rose.

Nothing dramatic. Just one sunflower. He held it out to her.

"For surviving psychology."

She looked at the flower, then at him. "That's the reason?"

"It's the safest one I could think of."

She laughed. "You are unbelievable."

"I've been told."

She accepted it carefully not because it was a flower, but because nobody had ever given her a sunflower before.

Walking back toward the parking area, Naina looked down at it in her hands, and a memory surfaced unbidden. Aarav had once given her roses big bouquets, expensive gifts, grand gestures meant to be photographed and remembered. She looked at the simple sunflower again. Somehow this one felt lighter. Not because it meant more. Because it expected less. She glanced over at Ved, who was busy arguing with Google Maps about the shortest route back to the car, completely unaware he was being watched. A small smile crossed her face.

For the first time, she wasn't comparing two people at all. She was simply noticing how different they were.

And maybe, she thought, that was the first real step toward moving on.

Naina noticed the change in herself before anyone else did.

It wasn't in Ved. It was in her. She had started looking for his messages the moment she woke up. She smiled before she even opened his texts. She began saving funny reels just to send to him later, and without meaning to, nearly every small moment of her day ended in the same quiet thought *I should tell Ved this.*

That thought frightened her more than she was willing to admit to anyone, including herself. Because she had lived this exact life once before. She knew precisely how beautiful it felt in the beginning. She also knew, with painful clarity, how it ended.

That night, scrolling through her gallery, she stumbled across an old photograph of herself smiling beside Aarav. She stared at it for a long time before finally locking her phone.

A whisper escaped her. "I'm doing it again."

The next morning, Ved sent his usual message. *Good morning, psychologist.*

Naina read it. She smiled. And then she set her phone aside without replying — not because she wanted to ignore him, but because she wanted to stop herself before it went any further. Ved checked his phone twice before leaving for work. No reply. Strange. She always replied, even if it was just an emoji. He shrugged it off. *She's probably busy.*

By afternoon he sent another. *Survived today's lecture?*

Naina saw the notification. She typed a reply. Deleted it. Typed again. Deleted that too. She locked her phone and set

it face-down, hating herself a little for it but hating the fear sitting in her chest even more.

Three days passed. The conversations grew shorter. Then fewer. Then almost nothing at all.

Whenever Ved called, she'd text back, *Busy*. Whenever he mentioned coffee, she'd reply, *maybe another day*. Whenever he sent a meme, she'd react with a single laughing emoji and nothing else.

Ved couldn't understand it. He reread every old conversation, searching for the exact place he must have said something wrong. Had he crossed a line without realizing it? Had he made her uncomfortable somehow? For the first time in weeks, he stopped smiling at his phone altogether.

Even Karan noticed. "Fight?"

Ved looked up from his desk. "What?"

"You've looked like someone stole your happiness."

He smiled faintly. "We didn't fight."

"so, what happened?"

He glanced at the unread chat still sitting on his screen. "I don't know."

And somehow, not knowing hurt far more than any argument ever could have.

On the other side of the city, Ira finally ran out of patience. She closed Naina's laptop mid-sentence.

"What are you doing?"

"Studying."

"No."

"I'm literally holding notes."

"I mean what are you doing with Ved?"

Naina froze. "What about him?"

"You've been avoiding him."

"I'm just busy."

Ira stared at her, unconvinced. "For three days?" Silence.

"Naina."

She looked away, and when she finally spoke, her voice trembled. "I think... I'm getting attached." Ira didn't interrupt, letting her continue. "And that's exactly what scares me." She took a shaky breath. "I laughed like this once before. I trusted someone this much once before. I made someone my habit once before." A tear slipped down her cheek before she could stop it. "And one day... I had to learn how to live without them." She closed her eyes. "I don't know if I can survive that twice."

Ira came and sat beside her without a word. She didn't say *not everyone leaves* that would have sounded too easy, too rehearsed, the kind of thing people say without understanding what it costs to believe it. She simply took Naina's hand.

"You know what I think?" Naina looked at her. "I think you're punishing Ved for something Aarav did."

The room went completely silent. Because somewhere deep inside, Naina already knew it was true.

A week passed. Seven days. Seven good mornings that went unanswered. Seven evenings without coffee. Seven nights where conversations that used to stretch for hours had shrunk down to a single word, or nothing at all.

At first Ved told himself she was simply busy, college could be exhausting, assignments piled up fast, and everyone deserved their own space without being chased for it. He never wanted to be the kind of person who demanded someone's attention. But as the days kept adding up, his patience slowly turned into questions. Had he said something wrong? Had he unknowingly crossed some line? Or had she simply realized she didn't want him in her life at all? He replayed every

conversation in his head, over and over, searching for a mistake that never seemed to be there.

Naina wasn't finding any of this easy either. Every time her phone lit up with his name, her heart reacted before her mind could catch up and stop it. She'd smile instinctively, and then remind herself, all over again, exactly why she'd decided to stay away.

She wasn't protecting herself from Ved. She was protecting herself from hope. She had once let someone become the entire centre of her world, and when he left, it had taken her months just to gather the broken pieces back together. She had promised herself, quietly and fiercely, that she would never hand anyone that kind of power over her again.

Ignoring him felt cruel. Getting attached felt terrifying. So, she chose the option that hurt less. At least, that's what she kept telling herself.

That Friday evening, heavy rain took over the city without warning. Ved sat inside his parked car for almost ten minutes, staring at her name on his phone screen.

He called. The ringtone echoed uselessly in the silence of the car. No answer. He tried again this time the call disconnected after only a few rings.

He rested his forehead against the steering wheel and closed his eyes for a long moment. Then, almost without deciding to, he started the engine.

Twenty minutes later his car pulled up outside Naina's apartment building. Rain poured down relentlessly, blurring the windshield into a wash of grey and streetlight. The security guard stood huddled under a small tin roof nearby, watching the empty road and trying, mostly unsuccessfully, to stay dry. Ved didn't get out. He wasn't there to create a scene, wasn't there to demand anything from anyone. He only wanted to

know she was okay. Maybe she was sick. Maybe she really was just busy, exactly like he kept telling himself. Maybe there was still some simple, forgivable reason behind all of it.

He looked up toward the building, hoping for even a glimpse of her silhouette against a lit window. Nothing. He picked up his phone one last time.

Calling... Naina.

The phone rang.

Inside her room, the screen lit up on the bedside table. *Ved's name*. Naina looked at it for what felt like an eternity. Her fingers twitched toward it. Every part of her wanted to answer, wanted to hear his voice, wanted to tell him that none of this was his fault, that it had never once been about him. But fear spoke louder than her heart that night.

She let it ring until the screen finally went dark on its own.

A tear slipped down her cheek. "I'm sorry," she whispered into the empty room. "I just... can't."

Outside, Ved lowered the phone slowly. For a long time, he didn't move at all, rain tapping softly against the roof of the car, filling a silence he no longer had any idea how to break. He looked up at her building one last time. A faint light was still glowing in one of the windows. He smiled, sad and small. "You're okay," he murmured to himself. "That's enough."

He started the car. As he pulled away from the curb, he made himself a quiet promise not out of anger, and not out of wounded pride, but out of something closer to respect.

If she needs distance, I'll give her all the distance she asks for. I won't call again.

The rain kept falling as his car disappeared into the night, taillights fading into the wet dark.

Neither of them knew it yet. But sometimes the loudest heartbreak isn't an argument at all.

It's two people standing on opposite sides of the very same silence, each one quietly wishing the other would be the first to speak.

"The hardest battles aren't fought between two people. They fight between your heart, asking you to trust again... and your memories, begging you not to."





Chapter 6

The Absence She Chose



The next morning felt unusually quiet.

Ved woke up and looked at his phone out of pure habit, the way he had every morning for weeks now. But for the first time, he didn't open Naina's chat. There was nothing left to type that he hadn't already tried saying, no version of an apology or an explanation he hadn't already turned over in his head a hundred times the night before. He got ready for work in complete silence, skipped breakfast after only a few bites, picked up his car keys, and left without a word to anyone.

By the time he reached the office, everyone sensed something was different. He didn't greet anyone at the door the way he usually did. He didn't smile at the security guard, didn't stop for his usual two minutes of small talk with the receptionist. He walked straight into his cabin, placed a stack of files down on the desk with more force than necessary, and buried

himself in work as if it were the only thing left that made any sense.

Karan knocked lightly before stepping inside. "Morning, sir."

Ved didn't even look up. "Hm."

Karan lingered a moment, clearly thrown by the response.

"Everything okay?"

"I'm working." The answer came out short. Too short, even for a man known for being economical with his words.

Within an hour, the entire office had noticed. The officer who usually listened with more patience than anyone else in the building was suddenly losing his temper over the smallest mistakes. A junior officer walked in with an incomplete file, and Ved barely glanced at it before snapping it shut.

"I asked for the final report."

"Sir... I thought"

"I didn't ask what you thought."

The room went silent. The young officer quietly picked the file back up and walked out without another word, careful not to meet anyone's eyes on the way. Karan watched the whole exchange from just outside the cabin door, a small frown settling on his face. He had never seen Ved like this. Not once, in all the years he'd worked under him.

On the other side of the city, Naina's day had started with an unusual habit of its own.

The moment she woke up, before she'd even fully opened her eyes, she reached for her phone.

No notification.

She smiled to herself anyway, the way people do when they're trying to talk themselves out of disappointment. "He's probably sleeping." She got ready for college. Checked again. Nothing. During her first lecture, her phone vibrated once

against the desk, and she looked at it immediately, her whole body tensing for half a second — a message from the class group. Not him. She locked the screen again, a little too quickly.

By lunchtime she had checked her phone so many times that even Ira noticed.

"Are you waiting for someone?"

Naina looked away, feigning casualness she didn't feel. "No."

"You've unlocked your phone six times in ten minutes." "I was checking the time."

Ira glanced pointedly at the large clock mounted on the cafeteria wall, directly in Naina's line of sight. "It's right there." Naina didn't answer. For the first time in what felt like a very long week, she understood, fully and painfully, what waiting actually felt like. Every day before this, she had let his messages sit unanswered, telling herself they would always be there tomorrow, that there was no real cost to the silence, that he would simply keep trying the way he always had.

Today, tomorrow hadn't arrived. And she was only now beginning to understand what that meant.

Classes ended around four in the evening. Students poured out through the college gate in loud, cheerful clusters, laughing, making evening plans, rushing toward buses and cafés. Naina stood near the entrance with Ira, scrolling absentmindedly through a phone that still hadn't given her the one notification she was quietly hoping for.

Then she heard it the familiar, unmistakable sound of a car slowing down nearby.

Almost against her own will, she looked up.

It was Ved.

His car moved slowly through the traffic just outside the college gates, and for one brief, suspended second, their eyes

met through the windshield. The world around them seemed to blur at the edges, the noise of the college gate fading into something distant and unimportant. Her heart skipped hard enough that she felt it in her throat, and she took a small, involuntary step forward before she even realized she'd moved.

For days she had rehearsed exactly what she would say if this moment ever came. *I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. Please don't stop talking to me.*

But before a single word could leave her lips, the traffic ahead of him cleared.

Ved looked forward again. He didn't stop. He didn't wave. He didn't offer even the smallest, saddest excuse for a smile. His car simply moved on, quietly folding back into the evening traffic until it disappeared completely from view.

Naina remained standing exactly where she was, watching the empty road long after the car had gone, long after there was anything left to watch at all. The silence he'd left behind hurt far more than any argument between them ever could have because at least an argument meant he was still trying to reach her. This meant he'd finally stopped.

Ira looked at her friend's face and, in that moment, finally understood everything she hadn't been saying for weeks. "You miss him."

Naina didn't deny it this time. Her eyes stayed fixed on the empty road ahead, unblinking, and when she finally spoke, her voice came out as barely a whisper.

"I thought I was protecting myself." A tear slipped down her cheek before she could stop it, and she didn't bother wiping it away. "I didn't realize I was pushing away the only person who never once asked me to be anyone except myself."

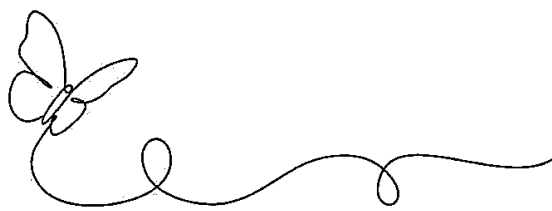
The wind carried the last few drops of rain across the empty road in front of them.

For the first time since Aarav had walked out of her life, Naina wasn't crying because someone had left her behind.

She was crying because, this time, she had been the reason they did.

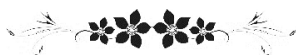
"She feared losing people so much... that she became the one who let them go first."





Chapter 7

The Sunflowers That Never Reached Her



An entire month passed. Thirty days of silence, unbroken by either of them. Neither Ved nor Naina crossed the distance they had created between themselves he never texted, and she never gathered the courage to. From the outside, it looked exactly like two strangers who had simply moved on with their lives, drifted apart the way people sometimes do. But reality was cruel than that, quieter and heavier than anything an outsider could have guessed.

Ved still drove past her college almost every evening, even when there was no real reason to take that route home. Sometimes he caught a glimpse of her walking with Ira, laughing at something he'd never known the punchline to, adjusting the strap of her bag, buying coffee from the same café they used to sit in together. He never stopped the car. He never rolled down the window. He simply made sure she looked okay, and then he drove away, carrying that one small

glimpse with him for the rest of the night. Sometimes he asked Ira, almost too casually, "How's she doing?" And Ira always gave him the same careful answer. "She's trying." Ved would only nod. "That's enough." He never once asked if she missed him. Some questions, he'd decided, were too painful to hear the answer to better to live with the not-knowing than to have it confirmed.

Naina, on the other hand, wasn't trying anymore. She was pretending. She smiled because everyone around her expected her to. She laughed at the right moments because silence, real silence, invited too many memories she wasn't ready to sit with. But every morning, the very first thing she reached for was still her phone, and every night, the last thing she looked at before sleep was the same empty chat, unchanged, unanswered, exactly as she'd left it. She had created this silence herself. Now she was the one drowning in it.

One afternoon, after staring at his name in her contacts for almost twenty minutes without moving, she finally typed something.

Coffee?

She erased it.

Typed again.

Can we talk?

Deleted that too, her thumb hovering, her heart hammering absurdly hard for four simple words. Finally, she took a deep breath, steadied her hand, and typed one last time.

Coffee. I want to talk.

She pressed send before the fear could catch up and stop her. The reply came five minutes later, five minutes that felt like an hour.

6 PM. Same café.

Nothing else. No smiley. No joke. No familiar "See you." Just a time, and a place, stripped of everything that used to make his messages feel like his.

The entire day stretched out unbearably long. Naina reached the café ten minutes early, her heart refusing to slow down since the moment she'd hit send that afternoon. She had rehearsed everything in her head a dozen times over *I'm sorry. I was scared. You never did anything wrong. Please don't let one mistake erase everything.* She wasn't planning to ask him to love her again. She was only going to ask him to stay.

At exactly six, she stepped out of the café to look toward the road, scanning every car that slowed near the entrance.

That's when she heard a familiar voice behind her.

"Naina..."

Her entire body went still.

She turned slowly, already half-knowing, already dreading it. Aarav. Standing only a few steps away, smiling with something that looked disturbingly like relief. "I've been looking for you." Before she could react in any way at all, he closed the distance and wrapped his arms around her. It happened so fast, so completely without warning, that for one full second, she simply stood there, frozen not because some part of her wanted the embrace, but because shock had stolen every reaction her body might otherwise have had.

Across the road, at that exact moment, Ved had just stepped out of his car, a small bouquet of sunflowers held carefully in one hand. He had stood in front of the flower shop for nearly fifteen minutes before choosing them. *No roses*, he'd thought to himself, turning the idea over. *She likes simple things.* He'd smiled at that, small and private, pleased with himself for remembering. Then he looked up toward the café. And saw them.

Aarav. Holding Naina. Naina standing inside his arms. The bouquet slipped slightly in Ved's grip. For a moment the entire street simply disappeared, the traffic, the noise, the people moving around him everything blurred at the edges except the one scene directly in front of him. He didn't hear whatever Aarav was saying. He didn't see the fear written across Naina's face. He only saw what heartbreak always shows a person first: the worst possible version of the truth, offered up before any other explanation gets the chance to arrive.

"Naina," Aarav was saying, his voice low, urgent. "I made the biggest mistake of my life."

That sentence finally broke through her shock. She shoved him away with both hands, hard.

"Don't." Her voice shook, but there was iron underneath it.

"You don't get to touch me anymore."

Aarav stared at her, wounded. "I came back because I" "No." Tears filled her eyes, fast and furious. "You left. You chose someone else. You don't get to come back just because life didn't go the way you wanted it to." A few people nearby had started to look. She didn't care, not even slightly. "You are a stranger to me now."

She turned around immediately, already searching. The first person she looked for wasn't a friend wasn't a witness to the scene it was Ved.

Her eyes found him across the road, standing beside his car, sunflowers still in his hand, his eyes already brimming with tears he hadn't let fall yet. For one endless second neither of them moved at all.

Then Naina shook her head. "No," she whispered, as if he could somehow hear her from that distance. "It's not what you think."

She grabbed her phone and tried calling him. The call disconnected before it could even ring properly on his end.

"Ved!"

She started running across the road, dodging a car that honked sharply as it swerved. And as if the sky had been waiting for exactly this moment, rain began falling soft at first, then all at once, the way it always seemed to with them.

"Ved!"

He finally turned to face her fully as she reached him, stopping only a few steps away, breathless, tears already mixing indistinguishably with the rain on her face.

"Please," she gasped. "Listen to me."

Ved looked down at the bouquet still in his hand. Then back up at her. When he spoke, his voice was painfully, unbearably calm.

"I bought these because" He smiled, though it barely reached his eyes, tears slipping freely down his face now. "I remembered you once said sunflowers make bad days feel lighter."

Naina cried harder. "It wasn't"

"I know." He cut her off gently. She looked at him with something like hope flickering through the devastation on her face. "I know you didn't hug him," he continued. "I saw him hug you." A long silence stretched between them, filled only by the sound of the rain. "And somehow," he added, swallowing hard against the lump rising in his throat, "that still hurts."

He looked down at the flowers one final time, turning the stems slightly in his hand, and then, slowly, deliberately, he placed the bouquet down on the wet pavement between them.

"I spent days convincing myself not to come back." A tear rolled down his cheek, and he let it. "Today I finally did." He

looked at her, and the smile he offered carried far more pain in it than anger ever could. "But I think... I'm late." Without another word, he turned to leave.

"Ved!" She reached desperately for his hand.

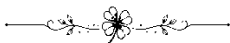
He moved it away gently. Not harshly. Not in anger. Just carefully, like someone setting something fragile back down instead of dropping it.

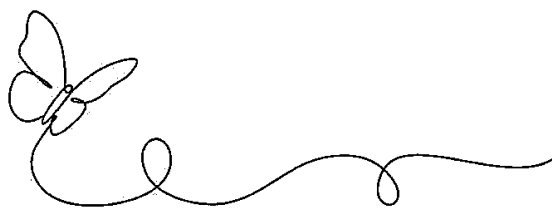
"As much as I wanted to become your safe place," he said, his voice nearly breaking entirely on the words, "I can't keep standing outside a heart that's still fighting yesterday." He got into his car. The engine started.

Naina stood in the middle of the rain, unable to move, unable to speak, watching the taillights pull away into the blur of the wet street. The bouquet of sunflowers lay forgotten on the road between them, petals already beginning to darken under the rain.

The flowers she had waited an entire month to receive had never actually reached her hands.

"Sometimes love doesn't end because two people stop loving each other. It ends because one moment arrives too early... and another arrives too late."





Chapter 8

Even After Everything



The rain refused to stop.

It had been falling since evening, first as a light drizzle that people barely noticed, and then, somewhere around the time Ved had walked away from that café, it had turned into something heavier, something that soaked through jackets and umbrellas alike, as if the sky itself had decided that tonight nobody deserved to stay dry. Cars came and went, their headlights smearing across the wet road until the whole street looked like a blur of yellow and gold, streetlights bleeding into puddles, horns fading in and out somewhere behind the curtain of water.

And in the middle of all of it, Naina stood exactly where Ved had left her.

She hadn't moved. Not because her legs wouldn't carry her, they would have, easily but because some part of her refused to accept that moving meant it was over. The bouquet of

sunflowers lay a few feet away on the wet pavement, petals darkening, stems bent from where they'd fallen out of his hand. She looked at them for a long time. She wanted to pick them up. Her fingers even twitched once, as if her body had decided before her mind had. But she couldn't do it. Picking them up would mean admitting they had been left behind. And leaving them would mean the same thing. There was no version of this where the flowers didn't mean what they meant.

For the first time in months, she really understood what it felt like to watch someone walk away. Not because they wanted to. Because she had given them a reason to.

She thought about Aarav, briefly, the way you think about an old bruise when you press on it by accident. That had been different. That had been him leaving because he wanted to, because something better had apparently existed somewhere else. This was different in a way that hurt more, not less because Ved hadn't wanted to walk away. She had watched his face in the two seconds before he turned. She had seen exactly how much it cost him. And she had let him do it anyway, because some old, scared part of her had decided a long time ago that if she was the one who caused the ending, at least she wouldn't be the one left standing there wondering why.

Except here she was. Standing there anyway.

Minutes turned into an hour. Then another. The rain grew colder, the kind of cold that settles into your bones rather than just your skin. Her clothes clung to her, heavy and useless against the wind. Her hands trembled, not just from the temperature. Somewhere in the distance a dog barked twice and went quiet. A couple ran past her under one shared umbrella, laughing about something, completely unaware that six feet away a girl was quietly falling apart in the rain.

She didn't call anyone. She didn't want to be found yet. It almost felt as if leaving that place would mean accepting that everything had ended, and some illogical, aching part of her believed that as long as she stood exactly where he'd left her, nothing was truly final. As if the universe owed her that much one more chance, held open by nothing but stubbornness and cold rain.

Across the city, Ved had somehow reached home.

He didn't remember the drive. Later, when he tried to reconstruct it in his head, there would be nothing there, no memory of traffic lights, no memory of turns, nothing except the silence, thick and suffocating, that had filled the car the entire way. His wet shirt was still on, sticking uncomfortably to his back. The bouquet wrapper, the one he'd bought for her, the one he never got to give her, still lay crumpled on the passenger seat, catching the streetlight every time a car passed outside.

He sat on the edge of his bed for a long time without doing anything. Just staring at the floor, elbows on his knees, hands hanging loose between them. His phone lay beside him, face down, the way he'd thrown it there without thinking. For the first time in longer than he could remember, he wished it wouldn't ring. He didn't want to talk to anyone. He didn't want to explain what had happened, mostly because he didn't fully understand it himself. All he knew was that he had stood in a café with a bouquet of sunflowers and an apology rehearsed in his head, and she hadn't come.

It rang.

The screen lit up against the dark of the room.

Ira Calling...

He looked at it for three full rings before closing his eyes and picking it up anyway, because some habits worrying about the

people he loved, even when he was the one hurting didn't switch off just because his heart was in pieces.

"Hello." His voice came out flat. Tired. Almost empty, like something had been scraped out of it.

Ira, on the other end, sounded unusually cheerful, completely unaware of the storm on his side of the phone. "So, Mr. Officer... how's the date going?"

Ved frowned, genuinely confused for half a second.

"What date?"

"The coffee date. With Naina."

A long silence stretched between them, long enough that Ira pulled the phone away from her ear once to check the call hadn't dropped.

"Ira," Ved said finally, quietly. "There was no date."

She laughed, assuming it was a joke. "What do you mean?"

"She never came."

The laughter disappeared instantly, cut off mid-breath. "What?"

Ved looked down at his own hands, still faintly trembling from the cold, or from something else entirely. "I waited. For over an hour. She never showed up. So, I left."

There was another pause on the line, this one heavier, and when Ira spoke again her voice had changed completely, the cheer replaced by something sharp and frightened. "Wait... if she wasn't with you... then where is she?"

Ved's heartbeat seemed to physically stop for a second, a strange cold drop somewhere behind his ribs. "What do you mean?"

"She hasn't come home." The words came out fast now, tumbling over each other. "I thought she was with you obviously she was with you, where else would she be but I've

been calling her for the last hour and her phone just keeps ringing. She's not picking up. Ved, she's not picking up."

He was on his feet before he'd consciously decided to stand, the chair behind him scraping backward and toppling with a clatter he barely registered. His voice, calm until that exact moment, rose sharply.

"Ye ladki bhi na"

He was already moving, grabbing his car keys off the dresser without even glancing at the wet clothes still sticking to him. "Ira. Listen to me. Stay at the apartment. Don't go anywhere. I'm going to find her." A beat. "And when I do, I swear I'm going to kill her myself, save the rain and the trouble."

He hung up before Ira could say anything else, because there wasn't time for anything else. There was only the rain, the dark, and a city that suddenly felt far too big to search alone. The city looked different in heavy rain. It always did as if the water erased the version everyone was used to and replaced it with something colder, quieter, more indifferent. Visibility was poor. Roads were nearly empty except for the occasional taxi crawling past, wipers working overtime. Ved drove through every place he could think of, cycling through a mental list assembled in a panic that felt more like instinct than memory.

The café first, obviously, though he already knew she wouldn't still be there. Then the college road, empty except for a stray dog sheltering under an awning. Then the metro station, where he got out despite the rain and walked the length of the platform twice, ignoring the strange looks from the two people waiting for a late train. Then India Gate, its lawns deserted, water pooling on the pathways where people usually sat in the evenings. Then the bookstore, the one they'd wandered into

on their second date, where she'd spent twenty minutes debating between two novels and ended up buying both.

Every place carried a memory. Every place was empty.

An hour passed. Nothing.

He tightened his grip on the steering wheel until his knuckles went pale, the plastic creaking faintly under the pressure. He caught his own reflection once in the rearview mirror at a red light, eyes red-rimmed, jaw clenched so tight it had started to ache and looked away immediately, unable to stand the sight of himself.

"Naina," he whispered under his breath, more prayer than name at this point. "Please be okay."

He thought, briefly and horribly, of every worst-case scenario a person's mind manufactures in moments like this. An accident. Someone taking advantage of a girl standing alone in the rain at night. A fall, a faint, a hospital somewhere he hadn't thought to check. He forced the thoughts down, one by one, because entertaining them for even a second longer felt like it might actually make them true.

As he drove past the café one last time, on what he'd already decided would be his final loop before he started calling hospitals, something caught his eye.

A lone figure.

Standing under the rain, unmoving, in almost exactly the spot he'd left her hours ago.

Not walking. Not sheltering under the café awning ten feet away, which would have been the obvious thing to do. Not crying, at least not in any way he could see from this distance. Just standing. Still. Like a photograph someone had left out in the wrong weather.

His heart dropped somewhere into his stomach.

He slammed the brakes so hard the tires screeched against the wet asphalt, the car fishtailing slightly before coming to a stop at an angle that would have earned him a ticket on any other night. Before it had even fully stopped, he was already out of the door, rain soaking through his clothes again within seconds, as if the sky had been waiting for him to step back into it. He ran.

"Naina!"

She didn't react. Didn't turn. Didn't even flinch at the sound of her own name.

He ran closer, his shoes slapping against wet pavement, his breath tearing out of him in ragged bursts that had less to do with the running and more to do with the fear clawing up his throat.

"Naina!"

Slowly, agonizingly slowly, she lifted her head.

Her lips had turned pale from the cold, a bluish tint at the edges that made something in his chest twist violently. Her hands were shaking uncontrollably, not the small tremor of someone merely cold, but the deep, uncontrollable shudder of a body that had been fighting the elements for far too long. Her eyes were swollen from hours of crying, red-rimmed and hollow, and for a moment one horrifying, endless moment she looked at him as if she didn't fully recognize the sound of her own name, as if some part of her had simply stopped expecting anyone to come looking.

For one terrifying second, Ved forgot every argument. Every misunderstanding. Every ounce of heartbreak from the last several weeks, every accusation either of them had thrown at the other. All of it evaporated. All he saw, standing in front of him in the rain, was the girl he loved broken, shivering, and somehow still there, still real, still breathing.

He stopped only inches away from her, his chest rising and falling heavily as he fought to catch a breath that refused to come easily.

"...Naina."

Absolutely. Converting it into flowing prose will make it feel much more like a published novel. Here's the same scene rewritten in long, immersive paragraphs while keeping the metaphors and emotional depth.

"...Naina."

His voice barely rose above the rain, yet it reached her as though the storm itself had stepped aside to let her hear it. Some names have a way of finding the heart even when the whole world is drowning in noise. She slowly lifted her head, and for one suspended moment, the rain seemed to forget how to fall. There he was soaked to the skin, breathing hard, his hair plastered against his forehead while rainwater traced the sharp line of his jaw. But it was his eyes that held her still. They carried the exhaustion of a man who had spent the last one hour outrunning every terrible possibility his mind could invent, only to find the one ending he had begged the universe for standing before him.

The fragile strength Naina had been forcing into her bones all evening quietly abandoned her. She didn't take a step toward him. She simply surrendered to gravity, collapsing into him like a hillside finally giving way after carrying the unbearable weight of endless rain. Ved caught her before the earth could. Her trembling fingers clutched the fabric of his shirt with the desperation of someone trying to convince herself that this wasn't another cruel dream waiting to disappear with the morning. The sob that escaped her wasn't merely the sound of tears; it was the sound of a heart finally breaking open after spending months pretending it wasn't already broken.

"I'm... sorry..." she whispered, the words dissolving into the rain before they could fully exist.

"I'm so... so sorry..."

Ved closed his eyes. Very slowly, as though afraid that even the smallest hurried movement might shatter her again, one arm found its way around her shoulders while the other gently cradled the back of her head. He held her the way people instinctively shield a flickering candle from the wind not because they know the storm will stop, but because they refuse to let the light disappear. He rested his forehead against her damp hair and finally allowed himself to feel what fear had denied him for the last three hours.

The warmth gathering behind his eyes escaped without permission. By the time the tears reached his face, the rain had already claimed them. The sky wept loudly. He did it quietly.

His voice came out rough, almost unfamiliar to his own ears.

"Do you have any idea what you just did to me?"

She couldn't answer. Not because she didn't want to, but because she had never seen fear wear someone's face so honestly. Every breath he took trembled against her hair. Every beat of his heart felt like relief struggling to believe it had arrived.

"I kept thinking..." His words faltered as though language itself had become too small for what he was trying to carry. "...if I reached one minute too late..." The sentence collapsed before it could reach its end. Some fears refuse to become words because saying them aloud would make them too real. He swallowed hard, a helpless smile breaking across his face only to disappear beneath the weight of everything he had imagined. "I didn't know whether I was more terrified of

finding you with someone else... or of never finding you at all."

His arms tightened around her almost without thought, not to stop her from leaving, but because his own heart still wasn't convinced, she was truly there. Naina held onto him just as fiercely, her fingers curling into the fabric of his shirt as though the night itself might steal him away if she loosened her grip. She wasn't holding a man anymore. She was holding the first place that had ever felt safe after months of learning how unsafe love could become.

Ved could feel the quiet tremor running through her body. It wasn't the shiver of cold rain. It was the aftershock left behind when a heart survives something it was never built to endure. Without thinking, he rested his cheek lightly against the top of her head. There were no promises, no speeches, no desperate attempts to repair the evening with perfect words. He simply stayed. Sometimes the greatest comfort love can offer is its presence. A silent promise that says, *you don't have to survive this moment alone.*

Around them, the storm continued its restless work. It carried fallen leaves through the empty streets, bent tree branches toward the earth, and washed away footprints as though trying to erase every trace of the night. It tried to carry them away too. It failed.

Because some people never become your shelter by standing above you. They become your shelter by standing beside you, refusing to move even while the whole world is falling apart. And beneath that relentless rain, while the sky mourned above them and two broken hearts quietly found each other again, they discovered a truth neither of them would ever forget.

Sometimes, the person who saves you isn't the one who rescues you from the storm.

It's the one who willingly walks into it...

just to make sure you never have to face it alone.

By the time Ved reached the apartment parking lot, Naina had almost lost consciousness in the passenger seat, her head lolling gently against the window, her breathing shallow and uneven. She had still been holding onto the front of his shirt as he'd half-carried, half-guided her into the car, and even now, drifting in and out, her fingers occasionally twitched toward him, as if some instinctive part of her feared that letting go meant he would disappear too.

He parked hastily, the car crooked across two spots, and didn't bother straightening it. He got out, circled to the passenger side, and opened the door carefully.

"Naina..."

No response. Only slow, uneven breaths, faint enough that he had to lean in close to be sure they were even there.

He slid one arm behind her back and the other beneath her knees, lifting her into his arms in one careful motion. She felt frighteningly light — too light, in a way that made his jaw tighten involuntarily. Her forehead came to rest against his shoulder, and the warmth radiating off her skin sank into him like a warning.

She was burning with fever.

"Oh God." He whispered it mostly to himself, adjusting his grip as he walked quickly toward the lift, ignoring the way water dripped steadily from both of them onto the lobby floor.

"What have you done to yourself?"

And then, quieter, almost too quiet for even himself to hear or *maybe, what have I done to you?*

That thought hurt more than the first one. If he had stayed at the café ten more minutes. If he had called her before leaving instead of assuming the worst. If he had looked into her eyes instead of turning and walking away the moment his pride got the better of him, would she have stood in that rain for two hours? His jaw tightened as the lift doors slid shut around him. He blamed himself more than he blamed her, and he let that blame settle into him like a weight he intended to carry for a while.

The lift doors opened. He walked straight to the apartment door and knocked, three times, hard enough that his knuckles stung.

Within seconds it swung open. Ira's face lit up instinctively, already expecting to see her best friend standing there, safe and probably a little sheepish about worrying everyone.

She froze completely.

"Ved..." Her eyes widened as they landed on Naina, unconscious and pale in his arms. "Oh my God! What happened to her?"

Ved stepped inside without wasting a second, careful with every movement despite the urgency thrumming through him. "She has a high fever. She was standing in the rain. For hours."

Ira's face was drained of colour. "What?"

"I'll explain later." His voice stayed remarkably calm despite the panic churning underneath it, years of training kicking in, the part of him that had learned to sound steady even when nothing about him felt steady at all. "Please. Help her change into dry clothes first. I'll wait outside."

He stepped back out into the hallway and pulled the door shut behind him, and only then, alone in the corridor, did he finally let himself exhale a long, shaking breath that seemed

to empty out everything he'd been holding since the phone call. His shirt was still soaked through, water dripping steadily off his sleeves onto the tile floor beneath him. His hands, when he looked down at them, were still trembling.

He went back down to his car and popped the trunk, where a neatly packed emergency bag sat, a habit from years of unpredictable work hours, of nights that turned into mornings without warning. He pulled out a fresh black T-shirt and a jacket, changed quickly in the building's common washroom on the ground floor, and made his way back upstairs.

Not because anyone had asked him to.

Because leaving simply didn't feel like an option anymore.

When he stepped back inside, Naina was already asleep beneath a blanket, dressed in dry clothes, her hair carefully dried, medicine set neatly on the bedside table. She looked calmer now, though the redness lingering around her eyes still told him exactly how much she'd cried before exhaustion had finally claimed her.

He pulled a chair quietly beside the bed. Not too close. Just close enough.

Ira came in a few minutes later, carrying three mugs of coffee, and handed him one without a word. He accepted it with a quiet nod, both of them settling into a silence broken only by the soft, steady sound of rain still tapping against the window glass.

Finally, Ira spoke. "What happened?"

Ved looked at the sleeping girl for a long moment before answering, his fingers tightening slightly around the warm mug in his hands.

"I'll tell you." A pause. "But first make sure she takes her medicine when she wakes up. Her fever is very high."

Ira studied him for a moment, and noticed something in his expression she had never seen there before, not once in all the time she'd known him. He wasn't angry. He wasn't even frustrated anymore, the way he'd sounded on the phone barely two hours earlier. He looked, more than anything, *scared* the particular kind of scared that only comes from almost losing something you didn't realize you couldn't live without.

She nodded quietly. "I will."

The night grew deeper. One by one, the lights outside the apartment windows began switching off as the city finally settled into sleep. But the lamp beside Naina's bed stayed on, and Ved never left the chair.

Sometimes he checked the clock, watching the minutes crawl by with an impatience he didn't fully understand as if watching time pass faster might somehow make the fever break sooner. Sometimes he simply watched the rain outside, listening to it slow gradually from a downpour to a drizzle to almost nothing at all. But most of the time, he watched her — just her, the slow rise and fall of her breathing, the occasional furrow in her brow that told him she was dreaming about something unpleasant.

Every few minutes he leaned forward and lightly pressed the back of his fingers against her forehead, checking whether the heat had lessened even slightly. Whenever she frowned in her sleep, his own eyebrows drew together in an unconscious mirror. Whenever she shifted restlessly, tangling the blanket, he quietly straightened it back over her shoulders, careful not to wake her.

He didn't realize how many hours had passed like that. He didn't care. For the first time in weeks, she was somewhere he could see her, somewhere within arm's reach, somewhere safe

and somehow, impossibly, that alone was enough to steady something in him that had been off-balance for far too long. Around four in the morning, exhaustion finally caught up with him completely. He rested one elbow against the arm of the chair, leaned his head into his palm, and let his eyes fall shut, still angled toward her even as sleep pulled him under. Soft morning light eventually slipped through the curtains, gentle and gold, replacing the grey that had hung over the city all night. The rain had finally stopped somewhere in the small hours, leaving behind that particular smell of wet earth that always follows a long storm. The room smelled faintly of coffee gone cold and rain-washed air drifting in from a window someone had cracked open.

Ira stepped out of her own room already dressed for college, bag slung over one shoulder, and paused when she saw the scene waiting for her. Ved was still asleep in the chair beside the bed, arms folded loosely across his chest, head tilted at an angle that would definitely leave his neck aching later as if he had fallen asleep in the exact act of making sure she was still breathing.

For a moment Ira simply stood there, something soft crossing her expression. Then she walked over and gently touched his shoulder.

"Ved..."

His eyes opened immediately, alert within seconds in a way that spoke of years of training himself to wake fast, to wake ready. And the first thing he did wasn't look at Ira. It was look at Naina.

Still asleep. Still breathing steadily.

Only then did he relax back into the chair.

Ira smiled. "I didn't want to wake you."

He straightened, rubbing a hand briefly over his stiff neck. "What time is it?"

"Almost eight." She adjusted the strap of her bag. "I have to go to college for today's assignment submission. I'm taking hers too."

Ved nodded silently, his gaze already drifting back toward the bed.

Ira watched him for a second longer before speaking again. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

She hesitated at the door. "If she wakes up... can you stay with her?"

Ved didn't take his eyes off Naina. "I wasn't planning to go anywhere."

Ira smiled softly, something knowing in the expression. "I knew." She picked up her keys, and just before stepping out, added, "Kitchen's there. If you want coffee... make some."

The smallest smile crossed his face. "Thanks."

The door clicked shut behind her. The apartment fell silent once more, holding only the two of them, one sleeping, the other quietly watching over her, as if love sometimes wasn't about grand declarations at all. Sometimes it was simply about choosing, quietly and without being asked, to stay.

Every few minutes his gaze drifted toward Naina almost without his permission.

Her breathing had grown steadier through the night. The fever, when he checked, had dropped not completely, but enough. Only then did he allow himself to breathe a little easier himself. He glanced at the thermometer on the bedside table and murmured, mostly to himself, "Thank God."

For the first time since the previous evening, his heartbeat wasn't racing.

Around nine, Naina shifted beneath the blanket. Ved straightened immediately in his chair, watching as her fingers twitched first, then her eyelashes fluttered against her cheeks. Slowly, she opened her eyes.

Everything looked blurry at first, the unfamiliar heaviness in her head making her wince as she tried to focus. She looked around the unfamiliar angle of the room before her eyes finally settled on the person sitting beside her.

Ved.

He was already looking at her, and had probably been looking at her for a while.

Neither of them spoke. For almost thirty full seconds there was only silence, the kind that carries more weight than words could.

Naina blinked twice, half-wondering if she was still dreaming. "You..." Her voice came out barely above a whisper, scratchy from disuse. "...didn't go home?"

Ved's mouth curved into a faint smile. "I did."

She looked confused, brow furrowing slightly.

"I went home for twenty minutes," he clarified, glancing down briefly at his own shirt.

"Changed my clothes. And then came back."

Another silence settled between them softer this time, warmer, nothing like the heavy one from the night before.

Naina's eyes drifted to the chair he was sitting in. "You slept there?"

He shrugged, feigning casualness. "It was comfortable enough."

She almost smiled despite herself. "That's a lie." "It is," he admitted easily.

She tried to sit up, and the moment she moved, a wave of dizziness hit her hard enough that she swayed. Ved was on his feet instantly.

"Easy." Before she could lose her balance entirely, his hand came up instinctively to steady her shoulder. He reached over and adjusted the pillow behind her with careful, practiced movements, as if he'd been doing this for years instead of one long night. "There."

She looked at him quietly for a moment. "So..." A pause. "You still care."

Ved looked away for half a second, something flickering across his face before he laughed softly, almost at himself. "I tried not to." He met her eyes again, his honesty catching even him off guard as the words left his mouth. "It didn't work."

Naina lowered her gaze, tears gathering unexpectedly at the corners of her eyes. "I'm sorry."

Ved shook his head firmly. "No. You've apologized enough." She looked back up at him. "I hurt you."

"You did." The answer came without hesitation, honest and unflinching. "And I hurt you too."

"We'll stop counting."

The room fell quiet again. Naina stared down at her own hands resting in her lap. "I was scared," she said eventually, the words coming slowly, like they cost her something to say. "I wasn't scared of you." A breath. "I was scared of... needing you."

Ved waited, saying nothing, giving her the space to keep going. "I knew what attachment felt like," she continued, quieter now. "I knew how badly it hurts when the person you depend on disappears. So, I thought if I pushed you away first it would hurt less." She laughed, but there was no humour in it, only a kind of tired bitterness. "I was wrong."

Ved listened without interrupting even once. Every sentence she spoke answered a question he'd been silently carrying for weeks, questions he'd never had the courage or the right timing to ask outright. He pulled his chair a little closer to the bed, not too close, just enough and finally said, quietly, "You know what the saddest part is?" She looked up at him.

"You were protecting yourself," he said, "while I was trying to protect you."

Neither of them said anything after that. Some truths simply don't need a reply. They only need to be heard.

An hour later, the small apartment smelled of fresh ginger tea and something considerably less pleasant than Ved's proud, thoroughly average attempt at khichdi. When he set the bowl down in front of Naina, she eyed it with open suspicion.

"You made this?"

He nodded chin lifted with entirely unearned confidence. "I watched a YouTube video."

She took one cautious bite. Then another, slightly less cautious. He watched her face the entire time, waiting, practically holding his breath.

"Well?" he finally asked.

She looked up, keeping her expression as flat and serious as she could manage. "I think..."

A pause, long enough to make him nervous. "...the YouTube chef deserves an apology."

Ved stared at her blankly for exactly two seconds before both of them broke into laughter real, unguarded laughter, the kind neither of them had shared with the other in what felt like months.

Outside, the sun finally broke through the last of the clouds. Around noon, the apartment door opened and Ira walked in

carrying two assignment submission receipts. She stopped short in the hallway at the sight waiting for her: Naina and Ved sitting together on the sofa, one bowl of half-finished khichdi balanced between them, Naina laughing so hard she had to set her spoon down, Ved looking thoroughly and dramatically offended at being mocked for his cooking.

For a moment, Ira said nothing at all. She simply smiled, because after weeks of heavy silence, the apartment finally sounded alive again properly, fully alive, in a way she hadn't realized she'd missed until she heard it again.

That evening, as Ved reached for the door handle on his way out, Naina's voice stopped him. "Ved."

He turned around.

She walked toward him slowly, stopped just in front of him, and held out something cradled carefully in her hand.

A sunflower.

The same one he had left behind in the rain the night before. Its petals had suffered some bent, some torn slightly at the edges and the stem had a visible curve where it had been pressed. But she had clearly taken the time to carefully dry it between the pages of one of her notebooks, preserving what was left of it rather than letting it simply rot on the wet pavement where he'd dropped it.

"I found it," she said, her eyes glistening. "I couldn't let it stay on the road."

Ved looked at the flower for a long, quiet moment before lifting his gaze back to her face. When he spoke, his voice came out barely above a whisper.

"Keep it."

She frowned, confused. "But you bought it for me."

"I know." A slow smile spread across his face. "And I still am."

The apartment felt strangely empty after Ved left.

It had only been five minutes. And yet somehow it already felt quieter than it had any right to, the silence pressing in a little differently than it had before he'd arrived the night before. Naina stood near the balcony with a cup of warm coffee held between both hands, the morning breeze carrying in the smell of wet soil left behind by the rain. Without quite meaning to, she found herself looking down at the parking area below.

His car was no longer there.

Only then did she realize, with a small jolt of surprise at herself, that she had been waiting to watch it leave.

"What is happening to me," she muttered, shaking her head at her own reflection in the balcony glass before walking back inside. She sat down and pulled open her psychology notes, reminding herself that final exams were only a few weeks away and she was already dangerously behind.

She read the first page. Then the second. Then realized, with mild frustration, that she hadn't actually absorbed a single word of either, because instead of reading about human emotional responses, she'd been thinking about the man who had stayed awake the entire night in an uncomfortable chair just to make sure her fever came down.

She closed the book. Picked up her phone instead.

Opened his chat.

Typed *Reached office?*

She stared at the words on the screen for almost a full minute, thumb hovering over the send button, before finally deleting them one letter at a time. "He's probably driving," she told herself, setting the phone face-down beside her, though her eyes kept drifting back to it every few minutes anyway.

Across the city, Ved stopped at a red traffic signal, and almost on instinct his hand reached for his phone sitting in the cupholder.

Nothing new.

He smiled faintly to himself. "Good. She's resting." A beat later, another thought followed, quieter but persistent: "Maybe she's awake now." He unlocked the phone, opened her chat.

Typed *Did you take your medicine?*

I looked at it. Then deleted it just as quickly.

"She'll think I'm treating her like a child," he muttered, tossing the phone back into the cupholder as the signal turned green and the cars behind him began honking impatiently. He drove on. But the unsent message stayed lodged somewhere in the back of his mind for the rest of the drive, refusing to fully let go.

The office wasn't any kinder that day. Three separate meetings stacked back-to-back two site inspections that ran longer than scheduled, and a mountain of paperwork waiting on his desk that seemed to have multiplied overnight. Karan walked into his cabin at one point holding yet another file.

"Sir, this one also needs your signature."

Ved signed it absentmindedly, barely glancing at the page.

"Sir?"

"Hm?"

"You signed the wrong page."

Ved blinked, looking down properly this time. "Oh."

For the first time in years, he realized he wasn't fully present at his own desk. Karan, watching from across the room, smiled knowingly. "I think someone has a fever."

Ved looked up, confused. "What?"

"I'm talking about you."

Ved rolled his eyes and told him to get out, which only made Karan laugh the entire way back to his own cabin, clearly enjoying himself far more than the situation warranted.

Back at the apartment, Naina had finally managed to push through two full chapters of her notes. She stretched lazily, glanced at the clock at 3:17 PM and without any conscious decision to do so, found herself wondering whether Ved had eaten lunch yet.

She frowned at her own thoughts. "Why do I care?"

Because she did. More than she was entirely comfortable admitting, even to herself.

She picked up her phone again. This time, she didn't let herself overthink it. She simply typed *Did you eat?* and hit send before the usual hesitation could catch up with her.

The moment the message showed as delivered, the panic arrived anyway, just a few seconds late. "Why did I send that? He'll think I'm weird. Should I delete it?" Too late. It had already reached him.

Inside a meeting room across town, Ved's phone buzzed silently against the polished table. Normally he ignored messages entirely during work hours, no exceptions. Today, his eyes moved to the screen almost on their own.

Naina: Did you eat?

He didn't hear another single word of the presentation still running in front of him. A smile broke through before he could stop it, small, but noticeable enough that several people around the table caught it and exchanged curious glances. Karan, seated across the room, had to physically bite back a laugh.

Finally, he mouthed silently to no one in particular.

Ved waited, with visibly poor patience, until the meeting finally ended. Then he replied immediately.

No.

Barely ten seconds later, her response came through.

Go eat.

He smiled at the screen. *Bossing me around already?*

The typing indicator appeared almost instantly.

Someone has to.

Ved leaned back in his chair, reading that single line twice over, something inside him quietly softening in a way he didn't examine too closely. He typed back *Yes, ma'am* and hit send with something suspiciously close to a grin.

Naina laughed so suddenly at her phone that she nearly knocked her coffee mug clean off the table. Ira, who had just walked in from college and dropped her bag by the door, raised an eyebrow at the sound.

"What happened?" "Nothing." "Show me." "No." "You laughed." "I know."

"You only laugh like that when" Ira stopped midsentence, narrowing her eyes suspiciously.

"Was it Ved?"

Naina tried, and failed, to hide her smile behind her notebook. "No."

"Liar." "...Maybe."

Ira threw a cushion across the room at her, grinning. "I've waited months to see that smile again."

Naina caught the cushion out of reflex, hugged it absentmindedly against her chest, and glanced down at her phone once more. The conversation wasn't extraordinary by any objective measure: three short messages, nothing more. And yet somehow, they had made her entire afternoon feel noticeably lighter, as if something that had been sitting heavy in her chest for weeks had finally, quietly, begun to loosen.

The sun slowly began its descent. Ved glanced at the clock on his office wall at 6:28 PM. Fifteen more minutes and he could finally leave for the day. He closed the last file on his desk,

signed the final document with considerably more attention this time, and stood up, gathering his things.

Karan looked over, mildly surprised. "Leaving on time today?"

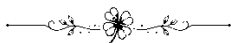
Ved picked up his car keys from the desk. "I have somewhere to be."

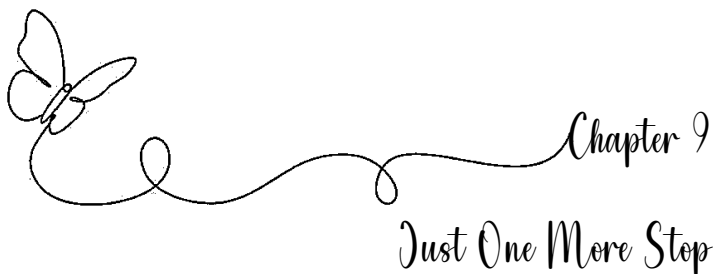
"Oh?" Ved allowed himself a small, private smile. "Yeah."

He didn't say where he was going. He didn't need to. But for the first time in weeks, maybe longer than that, if he was honest with himself going somewhere felt less like an obligation and more like something he'd been waiting for all day without quite admitting it.

It felt, for the first time in a long time, like going home.

Some love stories don't come back together with grand declarations or perfectly rehearsed apologies. They come back quietly in a chair pulled up beside a hospital-quiet bed, in a dried sunflower pressed carefully between notebook pages, in a bowl of terrible khichdi shared between two people who have finally stopped keeping score. Ved and Naina had broken something between them slowly, over weeks of misunderstanding and fear disguised as distance. But they didn't fix it all at once, either. They fixed it in the smallest possible pieces, a medicine forced down with a joke, a "did you eat" sent without overthinking it, a promise whispered in the rain that neither of them had any intention of breaking again. And somewhere in all those small, unremarkable moments, without either of them announcing it out loud, they had finally, completely, found their way back to each other.





Chapter 9

Just One More Stop



Some relationships begin with a confession. Some begin with a date. And then there are relationships that quietly grow somewhere between arguments over food, unnecessary detours, and one person constantly saying "five minutes," while the other already knows it'll never be just five minutes. It had become their routine. Ved finished work. Naina finished college. Around six-thirty, one message was always enough. *Outside? Coming.* No explanations, no formalities, just habit.

That evening, Naina came running down the apartment stairs with her bag hanging from one shoulder. The fever had completely disappeared, her cheeks had regained their color, and for the first time in weeks, there was a brightness in her eyes that even she hadn't noticed. Ved was leaning against his car, arms folded, pretending to scroll through his phone. The moment he heard her footsteps, he looked up.

"You're three minutes late."

Naina stopped in front of him and placed both hands dramatically on her waist. "Excuse me?"

"I've been waiting."

She looked at her watch. "I came exactly on time."

"You didn't."

"I did."

"You didn't."

She narrowed her eyes. "Are you trying to start a fight?"

Ved unlocked the passenger door with a grin. "No."

"Good."

"I'm trying to win one."

She laughed despite herself. "You've become very confident these days."

"I've learned from the best."

She shook her head and got into the car.

As soon as Ved started driving, Naina looked out of the window for barely ten seconds before announcing, "I want golgappe."

Ved didn't even take his eyes off the road. "No."

She blinked. "What?"

"You were sick three days ago."

"I'm perfectly fine now."

"No."

She turned toward him dramatically. "I've recovered."

"The doctor said light food."

"The doctor isn't here."

"I am."

She gasped in mock outrage. "You are not my doctor."

"No." He smiled. "But today I'm pretending to be."

She crossed her arms and looked out of the window. "I don't like you."

"That's okay."

"I mean it."

"I know."

"I'll complain."

"To whom?"

"Ira."

Ved nodded thoughtfully. "She'll probably agree with me."

Naina groaned loudly. "You people are impossible."

Five minutes of complete silence passed. Ved knew that silence. It wasn't real. It meant she was planning something. He glanced sideways Naina was looking out of the window with an exaggerated sad face, lips slightly puffed, pretending to be deeply offended. He bit the inside of his cheek to stop himself from smiling.

Exactly thirty seconds later, she spoke, very softly.

"Ved..."

"No."

"I haven't even asked yet."

"I already know."

She leaned a little closer. "Please?"

"No."

"Pleeease?"

"No."

"I'll only eat six."

He looked at her. "Six what?"

"Golgappas."

He almost laughed. "That isn't helping your case."

She folded both hands dramatically. "Officer saab..."

"No."

"Please."

"No."

"I'll never ask for anything again."

Ved raised an eyebrow. "That's the biggest lie you've ever told."
She couldn't help laughing. "Fine. I'll ask tomorrow."

"I know."

"So today?"

"No."

She looked at him for a long moment before making the cutest, most exaggerated puppy face she possibly could lower lip out, big innocent eyes, complete silence. Ved looked at the road, then at her, then quickly back at the road again.

"Oh, come on..."

She didn't say a word. She simply kept looking at him with the same expression. After another ten seconds, Ved let out a defeated sigh. "I can't believe this works."

"It does?"

"It shouldn't."

She immediately clapped her hands excitedly. "So we're stopping?"

He sighed dramatically. "For ten minutes."

She literally cheered inside the car. "I won!"

"No."

"You absolutely lost."

"I surrendered."

"Same thing."

"It isn't." "It is."

Ved parked near their favorite golgappa stall, shaking his head. "I've dealt with tax evasion. I've questioned criminals. I've handled political pressure." He looked at her while getting out of the car. "But nothing has prepared me for arguing with you."

Naina laughed so hard she had to hold the car door. "I told you I'd win."

"You emotionally manipulated me."

"I smiled."

"Exactly."

"That's manipulation?"

"When you do it, yes."

She looked ridiculously proud. "Good."

The golgappa vendor smiled as they approached. "The usual?"

Naina nodded enthusiastically. "Extra spicy!"

Ved immediately interrupted. "Medium."

She turned to him in horror. "Excuse me?"

"You just recovered."

"I want spicy."

"You'll cry."

"I won't."

"You always do."

"I don't."

"You absolutely do."

The vendor stood there watching them argue with an amused smile. He chuckled and said, "Bhaiya, bas maan jaiye. Didi manne wali nahi lag rahi."

Ved looked at Naina. She folded her hands innocently and whispered, "Please..."

He closed his eyes for a second. Then laughed. "Extra spicy."

Naina grinned like a child who had just won the biggest competition in the world. As the vendor prepared the golgappas, Ved looked at her from the corner of his eye. She was smiling at absolutely nothing, just because she had gotten her way. And somehow, watching her happy felt strangely worth every argument.

The golgappa challenge had ended exactly the way Ved predicted. Naina was standing beside the stall with tears in her

eyes, coughing dramatically after insisting she could handle "extra spicy." Ved stood beside her with a bottle of water, trying very hard not to laugh.

"I told you."

She glared at him between coughs. "...Don't... say... I told you so."

He handed her the bottle. "I wasn't going to."

She drank half of it in one go before pointing an accusing finger at him. "This is your fault." "My fault?"

"You should've stopped me."

"I spent fifteen minutes trying."

"You should've tried harder."

Ved laughed so loudly that even the golgappa vendor smiled.

"You really blame everyone except yourself."

"Obviously."

"It's called confidence."

"No. It's called being stubborn."

"It's called being cute."

Ved looked at her for two seconds. Then quietly nodded.

"...That too."

Naina blinked. "Were you complimenting me?"

"I don't remember."

"You did."

"I don't think so."

"You absolutely did."

Ved started walking toward the car before she could tease him any further. "Hurry up. We're getting waffles."

She gasped dramatically. "So you do love me."

Ved stopped walking for exactly one second. Then looked back over his shoulder with the smallest smile. "I never said that. I just don't like seeing you hungry."

For some reason, that sentence made her heart beat a little faster.

The waffle café was warm, cozy, and almost empty. Rain had started again outside, tiny droplets tapping softly against the large glass windows. Naina sat opposite Ved, absentmindedly drawing random circles on the table with her finger while waiting for their order. She noticed him looking outside.

"What happened?"

"Hm?"

"You've been smiling since we left the golgappa stall."

Ved looked down at the menu. "Nothing."

"I know that smile."

"You don't."

"I do. It means you're hiding something."

"I'm not."

"You are."

"I'm really not."

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "Ved Sharma..."

"What?"

"If this is another lecture about spicy food"

"It isn't."

"Then what?"

Instead of answering, Ved quietly stood up. "I'll be back."

"Where are you going?"

"Two minutes."

Before she could ask anything else, he had already disappeared. Five minutes later, Naina was beginning to get impatient. "He literally disappeared." She looked outside through the glass. The rain had become heavier. People hurried across the street with umbrellas while others stood beneath shop awnings waiting for it to slow down.

Just then, the café door opened. Ved walked inside, his hair slightly wet, raindrops clinging to the sleeves of his jacket.

And in his hands, he was holding two sunflowers. Not one. Two.

Naina looked at them, then at him, then back at the flowers again. She smiled without even realizing it. "For me?"

Ved walked over and held them out. "I think they belong to you."

She accepted them carefully, almost afraid the petals might break. "They're beautiful." "I know."

"No..." She looked at the flowers again. "I mean... you remembered. The sunflower theory. Where it said people who bring you sunflowers are the ones who bring sunshine back into your life."

She looked at him. "I didn't even think you'd watched it." Ved smiled. "I did." He looked at her for a long second, not smiling anymore, just looking. Then he answered quietly, "Naina... I remember each and every word you've ever said to me."

Silence. The entire café seemed to disappear. The music, the people, the rain everything faded. Because sometimes, one sentence says everything that "I love you" cannot.

Naina lowered her eyes to the flowers, her fingers gently tracing one of the yellow petals.

"So," she whispered, "that's why two?"

Ved nodded. "You once told me one sunflower feels lonely. You said flowers should have someone standing beside them. I remembered that too."

Naina felt something tighten inside her chest, not painfully, warmly. No one had ever remembered things like that. Not her favourite flower, not random reels she shared at two in

the morning, not silly little sentences she herself had forgotten saying. But he had. Every one of them.

She looked at him again. There were a thousand things she wanted to say. Instead, she smiled the kind of smile that reached her eyes, the kind that didn't need words.

Ved looked at her for a moment before saying with his usual teasing tone, "So does this mean I get forgiven for the medicine?"

She laughed through the tears gathering in her eyes. "Not yet."

"I bought flowers."

"Still no."

"I'll let you eat spicy golgappe."

"You argued for fifteen minutes first."

"I bought waffles."

She pretended to think. "Hmm... maybe..."

He leaned forward. "Maybe?"

She smiled mischievously. "Buy me ice cream too."

Ved dropped his head dramatically onto the table. "You are financially ruining an honest government officer."

Naina laughed so loudly that half the café turned to look at them. For the first time, neither of them cared. Because happiness had quietly returned. Not all at once. But two sunflowers at a time.

As they stepped out of the café, Naina held the two sunflowers close to her chest so the rain wouldn't touch them.

Ved noticed. "You'll get wet."

She smiled without looking at him. "That's okay."

"And the flowers?"

She looked down at them lovingly. "Some things deserve to be protected... even if it means getting drenched yourself."

Ved didn't reply. Because standing beside him was the girl who had once forgotten how to smile. And now, she was protecting the flowers he had given her. Somewhere deep inside, he realized maybe she wasn't protecting the flowers. Maybe she was protecting the feeling that came with them.

As they reached the parking area, an elderly couple walking past them slowed down. The old woman looked at Naina, then at Ved, and smiled warmly. "You both look adorable together."

Naina's eyes widened. Before she could react, the old man chuckled. "Newly married?"

Both of them spoke at exactly the same time. "No!" The answer came so quickly that even they looked at each other in surprise. The elderly couple exchanged amused glances. "Oh... not married." "Then engaged?" "No!" Again, at the exact same time.

Ved rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. "We're just..." He stopped.

Naina looked at him. "...Friends." She finished the sentence. The old man laughed. "The best love stories always start with that sentence."

The old woman nodded. "We've been married for thirty years. He called me 'just a friend' for the first six months."

The old man protested dramatically. "I was shy."

"You were scared." "I was."

All four of them laughed. Before leaving, the old woman gently touched Naina's shoulder. "Beta some people come into your life once. When you find someone who makes you laugh this easily, don't let them go." With that, the couple walked away.

Silence settled between Ved and Naina. Neither of them knew where to look. Ved cleared his throat. "So friends?"

Naina tried not to smile. "Best friends."

Ved nodded. "Best friends." But for some reason, both of them sounded slightly disappointed by the answer.

The drive back to the apartment was unusually quiet. Not uncomfortable, just filled with thoughts neither of them was ready to say aloud. Ved stole quick glances at her every now and then. Naina kept looking out of the window. Every time she remembered the elderly couple, she smiled. Every time she smiled, Ved noticed. Neither of them mentioned it.

The moment they entered the apartment, Ira looked up from the sofa. Then froze. Her eyes immediately landed on the two sunflowers in Naina's hands, then on the waffle box, then on the empty ice cream cups, then on Ved, then back at Naina. She slowly stood up, a dangerous smile spreading across her face.

"Oh so this is why madam came home late."

Naina blinked. "What?"

Ira folded her arms. "Nothing." She looked at Ved. "Sir, thank you for dropping my friend."

Ved smiled politely. "My pleasure."

Ira nodded dramatically. "I'm sure it was."

Naina already knew that expression. "Ira..."

"Hm?"

"Don't."

"I didn't say anything."

"You are about to."

"I absolutely am."

Ved looked between the two of them, trying not to laugh. Ira walked toward Naina and took one sunflower from her hand.

"Two flowers?" She looked at Ved. "Interesting."

Ved coughed awkwardly. "She likes sunflowers."

"I know she does." Ira smiled mischievously. "I just didn't know you knew."

Ved looked at Naina. Naina looked everywhere except at Ved. Ira wasn't finished. "So — what else happened?"

"Nothing."

"Really?"

"Really."

"No hand holding?"

Naina almost choked. "No!"

"Hug?"

"No!"

"Fed each other?"

"No!"

"Shared one spoon?"

"No!"

"Kissed?"

"IRA!"

Ved almost burst out laughing. Naina grabbed the nearest cushion and threw it at her roommate. Ira caught it easily. "I was just asking."

"You were interrogating."

"I've watched enough romantic movies to know what's happening."

"Nothing is happening."

Ira looked at Ved. "You tell me."

Ved raised both hands in surrender. "I value my life."

"Smart answer."

Naina buried her face in her hands. "I can't live here anymore."

Ira walked over, wrapped one arm around her shoulders, and whispered just loudly enough for Ved to hear, "You know I've never seen you smile this much."

Naina's expression softened. She didn't answer. Because somewhere deep inside, she knew Ira was right.

Ved quietly picked up his car keys. "I should leave." As he reached the door, Ira suddenly called out. "Ved."

He turned. She smiled sincerely this time. "Thank you." Not for the ride. Not for the flowers. Not even for taking care of Naina. She meant thank you for bringing my best friend back. Ved understood without asking. He simply nodded.

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

The door closed. Naina stood silently near the window, still holding the remaining sunflower.

Ira walked beside her with a huge grin. "So..."

Naina sighed. "No."

"You like him."

"No."

"You smiled thirty-seven times."

"You counted?"

"I started after the tenth one."

Naina laughed helplessly. "I hate you."

Ira nudged her shoulder playfully. "No. You love someone else."

Naina didn't answer. She simply looked out of the window. Downstairs, Ved was unlocking his car. As if he could feel her eyes on him, he looked up. Their eyes met for one brief second. He smiled. She smiled back.

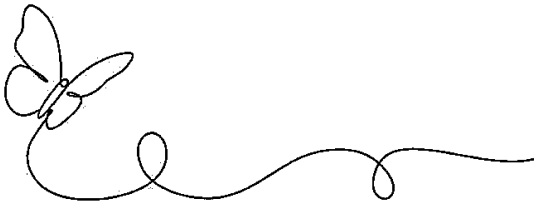
Ira watched the entire exchange from behind, then muttered to herself with a satisfied grin,

"These two are going to be the last people on earth to realize they're already in love."

Some love stories don't need a grand confession to be real, they need a boy who remembers a forgotten sentence

about lonely sunflowers, and a girl who protects two flowers from the rain without asking why it matters so much. If everyone around them can already see it, maybe the only two people left to convince are the ones standing closest to it.





Chapter 10

Saying Yes



Ved was waiting outside Naina's university. She walked out with Ira, balancing three books, a coffee, and her phone.

"One day you're going to drop all of that."

"I have talent."

"You have confidence."

"Same thing."

Before Ved could say anything, Ira noticed the suspicious smile on his face. "No."

Ved blinked. "I haven't even spoken."

"I know that smile. It's the 'I'm about to convince Naina to do something she'll refuse in the first five seconds' smile."

Ved laughed. "Smart girl."

Ira pointed at Naina. "Good luck. She's impossible."

"Challenge accepted."

A few minutes later, they were sitting at their favourite café. Naina was happily eating fries. Ved casually stirred his coffee.

"So..." "So?"
"Trip."
"Hm."
"Dehradun."
"Hm."
"This weekend."
"Hm."
"Come with me."
She looked up. "No."
Ved almost laughed. "You didn't even think."
"I did."
"When?"
"The moment you said 'office trip.'"
"Why not?"
"Because it's your trip."
"So?"
"I'll feel awkward."
"You won't."
"I don't know anyone."
"You know me."
"I know Rohan."
"You know Rohan too."
"I know Ira."
"Ira is coming."
Naina stopped chewing. "...She is?"
Ved smiled. "Yes."
She narrowed her eyes. "You planned this."
"I prefer the word 'strategically organized.'"
"You trapped me."
"I created favourable circumstances."
She couldn't help smiling. Still "No."
Ved leaned back. "Reason?"

"I've never gone on a trip with..." She stopped. "With...?"

"...a boyfriend." The word came out so quietly that he almost missed it.

Ved smiled without teasing her. "I know."

"It's weird."

"It doesn't have to be."

"What if your colleagues don't like me?"

"They already do."

"They don't even know me."

"They know you're the girl who makes me smile at my phone during meetings."

Naina looked at him. "You tell them about me?"

"I don't have to."

"Then?"

"They've seen me." She looked confused. He smiled. "I laugh more now." Silence.

Then he continued softly. "You know what Rohan asked me yesterday?"

"What?"

"Sir, promotion mili hai ya pyaar?"

Naina burst into laughter. "Seriously?"

"I wish I was joking."

She hid her face behind the menu. "This is embarrassing."

"It is."

Another silence settled between them. Ved reached across the table and held her hand. "No pressure. If you don't want to come, we won't go. It's just two days. But I'd rather spend two days with you than anywhere else."

She looked at their hands. Then at him. Then outside the café window. "You really want me there?"

Ved smiled. "I've wanted you in every plan since the day I met you."

Her heart skipped. Completely. Hopelessly. She looked down to hide the blush. "...Fine."

Ved grinned. "Fine?"

"Fine."

"That's a yes?"

"Don't make me change my answer."

He stood up dramatically. "Ladies and gentlemen..."

"There are no ladies and gentlemen here."

"...Operation Convince Naina has been successfully completed."

She laughed so hard she threw a tissue at him. Ved caught it mid-air. "So..."

"So?"

He leaned closer. "Pack something warm."

"Why?"

"The mountains are cold."

She smiled. "I know."

Ved shook his head. "I wasn't talking about the weather."

For a second, she forgot the café, the people, the noise, everything. All she could see was the boy who somehow made every ordinary moment feel like the beginning of a movie.

The first rays of the morning sun had barely begun to paint the Delhi sky when a black SUV came to a halt outside Naina's flat. The city was still rubbing sleep from its eyes. Tea stalls were only beginning to fill with office-goers, newspapers lay scattered outside closed shops waiting to be picked up, and the cool breeze carried the comforting smell of wet roads after the previous night's drizzle. Naina stepped outside with a backpack slung over one shoulder and a steaming paper cup of coffee in her hand. She had spent almost twenty minutes deciding what to wear before finally settling on a white top, a pair of light-washed jeans and white sneakers. She wasn't

someone who cared too much about appearances, yet today she had looked in the mirror one extra time not because she wanted to impress anyone, but because somewhere deep inside, she knew someone would notice.

Ved noticed. The moment she walked out of the gate, every conversation around him seemed to fade into the background. Rohan was saying something from the driver's seat, Ira was laughing at one of her own jokes, two of Ved's colleagues are busy arguing over whose playlist would survive the journey, but none of it reached him. His eyes had already found the girl walking towards them, absent-mindedly blowing over her coffee before taking tiny cautious sips. He smiled to himself. She still hadn't learned that coffee remained hot no matter how adorable she looked trying to drink it before it cooled down.

By the time Naina reached the car, Ved had already walked around to where she was standing. Without saying a word, he slipped the backpack from her shoulder as naturally as if it had always belonged in his hands.

"Ved, I can carry it," she said, instinctively trying to take it back.

He only looked at her with the kind of smile that never argued, never insisted loudly, yet somehow always won. "I know you can," he replied while placing it carefully inside the boot. "But you've been carrying enough all week. Let me carry this one."

It was such an ordinary sentence, spoken so casually that anyone standing nearby could have missed its meaning. Naina didn't. Somewhere between college assignments, sleepless nights and endless responsibilities, no one had remembered that she, too, got tired.

A loud whistle interrupted the moment. Nearly an hour later, the endless stretch of highway began to wake up around them. Small roadside dhabas came alive one after another, their kitchens filling the air with the irresistible aroma of fresh parathas, butter melting over hot tavas, and cardamom tea bubbling away in large steel pots. A faded signboard advertising "World Famous Chai" caught Rohan's attention, and before anyone could object, he had already convinced the entire convoy to stop for breakfast.

The moment the cars came to a halt, everyone stepped outside almost at once, stretching stiff shoulders after the long drive. The crisp morning breeze carried just enough chill to make the steaming cups of chai feel like a necessity rather than a choice. Naina closed her eyes for a brief second as the wind brushed against her face. Delhi already felt miles away.

"Five minutes," Ved reminded everyone, locking the car. "If I have to drag any of you, back I'm leaving without you."

"No, sir," one of his colleagues laughed. "You'll leave without us, but not without her."

The teasing earned a chorus of laughter. Ved only shook his head, while Naina looked down, pretending to be fascinated by the pattern on her coffee cup.

The dhaba owner welcomed them with a wide smile and hurriedly pushed a few tables together. Within minutes, plates of aloo parathas, paneer parathas, curd, pickle and freshly brewed chai covered the table. The conversation shifted effortlessly from office gossip to college stories, embarrassing childhood memories and exaggerated travel experiences. For the first time since joining them, Naina didn't feel like an outsider. Every joke pulled her in a little more, every laugh chipped away at the hesitation she had carried from Delhi.

She reached for the pickle jar placed in the middle of the table just as Ved quietly moved it closer to her.

"You always eat too little," he said casually. "At least finish one proper paratha."

She looked at him with mock annoyance. "Are you counting how much I eat now?"

"I don't have to count."

"Then how do you know?"

He smiled before tearing a small piece of his own paratha.

"Because whenever you're happy, you eat slowly. Whenever you're anxious, you forget to eat at all."

For a heartbeat, she simply stared at him. She couldn't remember ever telling him that. Perhaps she never had. He had simply noticed.

Before she could respond, the waiter arrived carrying another plate.

"I didn't order this," Naina said, confused.

Ved looked up from his tea. "I did."

"It has mushrooms."

"I know."

"I don't like mushrooms."

"I know."

She folded her arms. "Then why did you order them?"

"So, you could give them to me like you always do."

A laugh escaped her before she could stop it. Without another word, she began picking the mushrooms off her plate and dropping them onto his. The entire table watched the exchange in amused silence.

Rohan finally broke it. "I've seen married couples who don't know each other this well."

Another colleague pointed his spoon dramatically towards Ved. "Sir, respectfully... you're setting impossible standards."

"No," Ira replied with a grin, taking a sip of her chai. "He's just paying attention. There's a difference."

Those words lingered with Naina long after the conversation had moved on. He was paying attention. Not to impress her. Not because it was expected. Simply because, somewhere between late-night phone calls, library visits, coffee dates and silent walks back to her flat, he had started memorising the little things she never realised she revealed the way she always peeled the crust off a sandwich before eating it, the way she searched for the window seat without asking, the way she absent-mindedly twisted the ring on her finger whenever she was overthinking something. None of those habits were extraordinary. Yet somehow, he had made her feel as though every one of them deserved to be remembered.

"Sir," Rohan announced loudly enough for everyone in the parking lot to hear, "with all due respect, you're destroying the market for the rest of us."

Laughter erupted around them. Another colleague shook his head in mock disappointment. "At this point, girls aren't going to accept the bare minimum anymore."

"Forget bare minimum," Ira added while loading her luggage into the second SUV. "You're making the maximum look average."

Ved simply smiled, completely unaffected by the teasing. If anything, it amused him that everyone found his behaviour extraordinary. To him, it wasn't. Looking after Naina never felt like effort. It felt like instinct.

Naina lowered her eyes, unable to stop smiling. For the first time in a very long time, being cared for didn't feel uncomfortable. It felt safe.

As they resumed their journey, the roads narrowed and the landscape slowly transformed. Tall trees lined both sides of

the highway hills began appearing in the distance and cool mountain air slipped through the slightly open windows. The excitement inside the cars grew louder with every passing kilometre.

At one viewpoint everyone climbed out to take pictures. The wind was stronger there. Naina kept pushing loose strands of hair behind her ear every few seconds before eventually giving up.

Ved quietly excused himself. She assumed he had gone to answer a work call. Instead, he returned a few minutes later carrying a tiny paper packet from the pharmacy across the road. "What is this?"

"You forgot your hair ties."

She blinked. "I never told you that."

"No."

"Then how did you know?"

He looked at her as though the answer were obvious. "You've tucked your hair behind your ear seventeen times since we stopped."

She stared at him. "...You counted?"

He smiled. "I noticed."

For a moment she forgot the mountains, forgot the photographs, forgot the people standing around them. How could someone pay attention to details she herself never noticed?

Before she could respond, a sharp gust of wind blew her hair across her face again. Ved laughed softly, took one hair tie from the packet and placed it in her palm. "I'll keep the rest," he said. "You'll lose this one by evening."

"I won't."

"You will."

"I won't."

He slipped the remaining packet into his jacket pocket. "I'll return them when you prove me wrong."

Behind them, Ira leaned towards Rohan and whispered loudly enough for everyone to hear,

"I've decided."

"What?"

"If these two ever get married, I'm making Ved conduct relationship workshops."

The laughter echoed across the valley. Even Naina couldn't stop smiling. She had come expecting a trip. What she hadn't expected was to feel so completely, quietly cared for.

Love doesn't always arrive loudly. Sometimes it looks like a hair tie bought without being asked, a mushroom-free plate ordered from memory, or someone noticing you've tucked your hair back seventeen times before you noticed it yourself. This chapter was never about the drive to Dehradun; it was about a girl slowly learning that being paid attention to, in the smallest ways possible, could still feel like the biggest kind of love.





Chapter II

Dehradun



The journey that had begun before sunrise finally came to an end as the convoy entered Dehradun just after noon. The city welcomed them with winding roads, towering deodar trees, tiny cafés tucked into quiet corners, and the kind of fresh mountain air that instantly made everyone roll their windows down. Even before they reached the resort, phones were already out, someone had started recording the hills, and Rohan had confidently declared himself the "official travel vlogger" despite everyone begging him to stop talking into the camera.

The resort stood peacefully on a hillside, surrounded by pine trees that swayed gently with the afternoon breeze. The building wasn't luxurious enough to feel intimidating, nor too simple to go unnoticed. It had the warmth of a place people returned to every year, where every balcony opened towards

endless mountains and every corridor carried the faint fragrance of freshly brewed coffee.

Before anyone could rush inside, Ved stepped out of the SUV and walked straight towards the boot. Naina had barely reached for her backpack when he had already lifted it onto his shoulder along with his own duffel bag.

"Ved, at least let me carry mine."

He closed the boot and looked at her as if she had suggested something completely unreasonable. "You've carried your college bag every single day this week." "That's different."

"It isn't."

"It has my things."

He smiled. "Exactly. Which is why I'm carrying it."

She sighed in defeat, knowing there was no point arguing. Somewhere during the last few months, she had realized that Ved never tried to prove he was right. He simply cared for her in ways that made arguing feel unnecessary.

As they entered the lobby, Rohan watched the scene unfold before dramatically placing a hand over his heart. "Sir, respectfully..."

Ved didn't even look at him. "What now?"

"I've decided I'm never bringing my girlfriend around you."

Laughter echoed through the reception. "Why?" another colleague asked.

"Because after watching this, she's going to ask why I don't even carry her handbag."

Ira immediately joined in. "Handbag? Ved bhaiya would probably carry the entire wardrobe if Naina asked."

Ved finally looked up, completely unfazed. "I would."

The answer came so naturally that everyone went silent for a second. Then the entire lobby erupted with laughter. Even Naina couldn't stop herself from smiling.

The receptionist handed over the room keys while explaining the resort timings. As everyone gathered near the entrance, Ved clapped once to get their attention. "Listen, everyone." The chatter slowly died down. "You all have exactly one hour. Freshen up, unpack if you want, have some water and be downstairs by three. We've booked tickets for Robber's Cave, and trust me, nobody wants to arrive there late."

One of his colleagues groaned dramatically. "Sir, one hour? At least let us admire the room."

"You can admire it after dinner."

Another voice came from behind. "Any dress code?"

Ved nodded. "Yes. Wear something comfortable, preferably knee-length or above. The water level inside the cave rises almost to your knees, sometimes higher. If you wear long jeans or long dresses, you'll spend the entire day walking around in wet clothes."

Rohan immediately looked towards Naina with a mischievous grin. "Ma'am, you've heard the instructions. Sir has spoken."

Naina rolled her eyes while walking towards the staircase. "I was going to wear something comfortable anyway."

"Of course," Ira whispered with a teasing smile. "Pure coincidence."

Their room overlooked the mountains. The curtains danced gently with the breeze flowing in through the balcony doors, carrying with it the earthy scent that always follows the hills after a cool afternoon. Naina walked straight towards the balcony and rested both hands on the railing.

"So beautiful..." she whispered.

For a moment, she forgot everything else the assignments, the deadlines, the heartbreak she had once believed she would never survive. Standing there, surrounded by mountains, she felt lighter than she had in months.

An hour passed almost unnoticed. After a long shower, she stood in front of the mirror, trying to decide what to wear. Her suitcase lay open on the bed, clothes scattered everywhere, while Ira had somehow managed to get ready in fifteen minutes.

"You've been staring at those outfits longer than you studied for your statistics exam," Ira teased.

"I'm thinking."

"No, you're overthinking."

"I just want something comfortable." "And slightly cute." Naina laughed. "Fine. Slightly cute."

A few minutes later, she slipped into a sky-blue sleeveless jumpsuit that ended a little above her knees. It was simple, elegant and perfect for walking through water. She left her hair open, added tiny silver earrings and wore white sneakers she knew would probably get soaked. When she finally looked into the mirror, even she had to admit she looked happy. Not because of the outfit. Because somewhere along the journey, happiness had quietly returned to her face.

Downstairs, everyone had already gathered near the entrance. Ved was adjusting the strap of his watch while talking to Rohan when he looked up and forgot what he was saying. For a brief moment, the noise around him disappeared, the laughter, the conversations, the music playing softly in the lobby, everything blurred into the background. All he could see was Naina slowly walking down the staircase, sunlight pouring through the glass doors behind her, making the soft blue of her outfit glow against the warm wooden interiors of the resort. She wasn't trying to impress anyone. That was exactly why she looked breathtaking.

Rohan noticed the silence before anyone else. He followed Ved's gaze and immediately smirked. "Oh..."

Ved blinked, snapping out of his thoughts. "I'll be back." Without waiting for anyone to ask why, he turned around and disappeared towards his room.

"Where did he go?" one colleague asked.

Rohan folded his arms, already trying not to laugh. "Just wait." Barely three minutes later, Ved returned, this time wearing a blue T-shirt instead of the charcoal one he had worn during the journey. The shade wasn't exactly the same as Naina's jumpsuit, but it was close enough. Very close.

Ira looked from Ved to Naina, then back to Ved. A slow grin spread across her face. "Ved..." "Hm?"

"Did you just change your T-shirt?"

"No."

"You did." "I felt hot."

"In exactly three minutes?"

"Yes."

She raised an eyebrow. "What a coincidence that now you're wearing blue."

Ved looked genuinely confused. "I like blue."

"Since when?"

"Since..." He paused. "...today."

Rohan burst out laughing so loudly that everyone in the lobby turned to look at them. "Sir!" he said between laughs. "You could've at least made the lie believable."

Ved scratched the back of his neck, trying and failing to hide his smile. Naina looked down at her own outfit and then at his T-shirt. A tiny smile escaped her lips. She didn't say anything. Neither did he. But somehow, they were both secretly glad that they matched.

The moment they stepped into the icy water of Robber's Cave, every bit of tiredness from the journey disappeared. A

collective scream escaped the entire group as freezing water rushed around their ankles.

"Oh my God! This is freezing!" Naina laughed, instinctively grabbing Ira's arm.

"I told you to wear something short," Rohan shouted from ahead, already splashing water at one of his colleagues.

Within minutes, the cave echoed with laughter. The towering rock walls filtered the sunlight into thin golden beams that danced over the crystal-clear stream. Water flowed endlessly over smooth stones while tiny waterfalls trickled down the cave walls. It felt less like a tourist spot and more like a place hidden away from the rest of the world.

Naina had never laughed this freely before. Not after Raghav. Not after all those nights, she'd cried herself to sleep. Today, for the first time in months, she wasn't thinking about the past. She was simply living.

The group spent the next three hours wandering through the cave, clicking pictures, teasing one another and challenging each other to walk across the slipperiest rocks without losing balance. Rohan lost that challenge within two minutes. His dramatic fall sent water flying in every direction. The entire cave erupted in laughter.

"You did that on purpose!" he protested, standing up completely drenched.

"No," Ira replied between laughs. "Gravity just doesn't like you."

Even Ved laughed a genuine, carefree laugh that Naina had rarely seen.

Every now and then she would wander a little farther ahead, fascinated by the narrow streams and hidden corners of the cave. And every single time, Ved would quietly close the distance between them. Not because he didn't trust her.

Because the rocks didn't deserve that trust. Whenever the path became uneven, he extended his hand without saying a word. Sometimes she accepted it. Sometimes she purposely ignored it just to prove she could manage. He never insisted. He simply walked close enough that if she did lose balance, she wouldn't fall alone.

At one point, Naina stopped near a tiny waterfall flowing between two rocks. "It's beautiful..." she whispered. She bent slightly to touch the water. The rock beneath her shifted almost imperceptibly. Before she could even react, Ved's hand was already around her wrist, steadying her. She hadn't even slipped. He had noticed before it happened.

"You worry too much," she laughed.

"I know."

"You think I'll fall every five minutes."

"No." He smiled faintly. "I just don't like taking chances."

Something about the way he said it made her heart grow quieter.

By the time they finally came out of the cave, everyone was soaked from the knees down. The shoes were muddy, hair was messy, faces were glowing with happiness. Outside the entrance, the irresistible smell of roasted corn filled the air.

"Bhutta!" Ira shouted excitedly. Within minutes everyone stood near a roadside cart, hot roasted corn in their hands, rubbed generously with butter, lemon, salt and chilli powder.

"This," Rohan declared dramatically after taking one bite, "is why people travel."

"You've said the same thing about parathas, chai and momos today," one colleague replied.

"Because food deserves appreciation."

Naina laughed softly while blowing over the steaming corn before taking a careful bite. Ved stood beside her, listening to

everyone argue over whose bhutta looked better. Then his smile disappeared.

A few feet away, a group of four young men stood pretending to scroll through their phones. One of them wasn't. His phone camera remained pointed directly towards Naina. The screen reflected her clearly. Another whispered something before all of them laughed quietly. Ved watched for another few seconds. Maybe he was mistaken. Then the boy zoomed in again. Ved's jaw tightened.

Without saying a word to anyone, he walked towards them. The laughter around Naina continued. She didn't even notice he had left.

"Excuse me," Ved said calmly. The boys looked up. "Can I see your phone?"

One of them frowned. "Why?"

"Because you've been taking pictures of her."

"No, we weren't."

Ved's expression remained unchanged. "You were."

The boy laughed dismissively. "Who are you to ask?"

"The person asking politely."

Silence. The air suddenly felt heavier. "We didn't click anything."

"Then showing me, your gallery shouldn't be a problem."

The boys exchanged glances. One of them instinctively hid his phone behind his back. That was enough. Ved stepped forward. "I'm asking one last time."

"No."

The next few seconds happened too quickly for anyone to understand. The boy tried to walk away. Ved caught his wrist. The phone slipped from his hand. Another boy shoved Ved hard from behind. "What the hell are you doing?"

The peaceful afternoon exploded into chaos. Rohan and the others immediately ran towards them. "What happened?" Before anyone could answer, another shove landed. Ved stumbled against a rock, his shoulder hitting it with a dull thud before he regained his balance. Ignoring the pain completely, he picked up the fallen phone. The gallery was still open. There they were picture after picture, Naina laughing, Naina walking, Naina adjusting her hair.

Without saying a single word, Ved selected every photograph and deleted them. He emptied the recently deleted folder too. Only then did he hand the phone back. "You should've asked before taking someone's pictures."

One of the boys swung at him in anger. His fist grazed the corner of Ved's mouth. The sharp impact split his lower lip instantly.

"Naina!" Ira gasped. Only then did Naina turn around. Her smile vanished. For a second she couldn't even understand what she was seeing Ved, surrounded by strangers, blood at the corner of his mouth, people shouting, Rohan trying to pull someone away. Her heartbeat skyrocketed.

"Ved!" She ran towards them. "Stop! Please stop!" Nobody listened. With trembling hand, she pulled out her phone and immediately called the security guards stationed near the entrance. Within moments, whistles echoed across the area as two guards rushed in with the local staff.

"Enough!" The crowd slowly separated. The boys began explaining their side. Ved remained completely silent. One guard checked the phone, found the deleted folder empty, and looked sternly at the group. After a sharp warning, they were escorted away. Silence settled over the place once again. Naina turned towards Ved. Only now did she notice the scrape across the back of his shoulder where his T-shirt had

torn slightly against the rocks. A thin streak of blood stained the blue fabric. His lip had begun swelling too.

"You..." Her voice shook. "You're hurt."

Ved looked at her and gave the smallest smile. "I'm okay." "No, you're not." She took a clean handkerchief from her bag with trembling fingers and gently pressed it against the corner of his lip. He winced.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

He frowned. "For what?"

"Because..." Her eyes filled with tears. "...because they were taking my pictures."

Ved looked at her for a long moment before speaking softly. "You have nothing to be sorry for." His voice remained calm despite the pain. "The only people who should be ashamed are the ones who thought they had the right to do that."

For the rest of the drive back to the hotel, nobody played music, nobody made jokes. The mountains outside looked just as beautiful as before. Only now, the silence inside the car was louder than anything they had heard all day.

The drive back to the resort was unlike any other journey they had shared that day. The same roads that had echoed with laughter only a few hours ago now carried nothing but silence. No one argued over the playlist. No one cracked terrible jokes. Even Rohan, who somehow always had something to say, sat quietly in the front seat, occasionally glancing at Ved through the rear-view mirror.

Ved rested his head against the window, his split lip stinging every time the car hit a bump in the road. The scrape across his shoulder burned beneath his T-shirt, but he never complained. Instead, he kept his eyes fixed on the passing hills as though the scenery deserved more attention than the pain.

Across from him, Naina couldn't stop looking at the small cut near his mouth. Every time she looked away, her eyes found him again. Somewhere deep inside, guilt had begun to settle. If she hadn't been there, none of this would have happened. The resort finally came into view just before sunset. Everyone climbed out quietly, exhaustion replacing the excitement they had carried all morning. Ved adjusted the strap of Naina's backpack over his own shoulder before handing her the room key.

"You should rest," he said softly.

"What about you?"

"I'm fine."

She knew he wasn't. But she also knew he wouldn't admit it. With one last smile that failed to hide the pain in his eyes, he walked towards his room.

Almost twenty minutes later, a gentle knock interrupted the silence inside Naina and Ira's room. Ira opened the door. Rohan stood outside with both hands tucked into the pockets of his hoodie.

"I know everyone's tired," he said quietly. "Rest for an hour. Then we'll leave for Tapkeshwar Temple before dinner." He smiled, trying to lighten the mood. "And tomorrow early morning we'll drive to Rishikesh."

"Tomorrow morning rafting." Her eyes widened immediately.

"No."

Rohan laughed. "You haven't even seen the river."

"I don't need to."

"You'll love it."

"I'll watch from the shore."

"We'll discuss that tomorrow." With a playful salute, he walked away, leaving the room peaceful once again.

For several minutes neither girl spoke. Naina changed into a comfortable white kurta and tied her damp hair into a loose bun before sitting near the window overlooking the mountains. The room was silent except for the soft rustling of the curtains.

Ira looked at her for a long moment before speaking.

"Naina..."

"Hm?"

"He loves you."

Naina turned so quickly she almost dropped the towel she had been folding. "...Who?" Ira gave her a look that answered the question before she even spoke. "Ved." Silence.

"No..."

"He does."

"You don't know that."

"I do."

Naina laughed nervously. "You're imagining things."

"I'm not." Ira walked towards the window and leaned beside her. "I saw the way he looked at you today." Naina lowered her eyes. "He notices every little thing about you." She said nothing. "He carries your bag before you ask. He knows when you're cold. He notices when you stop smiling. He fought four strangers because someone took your pictures." Ira smiled gently. "People don't do that for someone who means nothing."

Naina swallowed. Her heart had begun beating faster. "I don't know what I feel."

Ira looked at her knowingly. "I think you do."

Naina remained quiet.

"I also think..." Ira smiled softly. "...you've started looking at him the same way."

Naina didn't deny it. Because for the first time, she wasn't sure she could.

An hour later, the group gathered once again in the hotel lobby. The evening breeze carried the scent of rain as they drove towards Tapkeshwar Temple. Unlike the noisy atmosphere from the morning, this journey felt peaceful. The temple rested quietly beside a stream, surrounded by ancient trees and echoes of temple bells.

Before entering, Naina unfolded the soft cream scarf she had bought from a small shop outside. As she covered her head, one corner slipped free. She tried again. It slipped once more. Without a word, Ved stepped closer.

"May I?" She nodded. Carefully, he adjusted the scarf, making sure it framed her face properly before tucking the loose edge over her shoulder.

"There." She smiled. "Thank you. It suits you."

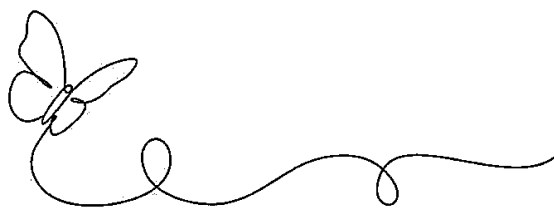
For a brief moment, neither of them moved. Then the ringing of temple bells gently brought them back to reality. Together they walked inside, folded their hands before Lord Shiva, and offered flowers, sacred water, and prasad in quiet prayer. Neither of them asked for anything aloud. Yet both silently wished for a happiness they were too afraid to name.

Coming out of the temple, a loud voice shattered the moment. "Guys! Group picture!" Within seconds everyone gathered near the temple entrance. Someone insisted on funny poses. Someone blinked every single time. Someone complained about sunlight. The result was dozens of imperfect photographs, and perfect memories.

They went back to the hotel, had dinner, and slept off. **Some days test how well two people fit together not through grand declarations, but through the small, quiet choices made when no one is asking for them: a bag**

carried without being asked, a hand offered on uneven ground, a photograph deleted without a second thought. Dehradun didn't just show Naina the mountains. It showed her exactly who Ved was when it mattered most.





Chapter 12

Rishikesh



The first ray of sunlight had barely touched the mountains when Rishikesh began to wake.

Mist floated lazily above the emerald-green Ganga, wrapping the river in a dreamlike haze. The air was crisp enough to make everyone pull their jackets closer, while distant temple bells echoed through the valley, blending with the soothing rush of the river. The mountains stood like silent guardians on either side, watching thousands of stories unfold every single day. Some came here searching for peace. Some for adventure. Some to heal. And some, without knowing it, were about to fall in love.

At nine in the morning, everyone assembled near the river. The sound of the Ganga was louder than anything else white water crashed against the rocks while colourful rafts floated near the shore. Everyone was excited. Everyone, except Naina, who stopped several feet away from the water.

"I'm not going," she said.

Rohan laughed. "You haven't even worn the life jacket."

"I don't care." She folded her arms. "I'm scared."

Ved walked over. "So?"

"So, I'm not coming."

He smiled. "You know what's funny? The people who are scared usually enjoy it the most."

"I won't."

"You will."

"I'll drown."

"You won't."

"What if I fall into the river?"

"I'll catch you."

"What if I drift away?"

"I'll pull you back."

"What if the raft goes too far?"

Without hesitation, he answered, "I'll swim."

She stared at him. "And then?"

"I'll take you to the nearest rock."

"And then?"

"I'll help you climb onto it."

"And you?"

"I'll stay in the water."

She blinked. "Why would you do that?"

He smiled as though the answer was obvious. "Like Romeo."

She frowned. "What?"

He looked straight into her eyes. "Romeo would've done the same for Juliet."

For the first time that morning, she forgot to be afraid. The river continued roaring behind them, the cold breeze dancing

through her hair, and she searched his face for a joke. There wasn't one, only quiet sincerity. Her voice softened. "...Why?" The question lingered between them. Ved looked at her for a long moment. There were a hundred answers fighting to escape *because I can't watch anything happen to you, because your fear matters to me, because somewhere between endless conversations and accidental smiles, you became important.* But none of those words left his lips. Instead, he simply extended his hand toward her, his eyes never leaving hers.

"Come." No explanation. No confession. Just one word, one hand, and a promise that, somehow, felt safer than the life jacket she was wearing.

"Everyone, wear your helmets properly!" the instructor shouted. The group gathered around the brightly coloured rafts while guides explained the safety instructions. "If anyone falls into the river, don't panic. Lie on your back, feet facing downstream. Trust your life jacket."

Naina wasn't listening. She was staring at the furious current, and the water looked anything but peaceful, crashing against the rocks with enough force to make her stomach twist. "I can't do this," she whispered. "I'm serious."

Ira nudged her shoulder. "You'll be fine."

"I won't."

"You will."

"Ira... I'll literally die." "You literally won't."

Naina swallowed hard. She had never been afraid of water. She was afraid of losing control. The instructor pointed toward the raft. "Come on!" Everyone climbed in excitedly, except Naina, who remained rooted to the spot.

Ved noticed immediately and jumped out of the raft before anyone could stop him. "You coming?"

She shook her head. "No."

He looked at the river, then back at her. "Are you scared of the water... or scared that something might happen?"

She didn't answer, because it was the second one. Ved smiled softly, and without saying another word, he climbed back into the raft and shifted his seat, deliberately choosing the place right beside hers. Then he looked at her and extended his hand.

"Now?"

She looked at his hand, then at his face. "...You're not leaving my side?"

"Not even for a second."

"What if I panic?"

"You'll panic."

"What if I scream?"

"You definitely will."

"What if I cry?"

"I'll pretend not to notice."

A tiny smile escaped her lips. "And..."

He leaned a little closer. "...if you fall into the river," his voice becomes unusually gentle,

"...don't look for the raft."

She frowned. "Look for me."

Something inside her quietly settled. She placed her trembling hand in his, only for a second just enough courage to climb inside.

The raft drifted away from the shore, and the current caught it instantly. Within seconds they were floating through one of the most beautiful landscapes Naina had ever seen. The Ganga shimmered beneath the morning sun like liquid crystal, dense forests covered the mountains, and white sandy beaches appeared between giant rocks. Colourful cafés overlooked the river from distant cliffs, monkeys watched

tourists from tree branches, and suspension bridges stretched across the valley like ribbons in the sky.

"This," Naina whispered, "is beautiful."

Ved looked at her instead of the scenery. "I know."

"Forward!" Everyone paddled together, water splashing everywhere, laughter echoing across the river. The raft bounced over gentle waves before entering its first rapid. The guide grinned. "Ready?" Nobody was.

The raft plunged downward. Everyone screamed as cold water exploded across their faces. Naina instinctively grabbed the nearest thing she could find Ved's hand holding it so tightly that he almost laughed.

"I've got you," he said.

The rapid ended, the raft steadied, and only then did she realize she was still holding his hand. Embarrassed, she quickly let go. "Sorry."

"It's okay." He flexed his fingers dramatically. "I think they'll survive."

She couldn't help laughing. The second rapid was bigger, much bigger. The raft tilted sharply to one side, and before anyone could react, three people fell into the freezing river including Naina. The icy water swallowed her whole, and for one terrifying second, everything disappeared. The noise, the raft, the sky. Then she remembered: don't panic, feet forward. She floated back to the surface, and before fear could return, a familiar hand reached her.

"I told you," Ved smiled. "You looked for me."

She hadn't even realized she had. She grabbed his hand without thinking, and the guide pulled both of them back into the raft. Everyone burst into laughter. Naina pushed wet hair away from her face. "I hate you."

"No, you don't."

"...No," she laughed. "I don't."

By the third rapid, something had changed. She wasn't scared anymore. Every time the raft bounced, she laughed.

Every time icy water splashed across her face, she laughed louder. Every time she lost her balance, her hand automatically found Ved's not because she needed help, but because somewhere inside, she believed that if she slipped, he would never let her disappear beneath the water. And strangely, that belief was enough.

When the rafting finally ended, everyone climbed onto the sandy shore completely soaked. "I can't feel my hands!" Rohan complained. "My soul has left my body," Kabir added dramatically, and everyone laughed. Naina looked toward the river one last time. The same river that had terrified her an hour ago had now become her favourite memory.

After changing into dry clothes, they met again at a small riverside café for brunch, hot aloo parathas, steaming masala chai, fresh fruit, laughter, and endless teasing, every conversation somehow ending with someone making fun of the way Naina had screamed during the first rapid.

"It wasn't a scream," she protested.

"It sounded like one."

"It was a survival strategy."

Ved nodded thoughtfully. "It scared the river." Everyone burst into laughter again.

The rest of the afternoon belonged to Rishikesh. They wandered through narrow lanes where every corner seemed to tell a different story. Tiny shops overflowed with rudraksha beads, silver jewellery, handmade journals, and colourful dreamcatchers dancing in the breeze. The fragrance of incense mixed with the aroma of fresh jalebis frying nearby, street musicians played soft bhajans, and foreign travellers sat cross-

legged outside cafés, sipping coffee and watching life move slowly. They visited quiet temples hidden between old stone staircases, offered prayers, rang the giant brass bells, and sat for a while without speaking. There was something about Rishikesh that never demanded silence. It simply created it.

By late afternoon, the serious pilgrims transformed into excited tourists. "I want gola!" Ira announced. "No, kulfi first!" Rohan argued. "No!" Kabir pointed dramatically. "Chaat!" Within ten minutes everyone had something different in their hands: orange baraf ka gola dripping down their fingers, creamy kesar pista kulfi, crispy aloo tikki chaat loaded with chutneys, spicy golgappas, sweet jalebis. No one shared. Everyone stole from everyone else's plate.

Naina carefully took one bite of her kulfi. Ved appeared beside her. "Can I taste it?"

She narrowed her eyes. "You have your own."

"I know."

"Then?"

"I just want yours."

She sighed dramatically before breaking off a tiny piece.

"This much."

He looked offended. "I'm not a squirrel."

She laughed and handed him the whole kulfi. "Happy?"

He took one bite. "Much better." Then, without warning, he held it back toward her. "Your turn." Their fingers brushed for the briefest moment, and heat rushed to her cheeks. No one noticed except Ira, who smiled to herself. Again.

As the sun slowly began to disappear behind the mountains, the entire city seemed to move toward one place, Triveni Ghat. The evening Ganga Aarti wasn't just a ritual. It was an emotion. Hundreds of people sat quietly along the steps facing the river, children, saints, travellers, locals, foreigners, all

waiting together. The first conch shell echoed through the air, then another, then the rhythmic chanting began. "Har Har Gange..." Priests dressed in saffron lifted enormous brass lamps, moving them in perfect synchronization, thousands of flames dancing against the darkening sky. The scent of camphor and incense drifted across the river, the bells rang together, the chants grew louder, and somehow the entire city breathed as one.

Naina sat on the stone steps without saying a word, watching the golden reflections shimmer across the flowing Ganga. She had never seen anything so peaceful, and without realizing it, she folded her hands. Beside her, Ved wasn't looking at the aarti at all. He was looking at the way the flickering lamps reflected in her eyes, as if the river itself had left a little light inside them.

She turned suddenly and caught him staring. "What?"

He blinked. "Hm?"

"You've been looking at me."

"I have?"

"Yes."

He smiled, completely unbothered. "I was."

She raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

He looked at the river, then back at her. "Some views are worth missing another view for."

For a second, the chants faded, the bells disappeared, and even the river seemed quieter. Naina looked away, hiding the smile that refused to leave her lips. Far away, tiny diyas floated down the Ganga, carrying prayers into the night. Neither of them knew it yet, but somewhere between the rapids, the shared laughter, a stolen bite of kulfi, and the glow of the evening aarti, they had stopped becoming two people on the

same trip. They had quietly begun becoming each other's safest place.

The night had settled gently over Rishikesh. Kabir stretched dramatically. "I don't want to go back."

Rohan nodded in agreement. "Same."

"I'm officially resigning from adulthood."

Everyone laughed. "Resigning from what?" Ira teased. "You were never employed."

Kabir placed a hand over his heart. "That was personal." Laughter echoed across the ghat before fading into the sound of the flowing river.

For a while, everyone simply watched the water. The Ganga flowed with the same calm certainty as it had centuries ago, carrying prayers, hopes, and memories without asking anyone to hold on.

"I think," Naina spoke quietly, her eyes fixed on the river,

"I understand now."

Everyone turned toward her. "Understand what?"

"Why do people come here again and again." She smiled faintly. "It isn't just a place." She looked at the mountains fading into the darkness. "It's a feeling. There are cities that entertain you, and then there are places that somehow make you quieter."

Ved glanced at her. "And lighter."

She looked at him. "Yes. Lighter."

A comfortable silence settled between them not awkward, not uncertain, just comfortable, the kind that only exists between people who don't feel the need to constantly speak.

The breeze grew stronger, and Naina rubbed her palms together. Without a word, Ved quietly removed the light hoodie tied around his waist and placed it beside her. She looked down, then at him. "Aren't you cold?"

"I'll survive."

She smiled. "I didn't ask if you'd survive." "I know."

"Then?"

He shrugged. "I've realized you get cold before everyone else."

She looked at the hoodie for a moment before wearing it. It was slightly oversized, the sleeves covering half her hands, carrying the faint scent of his perfume mixed with the freshness of the river. She pulled the sleeves over her fingers.

"Thank you." He only nodded.

Across from them, Ira noticed everything, again. She looked at Rohan with a knowing smile, and Rohan followed her gaze, then looked at Ved and Naina, a grin slowly spreading across his face.

"So," he said loudly enough for everyone to hear, "who's coming on the next trip?"

Kabir immediately raised both hands. "Me. I'll come if someone else pays."

"Obviously."

"What about you, Naina?" Rohan asked innocently.

She smiled. "If everyone comes, I'll come too."

"And Ved?"

Ved looked toward the river. "I'm fine wherever the group goes."

Kabir smirked. "Liar."

"What?"

"The group. We all know which member of the group you're talking about." Everyone burst into laughter, even Ira couldn't stop herself.

Ved shook his head. "You people seriously need hobbies."

"We have one," Kabir answered proudly. "What?"

"Teasing you." Another round of laughter erupted. Naina looked down, hiding the smile threatening to escape. She didn't defend him. She didn't deny anything. And strangely, that made everyone tease them even more.

Nearly an hour later, before leaving, Naina turned around one last time. The river continued flowing beneath the moonlight, the bells still echoed faintly from distant temples, and the mountains stood quietly in the darkness, exactly as they had welcomed them. She closed her eyes for a brief second. *Thank you. Not for anything specific. Just... Thank you.* When she opened them again, Ved was standing a few steps ahead, waiting.

"You coming?"

She nodded. "Yeah."

Together, they climbed the stone steps leading away from the ghat. Neither of them realized that sometimes the hardest part of traveling isn't reaching a place. It's leaving it.

The drive back to Delhi began a little after nine. Everyone claimed their seats with sleepy complaints, and within fifteen minutes, the car became unusually quiet. Kabir was the first to fall asleep, his head dropping dramatically onto Rohan's shoulder.

"Get off."

"No."

"I'm serious."

"So am I."

"You weigh like an elephant."

"I'm emotionally lightweight." Ira laughed so hard that tears filled her eyes. Eventually, even Rohan gave up. "Fine. But if you drool on my jacket, we're no longer friends." Five minutes later, Kabir was snoring.

The highway stretched endlessly ahead, the mountains slowly disappearing behind them, Rishikesh's cool breeze replaced by

the warmer night air of the plains. Music played softly through the speakers old Bollywood songs, the kind everyone somehow knew. Some sang, some hummed, some simply watched the lights pass by outside the window.

Naina rested her head against the glass, the exhaustion of the trip finally catching up with her, and her eyes slowly closed. A sudden speed breaker jolted the car, and her head hit the window lightly. Before she could settle again, Ved quietly folded his jacket and placed it between the glass and her head. She opened her eyes. "You'll need this more than I do," he whispered.

She looked at the jacket, then at him. "Thank you." He smiled. "Sleep." This time, she did.

The road stretched endlessly into the night. The laughter had faded, the conversations had ended, and only the rhythm of the moving car remained. Outside, the distance between Rishikesh and Delhi kept increasing. Inside, without either of them realizing it, the distance between two hearts had become smaller than ever before.

By the time the skyline of Delhi appeared in the distance, the sky had already begun changing its colours. The mountains were long gone, the fresh scent of pine replaced by the familiar smell of the city traffic, rain-soaked roads, roadside tea stalls opening for the morning, and the endless rhythm of people returning to their lives. The car, however, had grown unusually quiet. The trip that had started with loud music, endless arguments over playlists, and constant laughter was now ending in sleepy silence.

Kabir was still asleep. Rohan had given up trying to wake him. "I swear," he muttered while driving, "this man could sleep through an earthquake."

"I heard that," Kabir replied without even opening his eyes. Everyone laughed. "Then get up." "No."

Delhi welcomed them with its usual chaos cars honking impatiently, street vendors arranging fresh fruits on their carts, people hurrying toward metro stations with steaming cups of chai in their hands. Life had already resumed, as if nothing had changed. Only they knew everything.

"Girls first." Rohan turned the car toward the apartment complex where Ira and Naina lived.

The familiar gates came into view, and for the first time since leaving Rishikesh, reality hit. The trip was over. The car stopped. Nobody moved immediately.

"So," Kabir finally spoke, "that's it."

Ira smiled softly. "Until the next trip."

"Hopefully soon."

Everyone climbed out to help with the luggage. Ved silently lifted Naina's backpack from the trunk before she could reach for it.

"I can carry it," she said.

"I know."

"Then why are you carrying it?"

He shrugged. "Because I already picked it up."

She smiled. "There goes my independence."

"It'll survive."

They walked together toward the entrance of the building, the morning breeze playing with the loose strands of her hair. Neither of them spoke. Sometimes silence had begun to say more than words ever could.

At the gate, Rohan stretched dramatically. "Mission completed."

"Everyone alive?"

"Barely," Kabir yawned.

Ira laughed. "Thanks for the trip. It was worth every second." Group hugs followed, promises of meeting again, arguments about who would upload the pictures first, plans that everyone knew would probably change a hundred times the kind of goodbye that never really felt like one.

Naina turned toward Ved. "Thank you."

He looked confused. "For what?"

She smiled. "For... everything." The rafting. The scarf. The quiet conversations. The jacket. The hand she had never asked for but always found whenever she needed it. She didn't say any of that aloud. She didn't have to. He understood anyway.

His smile softened. "Anytime."

For a brief second, neither of them moved. Then Ira called from behind, "Naina!"

"Hm?"

"We're going?"

She blinked, almost forgetting everyone else was still standing there. "Yeah... coming." She picked up her bag, walked a few steps, then turned around. Ved was still standing beside the car. He lifted his hand in a small wave. She smiled back, and disappeared inside the building.

The moment the apartment door closed behind them, Ira threw herself dramatically onto the sofa. "I am officially dead."

Naina laughed. "So dramatic."

"My legs don't belong to me anymore."

"They didn't belong to you during rafting either." Both of them burst into laughter. Their apartment suddenly felt too quiet after two days filled with voices. Naina placed her backpack beside her bed. The room looked exactly as she had left it. But somehow, she didn't feel like the same person who had packed that bag two days ago.

Meanwhile, Rohan started the car again. "Next stop, our apartment." Kabir was already asleep again. "I give up," Rohan sighed, and Ved chuckled. The roads were quieter now. Within twenty minutes they reached their apartment building, and everyone dragged their bags upstairs. The moment Kabir entered the flat, he dropped onto the couch. "I'm not moving." "No one asked you to," Rohan replied, disappearing into his room.

Ved walked into his own room, placed his backpack near the wardrobe, and finally exhaled. The silence felt unfamiliar. For two days there had always been someone talking, someone laughing, someone calling his name. Now there was only the ticking of the wall clock.

He picked up his phone to put it on charge. The screen lit up. A new message. From Naina.

Reached?

A smile appeared on his face before he even realized it.

He unlocked the phone.

Ved: Yeah. Just got home... three minutes ago.

The typing indicator appeared almost instantly, then disappeared, then appeared again. He waited. *Naina: Good.*

Another pause.

Naina: Take some rest.

He stared at those three words for a moment longer than necessary. Simple, ordinary, yet they carried a warmth he couldn't explain. His fingers moved across the keyboard.

Ved: You too.

A few seconds later, her reply came.

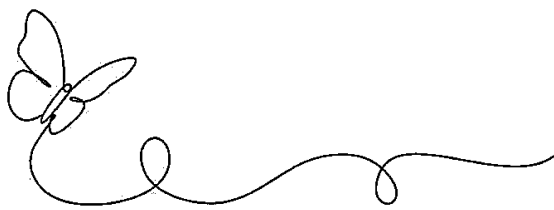
Naina: I will.

Neither of them sent another message. There was nothing left to say. Because sometimes, knowing the other person had reached home safely was enough.

The trip had ended. The roads had separated. But for the first time, both of them smiled at their phones for the exact same reason.

Some chapters of love don't begin with a confession, they begin quietly, in a raft, in a shared kulfi, in a borrowed jacket, in a simple text that says "Reached?" This one was never about Rishikesh. It was about two people who went looking for an adventure and came back having found each other instead.





Chapter 13

The Quiet That Waited



Life refused to pause. Just when Naina had started finding a small, honest peace inside herself, another storm arrived not heartbreak this time, but deadlines, sleepless nights, and semester exams that demanded every spare breath. The campus changed overnight:

laughter retreated to quiet corners, corridors that once held idle gossip felt hushed, and the canteen that had been a refuge for hours-long chai sessions emptied as students melted into libraries and study rooms. Group chats that used to be full of memes and dumb plans now revolve around a single ritualistic question “Kitna syllabus hua?” and even that sounded tired.

Naina’s room surrendered to the siege: sticky notes like tiny paper flags claimed every surface, highlighters bled neon across margins, open books formed impossible canyons, rough notebooks bore the ghosts of equations, and half-forgotten coffee mugs stood like small witnesses. Ved watched

the metamorphosis with the kind of quiet amusement that comes from loving someone through their chaos. The girl who had once replied to his messages within seconds now disappeared for hours. When she answered it was always practical and apologetic “Sorry... I was studying,” or “Call after an hour?” That hour folded into three, then, but he never complained. He offered constancy: every morning a short cheer Best of luck, topper; every afternoon a check-in Paper kaisa gaya? every night the same domestic commandments Eat. Sleep. Revise. Repeat. Don’t overthink. They were simple lines, but like a steady metronome, they became the calmest thing in her day.

After work he’d often stay on video while she studied, not to talk but to be present two silhouettes sharing a screen, two lives continuing side by side. She mouthed formulas; he wrestled with spreadsheets. He’d glance up and say, “Water.” She’d reach. An hour later, “Dinner.” “I’m not hungry.” “I wasn’t asking.” She called him bossy. He blamed Ira. When Ira chimed in from the kitchen “My influence is unmatched” they all laughed and folded themselves back into the rhythm of small cares. Exams make days blur into one another: wake up, revise, write, return, repeat. And then, without fanfare, the final paper arrived and Naina walked out of the exam hall into a sky so blue it felt like a promise. For the first time in weeks, there wasn’t another chapter to swallow.

Her phone buzzed Ved: Congratulations. The nation is proud of your survival. Her laugh spilled out. Naina: I deserve a holiday. Ved: Approved. Announcement of the semester break felt like a collective exhale. Suitcases rolled, promises of holiday plans floated, and Naina, folding the last shirt into her bag, looked at the apartment that had held her as if it were a map of herself. She zipped the case, locked the door, and said softly, “See you soon,” not just to the apartment but to

the city that had quietly stitched itself into her story. Ved wanted to drop them at the railway station. He had meant to. But life had other things an unexpected investigation, a mountain of files, meetings that refused to end. At 5:42 p.m., his phone buzzed: Naina: We're leaving. He typed, Ved: I'm so sorry... I tried. Three dots blinked, stalled, and finally Naina: I know. Don't worry. We'll meet after the break. She hadn't accused him, and that nonchalance pressed on him like a small, sensible guilt.

The train eased away from the platform, and Delhi folded slowly out of view behind passing buildings. Naina stood by the door until the city's edges blurred. She unlocked her phone and saw one unread message: Ved: Text me when you reach home. Her lips curved without thought. Someone, somewhere, had decided they would wait for her to reach home safely. She teased him: Naina: Only if you promise you'll have dinner on time. Ved: Bossy. Naina:

Learned from Ira. Ira, nestled in the berth opposite, said, "Are you blaming me again?" and Naina laughed, "Always." The train carried them through the night; lights smeared by like brushstrokes; station names glanced off the glass. Every so often Naina checked her phone, smiled at a short message, and locked it again. Some conversations are a soft pulse rather than a flood "Reached?" carrying more gravity than a love letter.

Their hometown station was a different kind of music families calling names, the warm press of reunion hugs, the familiar scent of evening air. Her mother waved before the suitcase was even settled in her hand and wrapped her in an embrace that felt like being folded back into a favourite sweater. "My baccha..." Her father's quiet smile and the way he took the suitcase said everything he didn't voice. Ira vanished into her own family's questions; for a moment everything fit like it

always had: comfortable, familiar, a home that knew her shape.

At dinner the house grew loud in a way that made Naina's chest feel full. Her mother fretted that she'd lost weight. Her father launched into stories about professors and hostels. Her little cousin, like a tiny thief of moments, pinched food from her plate. Between the noise her eyes kept drifting to her phone lying harmless and patient beside her plate. That small screen had quietly become a measure of presence.

Miles away, Ved sat back in his office chair with the city lights humming below. Files closed, meetings ended, the building hollowed out. He checked his phone with no messages and told himself she must be with family. The dismissal was a thin comfort. He kept checking. Time stretched. The last line in the chat. Text me when you reach home and remain unread. Missing someone crept up like a small, insistent ache; it had very little to do with distance and everything to do with the absence of everydayness. He whispered quietly, "Enjoy your holidays, Naina..." and placed the phone face down, not knowing that the small ritual had already become a kind of prayer.

The next morning, she woke without alarms, without the sharpness of schedules. One eye opened, she saw the clock, and for the first time in months she ceded the morning to herself and slid the blanket back over her head. Breakfast arrived like an offering, aloo parathas glistening with butter, fresh curd, homemade pickle, and a glass of lassi parents fussing like affectionate storms. Her grandmother, emissary of every childhood comfort, called her to sit and let her hair be massaged, the warm oil spreading through her scalp like a slow remedy. "You're working too hard," dadi murmured. "Don't think so much. And eat properly." Naina fell asleep under

that steady, untidy love; her grandmother laughed softly and smoothed her hair like she was rearranging a life.

The afternoon dissolved into delicious inertia: naps long enough to stitch up tired edges and no obligations to break the seam. By evening the lane filled with its old soundtrack kids playing cricket, neighbours calling from balconies, the smell of pakoras curling up through the windows. Naina slid out to the balcony, stretched, and noticed a black SUV under the neem tree. For a dizzy second, she thought of Ved's car suddenly ridiculously specific in her mind then dismissed it. Black SUVs, she told herself, are common. It drove away and she watched it go, telling herself a million small sensible things.

Dinner was a cacophony of stories and corrections and laughter, the kind that leaves your stomach sore from smiling. She excused herself early, humming, and climbed the stairs to the dim corridor light. Her key turned, the door pushed then she stopped. Ved stood in the balcony doorway like a private constellation, one hand raised over his mouth, shushing her with a look that was equal parts apology and grin. "Shhh."

Something in her chest unclenched at once the tightness of months, the tiny quotidian holes left when someone is missing like a knot being loosened by a careful hand. "What" she whispered, words folding into a question. "How did you get here?" He pointed to the balcony. "Your door was open." "You climbed up?" "There are stairs to the terrace." She blinked. "You are actually insane." He smiled like someone who'd gladly be accused of that. "I've heard that before." "Ved!" "If someone sees you." "They won't." "You don't know that." "My dad will literally." "I know." She shoved him lightly. "You have to leave. Now." He didn't move. "Ved." Silence hummed, full and waiting. She exhaled, "Why are you so stubborn?" He looked at her like someone studying

constellations and answered, simply, "Because I missed you." The words were a small, naked thing with four syllables that landed and warmed the air between them. "I missed you too," she admitted before she could edit herself. The confession felt less like falling and more like unhooking a heavy coat, something long held became liftable. When she stepped into his arms it wasn't dramatic or desperate. It was careful, the way you settle a sleeping child into bed; she fit against him like a key in a lock, and for the first time in months her body obeyed something her head had insisted it couldn't. Ved's hands came up along her back, not clutching but cradling, fingers splayed as if to map every centimetre like he wanted to memorize the place where her shoulder met her neck. There was no rush; there was a slow, soundless cataloguing of small details: the soft inhale of her hair scent, the warmth at the base of her throat, the slight hitch when she relaxed.

His chest was steady under her forehead an unhurried drum and she let her heartbeat sync to it. The pressure of his arms was an honest geography: it suggested safety without suffocation. Her shoulders, which had carried the semester's weight like a stoic thing, folded forward and melted as if heat had been applied right where she had been tense. Muscles that had been a taut for weeks loosened like ropes finally untied. Her body softened and her limbs uncurling felt like a visible thing; fingers slackened, jaw unclenched, and the breath that left her was not empty but whole. Her spine settled into him, and with that small physical decision her soul, which had been weary and wary for months, exhaled and rested.

Ved's face tilted down, his cheek resting against her hair, and his breathing smoothed to the same rhythm she had adopted unconsciously. He pressed his forehead to the crown of her head a tiny, private benediction and murmured nothing. Words would have been greedy there. The quiet held

impressions: the faint, honest scent of soap and rain; the soft brush of his stubble against her temple; the near-silent rustle of his breath. For a long minute, the world narrowed to the circumference of their bodies. The room stayed the same, the moon the same pale witness, but within that circle something recalibrated. Naina's eyes, which had been tired and sleep lined, filled with a slow, liquid peace.

He shifted slightly, his fingers tracing circles at the small of her back, each rotation a punctuation that read stay. She felt cherished in acts rather than speech: the thumb that found the hollow under her ear and lingered, the small nudge of his nose against her temple like a punctuation mark, the way his palm rested against the spine of her ribs as if to anchor her inside the moment. When she moved closer, forehead to chest, his hand rose to cup her face, not to steady but to show a tenderness that made everything else feel peripheral. The contact was private and electric; heat moved through her like a current, small and intimate, and her cheeks warmed until she felt flushed and weightless at once.

"You don't belong here anymore," he said softly against her hair, not as a command but a promise. The sentence folded into her like a hymn. It didn't erase old fears; it simply offered a place where they no longer had to be carried. She let out a sound that was half laugh, half sob, and felt answered in the squeeze of his arms. Later, in the safe hush that follows a storm, small gestures took on loud meanings: the sunflower, clutched and weathered, tucked between two joined hands; the brush of his thumb along the back of her hand as if sealing a secret agreement.

They didn't need to catalogue feelings aloud. Missing someone, she realized as she fit into his hold, is a low, constant hunger. Being held again is letting that hunger dissolve into contentment. Her body, which had been a drum of tiny

anxieties, slowed; her soul, for the first time since months of study and retention, felt like it could sleep. That strange paradox that the person you miss can simultaneously make your limbs relax while your spirit takes flight arrived fully then: her limbs surrendered, heavy and relieved, and her heart felt buoyant, as if it might lift off the mattress and hover, safe and bright.

At one point, with gentle humour, she whispered, "You secretly came to my house." "I drove here," he admitted. "You lied to your office." "I did." "You climbed into my room like a criminal." "I prefer 'romantic visitor.'" She laughed breathlessly. "I can't believe you." "I know." He reached into his jacket and drew out the sunflower petals rumpled, stem bowed, but stubbornly alive. He said, "I bought this before leaving Delhi." She held it like a relic. "Why didn't you give it to me then?" "Because I wanted it to reach you with me." It was a small theatricality, and it made her both smile and ache. She leaned in, forehead against him, and realized how fully the mundane had become sacrament: the touch of a thumb, the heat of breath, the clipped silences that meant more than declarations.

A tear escaped her eye; it felt unplanned and honest. He noticed, as he always did, and gently tucked a stray hair behind her ear, an action so small it could have been invisible, but to her it felt like the most careful of promises. "You've been tired," he murmured. "How do you know?" she asked. "The smile reaches your lips," he said, "but it hasn't reached your eyes today." The observation was intimate and true; it made something in her loosen further.

"I missed you," she whispered again. He smiled like someone given the entire sky. "I know." She shook her head, ridiculous and helpless. "No... I don't think you do." Tears tracked down, quick and hot. "I kept reaching for my phone today to

tell you random things. Mummy made my favourite breakfast; dadi gave me a champi; I saw a black SUV and for a second, I thought you'd come." She laughed wetly, embarrassed at the confession. He shook his head, grave and patient. "You weren't being stupid." His certainty was a small, stubborn anthem. "No." "I wasn't."

She finally closed the remaining distance and rested her forehead against his chest. The sound of his heart was now a slow, steady anchor; it pulled out the thin, fraying threads of her worries. He wrapped his arms around her again, slower this time, as if to press the moment into memory. She breathed in, felt his heartbeat under her cheek, and knew in her bones what words wouldn't have captured: that missing someone was not a hollow ache now but the lead-up to this shelter, where body and soul found different kinds of rests one easing into sleep, the other soaring with the relief of being chosen.

"You know what I realised?" she whispered into the warmth. "Hm?" "I spent so much of my life waiting for someone to fight for me." Her voice was small and naked. She lifted her face. "I never imagined someone would simply... show up." Ved rested his cheek against her hair. "There was never anywhere else I wanted to be." She closed her eyes and let those words gather like a soft tide. People arrive with vows, with poetry, with fireworks. Then, once in a lifetime, someone arrives after a four-hour drive, carrying a slightly crushed sunflower and asking only for one honest moment. Maybe that's why the heart trusts actions more than language because actions, repeated and quiet, become safe maps you can return to. That night, in the hush of her childhood room and under the thin watch of the moon, they chose each other again. She felt both light and grounded body softened into comfort, soul

finally allowed to rest and in that, stillness they became, in the smallest of ways, home.

The next fifteen days unfurled like a gentle tide. Naina slept without alarms and rose to the sound of parathas sizzling; the house filled with small, improvisational rituals that had nothing to do with schedules and everything to do with slow attention. She sat beside her grandmother as the same stories rolled out with the comfortable cadence of lullabies, helped her mother in the kitchen until she was shooed away with affectionate scolds, and walked the old lanes with her father, who greeted every passerby with the affectionate ease of a man who had watched a neighbourhood grow. They stopped at the chai stall where the vendor already knew their orders, argued good-naturedly over which samosa stall held the town's honour, and lingered over cups that steamed until they cooled. Even the small embarrassments her cousin was stealing from her plate, an aunt inventing a new excuse to fuss felt like stitches mending the frayed edges of months spent away.

Home's small ceremonies arrived in thickets: her grandmother's champi that smelled of oil and cardamom and made sleep arrive like an old friend; her mother stuffing laddoos into secret pockets of the suitcase despite protests; her father insisting on evening walks and retelling the same stories but with tiny new details, as if memory itself kept updating to make space for her. The dinner table became loud and generous, full of interruptions and replays; jokes landed heavier and made her chest ache in that domestic way that meant belonging. She let the phone go face down more often, learned the pleasure of being accounted for in a household that expected her at the table, and felt something in her loosen that had been knotted by months of being on edge.

When the day came to leave, farewell felt exactly like every family departure she had ever known: practical, ritualised, and quietly fierce. Her mother gripped her hand and ran through the litany “Eat. Call. Take care” the words said as if they could hold back any misstep. Her father, who carried the luggage as if trying to buy time, offered a softer “I will miss you.” Her grandmother, ever the mixture of blessing and tease, pinched her cheek and said, “Don’t cry after reaching.” At the platform, hugs were longer, voices softer, and as the train pulled out Naina watched the lane she’d grown up in fold away beneath gutters and mango trees. Delhi waited ahead like a second breath she had to remember how to take.

Arriving in Delhi felt like returning to a familiar song but in a new key. The city’s noise honks, chatter, the constant shuffle welcomed her, but there was an undertow of intimacy too: the cafe that made her favourite chai, the rickshaw driver who knew exactly which turn to take. Ira met her at the station and the hug they shared carried the relief of two people who had been on separate islands and suddenly found a bridge. The flat smelled like itself: dust on the table, fairy lights still draped over the balcony. They unpacked with the private efficiency of people who knew which mug belonged to whom; music started, cupboards were rearranged, and the silence of the empty flat vanished under the noise of two friends reacquainting themselves with a shared life.

That evening, because some small rituals are tender anchors, she called home. “I’ve reached,” she told her mother. “We’re home,” her mother laughed, and in the tiny exchange the distance thinned. Her mother’s voice asked practical questions: are you hungry, have you eaten while her father’s softer tone threaded in a careful reminder to be safe. The call was short and regular and ordinary and felt like the house had sent a little line of light to follow her back into the city. Those

calls arrived later like a pulse: a message saying, “Reached?” with a string of heart emojis, a video of her mother showing off a new pickle recipe, a voice note from her father that said nothing urgent but made the air on her side of the world steadier.

Ved’s presence threaded itself through these days in small, domestic stitches: a “Good morning” text before breakfast, photos of her grandmother’s cooking, video calls where her mother would steal the phone just to interrogate him about whether he was eating properly. Her father started to smile whenever Ved’s name lit the screen; her grandmother asked about his health as if he had always been part of the family roster. The ease of his appearing in the margins of her life made the break feel less like a pause and more like a warm, steady punctuation.

Back at Ved’s office the ordinary things that had always made up his days rearranged themselves around a small, relentless fact. He opened a single brown envelope with his name on it and read the words that sent a quiet tremor through the room: Transfer order Mumbai. Reporting office next week. Phones continued to ring, colleagues continued to laugh, but the paper sat between him and the hum of the office like a small, immovable certainty. That evening he said yes to coffee with Naina even as the paper felt heavier and heavier in his drawer. Life had turned a page for him without asking whether he was ready to close the chapter.

They met the next morning after rain had washed the city clean. Ved had been there early; the coffee he held was no longer warm but his fingers remained curled around the cup like a man holding onto more than a beverage. Naina’s smile found him and then faltered the kind of attention that is noticed when a smile doesn’t quite meet the eyes. He slid the

transfer letter across the table and she read it as if someone else had typed the words. Mumbai.

Next week. The noise of the café spoons, a barista's call muted into the background. She said, quietly, "Oh." Her voice held everything: surprise, a hollow memory of earlier endings, and the sharp sense of change. Ved let her name the pattern she feared: shorter calls, fewer messages, the slow erosion of two people and when she finished, he reached across the table and took her hand. He did not press the paper into her care; he placed his palm over hers and kept his fingers steady.

"Naina..." Ved said softly. She didn't look up. "I know what you're thinking," he continued. She smiled sadly. "No... you don't." "I do," he insisted.

"You think this is how it starts," she said. "The calls become shorter. The messages become fewer. People get busy. They miss one weekend. Then another. And one day..." Her voice cracked before she could finish. "...they become memories." She looked out through the rain-covered glass. "I've lived this once, Ved. I don't know if I can survive it again."

Ved smiled faintly. "I can't promise you that this will be easy. I can't promise work won't become exhausting. I can't promise flights will never get cancelled. I can't promise we won't argue." He laughed softly. "I probably won't even remember every anniversary." That earned the tiniest eye roll from her. "Idiot." "I know," he said, his thumb gently tracing the back of her hand.

"But there is one thing I can promise," he said, looking straight into her eyes. "I will never make you wonder whether I'm choosing you. If Delhi has you, then Delhi will always be home. If I get one free weekend, I'm coming. If I get only one day, I'm still coming. If I get only a few hours, I'll spend them with you. And if life ever makes it impossible, I'll wait for the

next chance. Because love isn't measured by how close two people live. It's measured by how many times they choose each other despite the distance."

A tear escaped before she could stop it. She quickly wiped it away. Ved smiled gently. "No. Let it fall. You've carried enough alone." She lowered her eyes. "What if one day... you stop trying?" Ved shook his head. "Then don't believe my promises." She frowned. "What?" "Believe my footsteps. When the distance becomes difficult, watch me. When work becomes impossible, watch me. When life becomes unfair, watch me. I'll keep finding my way back until distance itself gives up trying to separate us."

She laughed through her tears. "You always know exactly what to say." "No," he said. "I just know exactly what I never want you to feel again." The words settled quietly between them. Comfortably. Safely.

After a while, Ved smiled to himself. "You asked me something once." She frowned. "What?" "Why?" Recognition slowly appeared on her face — the question she had asked months ago, when his feelings first slipped into the silence between them. He had never answered. Until today. "I didn't answer because I wasn't sure whether I had the right," he said, taking a slow breath. "But today... I do."

He looked at her with the kind of certainty that only time, patience, and unwavering love can create. "I don't love you because you're perfect. I love you because every ordinary day becomes extraordinary when you're in it. I dream about you stealing my fries. You are arguing over waffles. You are forcing me to eat golgappas. You laugh so loudly that the entire café turns to look at us. I dream about coming home after exhausting days and finding you telling me stories. I have already heard a hundred times. I dream about growing old

with someone who still sends me reels at two in the morning." He smiled. "I don't want a perfect life. I want a real one. And I want every version of it with you."

Her vision blurred completely. She stood without realizing she had, walked around the table, and stopped in front of him. For a second, they simply looked at each other. She gently held his face. "You know what I realized?" He shook his head. "I spent so long asking myself why Aarav left," she said, a tear rolling down her cheek, "that I never stopped to wonder whether life was making space for someone who was always meant to stay."

Ved's eyes filled. She smiled through her tears. "You never tried to erase my past. You simply loved me until I stopped being afraid of my future." And then she hugged him not because she was scared, not because she was breaking, but because, for the first time in years, she had finally found peace. Ved rested his forehead against hers and smiled. "I don't know which city life will send me, to next. I don't know how many flights we'll have to take. I don't know how many goodbyes railway stations and airports will ask from us. But I know one thing no matter where I go, my favourite journey will always end wherever you're waiting."

Outside, the rain had stopped. The clouds slowly parted, making room for a sky washed clean after the storm. Inside that little café, two people quietly realized that love was never about living in the same city. It was about waking up every day and choosing the same person again, and again, and again. Because some people promise forever because it sounds beautiful. Others simply keep booking the next ticket home. And somehow, that has always sounded more like love.

For the five mornings before his move, they made a deliberate, ridiculous project of being ordinary. Naina bought a small notebook and on the first page wrote, "Our Five-Day Date Checklist. Ved had exactly five days before he had to leave for Mumbai. It didn't seem like enough time. Five days suddenly felt smaller than it ever had, as if the clock had decided to run faster just to be cruel. Naina had been unusually quiet since the transfer was confirmed, and Ved knew why. They had promised each other that they wouldn't spend those days worrying about the distance. If Mumbai was going to take him away for a while, then Delhi would give them memories that neither time nor distance could ever touch.

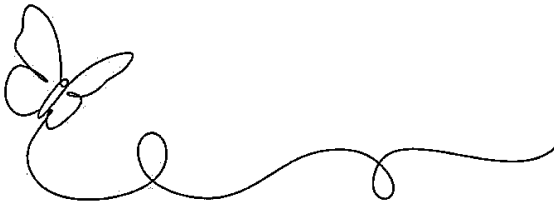
Watch the sunrise together. Go on a long drive. Make pottery. Eat golgappas. Watch a movie. Buy matching keychains. Try food we've never eaten before. Take too many pictures.

Make silly videos. Buy bangles. Dance in the rain if it rains. Sleep after watching a movie. Watch the stars.

Ved read the list and laughed. "You planned all of this?" "No," she said proudly. "We planned it. You just didn't know it yet." He looked at her for a few seconds before closing the notebook and slipping it into his jacket pocket. "Then we don't have a second to waste."

"When footsteps return day after day, distance stops being an absence and becomes a bridge."





Chapter 14

Let's Forget You're Leaving



The next morning, he picked her up before sunrise, and Delhi was still half asleep as they drove through empty roads with the windows cracked open. A slow breeze carried the smell of last night's rain, and the city looked almost unfamiliar in its stillness. Naina plugged her phone into the car and old songs filled the silence, the kind of songs neither of them fully remembered the lyrics to, which didn't stop either of them from singing at full volume anyway. They argued over whose playlist had better taste, laughed every time one of them cracked on a high note, and somewhere in the middle of an off-key duet, their eyes met at a red light and neither of them could stop grinning like idiots.

Ved suddenly pulled over near a roadside tea stall surrounded by mustard fields glowing gold in the early light. "What happened?" Naina asked, sitting up.

"Nothing," he said. "I just thought this sunrise deserved an audience."

They walked into the fields with steaming cups of chai, the warmth seeping into their fingers, dew soaking the edges of their shoes. Naina stood a few steps ahead, watching the horizon turn from grey to amber to gold. Ved never once looked at the sunrise. His eyes stayed fixed on her on the wind pulling strands of hair loose from her braid, on the way the light caught the curve of her cheek and made her look like something out of a memory he hadn't made yet.

"You've been staring at me for five minutes," she said, without turning around.

"I know."

"Aren't you going to watch the sunrise?"

"I've seen plenty of sunrises," he said quietly. "I've never seen this version of you."

She didn't answer. She just ducked her head, but not fast enough to hide the colour rushing to her cheeks, and Ved noticed of course he noticed and pretended not to, which somehow made it worse for her.

On the way back they wandered into Chandni Chowk, weaving through narrow lanes thick with the smell of fried jalebis and the jingle of a hundred bangle shops. Naina drifted from stall to stall, running her fingers over glass bangles and silver jhumkas, pausing longest at a delicate pair of earrings shaped like tiny lotus buds. She smiled to herself, turned them over once in her hand, then quietly set them back down.

Ved noticed that too. "You liked those."

"They're pretty."

"Then why'd you put them back?"

She shrugged, already walking ahead. "I'll get them some other time."

While she was distracted, running her hands along a rack of embroidered dupattas and holding one up against herself in a cracked shop mirror, Ved slipped away. He came back a few minutes later with a paper bag folded neatly at the top, and the most unconvincing look of innocence on his face. "What's that?"

"Nothing."

"Ved."

"Nothing important."

She grabbed the bag before he could stop her, and inside were the same lotus-bud jhumkas, nestled beside a set of green glass bangles that clinked softly against the paper. Her breath caught.

"You weren't supposed to buy these."

"I know."

"They're expensive."

"So?"

"I only said they were *pretty*."

"I remembered something else you said." He took her hand before she could protest, turning her wrist gently in his. "You once told me your grandmother loved the sound of bangles, because it made a house feel alive."

He slid one bangle onto her wrist, then another, then another, until the whole set sat against her skin, and when she moved her hand even slightly, the soft clinking rang out between them like something ceremonial. A few passersby glanced over and smiled at the two of them standing there in the middle of the lane, Naina's eyes shining, her cheeks unmistakably pink now, and she couldn't tell anymore if it was from the sun or from him.

Ved smiled, watching her wrist. "I think I've just found my favourite sound."

"Stop it," she whispered, looking anywhere but at him.

"Stop what?"

"Saying things like that. In public. Where I can't even react properly."

"Then react improperly," he said, grinning. "I won't tell anyone."

She swatted his arm, laughing despite herself, and the blush she'd been fighting finally won.

They spent the rest of the afternoon with no plan at all. They shared a single kulhad of lassi, passing it back and forth until Naina declared completely seriously that jalebis tasted better cold, a claim Ved treated as a personal betrayal. They stopped every few minutes to take photos neither of them would ever post: Naina mid-laugh with sugar syrup on her chin, Ved pulling an exaggerated offended face after being told his taste in jalebi temperature was "objectively wrong."

At one point, Naina caught him secretly filming her while she watched a street magician pull a coin from a stranger's ear, her whole face lit up with the kind of unguarded delight she usually only let out when she thought no one was watching.

"Delete it," she said, reaching for the phone.

"I'm not deleting proof that you laugh this beautifully." "Ved"

"I'm serious. Look at this. This is a national treasure. This should be in a museum."

She rolled her eyes so hard he thought she might strain something, but the blush that crept up her neck stayed long after the phone disappeared back into his pocket, and she spent the next ten minutes pretending to be annoyed while failing spectacularly to hide her smile.

By the time the sun dipped low and gold again, they had hundreds of photos, a dozen ridiculous videos, tired feet, and hearts that felt almost too full to hold. On the drive home,

Naina leaned her head against the window and scrolled slowly through everything they'd captured. Most of the pictures were blurry. In half of them, someone wasn't even looking at the camera.

"They're imperfect," she murmured.

Ved glanced over, just briefly, before looking back at the road.

"Exactly."

"They're real," she said softly, more to herself than to him.

For the first time since hearing about Mumbai, neither of them mentioned the distance. They didn't need to. Somewhere between roadside chai and mustard fields, bangles and street magicians, blurry photographs and unfinished arguments over jalebis, they had done something far more important than preparing for a goodbye.

They had given each other memories that would always feel like home, no matter how many cities came between them.

That day, they didn't defeat time, nor did they stop the clock. They simply loved each other so completely that, for a few beautiful hours, Mumbai didn't exist.





Chapter 15

Let's Live Every Reel We Ever Saved.



Naina woke Ved up with a video call at nine in the morning, her face far too close to the camera and her hair still messy from sleep.

"Get up," she announced. "Today's theme has been decided."

He rubbed his eyes, squinting at the screen. "Good morning to you too."

"No time for good mornings. We're living every reel we ever saved and never did."

"That's oddly specific."

"I made a list at 2 a.m." She held up her phone, scrolling dramatically through her notes app like she was presenting evidence in court. "Pottery. Bowling. Arcade. Matching hoodies. Photo booth. Weird street food. And the rule is " she paused for effect, " we have to actually look stupid doing at least three of them, or it doesn't count."

Ved groaned into his pillow, but he was already smiling. "You're going to be the death of me."

"A fun death. Now get dressed. I'm picking you up in an hour."

The pottery studio smelled of wet clay and old wood, sunlight slanting through dusty windows onto a row of spinning wheels. Naina sat down first, rolling her sleeves up with the seriousness of someone about to perform surgery.

"I've seen this in movies," she said confidently. "It's basically just... spinning and shaping. How hard can it be?"

Four minutes later, her bowl had collapsed sideways into something resembling a deflated hat, clay smeared up to her elbows and a streak of it across her cheek like war paint. Ved, watching from the next wheel, was laughing too hard to even pretend he was helping. "Don't laugh," she warned, pointing a clay-covered finger at him. "Come fix this."

"I don't know how to fix that. I don't think anyone does."

"I think we should just let it go." "Ved."

"Naina, that's not a bowl anymore. That's a cry for help."

She flicked a piece of wet clay at him before he could duck, catching him square on the jaw. There was a beat of stunned silence Ved touching his face, clay dripping slightly, Naina's hand still frozen mid-throw with the guiltiest expression she could manage.

"You're dead," he said.

"I regret nothing."

What followed was a full five minutes of clay warfare that got both of them thrown a disapproving look by the instructor and left Naina with a smear of clay across her nose that Ved refused to tell her about for the next twenty minutes, purely for his own entertainment. When she finally caught her reflection in a window and shrieked, swatting at him with both hands, he just grinned.

"You knew!"

"I did."

"For twenty minutes?!"

"It was a good twenty minutes."

She tried to look furious. She did not succeed. By the time they left, both their attempts at pottery sat drying on a shelf lopsided, cracked, utterly ruined and Naina insisted on taking a photo with them like they were prize-winning sculptures.

"These are terrible," Ved said.

"These," she corrected, "are *modern art*. You wouldn't understand."

The bowling alley was dim and loud, all neon lights and the constant clatter of pins. Naina picked the brightest pink ball she could find and held it up like a trophy before she'd even thrown a single frame.

"I used to be really good at this," she said.

She was not, in fact, good at this. Her first three throws went straight into the gutter with such consistent precision that Ved started timing how fast it happened.

"That's a talent," he said solemnly. "A rare one."

"Shut up and bowl."

Ved, of course, got a strike on his very first try, which he celebrated with an obnoxious little victory dance that made an entire family in the next lane turn to stare. Naina crossed her arms.

"Beginner's luck."

"I told you I used to play in college."

"You never told me that."

"I'm telling you now. Strategically. After winning."

She narrowed her eyes, then walked over, took his hand, and under the pretence of "fixing his form" stood far closer than any bowling technique actually required, adjusting his grip on the ball while he very deliberately did not look at her and

instead stared at the pins like his life depended on it. "Like this," she said softly, her hand over his.

"Right," he said, voice slightly higher than usual. "Like that."

Neither of them moved for a second longer than necessary. When she finally stepped back, there was a faint pink in both their cheeks that had nothing to do with the neon lighting, and Ved's next throw went embarrassingly wide.

"You did that on purpose," he muttered.

"Did what?" she asked, all innocence, already walking back to her seat with the smallest, most satisfied smile.

The arcade was a blur of flashing lights and old machine music. Naina declared war on the claw machine within the first thirty seconds, feeding it, coin after coin in relentless pursuit of a slightly cross-eyed stuffed panda.

"It's rigged," she said, after her sixth failed attempt.

"It's not rigged, you're just"

"Finish that sentence and I will end this friendship."

Ved, laughing, gently nudged her aside. "Move. Let a professional handle this."

"Oh, now you're a claw machine professional too? Is there anything you're not secretly good at?"

He didn't answer, focused entirely on angling the claw with theatrical precision, tongue between his teeth in concentration. On the first try, the claw closed around the panda's ear, lifted it clean off the pile, and dropped it straight into the chute.

Naina stared at the machine, then at him, utterly betrayed.

"You've been holding out on me." "I contain multitudes."

She snatched the panda before he could hand it over properly, hugging it to her chest like she'd won it herself, which as Ved pointed out, and was promptly ignored for she absolutely had not.

They moved on to air hockey, where Naina played with a competitive intensity that seemed disproportionate to a game involving plastic pucks, trash-talking him between every point with a viciousness that made him laugh so hard he missed an easy shot. She won 7-5 and celebrated by pointing both fingers at him and doing a slow, ridiculous victory strut around the table.

"I let you win," Ved said.

"You did not."

"I absolutely did. Out of love."

"Say that again and I'll make you play a rematch."

"I love you," he said immediately, grinning. "Rematch?"

She threw her hands up, laughing, cheeks flushed from the win, from the heat of the arcade lights, from something else entirely that she wasn't going to examine too closely.

Outside, they found a little street stall selling matching hoodies in every colour, and Naina insisted with zero room for negotiation that they buy two in the exact same mustard yellow, "so people know we belong to each other," a phrase that made Ved go quiet for a second too long before he simply nodded and paid for both.

They pulled the hoodies right there on the pavement, sleeves too long, hoods slightly lopsided, looking thoroughly ridiculous and not caring in the least. Naina tugged his hood down over his eyes just to hear him complain, and he retaliated by tugging hers down too, and for a moment they stood there half-blind and laughing at nothing in particular.

A few steps later they found a cramped little photo booth wedged between two shops, its curtain faded from years of flash bulbs. They squeezed in together, knees bumping, Naina immediately taking charge of poses the first one silly, tongues out and eyes crossed; the second one a dramatic fake-serious model shot that fell apart into laughter halfway through the

flash; the third one, unplanned, was just Ved looking at her mid-laugh instead of at the camera, and Naina noticing exactly a second too late in the little printed strip that came sliding out.

She stared at that photo for a long moment after they stepped out. "You're not even looking at the camera in this one."

"I know."

"You're looking at me."

"I know that too."

She didn't say anything else, but she folded that particular photo carefully and tucked it into her hoodie pocket, closest to her heart, while Ved pretended very hard not to notice the sudden pink climbing up her ears.

By evening, hunger sent them wandering through a street food lane thick with smoke and spice and shouting vendors. Naina, on a mission to try "something we've never eaten before," dragged Ved toward a stall selling some unidentifiable fried concoction the vendor called a "special surprise roll."

"Absolutely not," Ved said. "That name is a warning, not a menu item."

"Where's your sense of adventure?"

"I left it at the bowling alley when you nearly took my eye out with a gutter ball."

She ordered two anyway. The first bite made Ved's eyes water so badly he had to fan his own mouth with his hand while Naina, laughing, tried and failed to look sympathetic instead of thoroughly entertained.

"This is not food," he gasped. "This is a punishment."

"It's *character-building*."

"I don't want character. I want my tongue back."

She finally took pity on him and handed over her water, watching him gulp it down with poorly disguised delight, before admitting quietly, once his eyes stopped watering that

hers had been just as bad and she simply hadn't wanted to lose to him twice in one day.

They ended the night sitting on the curb outside the food lane, sharing one plate of something far more edible, hoodies smelling faintly of clay and street smoke, a folded photo booth strip tucked safely away, and a slightly deflated claw-machine panda propped between them like a mascot for the entire ridiculous day.

"Today was stupid," Naina said, leaning her head against his shoulder.

"The stupidest," Ved agreed.

"Best day this week."

"Best day this year," he corrected softly.

She looked up at him, and for a second, neither of them laughed, neither of them joked — they just sat there in the noise of the street, comfortable in a silence that felt like it belonged only to them. Then Naina broke it, because she always did, nudging him with her elbow.

"Tomorrow's list is longer, by the way."

Ved groaned, but he was already smiling. "Of course, it is."

"Don't worry," she said, resting the panda on his lap and standing up to pull him along by the hand. "I'll make sure it's impossible to forget."

He looked at her at the clay stain still faint on her sleeve, the mustard hoodie two sizes too big, the photo strip peeking out of her pocket and thought that she already had. **"Perhaps that was the secret of happiness, not living a perfect life, but laughing so freely that tomorrow forgot to scare you."**





Chapter 16

Plant Something That Outlives the Goodbye

Naina showed up at Ved's door the next morning holding two small clay pots, a bag of soil slung over one shoulder, and an expression far too serious for nine in the morning.

"What is this," Ved asked, eyeing the pots like they might be a trick.

"Today's theme," she said, stepping past him into the house without waiting to be invited, "is that we plant something for each other. Before you leave. Something that has to survive without us checking on it every five minutes."

"That's oddly poetic for someone who just barged into my house holding dirt."

"I contain multitudes," she said, echoing his own words from the arcade, and he laughed despite himself.

They set the pots on his balcony railing, sunlight already warm against the tiles. Naina handed him a small money plant sapling, its leaves still curled tight and unsure of themselves.

"This one's from me," she said. "Money plants grow anywhere. Water, soil, even a bottle on a windowsill. They don't need

perfect conditions. They just need someone to not forget them completely."

Ved turned the little sapling over in his hands. "That's not subtle at all."

"I wasn't trying to be subtle."

He looked up at her, something warm settling behind his eyes, before reaching into the second bag and pulling out a small marigold plant, bright orange buds already pushing at the edges of their green shells.

"And this one's from me," he said. "Marigolds bloom even in the worst soil. You could plant this thing in something absolutely wrong for it, and it would still find a way to open up."

Naina's fingers brushed his as she took it from him, and for a moment neither of them said anything, just knelt there together on the balcony floor, pressing soil around two small stems that would have to learn how to survive the same distance they were about to survive.

"We're basically leaving parts of ourselves in each other's houses," Naina said quietly, patting the soil down with more focus than the task really required.

"That's the plan," Ved said. "So that even on the days you forget to miss me, you'll water something and remember anyway."

She didn't answer that. She just pressed her thumb once, gently, into the wet soil of the money plant, like sealing a promise into the ground, and stood up before he could see exactly how much that sentence had gotten to her.

The plan for the rest of the day was simply no plan at all. Ved's car rolled out of the city by early afternoon, windows down, Naina's feet up on the dashboard in direct violation of at least three things Ved had asked her never to do.

"Feet down."

"Never."

"Naina, the dashboard is not a footrest."

"It's my throne now. I have declared it so."

She turned the music up instead of answering him properly, and within seconds they were both singing at the top of their lungs to a song neither of them fully knew the words to, filling in the gaps with nonsense syllables and dramatic hand gestures that had nothing to do with driving safely. At a red light, the car beside them rolled down its window, and an old uncle in the passenger seat gave them a thumbs up for their commitment to a chorus they were absolutely butchering. Naina saluted him solemnly through the windshield, and Ved nearly ran the light laughing. "We have a fan," she announced.

"We have a witness to a crime."

"Same thing."

Somewhere past the city limits, the road opened up into long stretches of green on either side, and Naina pulled a small Polaroid camera out of her bag with the triumphant flourish of someone revealing a secret weapon.

"When did you even buy this?"

"Yesterday. While you were losing to me at air hockey."

"You won by luck."

"I won by *skill*, and you're changing the subject." She leaned across the seat, camera raised, and snapped a photo of him mid-protest, mouth still open on the word "skill," eyes wide with indignation. The little square slid out, and she waved it in the air to develop, grinning at the ridiculous image slowly appearing.

"Delete that."

"Absolutely not. This is going in the sunflower notebook."

She took another of the road stretching out ahead of them, gold light spilling across the windshield, and then turned the camera around and pulled him close by the collar for one of the two of them together Ved caught slightly off guard, Naina already mid-laugh, both of them a little too close to the lens. When it developed, neither of them said anything about how it looked less like a photo and more like a moment neither wanted to end, but they both looked at it a beat longer than necessary before she carefully tucked it away with the others. They pulled over near an empty stretch of farmland as the afternoon began softening into evening, and what followed could only be described, later, as the making of several deeply embarrassing videos that neither of them intended to admit existed. Naina insisted on filming a fake weather report, standing dramatically in front of the fields and describing an entirely fictional storm system with complete news-anchor seriousness until Ved, playing her assistant, "accidentally" walked into frame holding the phone upside down.

"Cut, cut, we're cutting that."

"I'm keeping every second of it."

"Ved."

"This is content. This is *art*."

She tackled him gently, laughing, both of them nearly losing balance in the tall grass trying to grab the phone from his hand, and for a moment they were just a tangle of arms and laughter and stolen glances, her hand braced against his chest to steady herself, his hand instinctively catching her waist so she wouldn't fall, and the world went very quiet for exactly one second before Naina cleared her throat and stepped back, cheeks distinctly redder than the evening light alone could explain.

"Give me the phone."

"No."

"Ved, I swear"

He handed it over eventually, but not before secretly saving the fake weather report to a folder he labelled, with great affection, *Do Not Delete Ever*.

As the sky began turning orange, they climbed onto the roof of the car, Naina insisting it could hold their weight and Ved insisting it absolutely could not, right up until they were both sitting up there anyway, knees pulled up, watching the sun sink slowly behind the distant tree line. The fields around them turned gold, then amber, then a deep, quiet blue, and neither of them reached for their phones this time. This one they simply watched.

"Do you think the plants will survive?" Naina asked eventually, resting her head against his shoulder.

"The marigold will. Marigolds don't know how to give up."

"And the money plant?"

"That one just needs someone to remember to water it."

She was quiet for a moment, watching the last sliver of orange disappear below the horizon.

"I'll remember."

"I know you will."

"How do you know?"

He glanced down at her, the last of the light catching the side of her face, softening everything about the moment into something he already knew he'd be replaying in Mumbai, alone, at odd hours. "Because you kept a notebook titled *Five Days Before Goodbye* instead of just being sad about it. You don't forget things, Naina. You plant them."

She looked up at him then, and whatever she meant to say got lost somewhere between his eyes and the last of the sunset, so

instead she just leaned her head back against his shoulder and let the silence say it for her.

The stars started coming out one by one above the darkening fields, the car radio playing softly from the open window below them, two Polaroids drying on the dashboard, two small plants waiting back home for someone to remember them.

"Three days left," Naina said quietly.

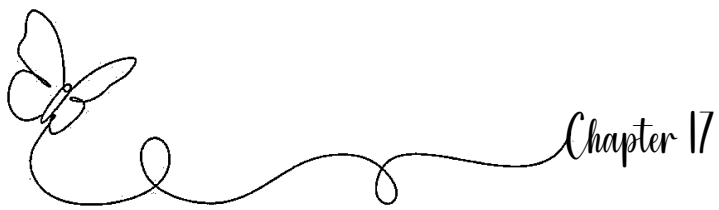
"Three days," Ved agreed. "Let's not waste a second of them."

She reached over without looking, found his hand in the near-dark, and held on.

Neither of them said anything else. They didn't need to. The sky said it for them, one fading colour at a time.

Long after the flowers had dried, the bangles had faded, and the photographs had grown old, they knew it wouldn't be the gifts they remembered it would be the way someone had looked at them while giving them





Chapter 17

Burnt Rice & Midnight Maggie



Naina texted him at eight in the morning with no explanation, just a single line: *No plans today. Just home.* Ved stared at it for a long moment before typing back, *Home it is,* and something about how easily that word left his fingers made him pause before hitting send.

She showed up at his door an hour later in an oversized t-shirt and flip-flops, hair tied up messily, holding nothing but her phone and a canvas tote bag.

"No sunflower notebook today?" he asked, leaning against the doorframe.

"Today I don't need a list," she said. "Today I just need a kitchen."

The grocery store was nearly empty at that hour, fluorescent lights humming over half-stocked shelves, and Naina pushed the cart like she was steering a ship into difficult waters, taking the whole enterprise far too seriously.

"We need onions, tomatoes, paneer, and rice," she announced, reading off a note on her phone.

"And chocolate," Ved added, already reaching for a bar on a nearby shelf.

"That's not on the list."

"It's on my list. I made my own list. It has one item."

She rolled her eyes but didn't stop him, which he took as a quiet kind of victory. They wandered the aisles bickering cheerfully over brands of rice neither of them had strong opinions about, Naina insisting a particular tomato "looked suspicious" and refusing to put it in the cart, Ved sneaking a packet of gummy bears in when she wasn't looking and getting caught almost immediately.

"I saw that."

"Saw what."

"The gummy bears, Ved."

"What gummy bears."

She pulled them out from under a bag of onions where he'd hidden them, holding the packet up like evidence in a trial, and he had the decency to look only slightly guilty. At the checkout counter, while the cashier rang up their odd collection of ingredients and one packet of gummy bears that Naina still hadn't decided whether to let through, Ved reached over and quietly paid before she could stop him, ignoring her protest with the ease of someone who'd clearly done this before and had no intention of losing this particular argument.

"You always do that."

"I'll stop when you stop pretending to be mad about it."

She didn't have a comeback for that, mostly because he wasn't wrong, and settled instead for carrying the heavier bag back to the car just to feel like she'd won something.

Back at his apartment, the kitchen quickly turned into something resembling organized chaos. Naina tied an apron over her t-shirt with unnecessary ceremony, declared herself head chef, and appointed Ved as her "assistant," a title he accepted with visible reluctance and immediate disobedience.

"Chop the onions."

"I am chopping the onions."

"You're chopping them wrong."

"Is there a wrong way to chop an onion?"

"Yes. Yours."

She nudged him aside to demonstrate, standing close enough that he stopped paying attention to the onions entirely and started paying attention to the way she bit her lip in concentration, the small furrow between her eyebrows, the flour already dusted faintly on her cheek from an earlier mishap with the rice packet. She caught him staring.

"What?"

"Nothing," he said, looking back down at the cutting board a beat too late.

"You're doing the staring thing again."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Chop the onions, Ved."

The paneer curry started off promising spices sizzling, tomatoes softening, the kitchen filling with a smell that made both their stomachs growl in unison. It was the rice that betrayed them. Deep in a conversation about which of them had worse handwriting, both of them entirely forgot the pot on the back burner until the smell of something distinctly *not* rice began creeping through the apartment.

"Is something burning?" Naina asked, mid-sentence.

They turned at the same time to see thin smoke curling up from the pot, the bottom layer of rice now a solid, blackened crust that no amount of stirring was going to save. Ved yanked

it off the flame while Naina fanned the smoke detector with a kitchen towel, both of them coughing and laughing at the same time in that particular way where the coughing made the laughing worse and the laughing made the coughing worse.

"You said you were watching it!"

"I said *you* were watching it!"

"I was chopping onions because *you* told me to!"

They stood there, apartment slightly hazy, ruined rice sitting between them like a small monument to their combined incompetence, and Naina finally just started laughing so hard she had to lean against the counter for support.

"Okay," she wheezed. "Okay, dinner is officially the curry and whatever bread we can find."

"That's a very generous way of saying we destroyed dinner."

"We didn't destroy it. We just gave it... character."

"That's what you said about the street food too."

"It's a running theme."

They ended up eating paneer curry with slightly stale bread sitting cross-legged on the living room floor, laughing every time either of them glanced at the pot still soaking in the sink, both silently agreeing without saying so that this particular disaster was somehow one of the best meals either of them could remember.

Movie night began with an argument that lasted almost as long as the movie itself would have. Naina wanted something "light and funny," Ved wanted "literally anything with a decent plot," and they eventually landed on an old romcom neither of them had seen in years, mostly because they were both too full and too tired to keep debating.

Halfway through, the blanket situation escalated into a full territorial dispute, Naina claiming most of it under the pretence of being cold, Ved retaliating by stealing it back the second she got distracted by the movie. By the time the credits

rolled, neither of them had actually won the blanket war, they'd simply ended up sharing it, shoulders pressed together, her feet tucked up against his leg without either of them mentioning it.

Somewhere in the second half of the movie, the day finally caught up with both of them. Naina's head slowly slid from the armrest to Ved's shoulder, and he sat very still for a long moment, not wanting to move, not wanting to be the reason she woke up. When she blinked awake near the ending credits, disoriented and slightly embarrassed, she found herself curled against him on the couch, the television glow the only light in the room. "I fell asleep on you."

"You did."

"You could've moved me."

"I didn't want to," he said simply, and she didn't have a response for that either, just tucked herself back against his shoulder like she hadn't meant to sit up in the first place.

It was well past eleven when hunger struck again, and Naina declared, with the seriousness of someone announcing a national emergency, that the night could not continue without Maggie. They ended up crowded together at the small kitchen counter at midnight, one pot between them, Naina insisting on adding double the amount of masala the packet recommended and Ved watching in mild horror.

"That's going to be inedible."

"That's going to be *perfect*. You just have a weak spice tolerance."

"I have a normal spice tolerance. You have a death wish." She won the argument by simply adding the extra masala anyway while he protested, and they ate straight out of the pot with two forks, standing at the counter at midnight in comfortable silence broken only by Naina occasionally

declaring "I told you it was perfect" between bites, and Ved reluctantly, quietly agreeing that she had, in fact, told him so. They ended up back on the couch afterward, lights off except for the soft glow of a single lamp, midnight Maggie pot abandoned in the sink for tomorrow's problem. What started as idle conversation slowly unravelled into something deeper, the kind of talk that only happens when it's late enough that both people have stopped filtering themselves.

Naina talked about things she rarely brought up her old fear of not being enough for people who eventually left anyway, the nights she used to lie awake convincing herself that love always came with an expiration date. Ved listened without interrupting, the way he always did, occasionally reaching over just to hold her hand a little tighter whenever her voice got quieter.

He told her things too about the pressure of being the one everyone expected to have it together, about how Mumbai felt less like an opportunity and more like a test he hadn't asked to take, about how the only thing that made the transfer bearable at all was knowing there was a reason to keep coming back.

Somewhere around two in the morning, the conversation turned lighter again, both of them trading childhood stories that got progressively more ridiculous, Naina recounting an ill-fated attempt to run away from home at age seven that ended two houses down the street, Ved admitting to a brief and deeply embarrassing phase of believing he could talk to birds. By three, they were mostly just laughing at nothing, the kind of delirious late-night laughter that needs no real reason to exist.

By four, the conversation had slowed into something quieter, comfortable silences stretching longer between sentences, Naina's head resting against his shoulder again, his arm settled

around her without either of them making a decision about it, it just happened, the way most of the best moments between them always seemed to.

"We should sleep," she murmured, not moving an inch.

"We should," he agreed, not moving either.

"Two days left."

"I know."

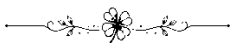
She tilted her head up slightly, just enough to look at him in the low lamp light. "Today didn't feel like a countdown."

"That's because it wasn't," he said softly. "Today just felt like home."

She smiled, eyes heavy with sleep, and settled back against him without another word. Outside, the city had gone quiet, the first hint of dawn still hours away, and neither of them moved from that couch, choosing instead to stay exactly where they were: burnt rice, borrowed blanket, empty Maggie pot, and all because for one whole day, distance hadn't mattered at all.

It had simply been home.

They owned nothing together, not a house, not a future they could touch but for one ordinary night, they lived the life they both hoped would one day become forever.





Chapter 18

Goodbyes Without Saying Goodbye



Neither of them said much that morning. There was no list this time, no sunflower notebook opened over breakfast, no debate over themes or destinations. Naina simply showed up at Ved's door in a plain white kurta, her hair loose, her eyes carrying the particular kind of quiet that comes right before something ends.

"No plan today?" Ved asked, though he already knew the answer.

"Today I don't need one," she said. "Today just needs to happen."

He nodded, understanding something in her voice that didn't need explaining, and reached for his keys.

They went to the temple first, before the streets had fully woken up. The air was cool, thick with the smell of incense

and marigold, the low murmur of morning prayers drifting from somewhere deep inside. Naina stood in front of the deity longer than usual, palms pressed together, eyes closed, lips moving slightly around a prayer she never said out loud.

Ved didn't ask what she prayed for. He already knew, because he was praying for the same thing not for the transfer to disappear, not for Mumbai to vanish off the map, but simply for whatever kept two people choosing each other despite everything trying to convince them not to.

As they stepped out, an old priest offered them both a small red thread, tying it gently around their wrists with a soft blessing neither of them fully caught. Naina looked down at hers, then at Ved's, the two threads almost identical against their skin.

"Funny," she said quietly. "Even the temple's tying us together today."

Ved just smiled, because there was nothing, he could say that wouldn't crack his voice.

They drove without a destination after that, the city slowly giving way to open roads, neither of them speaking for long stretches, both content to simply exist in the same space for a while longer. The radio played low in the background, and somewhere past the outskirts, without either of them deciding to, Ved just kept driving in a slow, wide loop, in no hurry to arrive anywhere, because arriving anywhere meant being one place closer to a station or an airport neither of them wanted to think about yet.

"Where are we going?" Naina finally asked, though she didn't sound like she wanted an answer.

"Nowhere," Ved said. "On purpose."

She smiled at that, small and sad and grateful all at once, and rested her head against the window, watching the fields blur

past in shades of green and gold, memorizing the shape of a day she already knew she'd replay a hundred times once he was gone.

The rain came without warning somewhere along that aimless road, the sky darkening fast, fat drops hitting the windshield in a sudden rush. Ved pulled over near an empty stretch bordered by trees, and before he could even suggest waiting it out, Naina had already thrown the door open and stepped straight into it, arms spread, face turned up toward the sky.

"Naina, you'll catch a cold"

"Come here," she said, not even looking back at him.

He hesitated exactly one second before following her out, the rain instantly soaking through his shirt, and she laughed the first full, unguarded laugh of the day spinning slowly with her arms still open like she was trying to hold onto the entire sky at once. He watched her for a moment, hair plastered to her face, eyes bright despite everything neither of them had said yet, and something in his chest ached in a way that had nothing to do with sadness.

"Dance with me," she said, holding a hand out to him through the rain.

He didn't need to be asked twice. They swayed there on the empty roadside with no music except the rain itself, her hands loosely around his neck, his hands at her waist, both of them soaked and laughing and not caring in the least, because for those few minutes, there was no Mumbai, no countdown, no goodbye waiting at the end of the week there was only this, only rain, only each other.

At one point she rested her forehead against his chest, breathless from laughing, and he felt her go quiet, felt the exact moment the laughter softened into something else. He

didn't ask what she was thinking. He just held her a little tighter, letting the rain say the parts neither of them could. By the time the rain slowed to a drizzle, they were both soaked through and shivering, and Naina, of all things, wanted ice cream.

"It's raining," Ved pointed out. "And cold."

"Exactly the right conditions for ice cream," she said, already tugging him toward a small roadside stall with a faded umbrella, "because now we have an excuse to say we were already cold, so it doesn't count against us later."

He didn't understand the logic, and didn't try to. They sat on the stall's narrow bench, damp and dripping, sharing one cup of vanilla because the vendor had run out of everything else, passing the single spoon back and forth in a silence that felt easier than words. Naina occasionally stole an extra bite before handing it back, and Ved let her every time, watching the last of the rain drip from the umbrella's edge instead of watching the clock neither of them wanted to look at.

"This is a terrible way to eat ice cream," he said eventually. "It's the best way," she said. "Cold, wet, sharing a spoon with someone who didn't complain once about me hogging it."

"I complained internally."

"That doesn't count."

They walked afterward, hand in hand, along a quiet stretch near the water where the evening light had softened into something warm and forgiving after the storm. Neither of them said much. There wasn't much left that needed saying, not in words, not yet. Every so often Naina's fingers tightened slightly around his, and every time, without looking at her, Ved tightened his back, a quiet conversation running entirely beneath the surface of their silence.

They passed a small stall selling little clover-shaped charms strung on thin cord, and Naina stopped without quite deciding to. "Lucky leaf," the old woman running the stall called them, promising they carried a person safely back to wherever they needed to return.

Naina picked one up, turned it over in her fingers, then picked a second one and pressed it into Ved's palm.

"For you," she said. "So you always find your way back."

He looked down at it for a long moment before choosing one for her in return, tying it gently around her wrist beside the temple thread from that morning, his fingers lingering slightly longer than the knot required.

"And this one," he said quietly, "so you never doubt that I will."

Neither of them said the words hovering behind everything they'd done that day. Nobody said *I'll miss you*. It sat in the space between their hands instead, in the way she leaned slightly into his side as they kept walking, in the way he kept glancing at her like he was trying to memorize the exact colour the evening light made of her eyes, in the way both lucky leaves swayed gently against their wrists with every step, tied not just to luck, but to a promise neither of them needed to say out loud because they'd already spent five days proving it. They ended up back at the same little café from the day it had all started, sitting by the same rain-streaked window, though tonight the sky outside had finally cleared. Naina traced the rim of her cup slowly, watching the last bit of dusk fade into evening.

"Tomorrow," she started, then stopped.

"I know," Ved said softly.

"I'm not going to cry," she said, in the exact tone of someone who was already fighting it.

"You don't have to not cry," he said, reaching across to hold her hand. "You just have to know I'm coming back."

She nodded, blinking fast, looking down at the two lucky leaves resting side by side on the table where their hands were joined hers a little damp from the rain earlier, his still slightly creased from being held too tightly in his pocket all evening, both of them a quiet, small, stubborn kind of proof.

"Five days," she murmured. "It went by so fast."

"It wasn't supposed to feel like enough," Ved said. "It was supposed to feel like proof."

"Proof of what?"

"That distance can take a lot of things," he said, looking at her steadily, "but it was never going to take this."

She didn't say *I'll miss you*. She didn't need to. She simply turned her hand over in his, laced their fingers together the way she had that very first evening, and let the silence between them hold everything neither of them had the words for.

Outside, the sky had turned a deep, settled blue, stars beginning to surface one by one, the same sky that would stretch, unbroken, over both Delhi and Mumbai come tomorrow. Somewhere beneath it, two lucky leaves sat tied to two wrists, two small plants waited patiently on two different balconies, and two people sat in a quiet café choosing, without a single word of goodbye, to simply keep choosing each other.

Because some things don't need to be said to be true.
They only need to be lived.

They spent the entire day pretending tomorrow didn't exist. But when the night finally arrived, they realized love had quietly taught them something beautiful. Goodbyes hurt a little less when both people promised to find their way back.





Chapter 19

The Departure



The suitcase lay open on the bed, half packed, and Ved stood in front of it for a long moment without actually folding anything. It was strange, he thought, how five days could rearrange a person so completely that packing for the life waiting in Mumbai suddenly felt like the unfamiliar thing, and staying in Delhi felt like the only life that had ever made sense.

His phone buzzed. *Ira, Karan aur Rohan neeche pahunch gaye hain. Ready ho?*

He wasn't. But he zipped the suitcase shut anyway, because some things don't wait for you to be ready, they just arrive, the way tonight's flight was going to arrive, whether his heart had caught up with it or not.

He took one last look around the room. The little money plant sat on the windowsill, leaves slightly more open than they'd been three days ago, already looking less unsure of

itself. He touched one leaf gently, the way you'd touch something you were trusting someone else to take care of.

"Don't die on me," he murmured to it, half joking, half not.

"She's counting on you to remind her I exist."

The airport was loud in the particular way airports always are: announcements overlapping, trolleys rattling, a hundred separate goodbyes happening at once in every corner. Ved's colleagues were already waiting near the entrance when he arrived, along with Ira, Naina's closest friend, who'd insisted on coming "to make sure Naina doesn't do anything embarrassing," a statement Naina had protested loudly and unconvincingly.

Ved moved through the group slowly, unhurried, as if some part of him understood that once these goodbyes were done, the next one waiting behind them would be the one that actually mattered.

Rohan, from his team, clapped him hard on the back.

"Mumbai's not ready for you, bhai."

"Mumbai better be ready," Ved said, managing a grin. "I'm bringing chaos."

"Don't forget us small-town Delhi people once you're all Bandra and sea-link," another colleague teased, pulling him into a quick hug.

"Never," Ved said, and meant it more than the joke deserved.

Ira hugged him next, shorter and fiercer than he expected.

"Take care of yourself," she said, voice dropping the teasing edge for just a second. "And don't make her regret waiting."

"I won't," Ved said quietly. "I promise you that before I promise her."

He shook hands, exchanged numbers that were already saved, promised visits that both sides half-believed and fully hoped for, laughed at jokes that were funnier than they should have

been simply because everyone needed something to laugh at instead of feel. Each hug, each handshake, each *take care* chipped away at the wall he'd built around himself all day to keep from feeling exactly what was coming next.

Then there was no one left standing between him and Naina. She was standing a little apart from the group, arms wrapped around herself, the mustard hoodie from arcade day peeking out from under her jacket, the lucky leaf still tied faithfully to her wrist. She hadn't said much since they'd arrived. She hadn't needed to. Some people are loud in their goodbyes, and some people simply go very, very quiet, holding everything inside because letting even one piece out risks letting all of it out.

Ved walked over slowly, and for a moment, neither of them said anything at all. He just looked at her really, the way he had that morning on the mustard fields, like he was trying to store an entire person into memory before the world took her out of view for a while.

"Naina," he finally said, and even her name sounded heavier than it usually did, like it was carrying five days' worth of everything neither of them had fully said out loud.

She looked up at him, eyes already glassy, jaw tight from trying to hold something back.

"Study well," he said softly.

It wasn't the sentence either of them expected to open with not grand, not poetic, almost absurdly ordinary but it landed exactly the way he meant it to, gentle, familiar, like something a person says when they intend to say it again a hundred more times over the years.

"I will come and meet you," he continued. "We will make this work. Trust me."

His voice caught slightly on *trust me*, not because he doubted it, but because he understood, standing there, exactly how much weight those two words were being asked to carry.

"Take care," he said. "Always carry an umbrella." A small, unsteady laugh escaped her at that, half a sob dressed up as amusement. "Wear proper clothes. Don't eat too much street food." He paused, and something in his composure finally slipped, just slightly, just enough for her to see it. "And miss me."

That was the line that broke her.

The tears she'd been holding back all evening finally spilled over, and she didn't bother wiping them this time, didn't bother pretending they weren't there. She simply stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him like she was trying to hold onto the last five days through the shape of him alone. Ved held her just as tightly, his own eyes stinging in a way he refused to acknowledge out loud, his hand moving slowly against her back in the same steady rhythm he'd used the very first night at the café, when she'd told him she wasn't sure she could survive this again.

"I'm not going to disappear," he said quietly, just for her, the noise of the airport fading into something distant and unimportant around them. "I know it feels like a goodbye. It's not. It's just a pause."

"It doesn't feel like a pause," she said into his shoulder, voice muffled and thick. "It feels like the beginning of everything you promised wouldn't happen."

"Then watch me prove it wrong," he said. "One flight at a time."

She pulled back just enough to look at him, eyes red, cheeks wet, and managed something that was almost a smile.

"You better."

"I will."

"Every time?"

"Every single time," he said, "until you stop counting because you stop doubting."

She laughed through the tears at that, a small broken sound that somehow still carried warmth in it, and pressed her forehead briefly against his chest, breathing him in one last time before the world pulled them apart for a while.

Neither of them said the actual word *goodbye*. It hung in the air between them, unsaid, the way it had all week, replaced instead by things that meant the same thing but hurt less to say out loud *take care, I'll call you, watch me, trust me, miss me*.

The final boarding announcement crackled over the speakers, and Ved closed his eyes for one long second, memorizing the exact weight of her against him, before finally, reluctantly, letting go.

"I have to go," he said.

"I know."

He picked up his bag, took two steps toward the gate, and then turned back around because some people simply cannot walk away without one last look and found her standing exactly where he'd left her, arms wrapped around herself again, lucky leaf catching the light on her wrist, watching him with an expression that was somehow both breaking and holding steady at the same time.

"Naina," he called out.

She looked up.

"Wait for me at the same café," he said. "When I come back for the first time. I want the next hello to happen exactly where the almost-goodbye did."

She nodded, unable to trust her voice with actual words, and lifted her hand in a small, quiet wave instead of a goodbye

wave, he realized, but something closer to a promise, sealed silently across the growing distance between them.

He turned and walked toward the gate, and did not look back again, not because he didn't want to, but because he knew that if he looked back one more time, he might not have found the strength to keep walking at all.

Naina stood there long after he disappeared past security, long after Ira gently touched her shoulder and suggested they head home, long after the rest of the group had said their final see-you-soon and drifted toward the parking lot. She stayed, eyes fixed on the empty space where he'd last stood, one hand pressed lightly against her own chest, as if she could hold the ache there long enough to turn it into something bearable.

"He'll come back," Ira said softly, beside her now.

"I know," Naina whispered.

"Then why do you look like you don't?"

Naina finally looked away from the gate, wiping her eyes with the sleeve of the mustard hoodie that still smelled faintly of clay and street smoke and five days that had rearranged something permanent inside her.

"Because knowing something and feeling safe in it," she said quietly, "aren't always the same thing yet."

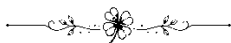
Ira didn't have an answer for that. She simply looped an arm through Naina's and started walking, letting the silence between them hold what words couldn't fix.

Outside, the Delhi night had turned unexpectedly clear, stars scattered generously across a sky that had spent the last two days drowning in rain. Naina looked up at it once before getting into the car, and somewhere above the clouds, in a plane cutting steadily toward Mumbai, Ved was looking up at the very same stretch of sky, holding onto the same quiet, stubborn certainty.

This isn't a goodbye, he thought, watching the city lights shrink beneath him. It's just the space between two people choosing each other again.

And somewhere back on a rain-washed Delhi street, tied gently around a wrist that refused to stop hoping, a small lucky leaf kept its silent, steady promise that some people don't need to say *I'll miss you* out loud, because they've already spent five days proving they mean it.

Neither of them said goodbye. They simply held each other's hand a little longer, trusting that love would remember the way home even when miles stood in between.





Chapter 20

A Year in Between



Mumbai welcomed Ved the way big cities always welcome someone new indifferently, loudly, without pausing to ask if he was ready. New office, new house, new roads that didn't yet feel like his own, new faces that would take months to turn into anything resembling familiar. The first night, sitting on the floor of an apartment still smelling of fresh paint, surrounded by unopened boxes stacked like small cardboard monuments to a life he hadn't fully moved into yet, he did the only thing that felt familiar anymore.

He called her.

"How's the new house?" Naina asked, her voice small through the phone, but steady.

"Empty," he said, looking around at the bare walls, the single mattress on the floor, the suitcase still half open in the corner.

"Loud outside, quiet inside. Basically, the opposite of what I need right now."

"Water the marigold," she said instead of responding to that, because some feelings are easier to redirect into instructions than to sit with directly. "Don't let Mumbai make you forget it."

"I haven't forgotten anything," he said quietly. "Especially not you."

She didn't say anything for a moment, and in that silence, both of them understood exactly how far fifteen hundred kilometres could suddenly feel not measured in distance on a map, but in the strange, hollow space between hearing someone's voice and actually being able to reach for their hand.

"I keep looking at the empty side of my hostel room," Naina admitted eventually, almost embarrassed to say it out loud. "Which makes no sense, because you never actually lived here."

"It makes complete sense," Ved said. "You're not missing a person who lived in a room.

You're missing the version of your day that used to have me in it."

"When did you get so good at saying things like that?"

"I've had a very long, very quiet flight to think about it."

She laughed, small and tired, and for a few minutes neither of them said anything important at all, just the low background hum of two lives trying to figure out how to exist in the same conversation despite existing in two completely different cities. It wasn't much. But in those first few days, it was enough to fall asleep.

The first few weeks ran on pure momentum daily calls, video chats propped up on desks while they both worked, voice notes sent at odd hours just to fill the silence of two different cities. Naina would send him a picture of her lecture notes

with tiny doodles in the margins; Ved would send back a photo of his empty desk with the caption *this needs you in it*. Somewhere along the way, ordering food for each other through the same delivery app became its own quiet language a Blinkit order landing at her hostel door at midnight with nothing but chocolate and a note that said *because you said you were sad*, or a random care package of chai patti and dry fruits showing up at his Mumbai flat because she'd decided, unilaterally, that he wasn't eating properly. Once, just to make her laugh, he ordered a single onion delivered to her room with a note reading *for old times' sake, don't let me catch you chopping it wrong*. She sent back a video of herself laughing so hard she nearly dropped her phone, and for a moment, fifteen hundred kilometres felt like nothing at all.

It felt, for a while, like distance was simply an inconvenience they were both too stubborn to let matter. They built little rituals without even meaning to good morning texts before either of them was properly awake, a goodnight call that neither of them wanted to be the one to end, a running joke about whose city had worse traffic that neither of them ever actually resolved.

Then the cracks started, the way they always do not in one dramatic moment, but in the small, exhausting accumulation of ordinary life getting in the way.

Naina's exams arrived in a brutal stretch that ate every free hour she had, textbooks stacked around her like small fortress walls, sleep rationed in increasingly smaller portions. Calls that used to last two hours shrank down to ten rushed minutes, sometimes nothing at all, just a hurried *studying, talk later* that neither of them meant unkindly but that still landed like a small, cold stone each time. Ved, meanwhile, was pulled into a string of late-night raids and audits that kept his phone

buried in his bag for entire days, batteries dying at the worst possible times, silence stretching where reassurance used to live.

"You didn't call yesterday," Naina said one night, her voice sharper than usual, the exhaustion of exam week bleeding into every word.

"My phone died, Naina. I told you I had a raid."

"You could've messaged before it died."

"I was literally standing in the middle of a warehouse at 2 a.m. going through crates. I wasn't exactly free to type out a paragraph."

"That's not the point."

"Then what is the point?"

"The point is I spent all day telling myself you'd call, and you didn't, and I don't even get to be upset about it because your reason is always valid, and mine never feels like enough of one."

The line went quiet for a moment, both of them breathing on opposite ends of a silence neither wanted to be the one to break.

The point, neither of them said out loud at first, was never really about a dead phone or a missed call. It was about the growing fear that maybe this was how it started the very thing Naina had confessed being afraid of on that rainy evening in the café, the calls becoming shorter, the gaps becoming longer, the two of them slowly drifting into separate lives that only technically still included each other.

They fought more in the months that followed than they ever had in person. Small things ballooned into bigger things over text, tone lost in typed sentences, silences misread as distance instead of exhaustion. A one-word reply from Ved during a long meeting would spiral, in Naina's tired, overworked mind,

into a full narrative about him losing interest. A late-night message from Naina about a stressful group project would land, in Ved's exhausted state after a twelve-hour shift, as something closer to blame than it was ever meant to be. Neither of them was wrong to feel what they felt. They were simply two people trying to read tone through a screen, guessing at each other's faces instead of seeing them.

There was the week Naina saw a photo of Ved out with his office team and felt something twist uncomfortably in her chest at the sight of a girl laughing next to him in the frame jealousy she hated feeling and couldn't quite talk herself out of, no matter how many times she reminded herself it was nothing.

"Who's that in the photo?" she asked, trying and failing to sound casual.

"Priya. From the compliance team. Why?"

"No reason. She just seemed... close."

"Naina." Ved's voice carried the particular patience of someone who understood exactly what was happening beneath the question. "There is no version of my life in Mumbai that has room for anyone but you in it. Not because I'm forcing myself to be loyal. Because I genuinely don't want anyone else."

"I know that," she said quietly, almost ashamed. "I just... Some days the distance makes my brain make up problems that don't exist. I hate that about myself."

"Don't hate yourself for missing me badly enough to feel threatened by a work lunch," he said gently. "Just tell me when it happens. I'd rather explain a photo than watch you go quiet on me for two days over one."

There was the weekend Ved planned a surprise visit and it fell apart at the last minute over a client emergency that couldn't

wait, and Naina, already emotionally worn thin from a difficult exam week, cried harder over a cancelled flight than she expected to, feeling foolish and heartbroken in equal measure, sitting on her hostel bed with a bag half packed for a reunion that wasn't going to happen.

"I already told everyone you were coming," she said through tears, more frustrated with herself for crying than with him for cancelling. "I feel so stupid." "You're not stupid.

I'm sorry. I hate this as much as you do."

"Do you, though?" The words came out sharper than she meant. "Because you're not the one sitting in an empty room with a packed bag."

"No," he admitted, voice heavy. "I'm sitting in an empty office with a cancelled ticket and a client who doesn't care that I had one weekend planned in three months. Naina, I'm not choosing this over you. I promise you that. This job is the reason I get to keep choosing you at all."

"I know," she whispered, wiping her face with the back of her hand. "I just miss you so much some days it feels unfair that missing someone this much doesn't count for anything."

"It counts for everything," he said softly. "It's just not always visible from where you're sitting."

"I'm so tired of this," she admitted once, on a different night entirely, voice cracking on a call neither of them wanted to end but neither knew how to fix. "I'm tired of missing you and pretending I'm fine."

"You think I'm not tired too?" Ved said, quieter than usual. "I sit through meetings thinking about whether you've eaten. I read your messages ten times to check if you sound upset. I don't know how to fix distance, Naina. I only know how to keep showing up despite it."

"Then show up," she whispered. "Not perfectly. Just... show up."

And somehow, again and again, he did. Not because the fights magically disappeared, but because both of them kept choosing, after every misunderstanding, after every dropped call and jealous spiral and exam-season silence, to reach back across the gap instead of letting it swallow them whole. They learned, slowly and imperfectly, the specific difference between a silence that meant *I need space* and a silence that meant *I'm slipping away* and they learned to ask instead of assume, even when asking felt harder than staying quiet.

The reunions became their own strange, precious rhythm. Some weekends they managed to meet Ved catching the last flight out on a Friday night, landing bleary-eyed and grinning at the airport where Naina waited, sometimes in the same mustard hoodie, sometimes with a fresh lucky leaf tied to a new thread because the old one had finally frayed and been quietly replaced without either of them making it a big event, because by then it had simply become part of who they were, no ceremony needed. The first sight of her across the arrivals gate never once got old every single time, without fail, something in Ved's chest would loosen the moment he spotted her, as if some part of him had spent the entire flight bracing for the possibility that this time might feel different, and every single time, it never did.

Other weekends, no matter how much either of them wanted it, they simply couldn't make it work clashing schedules, exam clashes, expensive last-minute tickets that neither budget could stretch to justify, work emergencies that ate into the one free day either of them had. Those weekends stung in a specific, quiet way that neither of them ever fully got used to, the kind of disappointment that didn't announce itself loudly

but sat heavy in the chest all Saturday, both of them going through their days a little more distracted than usual, checking the time more often than they needed to, aware of exactly what they should have been doing instead.

But the weekends that did happen made up for it in ways that felt almost unfair to the rest of the month. Late-night hotel check-ins where they'd order absurd amounts of room service and fall asleep mid-movie, tangled together like they were trying to physically make up for weeks of missing each other, Naina's head tucked under his chin, his arm heavy and warm across her back, both of them too tired to finish the film but too stubborn to admit it and turn it off. Mornings felt almost sacred, waking up tangled in unfamiliar hotel sheets to the sound of the other person's breathing instead of a phone alarm, neither of them rushing to check messages, both of them simply lying there for a few extra minutes pretending Sunday evening wasn't already creeping toward them.

Digital dates filled the gaps on the nights they couldn't meet the same movie playing on two different screens in two different cities, video call propped up beside them, sharing snacks they couldn't actually share, laughing at the same scenes a second apart because of lag, Naina narrating scenes dramatically like a bad commentary track just to hear him laugh, Ved pretending to fall asleep halfway through just to see how long it took her to notice and get offended. Random late-night flights got booked on a whim just because Ved had one free Saturday and couldn't stand the idea of not using it, landing at odd hours, texting *look out your window* before she even realized he'd left Mumbai, watching her scramble out of bed in her pajamas to find him standing outside her hostel gate looking far too pleased with himself for someone who'd had four hours of sleep.

"You're insane," she said once, laughing and crying a little at the same time, still in her pajamas, hair a mess, standing barefoot at the gate at midnight. "You have work in six hours." "I have to work six hours in Mumbai," he corrected. "Right now, I'm exactly where I want to be."

Ordinary Sunday mornings in a hotel room felt, for those few hours, like the home. Neither of them had time to build anywhere else breakfast shared off one plate because ordering two felt unnecessary, lazy conversations about nothing important, the specific comfort of not needing to fill every silence because the silence itself felt safe.

And then, always, the goodbye at the end of it. Airport security lines that felt cruelly short after weekends that felt cruelly shorter. Fights that flared up right before he left, born entirely out of the exhaustion of having to say goodbye again, both of them a little unfair to each other simply because it hurt too much to be kind about leaving.

"Why do we always fight before you leave?" Naina asked once, sitting outside the departure gate, arms crossed, eyes red, refusing to look at him directly because looking at him always made it worse.

"Because it's easier to be angry than to be sad," Ved admitted, sitting close enough that their shoulders touched despite the distance she was trying to keep. "Anger feels like it has somewhere to go. Sadness just sits there."

She hadn't had an answer for that, only reached for his hand anyway, because whatever the fight had been about ten minutes earlier always seemed to matter less than the fact that he was about to walk through that gate again. Every single time, the anger dissolved the moment his flight was called, replaced by the same quiet ritual one long hug, one *call me when you land*, one look back before he disappeared past

security, because some habits, once formed in love, refuse to be broken no matter how tired the two people carrying them become.

Somewhere in the middle of all of it the calls, the fights, the jealousy, the Blinkit orders, the flights, the tears at departure gates a year passed. Not all at once, the way years are supposed to feel like they pass, but slowly, in a thousand small pieces that neither of them fully noticed stacking up until one day they looked back and realized how much distance they'd actually survived together. The marigold on Ved's balcony had bloomed and wilted and bloomed again. The money plant on Naina's windowsill had grown long enough that she'd had to buy a second pot just to give it room. Somewhere in that quiet, ordinary growth, so had they.

The fights grew rarer, not because either of them stopped caring enough to disagree, but because they'd finally learned each other's specific exhaustion, learned when silence meant *busy* instead of *distant*, learned to say *I'm overwhelmed*, *give me an hour* instead of disappearing without explanation. They learned each other's bad days by pattern instead of confession. Naina knew Ved was having a hard week the moment his texts got shorter and more practical, and instead of spiralling into old fears, she'd simply send him something stupid enough to make him laugh, patient enough to wait for the version of him that wanted to talk. Ved learned that Naina's silence during exam season wasn't rejection, it was survival, and instead of taking it personally, he started sending single-word check-ins that asked for nothing back *breathing?* just enough to remind her she was thought of without demanding energy she didn't have to give.

The jealousy softened into trust earned the hard way, through a hundred small proofs instead of grand promises through

every photo he sent unprompted just so she never had to wonder, every time she mentioned a classmate's name so casually that it stopped feeling like something to hide. The goodbyes still hurt they never stopped hurting, not once, not even after the fiftieth one but they stopped feeling like threats to the relationship and started feeling like a familiar, if unwelcome, part of its rhythm, the way a long journey always includes a few uncomfortable stretches of road that you learn to simply drive through instead of fearing.

And somewhere in that year, without either of them announcing it, they had quietly become a mature couple the kind that fights less because they understand more, the kind that doesn't need daily reassurance because the reassurance is baked into a year of consistently showing up, brick by brick, phone call by phone call, cancelled flight by rebooked flight. Busy weeks came and went, sometimes swallowing them into their own separate worlds for days at a stretch, work deadlines and exam schedules pulling them into silence that would have terrified either of them a year ago, and yet, whenever they did resurface into each other's lives, it never felt like starting over. It felt, oddly, like they'd never left like whatever happens to most couples after the initial rush fades hadn't quite managed to touch them, because distance had somehow kept that rush alive instead of wearing it down.

They still got excited over dumb things. Ved still saved every single one of her voice notes, even the boring ones about lecture attendance, an entire folder of them sitting quietly on his phone labelled simply *her*. Naina still refreshed her phone every few minutes on the days he flew in, heart doing the same nervous flutter it had the very first time, as if a year of proof still hadn't fully convinced the anxious, hopeful part of her that he'd actually show up and every single time, he did, and

every single time, some small, guarded part of her exhaled all over again. They still argued over jalebi temperature, a debate that had by now become less about jalebis and more about the comfort of having something safe and small to disagree about. They still danced badly to songs neither of them fully remembered the lyrics to, whenever they got a few hours in the same city, still took Polaroids that came out blurry, still filmed stupid videos neither of them would ever post, still fell asleep mid-sentence on calls and woke up to find the line still open, the other person having simply stayed, listening to nothing but the quiet, unwilling to be the one to hang up first. A year in, and somehow, impossibly, it still felt like the honeymoon phase had simply refused to leave worn in at the edges, more patient, more forgiving, but every bit as alive. It had simply changed shape, the way love tends to when it's given enough time and enough distance to prove itself. It wasn't loud anymore. It didn't need to be. It had become something steadier, something that didn't announce itself with grand declarations every day but lived instead in the small, consistent things a goodnight text that never once got skipped, a plant that never once got forgotten, a promise made in an airport that had been kept, quietly, a hundred times over.

"Do you ever think," Naina asked one night, video call propped against her pillow, the two of them half-watching the same show on separate screens, "that we should be more used to this by now? Like it should feel normal instead of exciting every single time?"

"I hope it never feels normal," Ved said, without looking up from his side of the screen. "Normal is what happens to people who stop noticing each other. I never want to stop noticing you."

"Even after a year of fighting over dead phone batteries and cancelled flights?"

"Especially after that," he said, finally looking at her properly, the tiredness in his eyes softened by something that had only gotten steadier with time. "Anyone can love someone easily. It doesn't mean much until you've loved them through the hard, boring, exhausting parts to the parts nobody puts in songs. We did that. A whole year of it."

She smiled at that, tired from a long week, happy in a way that had taken an entire year of fights and flights and misunderstandings and Blinkit deliveries and hotel Sundays to earn a happiness with texture to it now, worn soft in the right places instead of shiny and untested.

"One year," she said softly.

"One year," he agreed. "And I'd choose every single fight, every missed weekend, every dead phone battery, all over again because it always ends the same way."

"With us choosing each other?"

"With us choosing each other," he said. "Every time. No matter what. No matter how tired, how busy, how far. That was never going to change."

She didn't say anything back right away. She simply looked at him through the screen a little pixelated, a little delayed, fifteen hundred kilometres away and somehow closer than anyone had ever felt and thought, quietly, that some promises don't need grand declarations to be kept. Some promises simply get lived, one ordinary, imperfect day at a time, until one day you look up and realize an entire year has passed and you're still here, still choosing, still each other's favourite person to come home to, even when home is a voice on a screen instead of a person in the room.

To anyone reading this who knows exactly what it feels like to love someone from a distance the fights that come from missing each other too much to be fair, the jealousy you're not proud of, the phone calls that end too soon, the flights booked on hope instead of certainty, the goodbyes that never really get easier this one's for you. Long distance doesn't survive on grand gestures alone. It survives on the boring, ordinary, exhausting decision to keep showing up, again and again, especially on the days it would be easier not to. If you're in the middle of your own year in between, hold on. The honeymoon phase doesn't have to end just because the city does. 🌻

🌻 The Sun & The Sunflower





A Note to My Readers

If you've made it to the last page, thank you for trusting me with your time, your heart, and your emotions.

Maybe this story reminded you of someone you loved, someone you lost, or someone you're still waiting for. Maybe it reminded you of yourself.

If you're carrying a broken heart today, I hope you remember this: life never stops moving forward, and neither should you. Some chapters end not because your story is over, but because they are making room for something you cannot see yet.

Not every goodbye is a failure. Not every delay is a rejection. Sometimes life takes away what isn't meant to stay so it can lead you to what truly belongs with you.

Keep believing in love, but don't forget to believe in yourself first. Keep chasing your dreams, keep choosing growth, and keep showing up for the life waiting to be lived.

And if you're wondering whether you'll ever find your person—the one who feels like peace instead of confusion, home instead of uncertainty. I hope you never lose faith. Love has a beautiful way of arriving when you've almost stopped looking for it.

Until then, be kind to yourself. Heal. Laugh. Learn. Grow. Fall in love with your own life.

Because one day, someone will meet the version of you that survived everything you thought would break you. And they'll be grateful they did.

Until our paths cross again in another story...

With love,

Himanshi Yadav 

