PERHAPS US!

THE SPACE BETWEEN FEELING AND CHOOSING

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Preface

Some stories begin with love. Some begin with loneliness. And some begin with a conversation that was never supposed to mean anything. We grow up believing that love has rules.

We are taught that once we choose someone, our hearts should become certain. That marriage should silence every unexpected feeling and friendship must remain friendship, and that emotions which arrive at the wrong time should simply be ignored.

But life is rarely that simple.

Sometimes, in the middle of ordinary days, we meet someone who understands a part of us that we had forgotten existed. Someone who listens, notices and with whom silence feels strangely comfortable. And sometimes, that person arrives when we are already married, already settled and successful in career, already carrying responsibilities we cannot simply walk away from.

What happens then? Does having a feeling make us disloyal? Or is it what we choose to do with that feeling that defines us?

This is not a story about perfect people. It is a story about people who have built lives, loved their families, fulfilled their responsibilities—and yet discovered that the human heart does not always follow the boundaries we create for it.

The characters in the story are not here to tell you what is right or wrong. They are here to make you question it. Perhaps you will understand one of them or will judge another.

Perhaps, somewhere between their conversations, silences, choices and sacrifices, you will recognise a little piece of your own life. Sometimes the most difficult love stories are not about two people trying to be together. They are about two people trying to understand whether they should be.

And sometimes, the greatest act of love is not staying. It is knowing when to let go.

This is a story about those feelings we don't invite, those choices we don't talk about, and the relationships that change us—even when they never become ours.

Because somewhere in every life there is a person, a possibility, or a version of life that was almost ours!

— The Author (Dr Gayatri Singh)

Chapter One



Ordinary Mornings

At 4:30 a.m., Avni Sharma's alarm went off. She opened one eye, reached across the bedside table and silenced it before it could wake anyone else. For a few seconds she lay still. The room was dark, the curtains drawn, and beside her Arjun was sleeping peacefully, one arm stretched across the empty half of the bed.

Avni looked at the time again. It's 5:15 am. She sighed and got up. There were two things she had learnt after eleven years of marriage and two children: mornings waited for no one, and an alarm clock was only the beginning of the day's negotiations.

She slipped on her dressing gown and walked quietly towards the kitchen. The house was still. She liked these few minutes. They belonged only to her. She filled the kettle, switched it on and opened the kitchen window.

The early morning air was cool. Somewhere outside, a milk delivery van stopped briefly before moving on. A newspaper landed on a neighbour's doorstep with a soft thud. The kettle clicked. Avni made tea. She took one sip. Too strong. She added a little more milk. 'Better!'

Her phone buzzed on the counter. An email from the university. She stared at it. Please don't start yet, she thought. Then she opened it. Seven minutes later, she was already mentally rearranging her day. A lecture had been moved. A research meeting had been brought forward. One of her students wanted to

see her. And there was a report she had promised to finish by the evening. Avni put the phone down.

“Enough.”

She said it aloud. There was no one there to argue with her. For precisely thirty seconds, the kitchen remained quiet. Then came a loud thud from upstairs. Avni closed her eyes. “Vihaan.”

Another thud. “Mum!”

She was already walking towards the stairs. “What happened?”

“I can't find my sock!”

Avni stopped halfway up. “Your sock?”

“Yes.”

“You have two feet, Vihaan. You need two socks. Look properly.”

“I am looking!”

“You've been looking for twenty seconds.”

“It feels longer!” From the bedroom opposite came a sleepy voice. “Because you're shouting.” Anaya appeared at her bedroom door, hair untidy and eyes half closed. “Morning,” she said.

“Morning, darling. Go and get ready.”

“Is Dad awake?”

“No.”

“Lucky him.”

Avni laughed. “Go.”

By six-thirty, the house was fully awake. The bathroom door was being knocked on. The toaster had been used twice. Vihaan was complaining about his school uniform. Anaya was looking for a hairband. And Arjun had finally appeared downstairs, still rubbing sleep from his eyes. He walked straight towards Avni.

“Tea?”

She handed him a cup. He took a sip. “Perfect.”

“You say that every morning.”

“Because you make it perfectly every morning.”

“You're only saying that because you want something.”

He smiled. “Can I have your toast?”

“No.”

“Please?”

“No.”

He took it anyway.

“Arjun!”

He laughed as he walked away.

“You've been married to me for eleven years. You should know by now that asking is merely a formality.” Avni tried to look annoyed. She couldn't. Anaya watched them from the table.

“You two are weird.”

Arjun looked at her. “One day you'll understand.”

“I hope not.”

Vihaan appeared carrying one shoe. “Mum, where's the other one?”

Everyone looked at him. He looked down. The missing shoe was already on his foot. There was a moment of silence. Then the kitchen erupted with laughter. Avni leaned against the counter, laughing until her eyes watered. This was her morning. Not glamorous. Not peaceful. Not remotely organised. But hers. At 7:25, the children finally left.

“Bye, Mum!”

“Lunch boxes?”

“Yes!”

“Homework?”

“Yes!”

“Water bottles?” A pause. Avni looked at them. Anaya turned around. “Got them!” The door closed. Silence returned. Avni exhaled and felt relaxed. Arjun stood beside her.

“Coffee?”

“Tea.”

“Again?”

“Always.” He made it for her. While she drank, he watched her gather her things for work. Laptop. Notebook. Phone. A folder she had forgotten on the dining table. He picked it up. “You nearly left this.”

“Thank you.”

“You've got that meeting today?”

“Yes.”

“The important one?”

“They're all important.”

“You know what I mean.”

She smiled. “Yes. That one.”

He handed her the folder. “You'll be brilliant.”

She looked at him. “You don't even know what I'm presenting.”

“I don't need to.”

She smiled. There were mornings when she wondered whether love was supposed to feel more exciting after eleven years. Then there were mornings like this. And she realised perhaps excitement wasn't the point. Comfort was. Knowing. Being known. Having someone who could tell from the way you put down your cup that you were worried about something. She stepped closer and kissed his cheek.

“See you in the evening.”

“I'll come home.”

Outside, the city was already busy. Avni walked towards her car, her bag over one shoulder, her mind already on the day ahead. She was a lecturer, a researcher, a wife, a mother. She had ambitions that had nothing to do with any of those titles. She wanted to publish more. She wanted to lead a research project of her own. She wanted, one day, to travel with Arjun without checking

the school calendar first. She wanted to see Italy. Perhaps Greece. Perhaps Japan.

She wanted a life that continued to grow even when the children no longer needed her to find their socks. For now, though, she had a lecture at nine. And somewhere between home and the university, she realised she was smiling. She didn't know why. Perhaps it was the tea. Perhaps it was the morning chaos. Perhaps it was the kiss on her husband's cheek. Or perhaps happiness did not always need a reason. Sometimes it was simply there. Waiting quietly inside an ordinary morning.

Chapter Two



The Other Half of Her Day

By eight-forty-five, Avni was walking across the university campus with a coffee in one hand and a folder tucked beneath her arm.

The morning rush had begun. Students hurried between buildings, some carrying books, others carrying cups of tea and unfinished assignments. A group of first-year students stood near the noticeboard, arguing about something with the seriousness only university students could manage. Avni smiled as she passed them.

“Good morning, ma'am.”

“Good morning.”

“Ma'am, are you taking our class today?”

“If you're asking because you've forgotten the assignment, then yes.”

The students laughed. One of them looked at the others. “We're finished.”

Avni continued walking, smiling to herself. She had been teaching for years, yet she still enjoyed this part of the job—the unpredictability of young minds, their questions, their confidence, their occasional complete lack of preparation. Inside her office, she placed her bag on the chair and looked at the pile of papers waiting for her. She took a breath. “Right.” Her day had begun. Her first lecture went better than expected. She had planned forty minutes of teaching. The students turned it into nearly an hour of questions. One question led to another, and before she realised it, the clock was already

approaching ten. “That's enough for today,” she finally said. “The rest we'll discuss next week.” A student near the front raised his hand. “Ma'am, one last question.”

Avni smiled. “That's what everyone says.”

The class laughed. She stayed another ten minutes. When she finally returned to her office, her phone was vibrating. Arjun.

She answered. “Hello?”

“Have you eaten?”

She looked at the time. “It's 11:30.”

“So?”

“So, no.”

“Avni.”

“I'll eat.”

“When?”

“Later.”

“You said that yesterday.”

“I was busy.”

“You're always busy.” She smiled. “Are you calling to check on me or complain?”

“Both.”

She leaned back in her chair. “How was your morning?”

“Better now.”

“Why?”

“Because I got to hear your voice.” There was a brief silence. Avni looked towards the window.

“That's very smooth.”

“Eleven years of practice.” She laughed.

“Are you coming home on time?”

“I'll try.”

“No.”

“What?”

“Don't say try. You always tell me not to say try.”

She smiled. “Fine. I'll come home.”

“Good.”

“Now go to work.”

“You too.”

They ended the call. Avni stared at her phone for a moment before putting it down. Their conversations were rarely dramatic. Sometimes they lasted two minutes. Sometimes twenty. But they were part of the rhythm of their marriage. Like morning tea. Like goodnight. Like knowing the other person was there. At lunchtime, Avni sat with two colleagues in the staff room.

“You're looking suspiciously cheerful today,” one of them said.

“Am I?”

“Yes.”

“Perhaps I've had good tea.”

Her colleague laughed.

“It's always the husband.”

Avni smiled but didn't answer. Her phone buzzed again. A photograph.

Arjun had sent a picture of his lunch. Underneath it: Not as good as yours.

She replied: Obviously.

Another message arrived almost immediately. Miss you.

Avni stared at the two words. She smiled. Then she put the phone face down.

“Still suspiciously cheerful,” her colleague said. “Eat your lunch.”

By late afternoon, Avni was tired. She had spent two hours reviewing research proposals and another hour helping a student who was struggling with her dissertation. When the student finally left, she closed the file and looked at the clock. 6:12 p.m. She had promised to be home for evening tea together. She packed her laptop quickly.

Outside, the campus was quieter. The evening sun had softened the buildings, and a few students sat beneath the trees talking. Avni stopped for a moment.

She liked this hour. It reminded her that university life continued long after lectures ended. There were conversations, ambitions and beginnings happening everywhere. She wondered what her own children would become. Would Anaya follow her? Would Vihaan? Or would they choose completely different lives? She hoped they would. She wanted them to choose freely. That was one of her quiet ambitions as a mother—not to give her children a particular life, but to give them the confidence to build their own. Her phone rang again.

Arjun: "Where are you?"

"Leaving."

"Good."

"You sound pleased."

"I am."

"Why?"

"Dinner."

"You're hungry?"

"No."

There was a pause.

"I missed you." Avni smiled.

"I'll be home soon."

When she reached home, Vihaan ran to the door.

"Mum!" He hugged her around the waist.

"You're late."

"I know."

"You promised."

"I did."

Anaya appeared behind him. "Did you bring anything?"

Avni laughed. "So that's why you came."

"No."

"Yes."

“Maybe.”

She handed her daughter a small packet. Anaya smiled.

“Thanks, Mum.”

Arjun was standing in the hallway. Their eyes met. He didn't say anything. He simply smiled. Avni smiled back. It was a small moment. No one else noticed. But they did. Later that evening, after dinner, the children went upstairs. Avni sat beside Arjun on the sofa.

“Long day?”

“Very.”

“Mine too.”

She rested her head against his shoulder. He took her hand. They sat quietly. “Remember Italy?” she asked. He smiled. “Still dreaming?” “Always.” “Then we'll go.” “When?” “Soon.” She laughed softly. “You really like that word.”

“I do.” He squeezed her hand.

“One day, we'll wake up somewhere we've never been.”

Avni closed her eyes. “I'd like that.” Neither of them knew when that day would come. But they had learnt something over the years. Dreams did not always need dates. Sometimes it was enough to have someone beside you who believed they would happen. Outside, the night settled over the city. Inside, their home was warm and quiet. For Avni, it was enough. For now.

Chapter Three



The Woman in the same City

Dr. Naina Bhatia had never been afraid of being alone. At least, that was what she told herself. At forty-one, she had become accustomed to making decisions on her own. She could travel alone, sit through a difficult meeting without needing anyone beside her, handle a room full of senior academics and defend her research when people one-half of her age disagreed with her.

She was good at her work. Her name carried weight in academic circles, and she had spent more than two decades earning it. But there was one thing she had never quite learnt to become comfortable with. Coming home to an empty flat. It was not the kind of emptiness that frightened her. It was simply noticeable. A second cup never needed to be placed on the table. A conversation never continued into the kitchen. No one asked whether she had eaten. No one complained that she worked too late. No one was there to steal the last piece of chocolate from the fridge. And yet, there were evenings when she would open the front door and instinctively say,

“I'm home.” Only to hear silence answer. She had laughed about it once with her husband. “You're becoming sentimental,” he had told her.

“I've always been sentimental.”

“No. You've always been practical.”

“Perhaps I'm becoming practical about being sentimental.”

He had laughed. She had missed him for the rest of the evening. Naina had grown up in a close-knit family in Bhopal. She was the eldest of three siblings and had always been the serious one—the girl who finished her homework

before watching television, who read books during family gatherings and who somehow knew, even as a teenager, that she wanted a career of her own. Her parents had never asked her to choose between family and ambition. That was perhaps why she had never wanted to choose She wanted to study, work, marry, children and family. She wanted to travel and to be useful.

And, most importantly, she wanted to remain herself while doing all of it. Life had given her much of what she wanted. Not always at the same time. Not always in the way she had imagined. But enough. She had married Rohan Bhatia in her late twenties. Rohan was not from the academic world. He had his own business in Bhopal, a life he had built over many years, and a temperament completely different from hers. Where Naina analysed everything, Rohan trusted instinct.

Where she planned three months ahead, he could decide something over breakfast and be perfectly happy about it. Their differences had not always been easy. But they had made room for each other. That, Naina believed, was what marriage really was. Not finding someone exactly like yourself. Finding someone who could remain beside you while you remained yourself.

Their marriage had begun simply. A small wedding. Two nervous people. Too many relatives. Too much food. Photographs in which neither of them looked entirely comfortable. And one promise they had made privately. Neither would ask the other to give up the life they wanted. For years, that promise had been easy to keep. They lived together. Built their home. Took holidays when they could. Celebrated festivals with both families. Had long conversations late at night.

Then Naina's career changed. The opportunity in Delhi had arrived unexpectedly. At first, it was meant to be temporary. One year. Perhaps two. Then came another project. Another appointment. Another responsibility. The temporary arrangement slowly became a permanent life. Rohan had never asked her to come back. Naina had never asked him to leave everything behind. They had simply learnt to live between cities.

Some marriages were built around shared kitchens and Sunday breakfasts. Theirs had begun to include railway platforms, airport calls and messages sent between meetings.

It was not the life they had imagined. But it was still their life.

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That morning, Naina woke at 5:47. She reached for her phone before getting out of bed. There was a message from Rohan.

Good morning. Don't skip breakfast.

She smiled. She typed: Good morning. Don't forget your medicine.

His reply arrived within seconds. You sound like my mother.

Someone has to look after you.

Come home and do it yourself.

She looked at the message for a long moment.

Then typed: Next weekend.

He replied with a single heart.

Naina put the phone down. She didn't need grand declarations. Not anymore. They had crossed that stage of love where every feeling needed words. Now love was hidden in reminders. Eat something. Drive carefully. Call me when you reach. Take a jacket. Don't work too late. Come home when you can. Small and ordinary sentences. The sort of sentences that only mattered because there was love underneath them. By six-fifteen, she was in the kitchen. She made tea, opened the curtains and stood on the balcony. Delhi was waking. She watched the city below. She had once found it intimidating. Now she knew its sounds. The traffic. The vendors. The early morning walkers. The hurried footsteps. The constant movement.

Delhi had slowly become familiar without ever becoming home. Perhaps that was the strange thing about belonging. You could belong to more than one place and still miss the place you were not in. Naina took a sip of tea. Her phone rang. Rohan. She answered.

“Morning.”

“Did you sleep?”

“Enough.”

“You're lying.”

“I slept.”

“How many hours?”

She smiled.

“Why are you interrogating me?”

“Because I know you.”

She leaned against the balcony railing.

“What's happening at home?”

“Mother wants to know when you're coming.”

“Of course she does.”

“She has already planned your entire weekend.”

“Of course she has.”

“You'll go to the market with her.”

“I know.”

“Visit your aunt.”

“I know.”

“Disha also coming from the hostel.”

“I had a talk with her.”

Disha is her eldest daughter studying in one of the prestigious day-cum-boarding school in Shimla.

“And Sunday lunch with your brother.”

Naina laughed. “Is there any time left for you?”

“I'm trying to find some.”

Her smile softened. “I'm coming.”

“When?”

“Friday evening.”

“Promise?”

“Yes.”

This time she hoped nothing would interfere. She missed him. Not desperately. Not tragically. Just steadily. The way a person misses something that belongs to the rhythm of their life. By eight o'clock, Naina was ready for work. She dressed

simply, picked up her laptop bag and checked her diary. The day was full. A lecture. A research meeting. Two student appointments. A paper to review. An online meeting with colleagues from another university. And a proposal she wanted to finish before leaving for Bhopal.

She looked at herself in the mirror. There was confidence in her expression. She liked that woman. The woman who had built something. The woman who had not allowed distance to make her smaller. She picked up her keys. Then paused.

On the dressing table was an old photograph. She and Rohan, years younger, standing outside their first home. She picked it up. “You've changed,” she whispered. Then she smiled.

“So have I.” She put the photograph down and left.

Naina Bhatia had a career she was proud of. A marriage she valued. A family she loved. A home waiting for her in another city. And a second life she was building in Delhi. She had no idea that, somewhere else in the same city, another woman was beginning her morning in a completely different way. A woman who had no reason to enter Naina's life.

Not yet.

Chapter Four



Avni — Between Lectures and Life

By nine in the morning, the university had lost the quietness of the early hours. The corridors were crowded with students. Some hurried towards lecture halls with books pressed against their chests. Others stood in groups near the canteen, arguing over assignments, examinations and things that seemed extremely important at the time. Avni walked through the corridor with her usual purposeful pace.

“Good morning, ma'am.”

“Good morning.”

“Ma'am, I sent you the research proposal.”

“I saw it. We'll talk after your class.”

“Ma'am, can I ask you something?”

“Of course.” She stopped.

The student hesitated. “I think I've chosen the wrong topic for my dissertation.”

Avni smiled. “That's not a disaster. That's what research is for—discovering what you don't know yet.”

The student smiled with relief. “Thank you, ma'am.”

“Come to my office at four.”

She continued walking. Her colleague, Dr Priya Menon, caught up with her.

“You've already solved someone's life before nine-thirty.”

Avni laughed. “Only their dissertation.”

“Same thing at this age.”

They entered the staff room together. Priya put her coffee down.

“Faculty meeting at eleven.”

“I know.”

“Research committee at one.”

“I know.”

“Student presentations at three.”

“I know.”

Priya looked at her.

“You know everything?”

“No. I just know my calendar.”

“That's more frightening.”

Avni smiled. Her office was small but comfortable. Books occupied most of one wall. Research papers were stacked neatly on her desk, although there was always one untidy pile that seemed to reproduce overnight. On the corner of the desk stood a photograph of her family. Anaya was smiling. Vihaan was making a ridiculous face. Arjun stood behind them with one arm around Avni. She looked at it for a second before opening her laptop. Then came the first lecture. The students were postgraduate scholars, bright and ambitious, but easily distracted. Avni walked into the room and placed her notes on the desk.

“Right. Who has actually read the paper I sent?”

Silence. She looked around. One hand slowly rose. Then another.

“Two?” A third hand appeared. Avni smiled.

“Progress.”

The class laughed.

She did not lecture at them. She questioned them. “What do you think the author is trying to prove?” A student answered. “Why?” Another student challenged him. Avni stepped back and let them argue. This was her favourite

part. The moment when students stopped waiting for the teacher to provide answers and began forming their own. At the end of the session, one of the quieter students stayed behind. “Ma'am?”

“Yes?”

“I don't think I'm good enough for research.”

Avni looked at her. “Why?”

“I don't know enough.”

“Nobody does.”

The girl looked surprised.

Avni smiled. “Research doesn't begin with knowing everything. It begins with being willing to keep asking questions.”

The student nodded. “Thank you.”

After she left, Avni remained at her desk for a moment. She had once been that student. Unsure. Ambitious. Terrified of getting things wrong. Perhaps that was why she cared so much. The afternoon disappeared into meetings. There were disagreements about funding. A discussion about a conference. A student whose work needed more supervision. A colleague who wanted to change the timetable. By four-thirty, Avni was tired. But she was happy. She liked being useful. She liked the feeling that her work mattered to someone beyond herself. At five, she finally closed her laptop. Her phone showed three messages.

One from Anaya: Are you coming home soon?

One from Vihaan: Mom I got full marks in mathematics.

And one from Arjun: Dinner is waiting. So am I.

Avni smiled. She typed: On my way.

She picked up her bag. The university would still be there tomorrow. Her family was waiting tonight.

Chapter Five



Naina — A Life of Her Own

Naina's department was different from Avni's. Older. More formal. Quieter. There was a seriousness to the corridors that reflected the postgraduate and research environment. By nine-thirty, Naina had already answered twelve emails. Her assistant knocked.

“Professor Bhatia, your ten o'clock meeting is here.”

“Send them in.”

The morning disappeared quickly. A research proposal. A discussion with a doctoral student. A call with a colleague from another university. Then a faculty meeting that lasted nearly twice as long as planned. Naina remained calm through all of it. She had developed that quality over the years. She rarely raised her voice. She didn't need to. When she disagreed, she listened first. Then she spoke. And people listened. Her colleagues respected her not because she demanded it, but because she had earned it. At eleven-thirty, a young lecturer came into her office.

“Ma'am, could I ask your advice?”

“Of course.”

“I've been offered a research position in another city.”

“That sounds good.”

“It is. But I'm frightened.”

Naina smiled. “Good.”

The lecturer looked confused.

“Good?”

“Yes. If you're frightened, it probably matters to you.”

“But what if I fail?”

“You might.”

The woman stared at her. Naina laughed softly. “I'm not going to tell you that you won't fail. You might. We all do. The important question is whether you'll regret not trying.” The young lecturer was quiet.

“What would you do?”

Naina leaned back.

“I'd go.”

“Even if it meant leaving home?”

Naina paused. Only for a moment.

“Yes.” She knew more about that question than she wanted to admit. The lecturer thanked her and left. Naina looked towards the window. Leaving home had once been a difficult decision for her too. She wondered whether she would make the same choice again. She didn't know. Her afternoon was spent with doctoral students. One student had submitted a chapter. Another had missed a deadline. A third arrived with twenty pages of notes and no clear argument. Naina read the first page. Then looked up.

“You have good material.”

The student smiled.

“But?”

“But you don't know what you want to say.”

The smile disappeared.

Naina laughed.

“Don't look so worried. That's fixable.” She took a pencil. “Start here.”

For the next forty minutes, they worked through the chapter together. When the student finally understood the structure, his face changed.

“Oh.” Naina smiled. “That 'oh' is why we do this.”

He laughed. “Thank you, ma'am.”

“Now go and rewrite it.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

When he left, Naina looked at the clock. Nearly six. She hadn't noticed how quickly the day had gone. Her phone vibrated. A message from Rohan.

Have you eaten?

She smiled. Not yet.

The reply came immediately. Of course not. She laughed quietly.

Another message followed. Come home soon.

She stared at it. Home.

The word meant two different places now. There was the flat in Delhi where she kept her books, clothes and work. And there was Bhopal. Where Rohan was. Where her family was. Where someone always knew whether she had eaten.

She typed: Friday. Then added: I promise.

Later that evening, Naina left the university. The campus was almost empty. A few students were still sitting beneath the trees, discussing something animatedly. She watched them for a moment. They reminded her of herself at that age. She had once believed success meant reaching a particular place. A particular position. A particular title. Years later, she had discovered that success was more complicated. It was not only about how far you travelled. It was also about what you carried with you. Naina walked towards her car. Her phone rang.

Rohan.

She answered. “Hello.”

“You're still at work?”

“I've just left.”

“You need to learn when to stop.”

She smiled.

“You've been saying that for twenty years.”

“And you haven't listened for twenty years.”

“Perhaps I'm consistent.”

“Perhaps you're impossible.”

She laughed. He laughed too.

Neither of them hurried to end the call.

There was comfort in hearing each other's voice at the end of an ordinary day.

“What are you doing tonight?” he asked.

“Nothing.”

“Good.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to talk to you.”

Her expression softened.

“I'm listening.”

And as Naina drove through the evening traffic, she listened to the man she loved talking about ordinary things. The sort of things that never appeared on a CV. The sort of things that made a life.

Two women. Two successful careers. Two very different evenings. And neither knew that, one day, their professional worlds would bring them into the same room.

Not yet.

For now, they were simply living the lives they had chosen.

Chapter Six



Ooty- Conference

The conference in Ooty had brought together academics from universities across the country. For Naina, it was supposed to be a straightforward three-day professional commitment. A presentation. A few panel discussions. Several meetings. And, if she was lucky, a quiet evening with a cup of tea overlooking the hills. She had arrived the previous afternoon. The morning air was cool enough to make her glad she had packed a shawl. Mist hung lightly between the eucalyptus trees, and the hills seemed to disappear into the pale sky.

Naina stood near the conference hall with a cup of coffee in her hand, listening to two colleagues discuss a research proposal. She smiled politely. Her mind, however, was elsewhere. She had not been feeling quite herself for the last few days. Nothing serious. Just tiredness. Too much work. Too much travelling. Too little sleep. She had barely eaten breakfast that morning, convincing herself that coffee would be enough to get her through the first session. Perhaps that had been a mistake.

"Naina?"

She turned. A familiar face stood a few feet away.

"Dr Ashish Malhotra?"

He smiled.

"Ashish Malhotra."

She looked at him for a moment before the memory returned.

“I remember.”

They had met briefly at an academic event some years earlier, though they had never really spoken.

“I didn't know you were coming,” he said.

“Neither did I, until last week.”

“That sounds like you.”

She laughed softly.

“What does?”

“Agreeing to everything at the last minute.”

“Perhaps I've changed.”

“I doubt it.”

There was something easy about the conversation. Nothing remarkable. Nothing that suggested this brief meeting would matter later. They exchanged a few words about the conference schedule before someone called Ashish from across the hall.

“I'll see you at the panel.”

“Of course.”

He walked away. Naina watched him for a second before turning back towards her colleagues. She lifted her coffee. Then stopped. The smell suddenly seemed stronger than it had a moment earlier. She put the cup down. The room appeared to tilt slightly. She blinked.

Once.

Twice.

Not now.

She took a slow breath. The voices around her became strangely distant. Someone was still talking. Someone laughed. A chair scraped against the floor. But everything seemed slightly blurred.

“Naina?”

She tried to respond. “I'm fine.”

Her own voice sounded far away. She reached for the edge of the table.

Her fingers didn't find it. Her phone slipped from her hand and landed softly on the carpet. She bent to pick it up. The movement made the dizziness worse. For one frightening second, she felt as though the floor had disappeared beneath her. Then someone caught her.

“Easy.”

An arm steadied her shoulder. Another hand supported her elbow.

“Naina?”

She recognised the voice.

Ashish.

He had returned just in time.

“I've got you.”

She closed her eyes.

“I think I'm dizzy.”

“Sit down.”

“I can manage.”

“You can manage after you sit down.”

There was enough firmness in his voice that she didn't argue. He guided her towards a nearby chair.

“Slowly.”

Naina sat. Ashish crouched slightly in front of her.

“Are you feeling better?”

“A little.”

“Have you eaten?”

She hesitated. “Some.”

He raised an eyebrow. “That doesn't sound convincing.”

She gave him a tired smile. “I had coffee.”

“Coffee isn't breakfast.”

“I know.”

“Apparently you don't.”

Despite herself, she laughed. The dizziness began to ease. Ashish picked up her phone from the carpet and handed it to her.

“Here.”

“Thank you.”

He looked at her carefully. “You've gone pale.”

“I'm just exhausted.”

“Have you been sleeping properly?”

“Not really.”

“Then that's probably it. You've been travelling, working and living on coffee.”

“You sound like a doctor.”

“No. Just someone who has made the same mistake many times.”

She smiled. “I'll be fine.”

“Promise?”

She looked at him. “You sound like my husband.”

Ashish smiled. “Then your husband is probably right.”

For a moment, their eyes met. Something about the moment felt unexpectedly warm. Not romantic. Not yet. Just human. Someone had noticed that she wasn't okay. And for some reason, that small act of concern touched her more than she expected.

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The conference continued. Naina insisted on attending her panel. Ashish checked on her once before the session began.

“Still dizzy?”

“No.”

“Headache?”

“A little.”

“Water?”

She held up her bottle.

“Happy?”

“Almost.”

She smiled.

“You're very persistent.”

“Only when people refuse to take care of themselves.”

“I'll remember that.”

He nodded and walked away. Naina watched him disappear into the crowd. She couldn't explain why the brief encounter stayed in her mind. Perhaps because she had been feeling unusually vulnerable. Perhaps because she had been away from home. Perhaps because, in a place full of unfamiliar faces, one familiar person had suddenly appeared. Whatever the reason, she found herself thinking about him again later that evening.

That night, Naina stood outside the hotel, wrapped in her shawl. The mist had thickened. The hills were almost invisible. She held a cup of tea between her hands.

“Better?” She turned. Ashish stood behind her.

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

He smiled.

“Good.”

He stood beside her, leaving a comfortable distance between them. For a while, neither spoke. Below them, the lights of Ooty appeared through the mist like scattered stars.

“Beautiful, isn't it?” Naina said.

“Very.”

She looked towards the hills.

“I needed this.”

“A break?”

“A reminder that life isn't only meetings and deadlines.”

He smiled.

“Then perhaps Ooty is doing its job.”

She laughed softly. Neither knew it yet. But years later, when they looked back, they would remember this morning. Not because anything extraordinary had happened.

There had been no confession. No dramatic moment. No promise.

Only dizziness.

A fallen phone.

A cup of coffee.

And a man who had simply stopped long enough to make sure a woman was all right. Sometimes, a story doesn't begin with love.

Sometimes, it begins with kindness.

Chapter Seven



Ooty - Second part

A three-day academic conference had drawn scholars and educators from universities across the country to Ooty. For Avni, it was supposed to be three days of lectures, research presentations and academic discussions. She had expected nothing more. On the second afternoon, after a particularly long session, she stepped outside the conference hall with a cup of coffee in her hand. The Ooty air was cool and misty. Avni pulled her shawl a little closer around herself and looked towards the hills.

“Avni?” She stopped.

There was something familiar about the voice. She turned. For a second, she simply stared. Then her face changed completely.

“Riya?” The woman standing a few metres away laughed.

“Oh my God!” They walked towards each other at almost the same time.

“You're really Avni!”

“And you're really Riya!”

They hugged. Both of them started laughing.

“How many years has it been?” Riya asked.

“Too many.”

“Twenty-seven?”

“Don't say it like that.”

“Why? It makes us sound ancient.”

Avni laughed.

“You haven't changed.”

Riya looked at her.

“That's a lie.”

“So have you.”

“Another lie.”

They laughed again. It was strange how quickly old friendships could return. There was no awkwardness. No need to explain the years between them. One moment they were two women in their late thirties and forties, standing outside a conference hall in Ooty. The next, they were schoolgirls again. Riya's eyes suddenly lit up.

“Do you remember the science exhibition?”

Avni groaned.

“Don't.”

“You broke the model.”

“You pushed me.”

“I did not.”

“You absolutely did.”

“You were the one who forgot the glue.”

“And you were supposed to bring it!”

They both burst out laughing. A passing academic looked at them curiously.

Neither noticed. They had already travelled fifteen years backwards. They remembered sitting together during lunch breaks, exchanging tiffin boxes, writing notes to each other during boring classes and getting caught laughing when they were supposed to be listening. They remembered the school annual function. The teacher they were both slightly afraid of. The day they had bunked an afternoon class to buy ice cream. The secret jokes that made absolutely no sense to anyone else.

"You remember the principal catching us outside the library?" Riya asked.

Avni covered her face.

"We were supposed to be returning books."

"We were eating samosas."

"You were eating samosas."

"You were eating mine."

"That was because you offered."

"I did not."

"You did."

They laughed until Avni had tears in her eyes. It felt good. Unexpectedly good. Riya finally looked at her properly.

"So. Tell me everything."

"There isn't much to tell."

"Don't be boring."

Avni smiled.

"I'm married."

"I know that."

"Two children."

"I know."

"How?"

"Social media."

Avni shook her head.

"Of course."

"And your husband?"

"Arjun. Still tolerating me."

"Poor man."

"Very."

Riya laughed.

"What about you?"

Riya hesitated for a moment. Then smiled. "I'm doing well."

"Professionally?"

"Professionally, yes."

"And personally?"

Riya glanced behind her. Avni followed her gaze. A man was walking towards them. He was carrying two cups of coffee and wearing a conference badge.

Riya smiled.

"And personally, I've brought company."

The man reached them.

"Sorry. The queue was longer than I expected."

Riya took one of the cups.

"You're forgiven." Then she turned to Avni.

"Avni, this is Raj."

Raj smiled.

"Hello."

"Hi."

Raj, You're our senior!

Avni looked at Riya.

"You have?"

"Only the embarrassing stories."

"Excellent."

Raj laughed. "Then I already know about the school pranks."

Avni looked at Riya.

"Traitor."

"Childhood friends have no secrets."

Raj was a lecturer at a college in Delhi. He spoke easily about teaching, students and the differences between university and college life. He had a natural

confidence without trying to dominate the conversation. Avni found herself listening.

“You're a lecturer too?” she asked.

“Yes. Delhi.”

“What do you teach?”

They talked for several minutes about education, students and the changing expectations of young people. RAJ had interesting opinions. He disagreed with her on one point, but instead of turning it into an argument, he listened carefully and explained his own perspective. Avni appreciated that. Riya noticed. She gave Avni a small, knowing smile. Avni ignored it.

“So, you two came together for the conference?” she asked.

“Riya isn't attending the academic sessions,” Raj explained. “She came with me. We thought we'd make a little trip of it.”

“Ooty is hardly a bad place for a trip.”

“Exactly.”

Riya slipped her arm through Avni's.

“And now we have an excuse to stay longer.”

They walked towards the hotel café. Over the next hour, the conversation moved effortlessly from careers to marriages, from school memories to travel plans. Riya told them about the trouble she had once got into for sneaking out of a school function. Avni retaliated with a story about Riya writing a fake note to their teacher. Raj laughed so much that he nearly spilled his coffee. “You two were impossible.”

“We were perfectly well behaved,” Riya said.

Avni looked at her. “Were we?”

“No.” They laughed again.

For Avni, the afternoon passed too quickly. She had not realised how much she had missed this particular version of herself—the girl who laughed without checking the time, who remembered silly things, who had once believed every friendship would last exactly as it had begun. Before they parted, Riya took out her phone.

“Give me your number.”

“You don't have it?”

“I had it once.”

“Once?”

“Things happened.”

Avni laughed and exchanged numbers with her. Raj did the same.

“Now you can't disappear again,” Riya said.

“I won't.”

“You promise?”

“Promise.”

Riya hugged her again. “I'm so glad I found you.”

Avni smiled. “So am I.”

As Riya and Raj walked away, Avni stood for a moment watching them. Raj seemed kind. Intelligent. Easy to talk to. And clearly very fond of Riya. Avni missed the golden days and recalled her affection for Raj. Avni smiled. It was good to see her old friends happy. Her phone buzzed.

A message from Arjun. How's Ooty?

She typed: Beautiful. And I met someone unexpected.

A reply came almost immediately. Who?

Avni smiled. An old friend.

She put the phone away and looked once more towards the mist-covered hills. She had come to Ooty expecting three days of academic work. Instead, the past had walked back into her life. She didn't yet know that some reunions were not merely reunions. Sometimes they were the beginning of another chapter.

Chapter Eight



Between Lectures and Laughter

The last day conference began on a Thursday morning in one of Ooty's large convention hotels, the sort of place where everything seemed polished—the glass doors, the marble floors, the registration desks and even the coffee served in small white cups.

Naina arrived ten minutes before the session. She had travelled to conferences many times, but there was something different this time. At the registration desk, she was looking through the programme when someone called her name.

"Naina?"

She turned. For a second, she simply stared. Then her face broke into a smile.

"Ritika!" They hugged.

"When did you get here?"

"Yesterday evening."

"You look exactly the same."

"That's a lie."

"Fine. You look better."

Naina laughed. Ritika had been her colleague years ago, before both women had moved into different institutions and different cities. They had shared conference papers, endless cups of tea, late-night discussions and more than one terrible departmental meeting.

“You're still in Bangalore?” Naina asked.

“Unfortunately.”

“You used to say you wanted to escape Bangalore!”

“I did. Then Bangalore became my escape.”

They laughed. Another familiar face appeared.

“Is this a reunion?”

Naina turned.

“Arvind!”

Within minutes, the three of them were talking as if no time had passed. That was the strange thing about old friends. Years could disappear in a conversation. They remembered people Naina had almost forgotten. Old professors. Embarrassing presentations. A conference in Ooty where the hotel had lost everyone's luggage. A paper they had written together at two in the morning because the deadline was the next morning. They laughed until Naina had tears in her eyes.

“I had forgotten that,” she said.

“Of course you had,” Ritika replied. “You only remember your achievements.”

“That is because I am a respectable academic.”

“Respectable?”

Arvind laughed.

“That's not the word I'd use.”

Naina shook her head.

“I should have known better than to meet both of you.”

The conference had brought together academics from several universities, and among the participants was Ashish, who was attending as one of the panel members. Naina noticed him during the opening session, seated a few rows away, and their eyes met briefly across the hall. Later, they exchanged a few words about the programme. Nearby, Avni and Raj had also arrived together, with Raj participating in one of the academic sessions while Riya planned to accompany him and explore Ooty in between the programmes. Riya, was far

more interested in the local markets and had already announced that she intended to spend most of her free time shopping.

The session was followed by a series of lectures, panel discussions and presentations. Naina was in her element. She spoke with confidence, challenged a few arguments and listened carefully to younger researchers. At lunch, she found herself surrounded by old colleagues and new acquaintances. Someone was discussing a research project. Someone else was arguing about funding. A young professor was passionately describing an idea. Naina listened, contributed and occasionally laughed. For a few hours, she forgot that she had a train to catch on Friday evening. She forgot that her suitcase was still half-packed. She forgot the quiet flat waiting for her. She was simply Naina. A professional. A friend. A woman who enjoyed being surrounded by people who understood the peculiar language of academic life.

That evening, a group of them decided to go out.

"Dinner," Ritika announced.

"I have work."

"No."

"I really do."

"No one at this conference believes you anymore."

Naina laughed. "Where are we going?"

"Somewhere you can remember that you're forty-six and still alive."

"I am perfectly aware of my age."

"Then dress accordingly."

"Meaning?"

"Not like you're attending another seminar."

Naina raised an eyebrow.

"I wasn't planning to."

"Good."

Later that evening, Naina stood in front of the mirror in her hotel room. She had changed into a simple dark dress with a light jacket, small earrings and heels she rarely wore. She looked at herself. For a moment, she didn't see

Professor Bhatia. She saw the woman she had been before conference schedules, research papers and endless responsibilities had filled her diary. She smiled. Her phone rang.

Rohan.

She answered "Hello."

"Where are you?"

"Going out for dinner."

"With whom?"

"Old friends."

There was a pause.

"Are you dressed up?"

Naina laughed.

"Yes."

"I knew it."

"Knew what?"

"That Ooty would turn you into someone else."

She smiled. "Jealous?"

"Perhaps."

"You should be."

He laughed. "I miss you."

Her expression softened. "I miss you too."

"Enjoy yourself."

"I will."

"And don't stay out too late."

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, Papa."

She ended the call smiling. The conversation had lasted barely three minutes. But it had changed the entire mood of her evening.

The restaurant was lively. Music played softly in the background, conversations overlapped and the tables were filled with people who seemed determined to forget the working week.

Ritika raised her glass. “To old friends.”

“To new memories,” Arvind added.

Naina lifted her glass. “To surviving academia.”

They laughed. The evening became easier as the hours passed. They talked about everything except work. Marriage. Travel. Food. Old romances. Bad decisions. Grey hair. Children. Future plans. Ritika looked at Naina.

“You still haven't learnt to relax.”

“I am relaxing.”

“You're discussing research over dinner.”

“I was asked a question.”

“Exactly.”

Naina laughed. “Fine. Tonight I won't talk about work.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

Twenty minutes later, she was telling them about a new project. Everyone groaned. Naina laughed so hard that she had to put her glass down. She had missed this. Not the conference. Not the city. This. People who knew her history. People who remembered the younger version of her. People with whom she didn't have to explain herself.

They left the restaurant close to midnight. Ooty was still awake. The streets were full of headlights and late-night conversations. Ritika insisted on taking a photograph.

“Come on.”

“One photograph.” They stood together, laughing. The camera flashed. Naina looked at the photograph afterwards. She barely recognised the expression on her own face. She looked carefree. Happy. Young. She sent it to Rohan.

A message appeared almost immediately. Beautiful.

She smiled. Then another message: Come home soon.

Her smile became softer. She typed: I will.

The next morning, Naina woke later than usual. For once, she did not feel guilty. She ordered breakfast. Sat by the window. Checked the photograph again. Then opened her diary. The next few weeks were crowded. Research deadlines. A new academic project. Travel. Meetings. And, somewhere in between, a weekend at home. She wrote one line in the corner of the page:

Make time for life, not only work.

She looked at it for a moment. Perhaps that was the lesson she was slowly learning. A successful career could give a person recognition. It could give freedom. It could give purpose. But there were other things that mattered too. A familiar voice on the telephone. A dinner with old friends. A husband's message waiting at midnight. A journey home. A family expecting you. Naina closed the diary. For the first time in a long while, she was looking forward to both parts of her life. The work. And the journey home.

Chapter Nine



The First Call

It was a Tuesday afternoon when Naina heard the name Dr Ashish Malhotra again. She had just finished a meeting when her colleague placed a file on her desk.

"Professor Bhatia, this came for you." Naina opened it. It was a proposal for an inter-university research project—ambitious, well-funded and potentially valuable for the work she had been developing for several years. She read the first few pages carefully. Then she stopped. There was a problem. One of the sections required clarification before she could approve the collaboration.

"Who prepared this?"

"Dr Ashish Malhotra. He is coordinating the project from the other institution." Naina looked at the name again.

"Do we have his contact details?"

Her colleague handed her a card. "His number is there."

Naina nodded. "I'll speak to him."

She had no reason to think that the conversation would be memorable. It was work. Nothing more. She dialled the number. The phone rang twice.

"Hello?"

The voice was calm, confident and slightly deeper than she had expected.

"Is this Mr Ashish Malhotra?"

“Yes.”

“This is Professor Naina Bhatia.”

There was a brief pause.

“Professor Bhatia?”

“Yes.”

“Good afternoon.”

“Good afternoon. I'm calling regarding the research proposal you sent.”

“Ah, yes.”

He sounded immediately attentive.

"How are you Ms Naina? “

" I was hoping you might call.”

Naina smiled faintly.

“Then you've saved me the trouble of explaining why I'm calling.”

“I have a feeling you're going to find several things wrong with it.”

“Several?”

“Possibly.”

She laughed softly. “Good. At least you're honest.”

For the next twenty minutes, they discussed the proposal. Ashish knew his subject well. More importantly, he listened. He didn't interrupt when she questioned something. He didn't become defensive when she disagreed. When she pointed out a weakness in one section, he asked how she would improve it.

Naina appreciated that. Too many people wanted to be heard. Very few genuinely wanted to understand. By the time the call ended, the professional issue had been resolved.

“Could you send me the revised section by Thursday?” she asked.

“Certainly.”

“And Mr Malhotra?”

“Yes?”

“Your proposal is good.”

There was a small pause. “That's almost a compliment.”

“Don't get used to it.”

He laughed. “Understood.”

She ended the call. For a moment, she sat looking at the phone. Nothing unusual had happened. It had been a work conversation. Yet she found herself smiling. She dismissed the thought and returned to her papers. Two days later, Ashish called again.

“I've sent the revised proposal.”

“I've seen it.”

“And?”

“Better.”

“Only better?”

“Would you prefer me to lie?”

“No. I think I like your honesty.”

Naina smiled. “You're becoming rather confident.”

“I've had two conversations with you. I'm allowed.”

She shook her head. “You academics are impossible.”

“You're an academic.”

“Exactly. I know.”

This time their conversation lasted longer. They discussed the project. Then research. Then teaching. Then, somehow, books. Naina discovered that Ashish read widely and had a particular fondness for history and biographies. She told him she preferred novels when she had time for them.

“Which you don't?”

“Rarely.”

“That's a shame.”

“Why?”

“Because people who read novels usually understand people better.”

She laughed. “That's a dangerous theory.”

“Possibly.” They ended the call fifteen minutes later. Again, Naina thought nothing of it. At least, that was what she told herself. A week later, Ashish was visiting Delhi for another professional meeting.

“Would you have half an hour?” he asked over the phone.

“For the project?”

“Of course.”

“Then yes.” They agreed to meet at a café near the university. Naina arrived first. She chose a table near the window and opened her laptop. A few minutes later, she saw a man approaching.

Ashish. He was perhaps in his early forties, neatly dressed, carrying a folder in one hand. He recognised her immediately.

“Professor Bhatia?”

“Naina is fine.”

He smiled. “Then Ashish is fine too.”

They shook hands. There was nothing remarkable about the gesture. And yet, somehow, both noticed it. They sat down. "How are you, Naina? Are you taking care of your health? "

Naina realized. He was the one who helped in Ooty while she was ill.

Fine. She replied.

For the first twenty minutes, they discussed work. Budgets. Research schedules. Students. Deadlines. The usual things. Then the waiter arrived.

“Coffee?” Naina nodded. Ashish looked at her.

“Black?”

She raised an eyebrow. “How did you know?”

“You sound like someone who drinks black coffee.”

She laughed. “That may be the strangest professional assessment I've ever heard.”

“Was I wrong?”

“Yes.”

He looked surprised.

“I take tea.”

“Then I've clearly misunderstood you.”

“Clearly.”

Their conversation became easier after that. They talked about Delhi. Bhopal. University life. The strange hours of academic work. The difficulty of maintaining friendships when careers became demanding. At some point, Ashish asked,

“Do you live in Delhi?”

“For work.”

“And your family?”

“Bhopal.”

He nodded. “That's difficult.”

“Sometimes.”

“Do you go home often?”

“When I can.”

He didn't ask anything further. Naina appreciated that. She didn't want sympathy. She had chosen her life. Ashish seemed to understand that.

“And you?” she asked.

“I live here.”

“Family?”

“My parents are in Jaipur. I visit them when I can.”

“Married?”

The question came naturally. Ashish smiled.

“No.”

Naina paused for the briefest moment. “Never married?”

“Never found the right person.” There was no bitterness in his voice.

Only a simple acceptance. Naina stirred her tea. She did not tell him that she was married. She had no reason to hide it. But something about the moment made her hesitate.

Then she said quietly, “My husband lives in Bhopal.”

Ashish looked at her. “Because of work?”

“Yes.”

He nodded. “Long distance.”

“Yes.”

There was no awkwardness. No judgement. Just understanding. Their conversation moved on. They discussed the project again. But something had changed. Not dramatically. Not romantically. Just slightly. Ashish had learnt something about her life. And Naina had learnt something about his. When they finally left the café, Ashish said, “I think the meeting was useful.”

“It was.”

“And the coffee?”

“Acceptable.”

He smiled. “High praise.”

Naina laughed. They walked in opposite directions. Neither looked back. At least, not immediately. That evening, Naina returned to her flat. She changed, made tea and called Rohan. He answered almost at once.

“How was your day?”

“Busy.”

“Anything interesting?”

Naina thought about the meeting.

“Work.”

Rohan laughed. “That's your answer to everything.”

She smiled. “Yes.”

They talked about home. About the weekend. About what he wanted her to bring from Delhi. The conversation was ordinary. Comforting. Familiar. When they said goodnight, Naina placed her phone on the bedside table. For

a moment, Ashish's face came to mind. Not because there was anything romantic about him. Simply because she had found the conversation unexpectedly easy. She dismissed the thought. There was nothing to think about. Ashish was a colleague. She was married. Her life was already full.

And she had no intention of allowing anything to disturb the balance she had spent years building.

Across the city, Ashish sat alone in his own flat. He thought about the woman from the café. Her intelligence. Her quiet confidence. The way she listened before answering. He smiled to himself. He knew very little about her. And perhaps that was exactly why she had caught his attention.

For now, though, there was a project to complete. Nothing more.

At least, that was what both of them believed.

Chapter Ten



A Conversation After Class

The corridor outside Avni's department was unusually quiet that afternoon. Most of the students had already left. A few remained scattered around the campus, some sitting beneath the trees, others making their way towards the library. Avni was gathering her papers when someone knocked softly on her open office door.

"Ma'am?"

She looked up.

It was Vivek, one of her students.

"Yes?"

He stood there uncertainly. "Can I talk to you?"

"Of course. Come in." He entered but didn't sit.

Avni noticed the expression on his face. "What's happened?"

"Nothing."

She smiled. "That's usually what people say when something has happened."

He gave a nervous laugh. "I don't know what to do."

"With?"

"My career."

Avni put her papers aside. "Sit down."

He did. For a moment, neither spoke.

“I don't think I'm good enough,” he finally said.

Avni leaned back in her chair. “Good enough for what?”

“Anything.” The answer came so quickly that she knew he had been carrying it for some time.

“Why do you think that?”

“Everyone else seems to know what they're doing. My friends have plans. Some are preparing for competitive exams. Some want to go abroad. My parents want me to choose something stable. I don't know what I want.”

Avni nodded. “That's not failure, Vivek.”

He looked at her. “It's not?”

“No. It's uncertainty. There's a difference.”

He remained quiet.

“Do you enjoy what you're studying?”

“Sometimes.”

“Sometimes isn't enough.”

He smiled faintly. “What should I do then?”

“Don't ask me what career you should choose.”

He looked confused. “Why?”

“Because it's your life.” She stood and walked towards the window.

“You're asking the wrong question. Don't ask, ‘Which career will make me successful?’ Ask yourself, ‘What kind of work can I imagine doing even when it becomes difficult?’”

Vivek listened carefully.

“Success isn't only a salary, a designation or a good university,” she continued. “Those things matter. But if you choose a career only because everyone else thinks it's impressive, you'll spend years trying to become someone you don't want to be.”

He looked down at his hands. “My parents won't understand.”

“Perhaps not immediately.”

“They want me to become a doctor.”

“And what do you want?”

He hesitated. “I want to work in design.”

Avni smiled. “Then learn everything you can about it.”

“Even if I fail?”

“Especially then.”

He looked at her. “You really think I can do it?”

“I think you should give yourself the chance to find out.”

Something changed in his expression. The tension in his shoulders eased.

Avni sat down again. “Listen to me, Vivek. You don't have to have your entire life planned at twenty-two. You need a direction, not a complete map.”

He smiled. “A direction, not a map.”

“Exactly. “She picked up a piece of paper and wrote down three things. “Research the field. Speak to people who actually work in it. And try something small before making a major decision.”

He read the list. “Thank you, ma'am.”

“You don't need to thank me.”

“I do.”

“Then promise me one thing.”

“What?”

“Don't choose your future out of fear.”

He looked at her for a moment.

“I'll try.”

Avni smiled. “Good.”

When he left, she returned to her work. She didn't notice the man standing at the far end of the corridor. Raj Malhotra had stopped without meaning to. He had come to the department to meet a colleague. He had been waiting for several minutes. And he had heard enough of the conversation to understand

what kind of teacher Avni was. He had expected an academic discussing marks, examinations and career options. Instead, he had heard someone teaching a young person how to trust himself. Raj watched Vivek walk away with a completely different expression from the one he had arrived with. Then he looked towards Avni's office. She was already reading another file. Completely unaware. Raj smiled. There was something about her. Not beauty. Not charm. Something quieter. The way she listened. The patience in her voice. The certainty with which she encouraged someone without making the decision for him. He found himself wondering how many students had walked out of her office feeling a little less frightened about their future. He had met plenty of intelligent people. Plenty of accomplished people. But intelligence without kindness had never impressed him. Avni seemed to possess both.

He realised he had been standing there too long. He straightened and walked towards the office.

“Sorry,” he said.

Avni looked up. “Oh, Raj. I didn't realise you were waiting.”

“It's all right.”

“Were you here long?”

“A few minutes.”

She closed the file. “I'm sorry.”

“Don't be.”

He hesitated. Then said, “I heard your conversation with the student.”

Avni looked slightly embarrassed. “Oh.”

“You were good.”

She smiled. “I'm a teacher. It's my job.”

“Perhaps.” He paused. “But not everyone does their job like that.”

Avni didn't know what to say. So she smiled.

“Thank you.”

Raj had known this old Avni professionally for some time, but until that afternoon she had simply been another respected colleague. Now he found himself noticing things he had never paid attention to before. Her calmness.

Her warmth. The way she spoke to students as though their problems mattered. He didn't know why the conversation had affected him. Perhaps because he had once been that uncertain student himself. Perhaps because he admired people who could make others feel capable. Or perhaps because, sometimes, admiration arrived before we had decided what to call it.

“Coffee?” he asked. Avni looked at the clock. “I can't. I need to get home.”

“Children?”

“Two.”

He smiled. “Then I won't keep you.”

She gathered her things. “My daughter has a school presentation tomorrow.”

“Important.”

“Very.”

“And your son?”

“He has apparently decided that homework is a form of human-rights violation.”

Raj laughed. “I remember those days."

Avni nodded. There was no awkwardness in it.

She picked up her bag. “Well, I'll see you tomorrow.”

“Of course.”

She walked away. Raj watched her for a moment. Then he turned back towards the office. He knew she was married. He knew she loved her family. There was no reason to think beyond that. And he didn't. Not consciously. Still, as he left the department that evening, he found himself thinking about her. Not as a woman he wanted. Not yet. Simply as someone he had begun to admire. And sometimes, admiration was the most innocent beginning of an attachment. Neither of them knew it. Neither of them was looking for it. Both had lives they loved. Both had people waiting for them at home. And neither had any intention of changing that. For now.

Chapter Eleven



The Surprise

The knock on the door came just after eight on Saturday morning. Naina frowned. She wasn't expecting anyone. She opened the door—and stood completely still. Rohan was standing there with a small suitcase. For a few seconds, neither of them spoke.

"You"

He smiled.

"Me."

"What are you doing here?"

"I thought I'd come and see my wife." Naina stared at him, still trying to understand. "But... you said you had work."

"I took leave." Her expression softened.

"You came all the way to Delhi?"

"I missed you."

That was enough. She stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him. He held her tightly. For a long moment, neither of them let go.

"I was supposed to come home," she whispered.

"I know."

"I cancelled."

“I know that too.”

“I felt terrible.” He pulled back slightly and looked at her.

“Then stop feeling terrible.”

“How?”

“Let me take care of you for the weekend.”

She smiled. “You always say things like that.”

“And you always pretend you don't like it.”

“I never said that.” He leaned closer.

“I know.” She laughed softly. The distance of the past few weeks seemed to disappear.

~

They spent the day together. Breakfast lasted nearly two hours because neither of them was in a hurry. They walked through the city, stopped at a bookshop, had lunch somewhere quiet and returned home in the evening. By then, Naina was tired. She changed into comfortable clothes and came out to find Rohan making tea.

“You're making tea?”

“Yes.”

“You'll ruin it.”

“Have some faith.”

She took the cup from him. One sip. She looked at him.

“It's actually good.”

He smiled. “I'm offended by the surprise in your voice.”

She laughed and leaned against the kitchen counter. For a while, they simply looked at one another. There were years between them. Years of shared mornings and difficult decisions, celebrations and arguments, laughter and long silences. Yet standing there, Naina suddenly felt shy.

Rohan noticed.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“You're looking at me strangely.”

“Maybe I've missed you more than I realised.”

His expression softened. He stepped closer.

“I've missed you too.”

He brushed a strand of hair away from her face. His fingers lingered gently against her cheek. Naina closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, he was still looking at her.

“Come here,” he whispered.

She moved closer. Their kiss was slow and familiar, carrying all the things they hadn't been able to say over the telephone. When they parted, Naina smiled.

“That was long overdue.”

“Very.”

He kissed her forehead. Then her cheek. She rested her hands against his shoulders.

“I've missed this.”

“What?”

“Being close to you without a screen between us.”

He smiled. “Me too.”

They stayed close, talking softly. About how difficult the distance had become. About how much they missed ordinary married life. About the future. About taking a proper holiday together. About perhaps finding a way to live in the same city again.

“You really want that?” Naina asked.

“Of course.”

“Even if it means I have to change my career?”

“No.” She looked at him.

“I don't want you to give up who you are.”

He took her hand. “I want us to find a life where neither of us has to.”

Her eyes softened. “That sounds difficult.”

“Probably.”

She smiled.

“But possible?”

“Definitely.”

He kissed her again.

Later, in the quiet of their bedroom, they remained close, talking and laughing in low voices. Naina rested against him, her head on his chest. Rohan ran his fingers gently through her hair.

“Do you know what I missed most?” he asked.

“What?”

“This.”

“Just this?”

“Just having you beside me.”

She smiled. “I thought you were going to say something more romantic.”

“I've been married to you for years. I don't need to impress you.”

“You still should.”

He laughed. She lifted her head and kissed him.

“Better?”

“Much.”

The night became theirs. Not dramatic. Not hurried. Just two people who had spent too many nights apart finally having the luxury of being close again. Outside, Delhi continued to glow beneath the darkness. Inside, Naina felt peaceful. For once, there was no train to catch. No meeting waiting in the morning. No distance to measure. Only Rohan beside her. And the quiet certainty that, whatever happened in the years ahead, this was a love worth coming home to.

Chapter Twelve - A



A Thought She Couldn't Explain

Avni did not think about Raj on the way home. At least, that was what she told herself. She thought about the groceries. She thought about Anaya's school presentation. She thought about the report she still had to finish. She thought about dinner. She thought about everything except Raj. And yet, when she parked the car outside her house, his voice came back to her.

You were good.

Such a simple sentence. She couldn't understand why she remembered it. That evening passed as usual. Vihaan wanted help with his homework. Anaya wanted to practice her presentation. Arjun complained that dinner was getting cold while continuing to check his phone. Avni moved between them, laughing, correcting, serving and listening. Everything was normal. Comfortably normal. At dinner, Arjun reached across the table and quietly took a piece of roti from her plate. She looked at him.

“Really?”

“You weren't eating it.”

“I was going to.”

“Too late.”

She shook her head. “You haven't changed.”

“Neither have you.”

She smiled. For a moment, she forgot everything else. This was her husband. The man who knew how she liked her tea. The man who waited for her when she was late. The man who had stood beside her through pregnancies, sleepless nights, career changes and all the ordinary difficulties of family life. She loved him. There was no question about that. So why had Raj's words stayed with her? She didn't know. Later, after the children had gone to bed, Avni and Arjun sat together in their room. The television played quietly in the background.

Arjun looked at her. “You're somewhere else.”

She turned. “What?”

“You've been quiet.”

“Just tired.”

He smiled. “Come here.”

She moved closer. He put an arm around her. Avni rested against him. The familiar warmth of him made her relax. He kissed her forehead. Then her cheek. She smiled.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“You're smiling.”

“Because you're sweet.”

“Only sometimes.”

“Mostly.”

He laughed. She turned towards him and kissed him gently. There was affection in the kiss, familiarity, years of knowing one another. They held each other closely. For Avni, there was nothing uncertain about the love she felt for him. And yet, somewhere in the back of her mind, an unwanted thought appeared.

Why did Raj notice me?

She pushed it away. She kissed Arjun again. This was where she belonged. This was her life. This was the man she loved. Still, when she finally lay beside Arjun later that night, she couldn't sleep. The room was dark. Arjun's breathing had become slow and steady. Avni stared at the ceiling. She felt guilty for a thought

she hadn't invited. It wasn't attraction. At least she didn't think it was. It was curiosity. Perhaps admiration. Perhaps nothing at all. She turned onto her side.

Why was she analysing it? Raj had simply complimented her work. People did that. She had complimented colleagues many times herself. So why had this one moment followed her home? She closed her eyes. “Stop thinking,” she whispered.

Beside her, Arjun stirred.

“Hmm?”

“Nothing.”

He reached for her hand without opening his eyes. mHis fingers found hers naturally. Avni looked down at their hands. A small smile appeared on her face. She squeezed his fingers. Whatever strange thought had entered her mind, this was real. This was years of love. This was home. Eventually, she fell asleep.

But sometime before morning, she dreamed of a university corridor. She was standing outside her office. Someone was saying her name. She turned. And woke before she could see who it was. Avni lay still in the darkness. Her heart was beating slightly faster than usual. She frowned. Then laughed quietly at herself.

“Ridiculous.”

She turned towards Arjun. He was still asleep. She moved closer and rested her head against his shoulder. Within minutes, her breathing slowed again. But the question remained somewhere inside her. Not Do I love my husband? She knew the answer. The question was much more uncomfortable. Why had another person's attention suddenly begun to matter to her? Avni had no answer.

And for now, she wasn't ready to look for one.

Chapter 12- B



The Years They Never Forgot

Before there was distance, before there were careers, marriages and responsibilities, there had been a school corridor.

A classroom. A playground. And two young people who knew each other without ever really knowing what they meant to one another.

Avni and Riya had been classmates since their early school years. They did almost everything together. They shared lunch boxes, complained about homework, prepared for examinations and whispered during assemblies whenever they thought the teachers weren't watching. Riya was the talkative one. Avni was quieter. But there was one subject on which Riya never allowed Avni any peace.

Raj. Raj was two years senior to them. He was one of those students everyone seemed to know. Good at academics, active in school activities and often seen helping teachers organise events.

Avni had noticed him long before she admitted to herself that she had noticed him. Riya had noticed it too. Much earlier.

“Why are you looking towards the stage?” Riya whispered during morning assembly.

“I'm not.”

“You are.”

“No.” Riya followed Avni's gaze. Raj was standing with the senior students near the microphone, helping arrange the programme. Riya smiled. “Oh.”

Avni immediately looked away. “Don't start.”

“I haven't said anything.”

“You're going to.”

“I was only going to say that the stage looks very interesting today.” Avni tried not to smile.

“Please be quiet.”

Riya laughed softly. She knew. She had known for months. Avni never spoke about Raj directly. But whenever his name appeared on the notice board, whenever he participated in a school programme, or whenever the senior students passed their classroom, Riya noticed the slight change in her friend's expression. It was innocent. A schoolgirl's quiet admiration. Nothing more. And Riya never let her forget it.

The annual function that year brought them closer than they had expected. Avni and Raj were both selected for the inter-house cultural programme. Raj was one of the senior students coordinating the event. Avni was part of the junior group. During rehearsals, he often helped the younger students understand their positions. “Avni, you're supposed to stand here.” She looked down at the marked spot on the floor. “Here?”

“Yes.” She moved. “Like this?”

“Exactly.”

“Okay.”

He smiled briefly. “Good.” It was an ordinary exchange. Barely a few seconds. But Avni remembered it for the rest of the day. Riya noticed her smiling when she returned. “What happened?”

“Nothing.”

“Raj said something?”

“No.”

“Then why are you smiling?”

“I can smile without a reason.”

"Of course." Riya grinned. Avni pushed her lightly. "Stop it." There were other little moments. Raj once helped them carry props to the auditorium. Another time, he handed Avni a missing sheet of music before the rehearsal began. During a debate competition, he wished her luck. "Don't be nervous."

"I am not nervous."

"You're holding your notes upside down." Avni looked down. They were. She quickly turned them around. Raj laughed. She laughed too. From a distance, Riya watched them. She knew Avni liked him. But she also knew something else. Raj never behaved differently with Avni. He was kind to everyone. He was a senior helping a junior. Nothing more. And perhaps that was why Avni's feelings remained safely tucked away in the private corner of her heart.

One afternoon, while they were sitting beneath a tree during lunch break, Riya finally asked: "You like him, don't you?"

Avni almost dropped her lunch box. "Who?"

Riya raised an eyebrow. "You know who."

"No."

"Avni."

"Fine."

She looked down. "Maybe."

Riya smiled. "I knew it."

"Don't tell anyone."

"I won't."

"Especially him." Riya nodded. "Why?"

Avni thought for a moment. "Because it's silly."

"It's not silly."

"He's a senior."

"So?"

"So… nothing will happen."

Riya looked at her friend. "Maybe nothing needs to happen."

Avni smiled faintly. "I think I just like seeing him."

That answer stayed with Riya. Perhaps that was all it was. Not a relationship. Not even a real friendship. Just the happiness of seeing someone you admired walk past your classroom. Then, unexpectedly, everything changed. Avni's father received a transfer order. The family had to move to another city. The news came suddenly. One evening, Avni sat with Riya after school.

“I have to leave.”

Riya stared at her. “When?”

“Next month.”

“Next month?”

Avni nodded.

Neither spoke for a while. The thought of leaving her school, her friends and the familiar corridors suddenly made everything feel different.

Riya looked at her. “And Raj?”

Avni's eyes immediately dropped. “Don't.”

“I didn't say anything.”

“You were going to.”

Riya smiled sadly. “Are you going to tell him?”

Avni shook her head. “What would I say?”

“I don't know.”

“Neither do I.”

The final week passed too quickly. Teachers wished Avni well. Friends promised to stay in touch. Riya cried more than Avni expected.

“You'll forget me,” Riya complained.

“Never.”

“You'll make new friends.”

“So will you.”

“But I won't find another person who knows all my secrets.”

Avni smiled. “You only have one secret.”

Riya laughed. “Exactly.”

On Avni's last day, she walked through the school corridors slowly. Every place suddenly seemed important. The classroom window. The staircase. The notice board. The auditorium. The tree where she and Riya had spent countless lunch breaks. She saw Raj near the staffroom, talking to another senior student. For a moment, she stopped. She wanted to say goodbye. She wanted to tell him she was leaving. She wanted to say something that would make him remember her. But what could she possibly say? She was just a junior student he had occasionally helped. Nothing more. So she kept walking.

Raj noticed her. He knew something was different. Perhaps it was the unusual sadness on her face. He didn't know why he was also feeling sad. As she passed him, he called:

“Avni.”

She stopped. “Yes?”

“You're leaving?”

She nodded. “Dad's been transferred.”

“Oh.”

There was a brief silence.

Then he said simply: “Take care. Going to miss you junior!”

Avni smiled.

“Me too.”

She walked away. Raj watched for a moment before turning back. Nothing dramatic happened. No confession. No promise. No exchange of addresses. Just two ordinary words.

Take care. But Avni remembered them. For years. At the school gate, Riya hugged her tightly.

“Write to me.”

“I will.”

“Call me.”

“I will.”

“Don't forget me.”

“Never.”

Avni looked back at the school once. The building looked exactly the same. Yet she knew she would never see it in quite the same way again. She climbed into the car. As it moved away, she caught one last glimpse of the school gate. And somewhere inside those familiar walls was a boy she had quietly admired. A boy who probably had no idea how much space he had occupied in one young girl's heart.

Years passed. New school. New cities. New friends. New responsibilities. Avni and Riya slowly lost touch. Life became busy. Phone numbers changed. Addresses changed. One friendship faded into an old memory—not because it had mattered less, but because life sometimes carried people in different directions.

The other slowly emerged. Raj and Riya...!

And Raj?

He became a distant memory too. A face from a school corridor. A voice from an annual function. A simple "Take care." Avni rarely spoke about him. But she never completely forgot. Perhaps some memories don't ask to be remembered. They simply stay. Quietly. Waiting for life to bring them back—or not.

And neither Avni nor Raj knew that years later, their paths would cross again. This time, they would meet not as schoolchildren separated by a transfer order - but as two adults carrying entire lives behind them.

Chapter Thirteen



The Darjeeling Meeting

For Avni, it was supposed to be a straightforward academic trip. Two days of presentations, a panel discussion, networking and, if she was lucky, a few quiet hours to herself.\ She had arrived the previous evening. The mountain air felt completely different from home. Cooler. Quieter.

The morning mist had settled over the hills, and the tea estates looked almost unreal through the hotel window. Avni stood by the balcony with her first cup of tea when her phone rang.

“Ma'am, the registration desk opens at eight.”

“I'll be there.” She ended the call, finished her tea and got ready. She had no idea that the conference would introduce her to someone who would later become one of the most important friends in her life.

The conference hall was already crowded when Avni arrived. Academics from different universities had gathered from across the country. She collected her conference folder and looked for her name badge

“Excuse me.”

Avni turned. A woman was standing beside her, trying to attach her badge to her kurta. The pin refused to cooperate.

“Could you help me?”

“Of course.”

Avni fixed it. “There.”

“Thank you.” The woman smiled. “I've been fighting with this thing for five minutes.”

Avni laughed. “Academic conferences have many challenges. This is apparently the first.”

The woman laughed. “I agree.” They introduced themselves.

“Naina Bhatia.”

“Avni Sharma.”

Naina looked at her badge. “Which university?”

Avni told her. Naina's expression changed slightly. “I've read some of your work.”

Avni smiled. “And I've heard your name.”

“Hopefully for good reasons.”

“Mostly.”

They laughed. It was an easy beginning. During the first session, they happened to be seated next to one another. The presentation was serious. Their whispered comments were not. At one point, the speaker spent nearly ten minutes explaining something that could have been said in two. Naina leaned towards Avni. “Do you think there's a rule that every conference presentation must be longer than necessary?”

Avni covered her smile. “I'm beginning to think so.”

They exchanged a glance. Both had to look away to avoid laughing. By the tea break, they were already talking like acquaintances who had known each other longer than an hour.

“Tea?” Naina asked.

“Definitely.” They stood near the window overlooking the hills.

“Have you been to Darjeeling before?” Avni asked.

“Once. Years ago.”

“This is my first time.”

“Then you must see the tea gardens.”

"Is that an academic recommendation?"

"No. Personal."

"That's more convincing."

Naina smiled. "Are you travelling alone?"

"My husband and children are at home."

Naina nodded. "My husband is in Bhopal."

"Oh."

"I live in Delhi because of work."

Avni looked at her. "That must be difficult."

"Sometimes."

"You go home often?"

"When I can." Naina took a sip of tea.

"What about you?"

"My family is in Delhi. Same city."

"You're lucky."

Avni smiled. "Yes. I am."

There was no sadness in Naina's voice. Only a quiet acknowledgement. That evening, the conference organisers arranged a small dinner. Avni had planned to sit with her colleagues. Instead, she found Naina at a table by the window. "Is this seat free?"

Naina moved her bag. "Of course." They talked until dinner was over. They spoke about their careers. Their husbands. Their families. Travel. Books. Children. The strange expectations placed on women who wanted both a successful career and a happy family. At one point, Naina asked, "Do you ever feel guilty?"

"About what?"

"Working."

Avni thought for a moment. "Sometimes."

“Me too.” “But then I remember that my family doesn't want me to stop being myself.” Naina smiled.

“That's a good family.”

“They are.”

“And your husband?”

“He's supportive.”

“Mine too.” They smiled at one another. There was comfort in discovering that someone else understood the complicated balance. The next morning, they went for a short walk before the conference began. Mist covered the road. The hills disappeared into the clouds. Avni pulled her shawl closer. “This is beautiful.” Naina looked around.

“It makes you want to stay.”

“Only until I remember how cold it is.” Naina laughed. They walked slowly. For those twenty minutes, they were not professors. Not mothers. Not wives. Not women trying to balance careers and families. They were simply two strangers becoming friends. On the final afternoon, they exchanged numbers.

“Keep in touch,” Naina said.

“I will.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

Avni smiled. “And if we don't?”

Naina looked at her. “Then we'll meet again somewhere.”

“Where?”

“I don't know.”

“Delhi?”

“Perhaps.”

Neither of them knew how close that prediction would come to reality. The conference ended. They returned to their cities. Their careers. Their ordinary routines. But something had changed. A friendship had begun. Quietly. Unexpectedly. In the misty hills of Darjeeling.

Chapter Fourteen



After Darjeeling

The first message came three days after the conference. Avni was sitting at her desk when her phone vibrated.

Naina: Have you recovered from the conference?

Avni smiled.

Avni: Almost. Still recovering from the amount of tea I drank.

A reply came quickly.

Naina: You mean the amount of tea we drank.

Avni: You were worse.

Naina: Professional research requires hydration.

Avni laughed.

She put the phone down and returned to her work. A few minutes later, she picked it up again.

Avni: How's Delhi?

There was a pause.

Naina: Busy. And strangely quiet.

Avni understood what she meant. The conference had been noisy. People everywhere. Conversations in corridors. Shared meals. The excitement of

meeting people from different places. Then suddenly, everything returned to normal.

Avni: I know. Darjeeling feels very far away.

Naina: It does.

That was all. But it was enough to make Avni smile. The messages didn't stop. At first they were occasional. A funny incident from work. A photograph of the morning sky. A book recommendation. A complaint about university paperwork. Then they became part of the day. Not constantly. Not obsessively. Just naturally. Naina would sometimes send a message before leaving for work. Long day ahead. Avni might reply during lunch. Same here. Survive. Sometimes Naina sent photographs. A rainy evening. A cup of tea. A book on her desk. Avni sent photographs of her children's school projects. A family dinner. A flower blooming in her garden. Neither woman thought of these exchanges as anything unusual. They were simply becoming friends.

One Saturday afternoon, Avni was sitting at home while Anaya worked on a school project. Her phone rang.

Naina. “Hello?”

“Am I disturbing you?”

“No. What's happened?”

“Nothing.”

“Then why do you sound serious?”

Naina laughed. “I don't know. I just felt like talking.”

Avni smiled. “That's allowed.”

They spoke for nearly forty minutes. The conversation wandered. From work to families. From books to travel. From their husbands to the strange ways children changed as they grew. Then Naina asked quietly, “Do you ever feel that you're becoming someone different from the person you were at twenty-five?”

Avni thought about it. “Yes.”

“Good or bad?”

“Different.”

Naina was silent.

Avni asked, “What about you?”

“I don't know.”

“You can tell me.” There was another pause.

“I think I'm stronger.”

“And?”

“More tired.”

Avni laughed softly. “That's probably adulthood.”

“Perhaps.”

Neither tried to solve the other's problem. They simply listened. That became one of the things they liked most about their conversations. Neither needed to fix everything. That evening, Arjun found Avni smiling at her phone.

“Who is it?”

“Naina.”

“The Darjeeling friend?”

“Yes.”

“You two talk quite a lot.”

Avni looked up. “Do we?”

“Yes.”

She smiled. “She is nice.”

“I can see that.” Arjun sat beside her. “I'm glad you've made a friend.”

Avni leaned against him. “So am I.”

Chapter Fifteen



Again

Three weeks later, Avni received an email. Her transfer had been approved. She was being moved to a new university for an academic assignment. She read the name twice. The same university where she had met Naina.

"Well," she murmured. Perhaps the world did have a sense of humour. Her family was supportive. Arjun helped her sort through the practical details. "You'll manage."

"I know."

"Different department?"

"Yes."

"New colleagues?"

"Yes."

"You'll make friends."

"I already know one person there."

"Who?"

"A professor I met at a seminar." Arjun smiled. "See? You're already prepared." Avni laughed. On her first morning at the new university, Avni walked through the main administrative building with her joining papers. She was looking down at the document when she heard a familiar voice.

“Avni?” She looked up. Naina stood a few metres away. For a second, both women simply stared. Then they laughed.

“You!”

“I told you we'd meet again.”

“I didn't expect this soon.”

“Neither did I.”

Naina hugged her lightly. “Welcome.”

“Thank you.”

“Come. I'll show you where everything is.”

That simple gesture became the beginning of something neither had planned. Their departments were different. Their schedules were different. Their responsibilities were different. Yet somehow, they kept meeting. In the library. At the staff café. Outside the auditorium. Near the administrative block. Once at the photocopy shop. Another time in the corridor just as both were leaving for the day. “Again?” Avni would laugh. Naina would smile. “It's becoming suspicious.” The coincidences became jokes between them. Then the jokes became conversations. Then conversations became coffee. One afternoon, Naina found Avni sitting alone in the staff café. “May I?”

“Of course.” Naina sat down.

They spoke about work. Then children. Then husbands. Then parents. Then travel. Then books. Avni discovered that Naina had a dry sense of humour. Naina discovered that Avni could turn an ordinary story into something funny. They disagreed about films. Agreed about books. Argued about tea. And slowly, without either woman noticing exactly when it happened, they became friends. One evening, they were walking towards the parking area. “You know something?” Naina said.

“What?”

“I feel as though I've known you longer than I actually have.”

Avni smiled. “I was thinking exactly the same thing.”

“Strange.”

“Very.”

They stopped near the gate. Naina looked at her. “You're different from most people here.”

“How?”

“I don't know.”

Avni laughed. “That's not very helpful.”

Naina smiled. “You listen.”

“So do you.”

“Perhaps that's why.”

Avni nodded. Neither of them knew what the bond was. It wasn't based on shared history. They hadn't grown up together. They hadn't studied together. Their families were different. Their careers had taken different paths. Yet something about their conversations felt easy. Safe. They could talk without explaining every sentence. They could sit quietly without feeling uncomfortable. And, perhaps most importantly, neither needed anything from the other. Their friendship had no demand attached to it. It simply existed. That evening, Avni reached home and told Arjun, “I made best friend.”

“Really?” “What is she like?”

Avni thought for a moment. “She's... interesting.”

Arjun smiled. “That's a very Avni description.”

She laughed.

Across the city, Naina called Rohan. “I met someone nice at work.”

“Another academic?”

“Yes.”

“Are you two going to discuss research all evening?”

“Probably.” He laughed. “Enjoy.” Naina smiled. She didn't know why meeting Avni had felt so significant. She only knew that she was glad they had met. Neither woman realised that their friendship would soon become one of the most unexpected relationships of their lives. And neither knew that, beneath the comfort of their friendship, each would eventually begin to recognise pieces of herself in the other.

Chapter Sixteen



The Things We Tell Friends

By the time Avni officially joined Naina's university, their friendship had already become comfortable. They didn't need formal invitations anymore. If one saw the other in the corridor, there was always a pause.

“Coffee?”

“Five minutes.”

Five minutes often became forty. They discovered that friendship had its own language. A look across a crowded room.

A message that simply said: Bad day.

A reply: Call me.

One afternoon, Naina found Avni sitting alone in the staff garden.

“You look upset.”

“I am.”

“Work?”

“Partly.”

Naina sat beside her. “Tell me.”

Avni hesitated. “One of my students is thinking of leaving university.”

“Why?”

“Family pressure. They want him to choose a career he doesn't want.”

Naina nodded. “You've spoken to him?”

“Several times.”

“And?”

“He still doesn't know what to do.”

“You can't make the decision for him.”

“I know.”

“But you care.”

Avni smiled faintly. “Too much sometimes.”

Naina looked at her. “That's not always a bad thing.”

Avni turned towards her. “What about you?”

“What?”

“Do you care too much?”

Naina smiled. “Probably.”

They laughed. Over the following weeks, the conversations became more personal. Naina told Avni about Bhopal. About her mother. About Rohan. About children. About how difficult it could be to miss family celebrations because of work. Avni listened. She never told Naina that she felt sorry for her. She knew Naina didn't want sympathy.

Instead, she said, “You must miss home.”

“Every day.”

“Then why don't you move back?”

Naina smiled. “You ask difficult questions.”

“I'm an academic.”

“So am I.”

“That's not an answer.”

Naina looked away. “My work is here.”

“And your family is there.”

"Yes."

"That's hard."

"It is."

For a moment neither spoke. Then Naina said, "Rohan never asks me to choose."

Avni smiled. "That's love."

"I know."

Another evening, it was Avni's turn. They were sitting in the café when Avni unexpectedly said, "Sometimes I worry that I'm becoming too comfortable."

Naina looked at her. "What do you mean?"

"I have a good family. A good marriage. A career I love."

"That sounds like something to be grateful for."

"It is."

"Then?"

Avni stirred her tea. "I wonder what comes next."

Naina smiled. "Isn't that normal?"

"Perhaps."

"What do you want?"

Avni thought for a long moment. "I want to travel more. I want to write something of my own. I want to do research that people remember."

"Then do it."

Avni laughed. "You make everything sound easy."

"No. I just think we're allowed to want things even when we're happy."

The sentence stayed with Avni.

They were both quiet. Then Avni smiled. "I like talking to you."

Naina looked at her. "Why?"

"Because I don't have to explain everything."

Naina's expression softened. "I feel the same."

Neither woman noticed when friendship became something deeper. Not romantic. Not inappropriate. Simply important. They had become the people each could call after a difficult meeting. The people who understood the exhaustion behind a successful day. The people who could listen without judgement. Their husbands knew about the friendship. Their colleagues noticed it. But neither Avni nor Naina understood yet how unusual their connection was. They had met by chance in Darjeeling. Then again by chance at the university. After that, chance seemed to disappear. They began choosing to meet.

And somewhere between coffee breaks, late messages and quiet conversations, they became part of each other's lives. Neither knew how long that would last. Neither imagined how much it would eventually change them.

Chapter Seventeen



Things We Don't Say Aloud

It was raining when Avni and Naina found themselves alone in the university café. Most of the staff had already left. The rain had turned the windows into blurred sheets of grey, and the usual noise of the café had disappeared. Naina was stirring her tea without drinking it.

Avni noticed. “You've been doing that for five minutes.”

Naina looked up. “Have I?”

“Yes.”

“I'm thinking.”

“That can be dangerous.”

Naina smiled, but only briefly.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Avni leaned back. “You've said ‘nothing’ three times today.”

“Perhaps I have nothing to say.”

“Then why do you look as though you're about to confess to a crime?”

Naina laughed. The sound was short and nervous.

“It's not a crime.”

“Good.”

Avni waited.

Naina finally put her spoon down. “Can I tell you something without you judging me?”

Avni's expression softened. “Of course.”

“Even if it's something stupid?”

“Especially then.”

Naina looked towards the rain. “It's about Ashish.”

Avni raised an eyebrow. “Ashish?”

“Yes.”

“What about him?”

Naina was quiet for a few seconds. “I don't know how to explain it.”

“Try.”

Naina took a breath. “You know I work with him on the project.”

“Yes.”

“He's very good at what he does.”

“I've heard you say that.”

“He listens.”

Avni smiled. “That sounds like a compliment.”

“It is.”

“Go on.”

Naina looked down at her cup. “I like talking to him.”

Avni didn't interrupt.

“Sometimes I'll have a difficult day and he'll call about the project. We'll talk for ten minutes, and I feel better afterwards.”

She paused. “And sometimes I find myself waiting for his call.”

Avni's smile disappeared. Naina continued quietly.

“I notice when he isn't around.” The rain tapped against the window. “Have you told him?” Avni asked.

“No.”

“Does he know?”

“I don't think so.”

“And what do you feel?”

Naina swallowed. “I don't know.”

“That's not true.”

Naina looked at her friend. “I think I'm attracted to him.”

The words were barely audible. Avni remained silent. Naina looked almost frightened after saying them. “I've said it now,” she whispered.

Avni reached across the table and held her hand. “You're not a bad person.”

“I feel guilty.”

“You haven't done anything.”

“But I've thought about him.”

“Thoughts aren't decisions.”

Naina looked at her. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Avni squeezed her hand. “Tell me honestly. Do you want to leave Rohan?”

Naina's answer came immediately. “No.”

“Do you love him?”

“Yes.”

“Then perhaps this isn't about replacing one person with another.”

Naina looked confused. “What is it about, then?”

Avni thought for a moment. “Perhaps Ashish makes you notice a part of yourself that has been quiet for a while.”

Naina stared at her. “What do you mean?”

"Maybe he makes you feel interesting. Seen. Admired. Not just Professor Bhatia. Not just someone's wife. Not just the woman who lives alone in Delhi."

Naina's eyes softened. "That's exactly what frightens me."

They sat quietly. Then Naina asked, "What about you?"

Avni looked away. "What about me?"

"You've been very understanding."

"I have a lot of experience with understanding."

"Avni." Naina's voice was gentle. "You're hiding something too."

Avni smiled weakly. "I'm not."

"You are."

"Naina…"

"Tell me."

Avni looked towards the window. The rain had become heavier.

Finally, she whispered, "Raj."

Naina's expression changed. "Raj?"

Avni nodded. "The colleague you told me about?" "Yes."

"What happened?"

"Nothing."

Naina gave her a look. Avni laughed nervously.

"Exactly. Nothing happened."

"Then why are we talking about him?"

Avni took a breath. "He said something to me after he saw me talking to a student."

"What?"

"That I was good at what I did."

Naina smiled. "That's all?"

"Yes."

"Avni…"

“I know.”

She looked down at her hands. “It shouldn't matter.”

“But it does.”

Avni nodded. “That's the problem.”

She was quiet for a moment. “I don't think I'm in love with him. I don't even know if it's attraction.”

“What is it?”

“I don't know.”

Naina waited. Avni finally said, “I think I like being noticed by him.”

Naina's expression softened. “That's human.”

“I feel awful saying it.”

“You shouldn't.”

“I come home to Arjun. He loves me. We have a beautiful marriage. He knows me better than anyone.”

“I know.”

“And yet…”

She stopped. “And yet?” “I sometimes wonder whether Raj is thinking about me.”

Naina remained silent. Avni looked embarrassed.

“It's ridiculous.”

“No.”

“It feels disloyal.”

“Thinking isn't betrayal.”

Avni looked at her. “Where does betrayal begin?”

Naina didn't answer immediately. “Perhaps when we stop being honest with ourselves.” The words hung between them. Avni looked at her friend. “So what do we do?” Naina smiled sadly.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

"We acknowledge it."

"And then?"

"We remember what we have chosen."

Avni nodded slowly. They sat together, hands around cooling cups of tea. There was something strangely comforting about admitting the truth. Neither woman had planned this. Neither had gone looking for another relationship. Neither wanted to destroy the life she had built. They were simply two married women who had unexpectedly discovered that admiration could feel dangerously close to attraction. And now they knew something important about each other. Something they could never quite unknow.

Naina finally smiled. "Promise me something."

"What?"

"If I ever become foolish, stop me."

Avni laughed softly. "Only if you promise to do the same for me."

"Deal." They shook hands across the table like two schoolgirls making a secret pact. Then Avni smiled.

"We're terrible people."

Naina laughed. "No."

"Confused people?"

"Definitely."

"Human?"

"Unfortunately."

They laughed together. Outside, the rain continued. Neither knew what the future would bring. But that evening, they had chosen honesty over pretending. And perhaps that was the first step towards understanding what these unexpected feelings really meant

Chapter Eighteen



The Things He Could Never Say

The rain had started just after nine. Ashish stood by the window of his apartment, watching the city slowly disappear behind a curtain of water. His laptop was open on the dining table. The project report was almost finished.

Almost. But for the last twenty minutes, he hadn't read a single line. His thoughts had wandered somewhere else. To Naina.

Again. He had stopped being surprised by it. She had become an almost permanent presence in the quiet corners of his mind. Not loudly. Not dramatically. She simply appeared. While he was working. While driving. While drinking his morning tea. Sometimes even in the middle of an ordinary conversation with someone else.

He wondered when it had happened. When had a professional acquaintance become someone whose absence he noticed? When had a phone call about research become something he looked forward to? When had hearing her say his name begun to feel different? Ashish sighed. He knew the answer didn't matter. Because there was one fact he could never change. Naina loved her husband. He had heard it in her voice. He had seen it in the way she spoke about home. He had noticed the quiet smile that appeared whenever she mentioned Rohan. That was why Ashish had never allowed himself to say anything. Not once. Not even indirectly. His phone vibrated. A message from Naina.

Naina: Did you check the revised introduction?

Ashish smiled and replied: Yes. Much better.

A few seconds later: Naina: Only much better?

Ashish: Don't become demanding.

Naina: Too late.

He stared at the screen for a moment. There was nothing unusual in their conversation. Nothing romantic. Nothing that could not be explained as friendship between colleagues. Yet Ashish knew himself well enough to recognise what was happening inside him. He was in love with her. Deeply. And completely. And helplessly. He placed the phone face down. He walked to his bookshelf and pulled out an old notebook. It had been years since he had written anything personal. He opened it to a blank page. For several minutes, he simply held the pen. Then he began.

I never asked you to stay,

never asked you to choose,

I only learnt your silences,

and treasured every word you used.

He stopped. The words felt too honest. He continued.

You speak of home with a different light,

of someone waiting there for you,

and I smile when you speak his name,

though my heart knows what is true.

Ashish put the pen down. He looked at the lines. Perhaps that was the hardest part. He wasn't angry with Rohan. He couldn't be. Rohan hadn't taken anything from him. Naina had never promised him anything. She had never encouraged him. She had simply been herself. And somewhere along the way, Ashish had fallen in love with that woman. He picked up the pen again.

You belong to a life already lived,

a home, a heart, a name,

so I keep my love where it cannot hurt you,

quietly hidden, without a claim.

He paused. Then added:

If loving you means standing far away,

then far away I shall remain,

for some hearts are not meant to be held—

only remembered, again and again.

He stared at the final line. Then slowly closed the notebook.

The following week, Naina came to his office. “Are you busy?”

Ashish looked up. “For you? No.”

She smiled. “I brought the final documents.” She placed the folder on his desk.

“Perfect.”

“You haven't even opened it.”

“I trust you.”

She laughed. “You shouldn't.”

“Perhaps not.”

She sat opposite him. “How are things?”

“Fine.”

“You sound tired.”

“Busy.”

“You need a break.”

“I'll consider it.”

“You won't.”

He smiled. “You know me too well.” The words escaped before he could stop them. Naina looked at him for a moment. Then smiled.

“Perhaps.”

There was a silence. Ashish looked down at the file. He could have said so many things. I think about you more than I should. I wait for your calls. I notice when you don't message. Sometimes I wish you lived in the same city.

Instead, he asked, “Will you be going to Bhopal this weekend?”

“Yes.”

He nodded. “Rohan will be happy.”

“He is.”

There was something warm in her voice. Ashish smiled. “I hope you have a good time.”

“I will.” She stood.

“I'll see you Monday.”

“Monday.”

She left. Ashish remained seated. He didn't regret staying silent. Not even for a moment.

That night, he opened the notebook again. He added one final line beneath the poem:

> ***Perhaps this is what love becomes when it has nowhere to go— it becomes patience.***

He closed the notebook. Then he placed it back on the shelf. Tomorrow he would return to work. He would call Naina about the project. He would listen to her ideas. He would laugh at her complaints about deadlines. He would remain exactly where he had always been. Beside her, professionally. Far from her, emotionally.

And perhaps that was enough. Because Ashish had finally understood something. Not every love story begins with two people falling into each other's arms. Some begin with one person quietly falling— and choosing, every single day, not to let the other person fall with him.

Chapter Nineteen



The Goodbye They Didn't Understand

The project was finally over. Months of meetings, arguments over data, hurried lunches, late-night emails and countless cups of tea had come to an end. There was nothing left to correct. No presentation waiting. No deadline. No reason for another phone call. Naina should have felt relieved. Instead, she felt strangely unsettled. It wasn't the project she was going to miss. It was the person who had quietly become part of it. Ashish had entered her routine without asking permission. A message in the morning. A disagreement over some insignificant detail. A shared joke during a long meeting. A call that was supposed to last five minutes and somehow lasted forty. She knew his voice when he was tired. She knew the silence that came before he disagreed with her. She knew when he was irritated but pretending not to be. And perhaps that was what frightened her most. She had noticed too much.

That evening, she called him. “Coffee?”

There was a small pause on the other end. “Of course.”

They returned to the café where they had first discussed the project. The same corner. The same window. The same quiet music in the background. Only this time, there were no files between them. No laptop. No reports. No reason to discuss tomorrow's presentation. Just two people sitting across from each other, suddenly aware that there might not be a next time.

Naina looked at him. “So this is it.”

Ashish smiled faintly. “Officially.”

“I don't like it.”

“You'll survive.”

“I know.” She looked down at her coffee.

“That doesn't mean I'll like it.” He watched her quietly.

“You'll miss the project?”

Naina looked up. “No.” She paused. “I'll miss the person I worked with.”

Something changed in his expression. Very slightly. But she noticed. He looked away and picked up his cup. “I'll miss you too.” The words were simple. But they stayed between them longer than they should have.

They talked for almost two hours. Not about work. About everything else. Childhood memories. The strange things people did when they were nervous. The places they wanted to visit. The things they had postponed because life always seemed to demand something more urgent. At one point, Naina laughed so hard that tears came into her eyes. Ashish smiled. “I'll miss that.”

“What?”

“That laugh.”

She became quiet. “You notice too much.”

“Perhaps.” There was no accusation in his voice.

Only honesty. Naina looked at him. For a moment, she wondered what it would feel like to be completely honest with him. To say: I don't want you to go. The thought frightened her. So she smiled instead.

When they finally left the café, the evening air had become cool. Naina pulled her shawl closer. Ashish noticed. “You're always cold.”

“I'm not.”

“You are.”

“You've become very observant.”

“I've had practice.”

She smiled. They reached her car. Neither opened the door. Neither seemed willing to make the first move towards goodbye. Naina looked at him. “You'll call when you reach?”

“Yes.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

She nodded. Then she reached into her bag. “I brought you something.” Ashish looked surprised. She handed him a small box. Inside was a fountain pen. “For your new assignment.”

He ran his fingers over it. “You remembered that I write by hand.”

“Of course.”

He looked at her. “Thank you.”

“It isn't much.”

“It is.” For a moment, neither spoke. Being remembered in small things felt strangely intimate.

“Naina…” His voice changed.

She looked up. “Yes?”

He hesitated. There were words sitting behind his teeth. Words he had rehearsed and abandoned more times than he could remember. I don't want to leave. I think about you more than I should. ou have become important to me. I love you. But he looked at her and remembered everything that stood behind her. Rohan. Her marriage. Her home. The life she had built. He knew he had no right to place his feelings in the middle of it.

So he swallowed the words. “Take care of yourself.”

Naina stared at him. Then laughed softly. “That was what you wanted to say?”

“Yes.”

“You made it sound very serious.”

“Perhaps it was.”

Her smile faded slightly. She knew there was something he wasn't saying. And perhaps he knew there was something she wasn't asking. That was their strange understanding. They didn't need words to recognise silence.

Naina stepped closer. Then, almost without thinking, she put her arms around him. Ashish froze for a moment. Then his arms came around her. The embrace was simple. Warm. Careful. But neither of them wanted it to end. Naina closed

her eyes. For a few seconds, the world disappeared. There was no marriage. No distance. No professional boundary. No tomorrow. Only the quiet comfort of being held by someone who had begun to understand parts of her she hadn't realised were visible. Ashish held her gently. He wanted to hold her tighter. He didn't. That restraint said more than words could have. Finally, Naina stepped back.

Her eyes were moist. “I'll miss you.”

Ashish looked at her. “I'll miss you too.”

She smiled. “More than the project?”

He smiled back. “Much more.”

She looked down. For one dangerous second, neither moved. The possibility of something more hovered between them. Naina felt it. Ashish felt it. And both understood. That was precisely why they stepped back.

On the drive home, Naina couldn't stop thinking about the evening. The coffee. The conversations. The pen. The hug. And the sentence he had never finished. She wondered what he had wanted to say. More importantly, she wondered why she had wanted to hear it. She tightened her grip on the steering wheel.

“No.” She said it aloud this time.

“I love Rohan.” She knew that was true.

But another truth had appeared beside it. She had become emotionally attached to Ashish. Not enough to abandon her life. Not enough to call it love. Or perhaps— not yet enough to admit that it might be. And that uncertainty frightened her more than a clear answer would have.

Ashish placed the fountain pen on his desk when he returned home. He sat there for a long time. Then he opened his notebook. He wrote:

You held me tonight,
and for a moment,
I forgot that goodbye was waiting.
There were words between us,
words we both understood,
but neither dared to speak.

Perhaps some feelings are safer

when they remain unnamed.

He stopped writing. Then added:

Go where your life is waiting.

I will find my way through the distance.

He closed the notebook. But he didn't sleep.

Across the city, Naina lay beside Rohan. He was already asleep. She looked at him for a long moment. Then she gently reached for his hand. His fingers closed instinctively around hers. The familiar gesture brought a strange calm to her. This was her home. Her husband. Her life. She loved him. That truth hadn't changed. But perhaps love wasn't always as simple as one heart, one person, one answer. Sometimes another person could enter your life without replacing anyone. Sometimes a connection could become important without having a place in the life you had already chosen. And sometimes the hardest part wasn't deciding what to do. It was accepting that you didn't completely understand what you were feeling. Naina closed her eyes.

Somewhere far away, Ashish was awake too. Neither had confessed. Neither had crossed the line. Neither had promised anything. Yet something had changed. The project was over. The distance had begun. And neither of them knew whether distance would make the feeling disappear— or finally give it a name.

Chapter Twenty



What the Heart Expects

The following afternoon, Avni found Naina sitting alone on a bench behind the academic block. She was holding a cup of tea, but it had clearly gone cold. Avni stopped beside her. “You're becoming very good at drinking cold tea.”

Naina looked up. For a second, she smiled.

Then the smile faded. “Sit.”

Avni sat beside her. Neither spoke immediately. The campus was unusually quiet. Students were in their classrooms, and the distant sound of a lecture drifted through an open window. Avni looked at her carefully. “So?”

“So what?”

“Your goodbye.”

Naina looked away. “You knew?”

“I know you.”

Naina gave a small laugh. “Unfortunately.”

“Fortunately.”

Naina smiled. Then she sighed. “He left this morning.”

“I know.”

“He called before leaving.”

“And?”

“We spoke for five minutes.”

“Only five?”

“Yes.” Naina looked down at her hands. “I wanted to tell him not to go.”

Avni remained silent. Naina continued. “Not because I wanted him to stay forever. Just…” She struggled to find the words. “I wanted those few months to continue.”

Avni gently asked, “What did you feel yesterday?”

Naina looked towards the trees. “Happy.” Then, after a pause, “Sad.”

“Anything else?”

Naina's eyes became moist. “Seen.”

Avni didn't interrupt. “That sounds strange, doesn't it?”

“No.” “When I'm with Ashish, I feel…” She stopped.

“Say it.”

“I feel interesting.”

Avni smiled softly. “You are interesting.”

Naina laughed through her tears. “You know what I mean.”

“I do.”

“He asks what I think. He remembers small things. He notices when I'm tired. He listens when I talk about something that matters to me.” She looked down.

“Sometimes I wonder whether that is what I've been missing.”

Avni's expression softened. “Not Ashish?”

Naina thought for a long time. “Maybe not him.”

“Then what?”

“Being noticed.”

The words came quietly. “I have a good marriage. Rohan loves me. He is kind. He respects me. He gives me freedom. He has never stopped me from working.”

“Then what is missing?”

Naina smiled sadly. “Perhaps nothing.”

She looked at Avni. “Perhaps I just forgot that I am a woman before I became a wife, a mother, a professor…”

She stopped. “Ashish reminded me.”

Avni took her hand. “That's important.”

“It scares me.”

“Why?”

“Because I liked the feeling.”

Avni understood. Naina continued,

“I liked being looked at as Naina. Not as Professor Bhatia. Not as Rohan's wife. Not as someone's mother.” She laughed softly. “Yesterday, when he hugged me, I didn't want to let go.”

Avni said nothing.

“I know what you're thinking.”

“What?”

“That I crossed some invisible line.”

“No.”

“I didn't want anything physical.”

“I know.”

“I just wanted to stay there.”

Her voice broke slightly.

“It felt safe.”

Avni squeezed her hand. “Maybe that's what you were really looking for.”

Naina looked at her. “What?”

“A place where you could put down all the roles for a while.”

Naina's eyes filled with tears. “That sounds exactly right.”

For a few moments they sat quietly. Then Naina asked, “What about you?”

Avni smiled. “Why does everyone keep asking me that?”

“Because you are hiding something.”

“Raj?” Naina nodded.

Avni sighed.

“He's still there.”

“In your mind?”

“Yes.”

“Does it feel like love?”

Avni shook her head.

“No.”

“Then what?”

“I don't know.” She looked towards the university building. “I think I like the way he looks at me.”

Naina smiled. “That's dangerous.”

“I know.”

“He makes you feel noticed too?”

Avni nodded. “Perhaps that's our common problem.”

Naina laughed softly. “Maybe we're not falling in love with men.”

Avni looked at her. “Then what are we falling in love with?”

“Being seen.” The two women looked at each other. Neither laughed this time. The idea was too close to the truth.

Naina leaned back against the bench. “Do you know what I secretly expect from love?”

Avni shook her head. “What?”

“I want someone to remember the little things.”

“Like?”

“The way I take my tea.”

“The books I like.”

“When I'm pretending I'm fine.”

“When I'm tired but don't say it.”

“When I need someone to sit beside me without asking questions.”

She smiled sadly.

“Maybe those things sound very small.”

“They aren't.”

“What about you?”

Avni thought. “I want to be admired.”

Naina looked surprised. “Not just loved?”

“Loved, yes. But sometimes I want someone to look at me and think…”

She hesitated.

“You're extraordinary.”

Naina smiled.

“You are.”

“I know Arjun thinks I'm good at what I do.”

“But?”

“Sometimes I want to feel it.”

They fell silent again. The conversation had become something much bigger than Raj and Ashish. It was about two women standing at a particular age in their lives, looking back at everything they had achieved and wondering whether the parts of themselves they had put aside were asking to be seen again.

Naina finally smiled. “Perhaps we're not unhappy.”

“No.”

“We're just discovering new parts of ourselves.”

“Maybe.”

“And that's why it feels confusing.”

Avni nodded. “Perhaps the heart doesn't always ask permission before showing us something.”

Naina looked at her. “And what do we do with it?”

Avni smiled. “We listen.”

“And then?”

“We decide.” Naina leaned her head gently against Avni's shoulder. “For the first time, I'm glad I can tell you these things.”

Avni rested her cheek lightly against Naina's hair. “Me too.”

They remained like that for a while. Two women. Two marriages. Two unexpected attractions. And one friendship that had become the safest place for both of them to tell the truth. Neither knew what would happen next. But for now, they didn't need answers. They only needed someone who understood.

Chapter Twenty-One



If You Miss Him

The conversation between Avni and Naina did not end that afternoon. They stayed on the bench long after their tea had gone cold. There was something liberating about speaking aloud the thoughts they had both been carrying privately. Naina looked at her phone. Ashish's name was still somewhere in her recent calls. She didn't touch it.

Avni noticed. “You miss him.”

Naina smiled faintly. “Perhaps.”

“Perhaps?”

“Fine. I do.”

Avni laughed. “Then call him.”

Naina looked at her sharply. “What?”

“Call him.”

“Avni!”

“What?”

“He's just left.”

“Exactly. You can ask how he is.”

“That sounds like an excuse.”

“Maybe it is.”

Naina shook her head. “I can't just call him because I miss him.”

“Why not?”

“Because…”

She struggled. “Because it means something.”

Avni thought for a moment. “Does it?”

Naina looked at her. “Maybe not every feeling needs to become a decision.”

The sentence made Naina quiet. Avni continued gently. “If you miss a friend, call your friend.”

“And if I miss him too much?”

“Then perhaps you need to understand why.”

Naina looked down at the phone again. “What if he thinks I'm expecting something?”

“Then tell him you're not.”

“And what if I am?”

Avni didn't answer immediately. “Then be honest with yourself first.”

Naina took a deep breath. Finally, she pressed the call button. The phone rang. Once. Twice. Three times. Then—

“Hello?” Ashish voice.

Naina smiled before she could stop herself. “Hi.”

There was a tiny pause.

“Naina?”

“Yes.”

“Is everything okay?”

“Yes.”

“Then?”

She laughed. “Can I not call you without a reason?”

Ashish was silent for a moment. “Of course you can.”

She looked at Avni. Avni smiled and mouthed: See?

Naina laughed softly. “I just wanted to know how you're doing.”

“I'm fine.”

“Settling in?”

“Trying.”

They talked for nearly twenty minutes. Nothing extraordinary. Work. The new city. The weather. The project. A book Naina had recommended. And yet, when the call ended, Naina felt lighter.

Avni looked at her. “Well?”

Naina smiled. “I feel better.”

“Then perhaps you needed the call.”

“Perhaps.”

She looked at the screen after the call ended. Then quietly said, “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For reminding me that missing someone doesn't automatically make you disloyal.”

Avni smiled. “Just don't let your feelings make decisions for you.”

Naina nodded. “I won't.”

Neither woman knew then how often they would repeat that sentence to themselves in the years ahead.

Chapter Twenty-Two



The Card

A year passed. Life settled into its familiar rhythm. Naina had become accustomed to the distance. She and Ashish still spoke occasionally. Not every day. Not even every week. But often enough to remain part of each other's lives. Their conversations had changed. There was less urgency. More restraint. Perhaps distance had taught them both something.

Avni, meanwhile, had settled comfortably into her new academic role. Her children were growing. Arjun remained the steady centre of their home. Their weekends were filled with ordinary happiness—family lunches, school activities, shopping trips, evening walks and the occasional short holiday.

Nothing was wrong. Everything was, in fact, quite good. Until one ordinary Sunday afternoon. Avni was sitting in the living room. Her daughter was doing homework at the dining table. Her son was watching television. Arjun was in the kitchen making tea. The house smelled of cardamom. The sunlight fell softly across the floor. Avni was sorting through the day's post when she found a cream-coloured envelope. She recognised the handwriting immediately.

She smiled. A childhood friend. She opened it casually. Then she stopped. Her smile disappeared. Her eyes moved over the printed words again. And again.

Wedding Invitation

She read the names.

Riya

&

Raj Sharma...!

Her fingers suddenly became cold.

Raj.

She sat down. For several seconds, she couldn't hear anything around her. Her daughter's voice seemed distant. The television sounded far away. Even the ticking clock appeared unnaturally loud. Raj was getting married.

Of course. Why shouldn't he? A year had passed. People moved on. People made choices. People built lives. She knew that. She knew all of it. And yet something inside her had shifted.

Suddenly.

Completely.

"Tea?" Arjun's voice brought her back.

She looked up. He was standing in front of her with two cups.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes."

He looked at the card in her hand. "What's that?"

"A wedding invitation."

"Someone you know?"

"Yes."

He placed the tea on the table. "Who?"

Avni hesitated. "Raj and Ria"

Arjun smiled. "Oh. Your colleague?"

"Yes."

"Good for him."

Avni forced a smile. "Yes."

Arjun sat beside her. "You should go."

"I probably will."

He picked up the card. “Childhood friends, apparently.”

“Yes.”

“Nice.” Avni nodded. But she wasn't really listening anymore.

That evening, after everyone had gone to bed, Avni sat alone near the window. The invitation was still on the table. She had read it so many times that she knew every word. She couldn't understand herself.

She wasn't in love with Raj. Was she? She had never asked him for anything. He had never promised her anything. They had barely spoken in months. So why did the thought of him marrying someone else hurt? Why did she feel as though something had been taken away? And why was she angry at herself for feeling it? She closed her eyes. She remembered the first time he had complimented her work. The way he had looked at her during that conversation. The small jokes. The moments when they had understood each other without speaking.

Nothing had happened.

Nothing.

Yet suddenly all those insignificant moments seemed precious.

She whispered, “What is wrong with me?”

There was no answer.

Arjun found her still awake. “You're not sleeping?”

“Not yet.”

He sat beside her. “Something bothering you?”

Avni hesitated. Then she leaned against him.

“I'm just thinking.”

“About the wedding?”

She nodded. “It's strange.”

“What is?”

“I thought I would be happy for him.”

“You can be happy for her and still feel strange.”

She looked at him. He smiled gently.

"You're human, Avni." She rested her head against his shoulder. For a moment, she felt ashamed. Arjun knew nothing. He trusted her completely. And she hated that a simple wedding invitation had disturbed something inside her that she had believed was safely buried.

"I love you," she whispered.

Arjun kissed her forehead. "I know."

The words should have settled her. They did. But only partly. Later, alone in bed, Avni turned towards the window. She thought about the wedding. About Raj. About her childhood friend Ria. She imagined him smiling beside her. Happy. Perhaps deeply in love. The thought hurt.

And that hurt frightened Avni more than anything else. Because for the first time, she had to confront a truth she had been avoiding. Maybe she had not simply admired Raj. Maybe she had wanted something she had never allowed herself to name. Not necessarily a relationship. Not necessarily a life with him. Perhaps she had simply wanted to remain special to him. And now she didn't know whether she still was. A tear slipped quietly down her cheek. She wiped it away.

The next morning, she would wake up. Make breakfast. Pack the children's lunches. Go to work. Smile at Arjun. Answer emails. Teach her students. Life would continue exactly as before. But something inside her had changed. A wedding invitation had done what a year of distance could not. It had forced her to look directly at a feeling she had spent a year pretending she didn't have.

And for the first time, Avni wondered—

If I never wanted Raj, then why does the thought of losing him hurt so much?

Chapter Twenty-Three



A Poem from Far Away

It had been almost a year since Ashish had left. Naina had learned to live with the distance. Their conversations had become less frequent, but somehow more meaningful. Sometimes they spoke about work. Sometimes about books. Sometimes about nothing at all. And sometimes there was simply silence between two messages that neither of them felt the need to explain.

One evening, Naina was sitting by the window of her Delhi apartment. The city lights were beginning to appear outside. The house felt unusually quiet. Her phone vibrated. A message from Ashish.

Ashish: Are you awake?

Naina smiled.

Naina: Yes. Why?

A few seconds passed. Then another message arrived.

Ashish: I wrote something.

Naina's smile widened.

Naina: A report?

Ashish: No.

Naina: Then I'm interested.

There was a pause. Then he sent her a photograph of a handwritten page. Naina opened it. She read.

Somewhere Between Here and There
Somewhere between your morning tea
and my lonely evening sky,
there is a road I cannot walk,
but still I travel it in my mind.
I don't ask where you are,
or who is waiting when you come home,
I only wonder if, sometimes,
you remember the conversations we've known.
Distance has taught me many things—
how silence can still speak,
how a familiar voice can remain close,
even when the miles are deep.
I never asked the stars for you,
nor asked the night to make you mine,
I only wished that somewhere,
for a moment,
your thoughts might cross mine.
And if they don't,
I will still be grateful
for the days we had,
for every laugh,
every argument,
every ordinary moment
that became something I could never call ordinary.

Naina read it twice. Then a third time. She didn't reply immediately. Her eyes had filled with tears. Not because the poem had declared love. It hadn't. That was what made it harder. It had said everything without saying the one thing she was afraid to hear. Her fingers moved across the screen.

Naina: It's beautiful.

She deleted it. Typed again.

Naina: You write beautifully.

Deleted that too. Finally:

Naina: Why did you write this?

The reply came after several minutes.

Ashish: I don't know.

Naina smiled sadly. She knew he was lying. Or perhaps he genuinely didn't know how to explain it.

She typed:

Naina: It made me miss those days.

A long pause.

Then:

Ashish: Me too.

Naina looked out of the window. The city was glittering below. She suddenly remembered the time spent together. The mist. The tea. Their first conversation. The project. The last coffee. The hug. She pressed the phone against her chest for a moment.

Then she typed:

Naina: Sometimes I miss talking to you.

The three dots appeared.

Disappeared.

Appeared again.

Finally:

Ashish: Sometimes is enough.

Naina smiled through her tears. She knew there was something hidden beneath those words. Something neither of them was ready to name. She put the phone down. Then picked it up again.

Naina: Goodnight, Ashish.

Ashish: Goodnight, Naina.

She switched off the light.

But sleep didn't come immediately. The poem stayed with her. Not because it asked anything from her. But because it reminded her of a feeling she had tried very hard to put into a safe corner of her heart. A feeling that distance had not erased.

Perhaps it had only taught them both how to live with it. And somewhere in another city, Ashish closed his notebook and looked at the same poem. He had finally sent her something he had written for her.

Not a confession.

Not a request.

Just a small piece of his heart— carefully wrapped in words.

Chapter Twenty-Four



The Life We Choose

The wedding invitation remained on Avni's desk for several days. She didn't know why she kept looking at it. Perhaps because Raj's name beside Ria's made something real that she had managed to keep safely imaginary. A possibility was easy to ignore. A marriage was not. She had decided to attend. Not because she wanted to see Raj. At least, that was what she told herself. She would go because he had been her friend.

Because once, somewhere between lectures, meetings and ordinary conversations, they had mattered to each other. And because happiness, even when it hurt, deserved to be celebrated.

The wedding was beautiful. There were lights everywhere.

Music.

Laughter.

Families meeting one another. Children running around. The familiar chaos of an Indian wedding. Avni arrived with Arjun and the children.

Arjun looked at her. “Are you ok?”

She smiled. “Of course.”

He didn't question her. He trusted her.

That trust made her feel both grateful and slightly guilty. Then she saw Raj. He was standing with his family. He looked happy. Genuinely happy. And beside

him stood Ria. Now she understood immediately why Raj had chosen her. Riya had a warm smile. There was confidence in the way she stood beside him. When Raj looked at her, his expression softened. Avni felt something inside her fall quiet. Not jealousy. Not anger. Something more difficult. Acceptance. She smiled. He's happy. And strangely, that made her happy too.

Raj noticed her. For a moment, his expression changed. Then he smiled. “Avni.”

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you.” He looked at Arjun. “I'm glad you came.”

“Of course.”

They spoke for a while. Ordinary things. Work. Family. The wedding. The children. Then Riya joined them. Later that evening, Raj found Avni standing near the garden. “Can I talk to you?”

She turned. “Of course.”

They walked a little away from the crowd. For a moment, neither spoke. Then Raj said, “I owe you an apology.”

Avni looked surprised. “For what?”

“For something I never said.”

Her heart skipped. She knew. Or perhaps she only feared she knew. Raj continued. “There was a time when I was confused about you.” Avni remained silent.

“I admired you. More than I should have.”

She looked down. “I think I knew.”

Raj smiled sadly. “Did you?”

“Perhaps.”

“I never wanted to make you uncomfortable.”

“You didn't.”

“I was happy with Riya even then.”

Avni looked at him.

“That makes it more complicated.”

"Yes."

He took a breath. "There were moments when I wondered what it would be like if our lives had been different."

Avni's eyes became moist. "But they aren't different."

"No."

"And I'm married."

"I know."

"And you're married now."

Raj smiled. "Yes."

There was a long silence. Then he said, "I think what I felt for you was real." Avni looked at him.

"But I also know what I feel for Riya is real."

She nodded.

"That's why I wanted to tell you."

"Why now?"

"Because I don't want something unspoken to become something uncomfortable between us."

Avni smiled faintly. "You're getting married. I think you're allowed to be honest about your past before starting your future."

Raj laughed softly. "You always make things sound simpler."

"They aren't simple."

"No."

He looked at her. "I don't want to lose you as a friend."

The words touched her more deeply than she expected. "Neither do I."

"Then let's leave it there."

Avni nodded.

"Friends."

"Good friends."

She smiled. “Deal.” For a moment, neither moved. Then Avni said, “You really love her.” Raj looked towards Riya. She was laughing with her friends. His face changed. “Yes.” Avni smiled. “Then go.”

“What?”

“She's waiting for you.”

He laughed. “You're sending me away?”

“Yes.”

“Cruel.”

“Practical.”

He smiled. “That's why I always admired you.”

Avni's smile softened. “And that's why I hope you always stay happy.”

Raj nodded. “Thank you.”

He turned to leave. Then looked back. “Avni?”

“Yes?”

“You'll always be someone special to me.”

Her eyes filled with tears. She smiled.

“And you'll always be someone I wish well.”

Both came close for that last hug. Paused. But finally gave each other a warm hug. Separated. Happy. Sad. Mixed emotions!

Raj walked away with heavy hearts. Avni watched him join Riya. Riya immediately took his hand. He looked at her. She looked at him. And Avni saw something that she had not allowed herself to see before. They belonged together. Not because their relationship was perfect. But because they had chosen one another.

Arjun found Avni a few minutes later. “You disappeared.”

“I was talking to Raj.”

“Everything okay?” She nodded. “Yes.”

He looked at her face. “You've been crying.”

She quickly wiped her eyes. “Just emotional.”

He didn't ask further. He simply took her hand. “Come.”

She followed him. On the way back to the hall, Avni looked once more towards Raj. He was laughing with Riya. For one brief moment, she felt the ache again. Something had ended. But it had never really begun. And perhaps that was why it hurt in such a strange way. She had not lost a lover. She had lost a possibility. A quiet what if. A version of a life that had never existed. And yet, as she watched Raj smile at Riya, she felt something else too. Happiness.

Real happiness for him. She whispered to herself, “Be happy, Raj.” Then she turned back towards her own family. Arjun was waiting. Her children were calling her. Her home was there. Her life was there. And she loved it. Perhaps growing older meant understanding that happiness was not always about getting what the heart once imagined.

Sometimes it was about knowing when to let an imagined future go— and being grateful for the life you had chosen.

That night, on the way home, Arjun held her hand while the children slept in the back seat. Avni looked out of the window. The wedding lights slowly disappeared behind them. She felt sad. She felt strangely lighter. She felt grateful. And, for the first time, she understood that some people could remain important to you without remaining part of your future.

Raj had chosen Riya. Avni had chosen Arjun. And perhaps, in their own complicated way, both had chosen well.

Chapter Twenty-Five



The Reply

Ashish had sent a poem again.

Some people enter our lives
not to stay beside us,
but to leave a little light behind.
Perhaps you are that light.
And perhaps I am simply learning
how to carry it from far away.

Naina kept Ashish's poem for three days before replying to it. She had read it several times. Once in the morning before work. Then late at night. And once during a quiet afternoon when the university corridors were almost empty. Every time, the same lines seemed to mean something slightly different. She had wanted to answer immediately. But what could she say?

Your poem touched me. Too simple. I miss you too. Too dangerous. I think about you. Too honest. So she said nothing.

Until one evening, she opened her laptop and began writing. She wasn't a poet. She had never thought of herself as one. But some feelings refused to fit inside ordinary sentences.

She wrote:

Some people arrive quietly,

without announcing that they will matter.
They become a familiar voice,
a cup of tea after a difficult day,
a conversation that lasts longer than planned,
a laugh remembered long after the call ends.
Perhaps we don't always choose
the people who become important.
Perhaps the heart simply recognises
a certain kind of understanding.
I don't know what distance does to feelings,
or what time will leave behind.
But I know this— some moments deserve gratitude,
even when they cannot become a life.

She read it twice. Then she sent it. Her heart beat faster the moment the message disappeared.

.....

Ashish was sitting in his apartment when the message arrived. He read it once. Then again. He sat back. For a long time, he said nothing. She hadn't said love. She hadn't asked him to come back. She hadn't crossed any boundary. But she had answered him. And somehow that was enough. His phone rang. Naina.

He answered. “Hello.”

“Did you read it?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

Ashish smiled. “I don't know what to say.”

“That's unusual.”

“I usually have plenty to say.”

“I know.” They laughed. Then silence settled between them. A comfortable silence. The kind they had learned to share. Finally, Ashish said, “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For understanding.” Naina's voice became softer.

“I think I do.” He wanted to tell her everything. Instead, he said, “I hope you're happy, Naina.”

She closed her eyes. “I am.”

“And?”

She smiled sadly. “And sometimes happiness is complicated.”

Ashish understood. He didn't ask anything more. Neither did she. They simply stayed on the phone for a few minutes. Two people separated by distance. Two lives moving in different directions. Yet somehow still connected by something neither had given a name.

That night, Naina saved both poems. She didn't know why. Perhaps because they represented something she didn't want to forget. Not a romance. Not an affair. Not a future. Just a chapter of her life when someone had seen her differently. And she had seen someone else differently too. She closed her phone. Rohan was asleep beside her. She looked at him and smiled. Her life was still hers. Nothing had changed. Except perhaps the way she understood her own heart.

Chapter Twenty-Six



Two Lives, Two Questions

A few weeks later, Avni and Naina met at their favourite café. It had become their place. Not because it was particularly special. It was simply where they had shared too many important conversations. Naina arrived first. Avni joined her a few minutes later. “You look tired.”

Naina smiled. “So do you.”

“Fair.”

They ordered tea. For a while, they talked about ordinary things. Work. Students. Family. The weather.

Then Naina said, “I replied to Ashish.”

Avni looked at her. “Really?”

“Yes.”

“What did you say?”

“I wrote something.”

“Poetry?”

Naina smiled. “Perhaps.”

“I knew it.”

They laughed. Then Avni's expression changed. “Did he understand?”

“I think so.”

"And?"

"He didn't ask for anything."

"That sounds like Ashish."

Naina looked down. "That makes it harder."

"Why?"

"Because if he had asked for something, I could have said no."

Avni understood immediately. "But he didn't."

"No."

"He just cares." Naina nodded. "And I care too."

The words came quietly. Avni reached across the table. "That's the difficult part."

Naina looked at her. "Do you still think about Raj?"

Avni smiled faintly. "Sometimes."

"After the wedding?"

"Yes."

"Does it hurt?"

"A little."

"Why?"

Avni thought. "Because I realised I didn't want him to belong to me."

Naina waited.

"I just wanted to know that I mattered to him."

"And now?"

"Now I know I did."

Naina smiled. "Does that make it easier?"

"Yes."

"Completely?"

Avni shook her head.

"No."

They sat quietly. Then Naina asked, “Do you ever wonder whether something is wrong with us?”

Avni looked at her. “All the time.”

“We have good marriages.”

“Yes.”

“We love our husbands.”

“Yes.”

“Our families are happy.”

“Yes.”

“And yet…”

“We notice other people.”

Naina sighed. “Exactly.”

Avni stirred her tea. “Maybe attraction doesn't always mean dissatisfaction.”

Naina looked thoughtful. “Maybe.”

“Maybe we spend years believing that if we love someone properly, we will never notice anyone else.”

“And that's not true.”

“Perhaps not.”

Naina looked through the window.

“Then what does it mean?”

Avni smiled. “I don't know.”

“That's helpful.” They laughed. The conversation became quieter. Naina said, “I think Ashish makes me feel seen.”

Avni nodded. “Raj did that for me.”

“And did you want more?”

Avni thought about the wedding. “No.”

Then she corrected herself. “Maybe a tiny part of me wanted more.”

Naina smiled. “At least you're honest.”

“I don't think wanting is the same as choosing.”

“That's what I've been telling myself.”

“And is it working?”

“Some days.”

They both laughed. Naina leaned back. “Do you think we can love our husbands completely and still carry another feeling?”

Avni looked at her. “I think people are more complicated than the promises they make.”

Naina's eyes became thoughtful. “But promises still matter.”

“Of course.”

“So what do we do?”

Avni smiled. “We don't punish ourselves for feeling.”

“And?”

“We don't let the feeling decide our lives either.”

Naina nodded slowly. That sounded right. Perhaps feelings were not instructions. Perhaps they were simply information. A quiet message from somewhere inside. Something saying: Look here. There is a part of you that needs attention.

Maybe Ashish had reminded Naina that she wanted to be listened to. Maybe Raj had reminded Avni that she wanted to feel admired. That didn't necessarily mean they needed those men. Perhaps they needed to rediscover those parts of themselves. That evening, both women returned home.

Naina found Rohan waiting for her. “Long day?”

“Yes.”

He smiled. “Dinner is ready.” She looked at him. Something warm filled her chest. She walked towards him and hugged him. He laughed. “What happened?”

“Nothing.”

“Then why the sudden affection?”

“Can't I hug my husband?”

“Of course.”

She held him a little longer. She wasn't trying to erase Ashish. She wasn't trying to prove anything. She simply wanted to remember the love that was already there.

Across the city, Avni sat beside Arjun on the sofa. The children were asleep. Arjun was reading. Avni rested her head against his shoulder. He closed the book. “Tired?”

“A little.”

“Good day?”

She smiled. “Yes.” He kissed her forehead. She closed her eyes. Her life was not empty. It was full. But perhaps fullness didn't mean the absence of complicated feelings. Perhaps maturity was learning to hold those feelings without allowing them to destroy what mattered. That night, both women fell asleep beside the men they had chosen.

And somewhere far away, Ashish looked at Naina's poem one more time. Raj looked at Riya sleeping beside him. Four people. Four hearts. Four different silences.

And one question that none of them could answer yet: Can a feeling be real without becoming a relationship?

Perhaps the rest of their lives would be spent discovering the answer.

Chapter Twenty-Seven



The Box

Sunday mornings had always belonged to the house. There was something comforting about the disorder of them. The children argued over the television remote. Arjun searched for his glasses while they were sitting on his bedside table. Someone had left a school notebook on the dining table. The washing machine hummed in the background. Avni moved from one room to another, collecting things that had somehow travelled far beyond where they belonged.

It was an ordinary morning. And perhaps that was why she noticed the cupboard. She had been meaning to clean it for months. The lower shelf was filled with old files, university papers, photographs and things she had not looked at in years. She pulled everything out. A stack of old notebooks fell onto the floor. She laughed.

"Of course."

She picked them up one by one. Then she found a small cardboard box. There was no label. She almost put it back. Something made her open it. Inside were photographs. Old ones. Avni at twenty-three. Avni at twenty-six. Avni standing beside a university building with a group of friends. Avni holding a book and smiling at the camera. Avni before marriage. Before children. Before responsibilities had filled every corner of her life. She sat down on the floor. For several minutes, she simply looked. Then she found an old diary.

The cover was faded. She opened it. The first page carried a sentence written in her younger handwriting: I want to become a professor, travel the world, write a book, learn classical music and live a life that feels completely mine.

Avni smiled. She had become a professor. She had travelled. She had built a family. But the book remained unwritten. The music lessons had disappeared somewhere between work and motherhood. And the phrase a life that feels completely mine made her strangely emotional. She turned another page. There were lists. Places she wanted to visit. Things she wanted to learn. A poem she had written at twenty-four. A terrible poem. She laughed at it.

Then suddenly stopped laughing. She wondered when she had stopped writing. Not because someone had asked her to. She simply had. Life had become full. And somewhere along the way, she had mistaken fullness for completeness.

~

"Ma?" Her daughter's voice came from the doorway.

Avni quickly wiped her eyes. "What?"

"What are you doing?"

"Cleaning."

Her daughter looked at the scattered photographs. "You were so young."

Avni smiled. "I was."

"Were you happy?" The question surprised her.

She looked at the photograph in her hand. "Yes."

Then she thought for a moment. "And I am happy now."

Her daughter smiled. "Then why are you crying?"

Avni laughed softly. "Sometimes we cry when we remember how many versions of ourself we've been."

Her daughter didn't understand. Perhaps she didn't need to. She picked up the diary. "Can I read it?"

"Absolutely not."

They both laughed.

That evening, Avni told Naina about the box. They were speaking over the phone.

“You found an old diary?”

“Yes.”

“What did you write?”

“My dreams.”

“And?”

Avni became quiet. “I realised I had forgotten some of them.”

Naina understood immediately. “Maybe you haven't forgotten them.”

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe they were just waiting.”

Avni smiled. “Waiting for what?”

“For us to have time.”

There was a long pause.

Then Naina said, “I think I need to find my own box.”

Two days later, Naina received an email from an old academic account. The subject line read:

Project Archive — Final Draft

She almost deleted it. Then she saw the sender.

Ashish.

She opened the attachment. It was an old document from their project. She smiled at the memories. Then she noticed something else. At the bottom of the file was a page that didn't belong to the report. A personal note. Perhaps Ashish had accidentally attached it.

She read:

Some collaborations end when the work is finished.

Some don't.

Sometimes the real thing we take away from a project isn't the research.

It is the person who changed the way we looked at something.

Naina stopped reading. She knew immediately. He hadn't written it for her. At least, she told herself he hadn't. She stared at the screen. Then closed the laptop. But the words stayed with her. That night, she opened an old drawer. She found photographs. Conference badges. Notes. A ticket from the Ooty conference. And one small folded piece of paper. She opened it. A list she had written years ago.

Things I want from life:

Work that matters. Time with my family. Travel. Good conversations. To keep learning. To be remembered for something meaningful.

Naina smiled. She had achieved most of them. Yet the last line suddenly felt different. To be remembered for something meaningful. Perhaps that was why certain people mattered. Not because they were meant to stay. But because they left something meaningful behind.

~

That night, Avni and Naina spoke again. Neither mentioned Raj. Neither mentioned Ashish. They spoke about themselves. Their younger selves.

Their dreams.

Their mistakes.

Their marriages.

Their children.

Their careers.

And finally, Naina said, “Do you think we're going through some kind of midlife crisis?”

Avni laughed. “Absolutely.”

“That's comforting.”

“It's not a crisis.”

“What is it then?”

Avni looked out of her window. “Maybe it's an awakening.”

Naina smiled. “That's dangerously dramatic.”

“I'm allowed.”

They laughed.

But neither dismissed the thought. Because somewhere between forty and fifty, they had discovered something unexpected. They weren't finished. They weren't merely wives, mothers, professors or successful professionals. There were still women inside them who wanted to learn.

To travel.

To create.

To be admired.

To be understood.

To dream.

And perhaps that was what Raj and Ashish had unknowingly awakened. Not a need for another life. A need to look again at the one they already had.

Before going to sleep, Avni took out the old diary. She opened to a blank page. Then wrote:

Perhaps the woman I was never disappeared.

Perhaps she has simply been waiting for me to remember her.

Across the city, Naina opened her notebook. She wrote almost the same thing:

Maybe growing older is not about becoming someone new.

Maybe it is about meeting the person you left behind.

Neither woman knew that the next few months would change them. Not because of a man. Not because of a marriage. Not because of a dramatic decision.

But because, for the first time in years, they had begun asking themselves a question they had been too busy to ask:

What do I want now?

Chapter Twenty-Eight



The Women They Could Have Been

The invitation arrived on a Monday morning. A three-day academic workshop in Jaipur. Naina read the email twice before forwarding it to Avni.

Naina : Look at this.

The reply came almost immediately.

Avni: Jaipur?

Naina : Three days.

Avni: Academic workshop?

Naina: Technically.

A pause.

Then:

Avni: You are thinking of something.

Naina: I'm thinking we need a break.

Avni stared at the message. She had not taken a trip without her family in years. Not a proper one. There had always been a reason to stay. Children. Work. Family commitments. Something. But this time,

She typed:

Avni: Let's go.

Naina smiled.

Naina : That's it?

Avni: Before I change my mind.

.....

They arrived in Jaipur on a Thursday afternoon. The city was warm and bright, filled with old buildings, colourful markets and the sound of traffic moving through narrow streets. They checked into the hotel, dropped their luggage and looked at each other.

“We're actually here.”

Avni laughed.

“We are.”

“No husbands.”

“No children.”

“No students.”

“No urgent household problems.”

Naina looked around dramatically.

“Should we be worried?”

“Absolutely not.” They laughed like schoolgirls.

That evening, instead of attending the optional welcome dinner, they went walking through the old market. They bought earrings they didn't need. A scarf that neither intended to wear. They ate street food. They took photographs. And they laughed. Really laughed. The kind of laughter that made their stomachs hurt.

At one point, Naina stopped beside a shop window. “Look at us.”

“What?”

“We look twenty-five.”

Avni laughed. “We definitely won't feel twenty-five tomorrow morning.”

“Let me enjoy the illusion.”

Later that night, they sat on the hotel balcony. Two cups of tea. One plate of biscuits.

The city glittering below.

For the first time in months, neither had to rush anywhere.

Naina looked at Avni. “Do you remember what we used to dream about?”

Avni smiled. “Unfortunately.”

“Travelling.”

“Writing.”

“Learning new things.”

“Falling in love.”

They both went quiet. Naina smiled. “We did that one.”

“Yes.”

“Twice?”

Avni looked at her. “You're asking dangerous questions.”

Naina laughed. “I mean with our husbands.”

“I know.”

Silence. Then Avni said, “Do you think we changed after marriage?”

“Of course.”

“For better or worse?”

“Both.”

Naina looked at the city. “I think I became very good at being needed.”

Avni understood. “And forgot how to simply be.”

Naina nodded. “Exactly.”

The next morning, after the workshop, they decided to skip the afternoon session.

“We're terrible academics,” Avni said.

“We've earned one afternoon.”

They hired a car and drove towards Ajmer. The enormous fort appeared against the blue sky. They walked slowly, taking photographs. At the top, Naina stood looking over the city. “Beautiful.”

Avni stood beside her. “Very.”

Naina smiled. “Do you ever think about the lives we could have lived?”

“All the time.”

“Not because I regret mine.”

“I know.”

“Just because there were so many possibilities.”

Avni nodded. “I could have become a writer.”

“You still can.”

“I could have travelled more.”

“You still can.”

“I could have learnt music.”

“You still can.”

Naina laughed. “You're making this sound very easy.”

“It is.”

“No, it isn't.”

Avni looked at her. “Perhaps we spend too much time thinking our lives are finished once we've reached a certain age.”

Naina was quiet. Then she said, “Maybe forty-five isn't an ending.”

“No.”

“Maybe it's the beginning of knowing what matters.”

Avni smiled. “Now you're sounding dramatic.”

“I learnt from you.”

They laughed.

.....

That evening, they sat in their hotel room with their shoes off, eating takeaway dinner from paper boxes.

Naina looked at Avni. “Tell me something honestly.”

“What?”

“Do you still think about Raj?”

Avni took a breath. “Yes.”

“Do you miss him?”

“Sometimes.”

“Do you want him back?”

Avni shook her head. “No.”

“Why?”

“Because I don't want his life.”

She paused. “I just miss the version of myself that existed when I was around him.”

Naina nodded. “I understand.”

“And you?”

“Ashish?”

“Yes.” Naina smiled sadly. “I miss him.”

“Do you want him?”

Naina was silent. “I don't know.”

“That's not an answer.”

“It is the most honest one I have.”

Avni waited.

Naina continued. “I don't want to leave my life.”

“I know.”

“I don't want to hurt Rohan.”

“I know.”

“But I also don't want to pretend that Ashish means nothing to me.”

Avni nodded. “Then don't.”

Naina looked at her. “What?”

“Don't pretend.”

“But what do I do with the feeling?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Some feelings don't require action.”

Naina smiled. “That's what you told me before.”

“And I still believe it.”

~

Later, the lights were switched off. They lay in separate beds, still talking in the darkness. Naina suddenly said, “Avni?”

“Hmm?”

“If we had met ten years earlier…”

“What?”

“Do you think our lives would be different?”

Avni thought.

“Definitely.”

“Better?”

“Not necessarily.”

“Worse?”

“Not necessarily.”

She smiled in the darkness.

“Different.”

Naina nodded.

“Different.”

They fell silent.

Outside, Jaipur continued to glow.

Inside the room, two women lay awake thinking about the people they had been, the women they had become, and the women they might still become. For the first time, they realised something important. The men they had met had not necessarily been destinations. Perhaps they had been mirrors.

Ashish had shown Naina how deeply she wanted to be understood. Raj had shown Avni how much she wanted to be admired. But the rest of the journey belonged to them. They didn't need another life. They needed to make more room inside the lives they already had. And perhaps that was the most unexpected freedom of all.

At forty-five, they were not finished.

They were beginning again.

Chapter Twenty-Nine



The Letter He Almost Sent

Three weeks after the Jaipur trip, Naina returned to her ordinary routine. Lectures. Meetings. Research papers. Home. Family. The days moved quickly. Yet something had changed. She had started writing again. Not academic papers. Not reports. Her own thoughts. Small observations. Memories. Questions she had never allowed herself to ask.

One evening, after everyone had gone to bed, she sat at her desk with a cup of tea. Her phone vibrated.

Ashish.

There was no message.

Only a photograph.

A handwritten page.

She smiled before opening it.

The Distance Between Two People

There are miles between us,

but miles are simple things.

They can be measured,

crossed,

and eventually forgotten.

It is the distance between two hearts
that is difficult.
Sometimes you are closer to me
than people sitting beside me.
Sometimes I hear your voice
in an ordinary evening,
and suddenly the city feels less unfamiliar.
I have learnt not to ask for more.
Not because I feel less,
but because I respect what you already have.
Perhaps that is the quietest form of love—
to wish someone happiness,
even when a small part of you wishes
you could have been the reason for it.

Naina stopped reading. Her eyes remained on the final line.

She whispered, "Ashish..."

Her phone rang. She answered.

"You sent me another poem."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"You always say that."

"Perhaps I don't know how else to say certain things."

Naina was silent. Then she asked, "Are you happy?"

There was a long pause.

"Yes."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Then why do you write these?"

Ashish laughed softly. "Because being happy doesn't mean every other feeling disappears."

The answer stayed with her. Naina looked down at the poem. "Do you regret leaving?"

"No."

"Do you regret meeting me?"

"Never."

Her eyes filled with tears. "Neither do I."

~

They spoke for almost an hour. About books. About their careers. About the strange realisation that they were both approaching a new phase of life. About the Jaipur workshop. Ashish confessed about stocking her during her Jaipur workshop. He loved the version of Naina, in Jaipur. Naina was surprised hearing this.

Why didin't you meet me there? Naina wanted to ask. But eventually, she said, "I've started writing again."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"Things that don't have a purpose."

Ashish laughed. "Those are usually the most important things."

She smiled. "I wrote something after reading your poem."

"Will you show me?"

Naina hesitated. Then she read:

Some people become chapters
we never meant to write.
Yet years later,
we return to those pages

not because we want to change the ending,
but because we want to remember
who we were when we wrote them.

Ashish was silent. Then he said quietly, “That is beautiful.”

“You're biased.”

“Perhaps.”

~

The conversation became quiet. Neither wanted to end the call.

Finally, Ashish said, “Naina?”

“Yes?”

“If one day we stop talking…”

She interrupted him. “Why would we?”

“Life changes.”

She thought about it. “Then we'll talk when life allows.”

He smiled. “That sounds like you.”

“What does that mean?”

“Practical.”

She laughed.

“And you're not?”

“Not when it comes to you.”

Silence. Naina's heart beat faster. Ashish seemed to realise what he had said. He quickly added, “I mean… emotionally.”

“I know.”

Neither mentioned the moment again.

After the call ended, Naina remained at her desk. She looked at the two poems on her screen. Then opened a new document. She began writing. Not to send. Not yet. She wrote:

Perhaps some people are not meant to be loved in the ordinary way.

Perhaps they are meant to be remembered.

Perhaps the heart can make room for a feeling without asking it to become a life.

She stopped. Then smiled. For once, she wasn't frightened by what she felt. She didn't need to name it. She didn't need to act on it. She only needed to understand it.

Across the country, Ashish placed his phone beside his bed. He opened his notebook. He wrote one final line beneath his poem:

Somewhere between love and letting go,

I found peace.

He closed the notebook.

And for the first time in a long while, the distance between them didn't feel like punishment. It felt like a boundary they had both chosen to respect.

And strangely, that made their connection feel even more precious.

Chapter Thirty



The Unexpected Call

Winter arrived quietly that year. The mornings became slower. Tea tasted warmer. The sunlight entering the house felt softer, as though the world itself had decided to move more gently. Life had settled into its familiar rhythm. Naina travelled between lectures, meetings, home and the endless small responsibilities that made up ordinary days. Rohan remained busy with work. The children were growing older, more independent.

And Ashish had become something unusual in her life—not a daily presence, not a distant memory, but a quiet, steady thread running through the years. Sometimes they spoke every week. Sometimes two weeks passed without a call. There was no expectation. No promises.

Only the understanding that, somehow, they would return to the conversation when life allowed. And perhaps that was why the call at ten-thirty on a Sunday night surprised her. Ashish rarely called that late. Naina looked at the screen. For a moment, she smiled. Then she answered.

"Hello?"

"Naina."

There was something different in his voice.

"Is everything alright?"

"Yes."

A pause.

"Mostly."

Naina sat up in bed. "What happened?"

Ashish laughed softly. "You always assume something serious."

"Because you sound serious."

"I've received an offer."

"What kind of offer?"

"A national academic project."

"That sounds wonderful."

"It is."

"Then why do you sound worried?"

There was a small silence.

"Because it would mean moving."

Naina waited.

"To Delhi."

For a second, she forgot to breathe.

Delhi.

The word settled quietly between them. A city. Only a city. And yet, suddenly, it felt like something much larger.

"Oh," she said.

"Yes."

"When?"

"If I accept, in three months."

Naina looked out of the window. The city below was asleep. Her mind was not.

"What do you think?" Ashish asked.

She smiled faintly. "Since when have you needed my advice?"

"Since always."

She laughed softly. Then became quiet again. She imagined it for one dangerous second. Ashish in the same city. Occasional meetings. Conferences.

Coffee. Ordinary conversations becoming ordinary again. The thought brought warmth. And fear.

“It's a good opportunity,” she said carefully.

“I know.”

“You've worked for this.”

“Yes.”

“Then why are you hesitating?”

Ashish was silent. Long enough for her to understand. He did not need to explain. Some truths had become too familiar to require words.

Naina closed her eyes. “Ashish?”

“Yes?”

“Don't make decisions because of me.”

He exhaled softly. “I know.”

“And don't avoid opportunities because of me either.”

Another silence.

“You always say the sensible thing.”

“Someone has to.”

He laughed. But there was sadness in it.

After the call ended, Naina remained awake for a long time. Rohan turned in his sleep beside her. She looked at him. Then looked back at the darkness outside. Why had the thought of Ashish returning unsettled her so much? Nothing had happened. Nothing was going to happen. And yet distance had been safe. Distance had allowed feelings to remain gentle, undefined. What would happen if distance disappeared? The question frightened her. Because, for the first time, she realised something. Perhaps distance had not weakened what she felt. Perhaps it had protected it.

~

The following weekend, Avni sat at her dining table surrounded by papers. Her old diary lay open beside her. For months she had been thinking about it. The unfinished dreams. The unwritten book. The younger version of herself who had wanted to create something meaningful.

Arjun walked in carrying tea. “What is all this?”

“My midlife crisis.”

He laughed. “That serious?”

“Very.”

He placed the tea beside her. “What are you writing?”

Avni looked at the pages. “A book.”

Arjun smiled. “About what?”

“I don't know yet.”

“You've written fifty pages.”

“Exactly.”

He looked at her. There was pride in his expression. Real pride. “When did you start?”

“After Jaipur.”

“And you didn't tell me?”

“I wanted to see if I could do it first.”

He sat beside her. “You can.”

The certainty in his voice touched her. Avni smiled. For a moment, she thought about Raj. Then she realised something surprising. She hadn't thought about him in days. Not because he had become unimportant. But because she had become important to herself again. That felt new. And strangely wonderful.

That evening, Avni called Naina.

“How is the book?” Naina asked.

“Slow.”

“Still writing?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

“And how are you?”

Naina hesitated. “Ashish might come to Delhi.”

There was silence.

"Oh."

"Yes."

"How do you feel?"

Naina looked out of the window. "I don't know."

"That means you know."

"That's unfair."

"It's true."

Naina laughed softly. Then became quiet. "I think distance made everything easier."

Avni understood.

"Because distance allowed imagination."

"Yes."

"And closeness requires reality."

Naina smiled.

"When did you become wise?"

"Jaipur."

They both laughed. Then Avni said gently, "What do you want, Naina?"

It was a simple question. Yet Naina had no answer. She loved her family. She loved Rohan. That was true. And Ashish? What was Ashish? A friend? Certainly. Something more? Perhaps. A possibility? Maybe. Or perhaps he had become a part of her inner life—a person connected not only to himself, but to the woman she had become while knowing him. The answer was not simple. Perhaps it never would be.

That night, Ashish opened his notebook. He had not written poetry for several weeks. He turned to a blank page. Then wrote:

Distance is a strange kindness.

It keeps some feelings gentle.

It turns ordinary moments into memories,

and memories into something almost beautiful.

But what happens when distance ends?

Do feelings become smaller?

Or do they finally meet the truth?

He stopped writing. Then added one final line:

Perhaps some questions should not be answered too quickly.

He closed the notebook.

Across two different cities, three people lay awake. Naina wondered what closeness would change. Ashish wondered whether returning was courage or foolishness. And Avni, writing quietly at her desk, wondered why it had taken her so many years to remember that she still had dreams of her own.

Winter deepened. Life continued. And somewhere, just beyond the ordinary rhythm of days, change was slowly making its way towards them.

Chapter Thirty-One



When Distance Ends

The message arrived on a Saturday morning. Naina was halfway through her first cup of tea when her phone vibrated. She glanced at the screen.

Ashish: I've accepted the Delhi position.

For a few seconds, she simply looked at the words. She had known this was coming. They had talked about the opportunity. She had encouraged him to accept it. She had even told him that Delhi would be good for his career. And yet, seeing those words on her phone made her heart beat differently. She put the cup down. Then picked up the phone again.

Naina: Congratulations! I'm genuinely happy for you.

The reply came almost immediately.

Ashish: Thank you.

Then another message appeared.

Ashish: I'll be there next week.

Naina stared at it. Next week. Not next year. Not someday. Next week.

The distance that had protected their friendship for so long was about to disappear. She typed:

Naina: Delhi is lucky to have you.

She almost added something else.

And perhaps I'm lucky too.

She deleted it.

Instead, she sent: You'll do wonderfully.

Ashish replied: I hope so.

She smiled.

You will.

She thought it.

But didn't write it.

That evening, Naina told Rohan. They were sitting in the living room after dinner. Rohan was checking something on his laptop while Naina folded the children's clothes.

“Ashish has accepted a position in Delhi.”

Rohan looked up. “Really?”

“Yes.”

“That's great.”

“He'll be leading a national academic project.”

“Sounds like a big opportunity.”

“It is.”

Rohan smiled. “You'll probably see him more often now.”

Naina's hands paused for a fraction of a second. “Probably.”

He went back to his laptop. There was no suspicion. No uncomfortable question. Just simple acceptance. And somehow that trust made Naina feel more emotional than she expected. She looked at her husband. This was the man who had shared ordinary mornings with her. Who remembered her even in her absence. Who waited when she worked far. Who had seen her tired, irritated, excited, worried and happy. Her life with him was not an illusion. It was real. Solid. Deeply familiar. And she loved him. That truth did not disappear simply because another person mattered to her. That was what frightened her.

The week passed quickly. Too quickly. Naina came back to Delhi. On Friday night, Naina found herself standing in front of her wardrobe longer than necessary. She had been invited to a small welcome gathering for Ashish's new team. Nothing formal. She had no reason to be nervous. Yet she changed her outfit twice.

Then she laughed at herself. "What am I doing?"

She chose a simple blue kurta. Nothing special. Nothing that would suggest she had thought about it too much. She looked in the mirror. Then picked up her phone. There was a message from Ashish.

Ashish: See you tomorrow.

Her heart gave a small, foolish flutter. She smiled despite herself.

Naina: See you.

Ashish arrived Delhi on Thursday morning. The city greeted him with traffic, noise and familiar chaos. He had lived away for years. He should have felt nervous about starting again. Instead, beneath the anxiety, there was a quiet happiness. He was coming home professionally. But there was another reason. Naina was here. He tried not to think too much about that. He unpacked his books. Placed his notebooks on the desk. Arranged his files. Made tea. Then stood by the window. He remembered the last time he had left her. The airport. The unfinished conversation. The hug. The poem he had written afterwards. At the time, he had thought distance would slowly make things easier. It had. But only in one sense.

He had learnt how to live without seeing her. He had not learnt how to stop caring.

The Friday evening, they met. The gathering was crowded. Colleagues moved around them. People introduced themselves. There were photographs. Laughter. Too much tea. Too many questions about Ashish's new project. And yet, through all of it, Naina kept becoming aware of him. Across the room. Near the window. Speaking to a professor. Laughing at someone's joke.

He looked comfortable. Happy. Settled. She liked seeing him that way. More than she wanted to admit. Eventually their eyes met. He smiled. She smiled back. It felt strangely familiar. As though the year between them had been only a long pause in a conversation.

Later, they found themselves standing together near the balcony.

“You look well,” Ashish said.

“So do you.”

“Delhi has been kind.”

“Give it another month.”

He laughed. “I forgot how much traffic there is.”

“You'll remember quickly.”

He looked at her. “I've missed this city.”

Naina smiled. “The city?”

He held her gaze for a moment. “Among other things.”

She looked away. Neither spoke for a few seconds.

Then Ashish said, “I was nervous about coming back.”

“Why?”

He smiled. “You know why.”

Naina's smile faded slightly. She understood. “I'm nervous too.”

He looked at her. “You are?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

She took a breath. “Because distance was easy.”

He nodded. “Very.”

“We knew where the boundaries were.”

“And now?”

“Now we're in the same city.”

He looked towards the busy room. “We don't have to change anything.”

“I know.”

“We can remain exactly as we were.”

Naina looked at him. “Can we?”

Ashish didn't answer immediately. Finally, he said, “I don't know.” It was the most honest answer he could give.

A few days later, they met for coffee. This time deliberately. There was no conference. No project. No professional reason. Just coffee. They sat across from each other at a quiet table. For a while, they spoke about ordinary things. His new apartment. Her students. Their work. Books. The weather.

Then Ashish smiled. “Do you remember Ooty?”

Naina laughed. “How could I forget?”

“The terrible coffee?”

“The terrible weather.”

“You blamed me for both.”

“You deserved it.”

He laughed. The memories came easily. The first conversation. The project. The walks. The arguments over small things. The final evening. The poem. The goodbye. They had become memories. But sitting there, Naina realised something. Memories could come alive very quickly when the person who shared them was sitting across the table.

She looked at him. “I thought I'd forgotten some of it.”

“So did I.”

“But I haven't.”

“Neither have I.”

The silence that followed wasn't uncomfortable. It was tender.

On the way home, Naina felt strangely happy. She had missed him. Seeing him again had confirmed that. But something else had surprised her. She wasn't unhappy about the fact. She didn't need to deny it. She simply needed to understand it. That night, she stood on the balcony. She thought about Ashish. Then about Rohan. She felt no need to compare them. They belonged to different parts of her life. And perhaps that was precisely what made everything so complicated.

Ashish had his own difficult evening. He sat alone in his new apartment. The room was still filled with unopened boxes. He thought about Naina. Her smile. Her voice. The way she had looked away when he said he had missed the city. He smiled. Then his expression became serious. He had imagined being near her for so long. Now that it had happened, he realised proximity demanded restraint. He couldn't allow his feelings to become a burden for her. He didn't want to become the person who made her question everything she had built. He opened his notebook.

After a long pause, he wrote:

When You Came Closer

I once believed distance was the hardest thing.

I was wrong.

Distance asks only that you miss someone.

Closeness asks what you intend to do with that feeling.

When you were far away,

I could write about you.

I could remember you.

I could let the silence carry what I couldn't say.

But now you are here.

Now I can see the smile I remembered.

Hear the voice I missed.

Sit across from you and pretend

that coffee is only coffee.

And suddenly,

the heart becomes less poetic

and much more afraid.

So perhaps love is not always the courage to come closer.

Perhaps sometimes it is the courage

to remain where you are,

even when every emotion asks you to take one step more.

He read it once. Then closed the notebook. He did not send it. Not this time.

Weeks passed. They met occasionally. Always carefully. Coffee after a seminar. A discussion about research. A book recommendation. A brief conversation in a corridor. Nothing that could be called an affair. Nothing that could be called meaningless either. Their friendship had become deeper because they understood the danger of pretending it was something else.

One evening, Naina said, "I don't want to lose what we have."

Ashish looked at her. "Neither do I."

"And I don't want to hurt anyone."

"I know."

"Especially the people who trust us."

He nodded.

"I know."

She smiled sadly.

"Then we're agreed."

"Yes."

"On what?"

"That whatever this is…" He paused. "…we don't let it become something that destroys the lives we love."

Naina looked at him. There was relief in her eyes. And sadness. And something almost like gratitude. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For understanding without making me explain everything."

Ashish smiled. "I've always understood more than I've said."

She looked away. "That's sometimes the problem."

He laughed softly.

That night, Naina returned home. Rohan called her. "How was your day?"

"Good."

"Tired?"

"A little."

Between the screen he opened his arms. She went to him. She rested her head against his chest. For a moment, she simply stood there. She felt the warmth of his arms. The familiarity. The safety. The life they had built together. And somewhere inside her, the fear became quieter.

Perhaps she did not have to choose between acknowledging a feeling and honouring her marriage. Perhaps the real choice was what she did with that feeling. She kissed Rohan gently.

"I love you."

He smiled. "I love you too."

The call disconnected. Later, lying in bed, Naina thought about Ashish's return. She was happy he was nearby. That was true. She was afraid of what closeness might bring. That was also true. Both could exist together.

And perhaps that was the most grown-up truth she had learnt so far: The heart does not always offer simple choices. Sometimes it gives you two truths at once. And growing older means learning how to hold both without destroying either.

Chapter Thirty-Two



The Moment They Stopped

The rain began just after six. By seven, Delhi had disappeared behind a curtain of water. Naina stood at the window of her office, watching headlights blur across the wet road. Her last meeting had been cancelled. Most of the staff had already left. She checked her phone. Rohan had called earlier from Bhopal. He was busy with his parents and the children. They had spoken for a few minutes.

“I'll call you tonight,” he had promised.

She smiled at the memory. Then another message appeared.

Ashish: Still at the university?

She replied: " Yes. The rain has trapped me."

A minute later:

Ashish: I'm still here too.

She smiled.

Naina: Lucky us.

His reply came:

Ashish: Coffee?

She hesitated.

It was late. It was raining. She should go home. Instead, she typed: “Ten minutes.....!”

But not sent it.

The campus café was almost empty. Rain tapped against the glass. Ashish was sitting near the window with two cups of coffee.

“You knew I'd come.”

He smiled. “I hoped.”

Naina sat opposite him. For a while they simply watched the rain. It felt peaceful. Too peaceful.

Then Ashish said, “Do you ever think about how strange our lives are?”

Naina smiled. “All the time.”

“We spent years trying not to cross a line.”

“And?”

“And somehow being careful has made us closer.”

She looked at him. “That doesn't make sense.”

“I know.”

They laughed softly. The conversation moved from work to books, from books to memories. They talked about Ooty. About the project. About the first coffee they had shared. About the poem he had written before leaving.

Naina's smile slowly faded. “I missed this.”

Ashish looked at her. “So did I.”

There was no reason to say anything more. But neither looked away.

The café lights flickered. The rain became heavier. Naina glanced at her phone. No signal.

“Wonderful.” Ashish laughed. “You're stuck.”

“Apparently.”

They moved to the covered corridor outside. The rain was too heavy to leave immediately. They stood close beneath the narrow shelter. Closer than they had ever stood before. Naina could hear his breathing.

Ashish looked at her. “Naina…”

She didn't answer. There was something in his eyes she had seen before. But tonight she didn't look away. He reached for her hand. Very slowly. Giving her every opportunity to move. She didn't. Their fingers intertwined. For a moment, the world seemed to disappear. No offices. No cities. No responsibilities. No distance.

Only two people who had spent years pretending that what they felt could remain safely unnamed. Ashish moved closer. Naina closed her eyes. Ashish kissed her forehead. Almost hesitant. And for those few seconds, neither of them thought about tomorrow. They only knew that they had missed each other. That the feeling was real. That the closeness they had feared was finally here. Ashish's hand rested gently against her face. Naina leaned towards him. The moment deepened. Their lips were inches away from meeting. Then suddenly she opened her eyes. She stepped back. “Ashish.”

He stopped immediately. They looked at each other. Both breathing unevenly. Neither spoke. Then Naina whispered, “We can't.”

Ashish closed his eyes. “I know.”

She took another step back. “If we stay here…”

“I know.”

“We'll do something we can't take back.”

He nodded. For a moment, neither moved. Then Ashish said quietly, “I don't want our beautiful memories to become something we have to regret.”

Naina's eyes filled with tears. “Neither do I.”

He looked at her. “I love what we have.”

She swallowed. “So do I.”

“And I don't want to destroy it.”

Naina nodded. Neither of them said the word love again. They didn't need to. It was already there.

They walked back towards the café in silence. The rain had become heavier. By the time they stepped out of the café, the road outside had almost disappeared beneath sheets of water. Naina opened her phone and tried booking a cab. Nothing. She tried again. Still nothing.

“Network is terrible,” she said.

Ashish looked at the road. “I'll try.”

He checked his phone. “No cars available.”

Naina sighed. “I'll wait.”

“It could take an hour.”

“I don't mind.”

“You'll be soaked by the time you reach home.”

She looked at him. “And what do you suggest?”

He hesitated. “I can drop you.”

Naina immediately shook her head. “No, it's late.”

“So?”

“So…”

She stopped. There was no sensible argument. His car was parked nearby. Her home was on his way. And the rain showed no intention of stopping.

Finally, she nodded. “All right.”

The car was quiet. Rain struck the windscreen steadily as Ashish drove through the nearly empty roads. Naina sat beside him, watching the city pass in blurred lights. Neither spoke much. A soft, soothing Hindi melody played from the speakers. The kind of song that didn't demand attention. It simply filled the silence. Naina looked out of the window. Streetlights appeared and disappeared through the rain. She thought about how strange the evening had become. It had begun as coffee. Just coffee. And now she was sitting beside Ashish in his car, listening to music while the rain wrapped the city in darkness.

Ashish glanced at her. “You're quiet.”

“So are you.”

“I'm trying not to say something stupid.”

She smiled. “That's very responsible of you.”

He laughed softly. “I have my moments.”

The music continued. Neither spoke again. But the silence between them wasn't empty. It was full of everything they were deliberately not saying.

At a red light, Ashish looked at her again. She caught him. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“You were looking at me.”

“I know.”

Naina smiled. “Why?”

He looked back at the road. “I've missed seeing you.”

Her smile disappeared. She looked down at her hands. “I've missed seeing you too.”

The light turned green. The car moved forward. Neither said anything after that.

A few minutes later, they reached a quiet stretch of road. The rain was still falling heavily. Naina suddenly said, “Can we stop somewhere for a minute?”

Ashish looked at her. “Are you all right?”

“Yes.”

He pulled over beneath the shelter of a large tree. The rain continued around them. The music played softly. Naina didn't get out. Neither did he.

She looked ahead. “I don't know what I'm doing.”

Ashish's voice was gentle. “Neither do I.”

“I thought I did.”

“So did I.”

She turned towards him. “When you were away, everything was easier.”

“I know.”

“I could miss you without having to decide what that meant.”

Ashish looked at her. “And now?”

“Now you're here.”

He nodded. “I know.”

Their eyes met. Neither looked away. The song continued quietly in the background. The rain blurred the windows. For a moment, it felt as though the entire world had become distant. Ashish slowly reached for her hand. He

stopped halfway. Naina closed the remaining distance herself. Their fingers touched. Then intertwined. Neither spoke. The warmth of his hand felt painfully familiar. She looked at him. He looked back. There was affection in his eyes. Longing. Fear. Restraint. And something neither of them had ever managed to name properly.

Ashish leaned closer. Naina didn't move away. Their lips met. A brief, tender kiss. They separated. Looked at each other. Then, almost without thinking, came together again. This time the kiss lasted longer. The rain seemed louder. The music softer. Naina's eyes closed. For those few moments, there were no complicated questions. Only two people who had missed each other.

Then reality returned. Naina opened her eyes. She pulled back gently. “Ashish.”

He stopped immediately. She looked at him. “We can't.”

He nodded. “I know.”

Neither moved. She swallowed. “I don't want this to become something that hurts everyone.”

“Neither do I.”

“I love my family.”

“I know.”

“And I know you care about your life too.”

“I do.”

Her eyes filled with tears. “Then why does this feel so difficult?”

Ashish looked away for a moment. “Because feelings don't always listen to reason.”

She gave a small, sad smile. “No. They don't.”

He looked back at her. “But choices can.”

The words settled between them. Naina nodded. She reached for his hand again. Not to pull him closer. Just to hold it. “I'm glad you stopped.”

“So am I.”

“I don't want to lose you.”

“You won't.”

“But things have changed.”

He smiled sadly. “Yes.” “Maybe we can't pretend they haven't.”

“No.”

They sat quietly, hands joined, listening to the rain.

After several minutes, Ashish started the car again. Neither mentioned the kiss. Neither needed to. The same song was still playing. Naina looked through the window. The city lights moved across her face. Ashish kept his eyes on the road. Their shoulders were close. But there was a careful distance between them now. A distance they had chosen. When they reached her apartment, the rain had finally begun to weaken. Ashish stopped outside.

Naina didn't immediately open the door. “Thank you.” “For the ride?” “For tonight.”

He understood. “Goodnight, Naina.”

“Goodnight.” She stepped out. Then turned back. Ashish was still watching her. For a second, neither spoke. She smiled. He smiled back. She closed the door. And walked towards her building. Ashish waited until she disappeared inside before driving away.

Naina entered her empty flat. It was quiet. Rohan was still in Bhopal. The children were with him and his parents. She placed her bag down. Her phone showed a message from Rohan.

Rohan: Reached home safely?

She stared at it for a moment. Then replied:

Naina: Yes. I'm home.

Rohan: Good. Sleep well. Love you.

Naina's eyes filled with tears. She answered, “Love you too.”

She put the phone down. Then stood by the window. She wasn't ashamed of what she had felt. But she wasn't going to let the feeling choose her future. Perhaps that was the hardest part of being an adult. Not controlling what the heart felt. But deciding what deserved to become a part of one's life.

Ashish reached home half an hour later. He didn't turn on the lights. He sat in the darkness for a while, listening to the rain. Then he opened his notebook. He wrote:

The Rain Between Us

Tonight the rain brought you closer.

And for a little while,

I forgot the distance we had promised to keep.

Your hand was in mine.

Your eyes said what neither of us dared to say.

And then we stopped.

Not because the feeling wasn't strong.

Because the lives waiting for us beyond this moment were stronger.

Perhaps love is not always taking another step.

Perhaps sometimes it is knowing exactly where to stop.

He closed the notebook. Outside, the rain slowly faded. And somewhere across the city, Naina was awake too. Both were thinking about the same moment. Neither sent a message. Neither called. For the first time, their silence was not uncertainty. It was a decision. And somehow, that made the night even more intimate.

Chapter Thirty-Three



What Friends Notice

For the next few days, Naina became unusually good at pretending. She answered emails. Took lectures. Attended meetings. Called her children. Spoke to Rohan every evening. She laughed when she was supposed to laugh. She worked when she was supposed to work. She slept when she could. From the outside, nothing had changed. But something had. Every time it rained, she remembered the car. The music. Ashish's hand in hers. The moment they had stopped. She didn't regret stopping. That was the strange part. She regretted how much she had wanted not to.

On Friday afternoon, Avni called. “Are you free?”

Naina smiled. “For you? Always.”

“Liar. You never answer on time.”

“I am answering now.”

“Good. Coffee?”

Naina hesitated. Then smiled. “Coffee.”

They met at a quiet café near university. Avni arrived first. Naina walked in a few minutes later. Avni looked at her once. Then twice. “You're hiding something.”

Naina laughed. “Good afternoon dear.”

“I'm serious.”

“I know.”

Avni pushed a cup towards her. “Drink.”

Naina took a sip. Avni watched her. “You've become quiet.”

“Work.”

“That's your excuse for everything.”

“Because work is usually the problem.”

“No.”

Avni leaned back. “Sometimes work is the excuse we use when we don't want to talk about the real problem.”

Naina looked at her. “You've become annoying.”

“I've always been annoying. You're just noticing now.”

Naina laughed. For a few minutes, they talked about ordinary things. Avni's writing. The children. The workshop. Their careers. Then Avni asked casually, “How is Delhi treating Ashish?”

Naina's hand stopped around the cup. Only for a second. But Avni noticed. Of course she noticed.

“Fine.”

“Fine?”

“He's doing well.”

“And you?”

Naina looked away. “I'm fine too.”

Avni didn't push. That was one of the things Naina appreciated most about her. She could ask a difficult question without demanding an answer.

Instead, Avni said, “You don't have to tell me anything you're not ready to say.”

Naina looked at her. Something in her expression softened. “Thank you.”

They walked outside after coffee. The afternoon was warm. The sky was clear. No rain. No memories waiting in the weather. At least, that was what Naina told herself. Avni suddenly stopped. “Naina.”

“Hmm?”

“Are you happy?”

The question was simple. Naina smiled. “Yes.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Then why do you look sad?”

Naina didn't answer. Avni waited. Finally, Naina said, “Have you ever felt something you didn't ask for?”

Avni's expression changed. “Yes.”

“Something that wasn't supposed to happen?”

“Yes.”

“And something you knew you shouldn't encourage?”

Avni nodded slowly. “Yes.”

Naina looked at her. “You never told me that.”

“You never asked.”

They both smiled sadly.

They found a bench beneath a tree. Naina sat down. “I don't want to hurt anyone.”

Avni remained silent.

“I don't want to destroy anything I've built.”

“I know.”

“But sometimes I feel something before I can stop it.”

Avni sat beside her. “Feelings aren't crimes.”

Naina looked at her. “But actions have consequences.”

“Yes.”

“And I don't want to cross that line.”

“Then don't.”

Naina smiled faintly. “You make everything sound easy.”

“No.” Avni shook her head. “I'm saying it because I know it isn't easy.”

She paused.

“Sometimes the strongest thing a person can do is admit, 'Yes, I feel this,' and still choose not to act on it.”

Naina looked down.

“You've learnt that?” Avni smiled.

“I'm still learning.”

For a while, neither spoke. Then Naina whispered, “We kissed.”

Avni's eyes widened slightly. She didn't react dramatically. She simply waited. “Once?”

Naina nodded. “Twice.”

Avni exhaled slowly. “Do you regret it?”

“No.”

“Do you want it to happen again?”

Naina's eyes filled with tears. “I don't know.”

That was the truth. Avni reached for her hand. “You stopped.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because we both knew we were getting too close.”

Avni squeezed her hand. “Then remember that.”

Naina nodded. “I do.”

“Every time you feel confused, remember the moment you chose to stop.”

Naina looked at her friend. “Why aren't you judging me?”

“Because you're my friend.”

“Even after this?”

“Especially after this.”

Naina's eyes filled completely now. She looked away. Avni waited until she had composed herself. Then said, “You know what I think?”

“What?”

“I think you're not confused about whether you love your husband.”

Naina looked at her.

“You're confused about what this other feeling means.”

Naina was silent. Avni continued gently. “Perhaps Ashish isn't asking you to leave your life. Perhaps he's showing you something about yourself that you haven't allowed yourself to see.”

“What?”

“That you still want to be seen.”

Naina's eyes softened. “Perhaps.”

“Perhaps you miss being someone's first thought.”

Naina swallowed. “Perhaps.”

“Perhaps you miss the woman you were before life became responsibilities.”

Naina looked at her. “That sounds frighteningly accurate.”

Avni smiled. “That's what friends are for.”

That evening, Naina returned home. She called Rohan. They talked for almost an hour. He told her about the children's school. She told him about her students. They laughed about something completely ordinary. Before ending the call, Rohan said, “I'm coming next weekend.”

Naina's face lit up. “Really?”

“Yes.”

“I'll wait.”

“I know.”

After the call, Naina sat quietly. She felt lighter. Not because the confusion had disappeared. But because she had finally said it aloud. Sometimes the secret became less frightening once it had a name.

Meanwhile, Avni returned home and opened her laptop. Her manuscript was waiting. She began a new chapter. She wrote about two women who had everything they had once dreamed of— careers, families, respect, security— and yet still discovered that the heart could surprise them.

She stopped. Then smiled. Perhaps she wasn't writing fiction anymore. Perhaps she was writing about the strange territory between who we are and who we might have been. Her phone buzzed.

A message from Naina.

Naina: Thank you for today.

Avni replied:

Avni: Anytime.

Then another message appeared.

Naina: I feel better.

Avni smiled.

Avni: Good. Now sleep.

A few seconds later:

Naina: Bossy.

Avni: Always.

Avni put the phone down.

Outside, the evening settled quietly over the city. Two women, in two different homes, were beginning to understand something neither had expected. Their friendship had started with coincidence. Then became companionship. Now it was becoming something deeper— a safe place where neither had to pretend to be perfect.

And perhaps that was the kind of love they had both needed all along.

Chapter Thirty-Four



The Space Between Them

The evening had begun innocently. A late meeting. A long discussion about the project. Coffee that had gone cold because neither of them was paying attention to it. By the time they left the university, it was nearly seven. The corridors were empty. Outside, the winter air was cool and quiet. Ashish walked beside Naina towards the parking area. Neither was in a hurry.

“You've been quiet,” he said.

“So have you.”

“I'm thinking.”

“That's usually dangerous.”

He smiled. “About us.”

Naina stopped walking. The word remained between them.

Us. Almost Us! Perhaps Us!

She looked at him. “We agreed not to complicate things.”

“I know.”

“Then don't.”

“I am trying.”

She smiled sadly. “So am I.”

For a moment they simply stood there. Ashish stepped a little closer. Naina didn't move away. “I missed you,” he said quietly.

“I know.”

“No. I mean…” He stopped.

Naina understood. She looked down. “I missed you too.”

His hand gently touched hers. This time there was no hesitation. She held it. They stood silently beneath the dim light of the parking area. Then Ashish leaned towards her. He kissed her on her forehead. The kiss was slow and tender, carrying all the things they had refused to say. Naina's hand rested against his shoulder. He drew her a little closer. For a few moments, neither thought about consequences. There was only the warmth of being near someone they had spent so long missing. When they finally separated, their foreheads rested against each other.

Naina whispered, “This is dangerous.”

“I know.”

She closed her eyes. He kissed her forehead again. That small gesture affected her more than anything else. It wasn't desire that frightened her. It was tenderness. The possibility of wanting this tenderness again. She opened her eyes. “Ashish…”

He looked at her.

“We have to stop.”

He nodded. But neither moved immediately. She took a breath and gently stepped away. He let her go. There was no anger. No disappointment. Only sadness. And understanding.

“I don't want this to become a secret life,” Naina said.

“It won't.”

“I don't want to lie to Rohan.”

“Neither do I.”

“I don't want to lose what we have.”

Ashish looked at her. “Then we'll protect it.”

She smiled through tears. “How?”

“By knowing when enough is enough.”

Naina nodded. She reached for his hand one last time. “Thank you.” “For stopping?” “For understanding.”

He squeezed her hand. “Always.”

They walked towards the car. This time, there was a careful distance between them. Not because the feeling had disappeared. Because they had finally understood its strength. And perhaps that was why they had to be careful with it. Later that night, Ashish sat alone in his apartment. He opened his notebook but couldn't write.

Across the city, Naina stood by her window. She thought about the evening. The kiss. The closeness. The moment they had stopped. She knew something had changed. But perhaps not in the way she had feared. They hadn't crossed the line. They had discovered where it was. And together, they had chosen to respect it. For now.

Chapter Thirty - Five



The Name She Had Not Spoken

Avni noticed the change in Naina. Not because Naina told her. Because friends notice things that words don't explain. They met again one Saturday afternoon. This time, Naina was happier. Not carefree. But lighter.

"You look better," Avni said.

"I feel better."

"Ashish?"

Naina smiled. "Perhaps."

Avni raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps?"

"He's become easier to be around."

"That's dangerous."

Naina laughed. "Don't start."

"I'm only warning you."

"I know my limits."

Avni nodded. "I believe you."

Naina told her about their meetings. The work. The coffee. The poem. Nothing dramatic. Nothing secretive. But while listening, Avni felt something unexpected. A strange emptiness. She couldn't explain it. Naina was describing the kind of emotional connection she had once experienced with Raj.

Someone who understood her professional ambitions. Someone who noticed small things. Someone whose presence made ordinary conversations feel significant. Avni suddenly became quiet. Naina noticed.

“What happened?”

“Nothing.”

“Avni.”

She smiled. “I'm fine.” But she wasn't.

That night, after returning home, Avni opened an old drawer. She wasn't looking for anything in particular. Yet her hand stopped at a familiar envelope. She pulled it out. A photograph. Raj. She stared at it for a long time. She hadn't looked at it in months. Maybe longer. She remembered the conference. The conversations. The way he had once looked at her when she spoke passionately about her work. She remembered how understood she had felt. And then she remembered how complicated everything had become. She put the photograph down. “Why now?” There was no answer.

The next morning, Avni woke earlier than usual. Rohan was asleep beside her. The house was quiet. She went into the kitchen and made tea. As she stood by the window, she thought about Raj again. Not with longing exactly. Not with regret. Something subtler. She missed the friendship. The intellectual companionship. The version of herself that had existed around him. She realised something uncomfortable. She had spent so much time convincing herself that she had moved on that she had never asked whether a small part of her still missed him. And now Naina's story had reopened that door.

That afternoon, Avni called Naina. “You were right.”

“About what?”

“Sometimes feelings don't disappear. They just become quiet.”

Naina became silent. “Raj?”

Avni nodded, though Naina couldn't see her.

“Yes.”

“Do you want him back?”

“No.”

The answer came immediately. “Then what?”

Avni looked at the photograph lying on her desk. “I miss having him in my life.”

Naina understood. “You miss the friendship.”

“Perhaps.”

“Perhaps?”

Avni smiled sadly. “You've infected me with that word.”

They both laughed. Then Avni became serious. “I don't want to change my life.”

“I know.”

“I love my family.”

“I know.”

“But I suddenly realised that losing someone doesn't always mean you stop missing them.”

Naina's voice softened. “Maybe you don't have to.”

Avni closed her eyes. “Maybe.”

That evening, Avni opened her manuscript.

She wrote:

> *There are people we leave behind without ever truly leaving them. Not because we want them back. Not because our present is insufficient. But because some people belong to a particular version of ourselves. And sometimes, when life becomes quiet, we miss that version too.*

She stopped writing. Then looked at Raj's photograph. For the first time, she didn't feel guilty. She simply accepted the feeling. Somewhere between memory and reality, Raj still existed. Not as a future. Not as a forbidden possibility. Just as a chapter that had mattered. And perhaps that was enough.

A week later, Naina and Avni met again. This time there was no need to explain anything. They sat together in comfortable silence. Naina received a message. She smiled. Avni noticed.

“Ashish?”

“Yes.”

“What did he say?”

Naina showed her. It was a photograph of a book with a simple message: Thought you might like this.

Avni smiled. “You're happy.” Naina looked at the screen. “Yes.” Then she put the phone away. “But I'm careful.”

“I know.”

“And you?”

Avni looked at her. “I'm learning.”

“About Raj?”

“Yes.”

“Do you still miss him?”

Avni smiled. “Sometimes.”

“Do you want to see him?” A pause. “I don't know.”

Naina nodded. Neither woman tried to solve the other's feelings. They had learnt something important. Not every emotion needed an immediate decision. Sometimes acceptance was enough. Sometimes distance was necessary. Sometimes a person could remain important without remaining present. And sometimes the most difficult form of love was not holding on. It was knowing what to leave untouched. They finished their coffee. Outside, the evening was beginning.

Naina looked at Avni. “Whatever happens next…”

Avni smiled. “We'll deal with it.”

“Together?”

“Always.”

They walked away side by side. Neither knew that the next few weeks would test everything they had just promised themselves. Because life had a habit of bringing old chapters back— usually when you finally believed you had learnt how to live without them.

Chapter Thirty-Six



An Evening Without Answers

The invitation had arrived almost casually. A university colleague was celebrating the successful completion of a major academic project, and the evening gathering was being held at one of Delhi's quieter rooftop lounges. There would be music. Dinner. Drinks. People from different universities and research institutions. Naina almost declined.

Then Avni called. "Don't you dare say you're too busy."

"I wasn't going to."

"You were thinking it."

"I was thinking about it."

"Then stop thinking."

Naina laughed. "All right. I'll come."

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Nothing that required much thought. And yet, by six o'clock, Naina had changed her outfit twice. She stood before the mirror in her bedroom, looking at herself critically. The first outfit had been a cream saree. Too formal. The second was a black dress she rarely wore. Too much.

She finally picked a deep yellow saree with delicate embroidery and a simple pair of earrings. She looked at herself again.

"Perfect." Then immediately frowned. "Or perhaps not."

She changed the earrings. Then changed them back. She laughed at herself. "What has happened to me?"

Her phone rang.

Avni. "Tell me you're ready."

"Almost."

"You said that twenty minutes ago."

"I changed my dress."

"Twice?"

"Three times."

There was a pause. Then Avni burst out laughing.

Avni was having exactly the same problem. Her bed was covered with clothes. A soft saree lay across one side. A dark green dress was on the chair. A pair of trousers and a silk blouse had been rejected and abandoned near the wardrobe. She finally chose the light pink saree. Then looked at herself.

"No."

She changed into the green dress. "No." Finally, she returned to the saree. She added simple earrings and stood before the mirror. For a moment, she remembered how Raj had once told her she looked beautiful in sarees. She immediately pushed the thought away.

"I'm dressing for myself," she said aloud. Then smiled. "Obviously."

From the other room, her husband called out. "Are you ready yet?"

"Almost."

"You've been saying 'almost' for half an hour."

Avni looked at herself in the mirror. "I can't decide what to wear."

"You always look good. Wear whatever you like."

She smiled faintly. "That is not helpful."

He appeared at the bedroom door, still holding his laptop. He looked at her for a moment. "The pink saree."

"You think so?"

"Definitely."

She turned around. "Does it look too much?"

"No. It looks elegant."

She smiled. "Then you should come with me."

He hesitated. "I told you, I can't."

"You can come for a little while."

"I really can't, Avni. I have to finish the project presentation. The preparation is already behind schedule."

Her expression changed slightly. "You could have told me earlier."

"I thought I did."

"You said you had work. I thought you'd finish it."

He sighed. "I'll try to join you later."

"You won't."

He smiled apologetically. "You know me too well."

She looked away. For a moment, there was a quiet disappointment in her eyes. It wasn't anger. She had become used to his work. Used to postponed dinners. Used to him carrying his laptop into weekends and answering calls during family time. Still, some part of her had wanted him beside her tonight.

"It's okay," she said finally.

"I'm sorry."

"I know."

He came closer and adjusted the edge of her saree that had slipped slightly from her shoulder. "You really do look beautiful."

She looked at him through the mirror. "Thank you."

"Enjoy yourself."

"I will." He kissed her forehead and returned to his laptop. Avni watched him walk away. Then she looked at herself again. The saree looked beautiful. The earrings suited her. Everything was perfect. And yet, for one brief moment, she wondered what the evening would have felt like if he had come with her. Then another thought quietly appeared. And why did I think of Raj when I

wondered who would notice? She immediately dismissed it. She picked up her handbag. “I'm dressing for myself,” she reminded herself. This time, she didn't smile quite as confidently.

Across the city, Ashish was experiencing his own crisis. He had never considered choosing clothes an intellectual challenge. Tonight, somehow, it was. He tried a navy blazer. Too formal. Removed it. Tried a simple shirt. Too ordinary. Changed to another. Then stood before the mirror. He ran a hand through his hair. “It's just dinner.”

He paused. “Just dinner.” But he knew that wasn't entirely true. Naina would be there. He didn't know that for certain. He tried to ask. But! But he hoped. Eventually he chose a charcoal jacket over a pale shirt. Simple. Elegant. Nothing that looked as though he had tried too hard. He checked his watch. Then his reflection again. He laughed at himself. “This is ridiculous.”

Raj was no better. His first choice was a formal suit. He rejected it immediately. “Too much.” Then a casual shirt.

“Too little.” Finally, he chose a well-fitted dark shirt with a jacket. He adjusted his collar. His phone buzzed.

A message from Riya: Have a good evening. Don't stay too late.

Raj smiled: I won't.

He put the phone away. For a moment, he wondered whether Avni would be there. He immediately told himself it didn't matter. But he changed his watch anyway.

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The rooftop was beautifully lit. Soft music played in the background, while the Delhi skyline glittered beyond the terrace. Avni arrived first. Naina joined her a little later. “You look lovely,” Avni said.

“So do you.” They hugged. For once, neither wanted to discuss complicated emotions. Tonight was supposed to be simple. They took a table near the edge of the terrace. A waiter offered them drinks. Avni chose something light. Naina ordered a mocktail. Avni looked at her. “Still responsible?”

“Someone has to drive.”

“You're impossible.”

“I know.” They laughed. For the first time in weeks, Naina felt completely relaxed.

Ashish arrived about half an hour later. He hadn't known Naina would be there. At least, that's what he told himself. When he saw her, his expression changed. He couldn’t take his eyes off her. Naina noticed. Their eyes met across the room. He complimented her beauty with just a glance, and she understood it all without a single word. A smile passed between them. Nothing more. Avni noticed it too.

She leaned towards Naina. “You two are getting very good at pretending.”

Naina smiled. “We're not pretending.”

“Good answer.”

Ashish eventually joined them. “May I?”

Avni moved her chair. “Of course.”

All three complemented each other. They began talking about the project. Then books. Then travel. Then embarrassing university stories. The conversation became easy. Too easy. Naina looked around the table. For a moment, she felt almost normal. Then someone approached them. “Avni?” She turned. Her smile disappeared. “Raj?”

His eyes paused on her, as if the world had forgotten to move. He looked equally surprised.

“What are you doing here?”

“Same question.”

He laughed. “I was invited by one of the organisers.”

Avni looked at him for a moment. Then smiled. “Of course you were.” Raj looked at the others. His eyes stopped briefly on Ashish. Ashish stood. “Hi. I'm Ashish.”

“Raj.” They shook hands. Naina watched them. There was something almost amusing about the coincidence. Four people. Four complicated stories. One table.

Raj looked at Avni. “May I join you?”

Avni hesitated for only a second. “Of course.”

And suddenly the evening felt like something neither of them had expected. Four people. Four carefully chosen outfits. Four different reasons for looking in the mirror one extra time. And perhaps, beneath all that careful dressing, each of them had secretly been asking the same question: What will the other person see when they look at me?

The evening became unexpectedly warm. Someone ordered another round. Music became louder. People began moving towards the dance floor. The four of them stayed together. Raj and Ashish discovered that they had several academic interests in common. Avni and Naina exchanged amused looks.

"You know," Avni whispered, "this could become dangerous."

Naina laughed. "We survived worse."

Later, after dinner, they moved to a quieter corner of the terrace. The city stretched endlessly before them. Raj looked at Avni. "You seem happy."

"I am."

"Good." There was something sincere in his voice.

Avni smiled. "I heard you're doing well."

"I am."

"Riya?" His smile softened. "She is wonderful." Avni nodded.

"I'm happy for you."

"I know." For a moment, neither spoke. Then Raj said, "I missed our conversations."

Avni looked at him. "I did too." There was no accusation. No expectation. Just honesty.

At the other end of the terrace, Ashish and Naina stood near the railing. "Strange evening," Ashish said.

"Very."

"You seem happy."

"I am."

He smiled. "Good."

Naina looked at him. "You always say that."

“Because I mean it.”

She looked towards the city. Then said softly, “Do you ever wonder what would have happened if we had met at a different time?”

Ashish smiled sadly. “Sometimes.”

“And?”

“And I don't let myself finish the thought.”

Naina laughed softly. “Neither do I.” They stood quietly. The music drifted towards them. For a moment, Ashish wanted to reach for her hand. He didn't. Naina noticed. She was grateful.

A little later, the four found themselves sitting together again. The conversation had become more personal. Perhaps it was the atmosphere. Perhaps it was the drinks. Perhaps they had simply reached an age where pretending became exhausting. Raj looked at Ashish. “You and Naina have known each other for a long time?”

“Yes.”

“She's spoken about you.”

Ashish smiled. “Only good things, I hope.”

Naina interrupted. “Don't get too confident.” Everyone laughed. Then Raj asked, “Do you believe people can love someone and still choose not to be with them?”

The table became quiet. Avni looked at him. Ashish looked towards Naina. Naina answered first. “Yes.”

Raj nodded. “Why?”

“Because love isn't always about possession.”

Ashish added quietly, “Sometimes it's about responsibility.”

Avni looked at both of them. “And sometimes,” she said, “it's about accepting that the person you care about already has a life they don't want to lose.” Silence. The four of them understood more than they said.

The music changed to something slower. A familiar old song. Raj smiled. “Do you remember when we used to dance at school festivals?”

Avni laughed. “That was a long time ago.”

"Still remember?"

"Unfortunately."

He stood. "Just one dance?" Avni hesitated. Then looked towards Naina.

Naina gave her a tiny nod. "Go."

Avni stood. They walked towards the dance floor. There was nothing romantic about it. And yet, for Avni, the moment carried years of memory. Raj didn't hold her too closely. He respected the distance. They moved slowly with the music. "You know," he said, "I thought I had forgotten this."

"So did I."

"Have you ever regretted us?"

Avni looked at him. "No."

"Me neither."

She smiled. "Then perhaps we did something right."

Raj nodded. "Perhaps."

Nearby, Naina watched them. Ashish stood beside her. "You're thinking about Avni."

"Yes."

"She's all right."

"I know." Naina smiled. Then Ashish said quietly, "You know what I think?"

"What?"

"Some people come into our lives and change the direction of them."

Naina looked at him. "And some?"

"Some change the way we understand ourselves." She knew what he meant. She didn't answer. She simply looked at the city.

When the night finally began to wind down, the four returned to their table. No declarations had been made. No boundaries had been crossed. Yet something had changed. They had all said more than they normally would. Perhaps not directly. But enough. Raj looked at Avni. "I'd like to stay in touch."

Avni smiled. "So would I."

Ashish looked at Naina. “Coffee sometime?”

She smiled. “Of course.” The four laughed at the simplicity of it. After everything they had felt, feared and hidden, the answer was still something as ordinary as coffee.

Chapter Thirty-Seven



Two Men, One Conversation

The music had become softer. Dinner was almost over, and the rooftop had begun too musical. People stood in small groups, dancing together, exchanging numbers and enjoying the night. Naina and Avni were near the railing, talking quietly. Raj and Ashish remained at the table. For the first time that evening, they were alone.

Ashish lifted his glass. “Another?”

Raj smiled. “Just one.”

They moved towards the bar. For a few moments, they talked about ordinary things—universities, research, conferences, the endless paperwork that seemed to accompany academic life. It was comfortable.

Then Raj said, “You work with Naina?”

“Yes. On a project.”

“She speaks highly of you.”

Ashish smiled. “She speaks highly of everyone she respects.”

Raj looked towards the two women. “She's very driven.”

“She is.” There was admiration in Ashish's voice. Raj noticed it.

“You seem to understand her well.”

Ashish paused. “I've had the opportunity to.”

Raj nodded. “That's rare.”

“What is?”

“To meet someone professionally and eventually understand the person behind the professional.”

Ashish looked at him. “You sound like you've experienced that.”

Raj smiled faintly. “Once.”

“Someone from work?”

“Someone I knew a long time ago.”

Ashish didn't ask. But something in Raj's expression made him curious.

“Do you still know her?”

Raj looked towards Avni. “Yes.”

Ashish followed his gaze. He understood. “Avni.”

Raj smiled. “Yes.”

There was a pause. Then Ashish asked, “Did it work out?”

Raj gave a small laugh. “That depends on what you mean by work out.”

Ashish smiled. “Fair answer.”

“We cared about each other.”

“And?”

“And life was complicated.”

Ashish looked down at his glass. “Sometimes life is.”

Raj studied him. “Someone complicated your life too?”

Ashish laughed softly. “Perhaps.”

“Still in your life?”

“Yes.”

Raj nodded. “Then you're lucky.”

Ashish looked at him. “Lucky?”

“To have someone who matters.” He paused. “Even if you can't have everything you want.”

Ashish was silent. Those words stayed with him.

Across the terrace, Naina noticed the two men talking. “What do you think they're discussing?” she asked.

Avni smiled. “Probably work.”

Naina laughed. “Of course.”

But both women knew better. Avni watched Raj. “He looks comfortable with Ashish.”

“So does Ashish.”

There was something strange about seeing them together. Two men who belonged to two completely different parts of their lives. Yet, somehow they seemed to understand each other.

Naina smiled. “Perhaps they needed to meet.”

Avni looked at her. “Maybe we all did.”

At the bar, Raj asked, “Do you ever think about what would happen if circumstances were different?”

Ashish didn't answer immediately. “More often than I should.”

Raj nodded. “I understand.”

“What about you?”

Raj looked towards Avni. “I've wondered.”

“Do you regret not choosing differently?”

“No.”

The answer was firm. “I love the life I have.”

Ashish nodded.

“So do I.”

Raj smiled.

“Then perhaps the question isn't what we could have had.”

“What is it?”

“What we do with what we have now.”

Ashish looked at him. For a moment, neither spoke. Then Ashish smiled. “You're wiser than you look.”

Raj laughed. “And you're more serious than you look.”

They shook hands. The conversation was over. But something had changed. Neither man knew the other's complete story. Neither knew just how close their situations were. Yet both had recognised the same struggle: The heart can imagine another life while the mind remains loyal to the one it has chosen.

When they returned to the table, Avni looked at Raj. “You two disappeared.”

Raj smiled. “Men need private conversations too.”

Naina laughed. “About?”

Ashish answered, “Life.”

Avni raised an eyebrow. “That sounds suspiciously philosophical.”

Raj laughed. “Don't worry. We solved nothing.”

“Good,” Avni said. “Some things shouldn't be solved in one evening.”

Naina looked at her friend. For some reason, the sentence stayed with her.

A little later, soft music began playing again. A familiar romantic melody filled the rooftop. Raj looked at Avni. “Dance?”

She hesitated. Then smiled. “Just one.”

They walked onto the floor. Ashish looked at Naina. “Would you like to?”

Naina smiled. “Perhaps one.”

They joined them. Four people. Two pairs. No promises. No secret declarations. Just music, conversation and memories. Naina rested her hand lightly on Ashish's shoulder. There was no urgency. No attempt to recreate the moment in the car. Only a quiet awareness of what existed between them. Across the floor, Avni and Raj moved gently with the music. For a few seconds, Avni closed her eyes. She remembered another time. Another evening. Another version of herself. When she opened her eyes, Raj was smiling. “You okay?”

“Yes.”

“Sure?”

She nodded.

"Yes." And she meant it.

When the song ended, they returned to their table. Avni looked at Naina. "Strange evening."

"Very."

"Do you think we should have stayed home?"

Naina laughed. "Definitely not."

Avni smiled. For the first time in a long while, neither woman felt the need to run away from her feelings. They simply acknowledged them. That was enough.

Outside, the Delhi skyline shimmered beneath the night sky. Four lives had crossed unexpectedly. None of them knew what tomorrow would bring. But perhaps that was the beauty of it. Not every meeting had to lead somewhere. Some meetings simply reminded us of who we were—and who we had become.

Chapter Thirty-Eight



The Morning After

The morning after the gathering arrived quietly. Delhi looked exactly as it always did. Traffic. Morning newspapers. The smell of tea from nearby stalls. People rushing towards work. Nothing about the city suggested that four lives had shifted slightly the night before. But for Naina, something had changed. She stood in front of her mirror, tying her hair, when her phone buzzed.

A message from Ashish.

Ashish: Reached home safely last night?

She smiled.

Naina: Yes. You?

Ashish: Yes.

A pause. Then another message.

Ashish: Thank you for yesterday.

Naina stared at it. She knew what he meant.

Naina: I had a good evening.

He replied: Ashish: So did I.

Nothing more. No unnecessary words. No mention of the kiss. No emotional confession. Yet somehow, the restraint felt more intimate than any declaration. Naina put the phone down. Then she noticed herself smiling.

In Bhopal, Rohan was having breakfast with the children. One of them was complaining about school. The other was trying to steal the last piece of toast.

Rohan laughed. “Both of you, stop fighting.” His phone rang.

Naina. He answered immediately.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning.”

“How are you?”

“Fine.”

“How was your event?”

“Nice.”

“Did you enjoy?”

“Yes.”

She smiled. There was something comforting about his ordinary questions. No drama. No suspicion. No complicated expectations. Just familiarity. The kind built over years. After they hung up, Naina sat quietly for a moment. She loved this man. That truth hadn't changed. And yet another truth existed too. She was beginning to understand that having one truth didn't automatically erase another. The challenge was deciding what to do with both.

Across Delhi, Ashish sat at his desk. He had a meeting in twenty minutes. But he wasn't working. He was thinking about Raj. The conversation from the previous night kept returning. What we do with what we have now. Ashish opened his notebook. Instead of writing poetry, he wrote one sentence:

> *Some people make you question your choices. Others make you understand them.*

He closed the notebook. Perhaps Naina was both.

Avni's morning was less peaceful. She was preparing breakfast when her phone buzzed. A message. From Raj. She stared at the name. For several seconds, she didn't open it. Then she did.

Raj: It was good seeing you yesterday.

Nothing more. No hidden meaning. No expectation. Just a simple sentence.

She typed: Avni: It was good seeing you too.

She almost put the phone away. Then another message arrived.

Raj: I hope we can stay friends this time without making everything complicated.

Avni smiled sadly. She knew exactly what he meant.

Avni: I'd like that.

She put the phone down. Then stood still. Her husband was in the next room. Her children were getting ready. Her home was full of life. And yet, for a few seconds, her mind was somewhere else. Not because she wanted another life. Because an old part of her had suddenly become visible again.

That evening, Naina met Avni. “Raj messaged you?”

“How did you know?”

“You're smiling.”

Avni laughed. “Maybe.”

“What did he say?”

“That he wants to stay friends.”

“And?”

“I said yes.” Naina was silent for a moment.

“Are you happy?”

Avni thought. “Yes.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Then that's good.”

Avni smiled. “What about Ashish?”

Naina's smile faded slightly. “He messaged too.”

“Anything serious?”

“No.”

“Then why do you sound serious?” Naina sighed. “Because I think we're becoming comfortable again.”

Avni understood immediately. “Comfortable is not necessarily dangerous.”

"No." "But forgetting the boundary is."

"I know." They fell silent. Then Avni said, "Maybe the answer is not to stop caring." Naina looked towards the window. "Then what?"

"Learn how to care without losing yourself."

Naina smiled. "You've become wise."

"No." Avni laughed. "I'm just trying to survive my own emotions."

That night, Naina received another poem from Ashish. She opened it slowly.

After the Evening

Morning came, and nothing had changed.

Your life was still yours.

Mine was still mine.

Yet somewhere between yesterday and today,

we became more honest with ourselves.

Perhaps that is enough.

To know. To feel. And still choose carefully.

Naina read it once. Then again. She didn't reply. Instead, she saved it. Across the city, Ashish waited for a response. He knew she might not send one. And for the first time, he was comfortable with that. Meanwhile, Avni sat at her desk. She opened her manuscript. The cursor blinked on an empty page. She began typing:

Sometimes people return to our lives not to become part of our future, but to remind us of a part of our past.

She stopped. Then added:

And sometimes the greatest act of love is allowing that memory to remain beautiful without trying to possess it again.

She leaned back. For the first time, she wasn't writing about Raj. She was writing about herself. And perhaps that was the beginning of something new.

Chapter Thirty-Nine



The Things They Never Asked For

After that evening, nothing changed. And perhaps that was the problem. Naina and Ashish continued exactly as before. Messages in the morning. A quick discussion about work. Coffee whenever their schedules happened to overlap. Long conversations that began with a research paper and somehow ended with childhood memories, books, travel, family and dreams. There were no more kisses. No promises. No conversations about what they had almost become. Yet something had settled between them. A quiet familiarity. A kind of companionship that didn't need an explanation.

“Have you eaten?” Ashish's message arrived at 1:40 one afternoon.

Naina smiled: Not yet. You?

Ashish: Same.

Naina: Then stop pretending to be responsible and go eat.

Ashish: You first.

She laughed. Naina: Bossy.

Ashish: Learned from you.

She put her phone down. Five minutes later, she picked it up again.

Naina: Coffee tomorrow?

His answer came almost immediately. Ashish: Always.

Their coffee meetings became part of the week. Sometimes twenty minutes. Sometimes two hours. They talked about everything. Ashish told her about his childhood. Naina told him stories about her children. He knew which books she kept beside her bed. She knew exactly how he took his coffee. He knew when she was pretending to be fine. She knew when he was avoiding a difficult conversation. They never discussed the obvious thing. But it sat quietly between them. Like a book neither dared to open.

One evening, Naina received a photograph from Bhopal. Rohan had sent a picture of the children in the garden. She smiled immediately. Look at them! She called him. The conversation lasted nearly an hour. They discussed school. His parents. Her work. Their plans for the holidays. The ordinary things that made a marriage feel like home. After the call, Naina sat quietly. She was happy. Truly happy. But then her phone lit up again.

Ashish: Found that book you were looking for.

She smiled: Really?

Ashish: I'll bring it tomorrow.

She stared at the message longer than necessary. She knew what was happening. She wasn't falling out of love with Rohan. She was simply developing another kind of attachment. And that was precisely what frightened her.

Avni noticed it too. Not the messages. Not the coffee. The expectation. One afternoon, Naina was looking at her phone while they sat together. “Waiting for something?”

Naina smiled. “No.”

Avni raised an eyebrow. “You looked disappointed.”

Naina sighed. “Perhaps I was expecting a message.”

“From him?”

“Yes.”

“And if it doesn't come?”

“I'll be fine.”

Avni smiled. “That wasn't my question.”

Naina looked at her. After a pause, she said, “I suppose I want things I know I shouldn't expect.”

Avni understood immediately. “That is the difficult part.”

“Why?”

“Because expectations are often born before we give ourselves permission to have them.”

Naina looked away. “Exactly.”

Avni had her own version of the same problem. Raj and she had started exchanging occasional messages. Nothing inappropriate. Nothing secret. Just friendship. A photograph of a book. A question about an academic conference. A birthday greeting. A funny memory. Sometimes their conversations lasted only five minutes. Sometimes they went on for an hour. And sometimes, after the conversation ended, Avni found herself staring at the screen. Waiting. For another message. She hated that she did it. Not because Raj had done anything wrong. But because she knew what the waiting meant. She missed him. Not necessarily as a lover. Not even necessarily as a future. She missed the possibility of being understood by him again.

One evening, Raj sent: Remember that old café near the college?

Avni smiled: Of course.

They still serve terrible coffee.

She laughed: Some things never change.

He replied: Some things shouldn't.

Avni read the message twice. Then put the phone down. Her husband called from the other room. She went to him. Life continued.

Meanwhile, Naina and Ashish had developed another little ritual. Friday evening coffee. No matter how busy the week had been. Sometimes they talked for hours. Sometimes they simply sat together.

One Friday, Naina arrived late.

“Sorry.”

“You're twenty minutes late.”

“Meeting.”

“I know.”

“You were waiting?”

“Perhaps.”

She smiled. “You could have left.”

“I could have.”

“But you didn't.”

“No.”

Their eyes met. There was that familiar silence again. Naina sat down. Ashish pushed a cup towards her. “Your usual.”

She smiled. “Thank you.”

For a while they said nothing. Then Naina asked, “What do you want from life?”

He thought about it. “Peace.”

“That's all?”

“And meaningful work.”

“Anything else?”

He looked at her. For one dangerous second, the answer almost came. You. Instead, he smiled. “Good health.”

Naina laughed. “Very academic answer.”

“And you?”

She looked down at her coffee. “A happy family.” She paused.

“And?” “A life I don't regret.”

Ashish nodded. “I hope you get it.”

She looked at him. “I hope you do too.”

Neither said what they were thinking. Perhaps they were both imagining a version of happiness that included something they could never openly ask for.

The weeks passed. Their routines continued. Messages. Coffee. Work. Family calls. Occasional meetings. Little jokes. Long conversations. Nothing happened. And yet, in the quietest corners of their minds, both had begun to expect something. Not an affair. Not a broken marriage. Not a dramatic declaration. Something much more impossible. They expected a future in which they could somehow remain this close forever without anyone getting

hurt. They wanted the impossible luxury of keeping the feeling without paying its price. And somewhere deep down, they both knew— that future probably did not exist. But knowing that didn't stop them from quietly wishing for it.

One night, Naina lay in bed in Delhi while Rohan spoke to her from Bhopal.

“Are you listening?”

“Yes.”

“You're quiet.”

“Just tired.” “Sleep.”

“I will.” “Goodnight.” “Goodnight.”

The call ended. Naina placed the phone beside her. A few seconds later, another notification appeared.

Ashish: Goodnight. Don't work too late tomorrow.

She smiled. She typed: Goodnight. Then stopped. She wanted to write something more. Something she couldn't safely say. She deleted the words.

And sent only: Goodnight.

Across the city, Ashish read it. He had wanted to say more too. He didn't. Perhaps that was what their relationship had become. A thousand things felt. A hundred things understood. And almost nothing said. The strange thing was— they were both beginning to realise that sometimes the most painful expectation is not expecting someone to choose you. It is expecting life to somehow create a place for a love that was never meant to have one.

Chapter Forty



The Habit of You

There was a strange comfort in routine. Naina had never thought she would become accustomed to someone's presence without actually having that person in her life in the conventional sense. Yet Ashish had somehow become part of her days. Not dramatically. Quietly. A message in the morning. A question about work. A photograph of a book. A coffee after a long meeting. A simple Did you reach home? at the end of a difficult day. None of it seemed significant on its own. Together, it had become something. One Monday morning, Naina's phone buzzed before she had even finished her tea.

Ashish: Big presentation today. Nervous?

She smiled. Naina: No.

Three dots appeared. Ashish: Liar.

She laughed. Naina: Maybe a little.

Ashish: You'll be brilliant.

She stared at those three words. Not because they were extraordinary. Because she believed him. Naina: Thank you.

A moment later: Ashish: Always.

She put the phone down. That one word stayed with her throughout the morning.

The presentation went well. Better than well. Her colleagues congratulated her afterwards. But the first person she wanted to tell was Ashish. She waited until she reached her office. Naina: Done.

His reply came almost immediately.

Ashish: I knew you would.

She smiled. Then typed: Naina: Coffee?

His answer: Ten minutes.

They sat in their usual corner. Ashish listened while Naina described the presentation. He asked questions. Remembered details. Celebrated her success without making it about himself. At one point she stopped talking. “What?”

“You actually listen.”

He smiled. “Of course I do.”

“Most people wait for their turn to speak.”

“I'm not most people.”

She looked at him. “No.”

There was a softness in her voice. “You aren't.”

For a moment, neither touched their coffee. They simply looked at one another. Then Naina smiled and changed the subject. But the moment remained.

That evening, Naina called Rohan. He was busy with the children. She told him about the presentation. He sounded genuinely proud. “I knew you would do well.”

“Everyone says that.”

“Because it's true.”

She smiled. “Thank you.”

When the call ended, she sat quietly. Two men in two different cities had believed in her that day. One was her husband. The other was Ashish. The difference wasn't in how much either believed in her. It was in how differently their presence made her feel. She didn't know what to do with that realisation. So, she did nothing.

Chapter Forty-One



Things We Tell Only One Person

Winter settled over Delhi. The mornings became colder. The university corridors emptied earlier. Coffee became more tempting. Naina and Ashish started staying longer after meetings. Sometimes they talked about work. Sometimes they talked about absolutely nothing. One evening, Ashish seemed unusually distracted.

Naina noticed. “What's wrong?”

“Nothing.”

She gave him a look. “Don't do that.”

“Do what?”

“Say nothing when something is clearly wrong.”

He smiled faintly. “My father isn't well.”

Her expression changed immediately. “Why didn't you tell me?”

“I didn't want to burden you.”

“You could have told me.”

He looked at her. “I know.”

She reached across the table and placed her hand over his. It was instinctive. Neither moved. “I am here,” she said.

Ashish looked down at their hands. Then back at her. “That's dangerous to hear from you.”

Naina slowly withdrew her hand. “I meant as a friend.”

“I know.” But his voice betrayed him.

She knew what he meant. They sat silently. Finally, Ashish said, “Sometimes I wish things were simpler.”

Naina looked at him. “So do I.”

“But they aren't.”

“No.” He smiled sadly.

“Then we deal with what we have.” She nodded.

That night, Naina called him once more. “Any update?”

“He's stable.”

“Good.”

“Thank you for checking.”

“Of course.”

There was a pause. Then Ashish said, “Goodnight, Naina.”

“Goodnight.” She almost ended the call.

Then he said, “Naina?”

“Yes?”

“I'm glad you're in my life.”

Her eyes filled with tears. “Me too.”

Neither said anything else.

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Days passed. Their conversations became more personal. Ashish told her about his fears. Naina told him about hers. She confessed that sometimes she felt guilty for wanting something more from life when she already had so much. He told her that he sometimes wondered whether success had cost him too many ordinary moments. They understood each other's loneliness. Perhaps

that was the most dangerous intimacy of all. Not physical closeness. Being understood. One evening, Naina said, “Do you know what scares me?”

“What?”

“That I can tell you things I don't tell anyone else.”

Ashish looked at her. “Why does that scare you?”

“Because I like it.”

He didn't answer.

She continued, “And I know I shouldn't depend on it.”

He nodded. “You're right.”

She smiled sadly. “You're supposed to disagree.”

“I would, if I thought you were wrong.”

She looked at him. “And are you dependent on me?”

Ashish was silent. Then: “Yes.” The honesty hurt. But neither took it back.

Chapter Forty-Two



Almost a Future

It was a Sunday afternoon. Naina had finished speaking to her children and Rohan. She was sitting by the window with a cup of tea when Ashish called. "Busy?"

"No."

"Can I talk?"

"Of course."

They spoke for nearly two hours. About childhood. About travelling. About places they wanted to visit. About books they wanted to read. About retirement. About the kind of home they imagined someday. At one point, Naina laughed. "We sound like we're planning a life."

There was silence. Ashish's voice became quieter. "Maybe we're only talking about one."

Naina's smile disappeared. She knew exactly what he meant. "Ashish…"

"I know." He sighed. "I'm sorry."

"No." She closed her eyes. "Don't apologise."

Another silence. Then Naina said, "Sometimes I imagine what it would be like."

He didn't ask. He already knew.

"If we had met earlier?"

"Yes."

“If circumstances were different?”

“What would it look like?”

Naina smiled sadly. “Maybe we'd have a little house somewhere quiet.”

Ashish laughed softly. “With too many books.”

“And plants.”

“You'd kill the plants.”

“I would not.”

“You forget to water them.”

She laughed. For a few minutes they allowed themselves to imagine. Nothing explicit. Nothing improper. Just an ordinary life. A kitchen. Bookshelves. Sunday mornings. Coffee. Arguments about where to travel. A balcony. Rain. A quiet home. Then Naina stopped. “This is dangerous.”

“I know.”

“We shouldn't keep imagining.”

“I know.”

“But I'm glad we did.”

They sat in silence on opposite ends of the phone. The imagined future slowly disappeared. Reality returned. Rohan in Bhopal. Ashish's own life. Her children. His family. Their careers. Everything they had promised themselves they would protect. Finally, Ashish said, “Perhaps some futures are beautiful precisely because they remain imaginary.”

Naina wiped a tear from her cheek. “Perhaps.”

That evening, neither sent another message. They had said enough. The following morning, Ashish sent only one line: Have a good day.

Naina replied: You too.

Nothing more. Yet both knew that something had changed. Emotionally, they had reached a place from which pretending was no longer possible. They cared deeply. They imagined. They missed. They waited. And still, they chose restraint. For now. Because sometimes the heart doesn't ask for permission. It simply builds a small room inside you— and waits there quietly.

Chapter Forty-Three



The Distance Between Understanding and Love

By now, Avni and Raj had found a quiet understanding. Their messages were occasional, warm and completely natural. Neither expected anything from the other. Neither demanded time, attention, or explanations. They both understood something important: friendship could be meaningful without becoming a threat to the lives they had built. One evening, Raj messaged:

Raj: How was your day?

Avni: Long. Meetings, work, home, the usual.

Raj: And still smiling?

Avni: Trying.

She added: How about you?

Raj: Same story. Different city.

Avni smiled.

There was something comforting about knowing that someone understood the exhaustion behind such ordinary words. But there was also a boundary neither of them needed to discuss. They had families. Responsibilities. People who trusted them. And neither wanted their friendship to become the reason for someone else's pain. Their bond had become something gentle. A friendship that asked for nothing. And because it asked for nothing, it remained safe.

Naina and Ashish were different. They had tried to keep things simple. They really had. But closeness had a strange way of growing quietly. It happened in conversations that lasted longer than necessary. In coffees that turned into dinners. In messages about work that somehow ended with discussions about life. In the comfort of sitting together without needing to speak. They still had boundaries. They still respected their marriages. They never deliberately crossed a line. But the feelings underneath their friendship were becoming harder to ignore.

One afternoon, Naina sat with Ashish in a quiet corner of the university café. His laptop was open between them. They were supposed to be discussing a research proposal. Instead, they had been talking about life for nearly an hour. "You haven't touched the proposal," Naina said.

"Neither have you."

"I was waiting for you."

"I was waiting for you." They looked at each other and laughed. For a moment, there was nothing academic about them. Just two people enjoying each other's company. Naina leaned back. "You know what I like about talking to you?"

"What?"

"I don't have to explain everything."

Ashish smiled. "I know."

She looked at him. "And that's rare."

Something softened in his expression. "I feel the same."

The silence that followed lasted a little longer than it should have. Naina looked away first. Neither said anything. But both felt it. That tiny shift. That moment when friendship became emotionally intimate without anyone deliberately choosing it.

Later that evening, Naina called him. "Did you reach home?"

"Yes."

"Good."

"You sound tired."

"I am."

"Then sleep."

"I will."

She hesitated. "Ashish?"

"Yes?"

"Today was nice."

He smiled. "Yes. It was."

"Good night."

"Good night, Naina."

The call ended. Ashish kept looking at his phone. He didn't know why a simple sentence like today was nice had affected him so much. Then he understood. He was becoming attached. Not merely to her presence. To the feeling of being understood by her. And that was dangerous.

That night, Ashish thought about Naina's family. About Rohan. About the life she had built. He thought about his own responsibilities. He imagined what could happen if their closeness continued to deepen. Perhaps nothing would happen. Perhaps they would always remain careful. But what if one day they weren't? What if emotions became stronger than judgment? What if someone noticed? What if their families suffered? What if Naina's marriage was damaged by something that had started so innocently? The thought frightened him. He didn't want to become a person who brought pain into her life. He didn't want to be the reason she had to choose between her heart and her family. And most importantly, he didn't want their beautiful friendship to eventually become something ugly. He sat at his desk. Opened his notebook. And wrote:

If Distance Can Protect You

I never meant to come this close,

yet somehow you became

the quietest part of my day.

I never asked for your heart,

and you never asked for mine,

but somewhere between our conversations,

something began to grow.

And now I am afraid.
Not of loving you,
but of what love might ask from us.
Because your life has a home,
and mine has responsibilities.
There are people who trust us,
people who love us,
people who should never have to suffer
for feelings they never chose.
So perhaps I must go.
Not because you mean less,
but because you mean too much.
If distance can keep your family safe,
I will choose distance.
If leaving can preserve
what is beautiful between us,
I will leave.
And if someday you wonder
why I walked away,
perhaps you will understand—
I wasn't running from you.
I was protecting you.

Ashish closed the notebook. His decision was beginning to take shape.

The next morning, he started searching for opportunities abroad. At first, it was only research. A university here. A fellowship there. A visiting position. But then he found a programme that matched his academic interests perfectly. He stared at the screen. It was far away. Far enough to create the distance he needed. He opened the application form. His finger paused above the keyboard. Then he began. He didn't know what would happen if he got accepted. He didn't know how Naina would react. He didn't even know

whether leaving would actually make the feelings disappear. But he knew one thing. Staying close was becoming harder than walking away.

Meanwhile, Naina knew nothing. She was at home, speaking to Rohan about an upcoming family plan. She laughed at something he said. Her life was ordinary. Safe. Full. And somewhere inside that ordinary life, Ashish had quietly become important. Not enough to replace anyone. Not enough to destroy anything. But enough to make his absence hurt. That was precisely what frightened Ashish.

He didn't want to wait until the hurt became something larger. So, he made himself a promise. If the university accepted him, he would go. He would take the opportunity. He would build his career. And he would leave behind a friendship that had become far more complicated than either of them had ever intended. Because sometimes the deepest form of love is not holding someone closer.

Sometimes it is knowing when to step away before closeness becomes a wound.

Chapter Forty-Four



The News

Naina found out on an ordinary Tuesday. There was nothing dramatic about the moment. She was sitting in her office, reviewing a project report, when a colleague mentioned casually, "Have you heard? Ashish has been selected for the new assignment."

Naina looked up. "What assignment?"

"Another college. Different country. Looks like he'll be moving soon."

For a few seconds, she didn't understand the words. "Moving?"

"Yes. Probably within a couple of months."

Her colleague continued talking, but Naina barely heard her. She looked down at the report in front of her. The letters had suddenly become meaningless. Different country! Another college. A few months. She picked up her phone. There was no message from Ashish. She stared at his name. Then put the phone down. She didn't want him to tell her through a message. She wanted to hear it from him.

He called that evening. "Hi."

"Hi."

"You sound quiet."

"I heard."

There was a pause. "So, you know."

"Yes."

Ashish sighed. "I was going to tell you."

"When?"

"Tonight."

Naina smiled sadly. "You always wait until the last moment."

"I didn't know how to tell you."

"Neither do I know how to hear it."

Silence. Then Ashish said, "It's a good opportunity."

"I know."

"Career-wise, it's important."

"I know."

"I should be happy."

"You should."

"But I'm not."

Naina closed her eyes. Neither spoke for several seconds. Then she whispered, "I don't want you to go." The words escaped before she could stop them.

Ashish's voice softened. "I don't want to go either."

"But you have to."

"Yes."

"That's the problem."

.....

They met the next day. No coffee. No work. Just the two of them sitting quietly in a familiar café. Naina looked exhausted. "I keep telling myself this is normal."

"It is."

"People move."

"Yes."

"Careers change."

"Yes."

“Life continues.”

Ashish smiled faintly.

“But?”

“But I hate every sensible sentence I'm saying.”

He laughed quietly. Then his expression became serious. “I've spent years moving from one place to another.”

“I know.”

“I never thought leaving somewhere would hurt this much.”

Naina looked at him. “Because of the city?”

He shook his head. “No.”

She knew. Neither needed to say the name.

Over the next few days, they tried to make the most of the remaining time. They had coffee. Walked through the university campus. Talked about work. Talked about their families. Talked about everything except goodbye. But goodbye was always sitting quietly between them.

One evening, Ashish said, “Promise me something.”

“What?”

“Don't stop living your life because I'm leaving.”

Naina looked at him. “I wouldn't.”

“Promise.”

She nodded. “I promise.”

“And don't wait for me.” Her eyes filled with tears.

“That one I can't promise.”

She looked away. Because she knew exactly what he meant.

Chapter Forty-Five



The Last Evening

Ashish's house was almost packed. Boxes stood against the walls. Books had already been placed into cartons. The apartment looked unfamiliar. Naina stood near the doorway, looking around. “So, this is really happening.”

“Yes.”

She smiled sadly. “I hate your boxes.”

“I hate them too.” He made tea. They sat together on the sofa. For a while, they talked about nothing. Then silence settled. Naina looked at him. “I'm going to miss this.”

“What?”

“This.” She gestured between them. “Talking. Coffee. You knowing what I'm thinking before I say it.”

Ashish reached for her hand. “I'll miss it too.” Their fingers intertwined. Neither pulled away.

“I don't want tonight to end,” Naina whispered.

“Neither do I.”

She looked at him. “Then don't let it.”

He understood the emotion behind the words. He moved closer. Their foreheads touched. For a moment, they simply breathed. Then they kissed. There was no hesitation this time. No sudden retreat. No attempt to pretend

the feeling wasn't there. The kiss carried all the things they had held back for months—their loneliness, tenderness, fear of separation and the desperate wish to keep one precious evening from ending. Naina held him tightly. Ashish wrapped his arms around her. They stayed that way for a long time. When they finally separated, Naina rested her head against his shoulder. "I wish we had met at another time."

"So do I."

"Another life."

"Maybe."

She looked up at him. "Do you love me?"

He was quiet. Then answered honestly. "Yes."

Her eyes filled. "I love you too." The words were finally spoken. No poetry. No carefully chosen language. Just the truth. They held each other again. That night, they wanted themselves to be close in the way they had been afraid to be. They wanted tenderness became deeper, their embraces longer, their kisses more desperate with the knowledge that morning would bring distance. But even in that closeness, they remained aware of the lives waiting beyond the walls.

They didn't promise forever. They didn't make impossible demands. They simply stayed together until neither could pretend the moment wasn't precious. Later, they sat quietly beside each other. Naina rested her head on his shoulder. "Tomorrow you'll leave."

"Yes."

"And we'll go back to being sensible."

Ashish smiled sadly. "We'll try." She laughed through her tears. "That's all we've ever done."

He kissed her forehead. "Perhaps that's why we've survived." She closed her eyes. For one night, there was no project. No college. No distance. No unanswered question. Only two people who loved each other sitting quietly in the same room, knowing that love could be real even when life could not make room for it. Morning would come. And with it, the difficult part. Letting go.

Chapter Forty-Six



After the Goodbye

The airport was crowded. Announcements echoed through the airport lounge while people hurried with bags, children and last-minute cups of tea. Naina stood a little away from the crowd. Ashish was beside her. His flight was due in fifty minutes. Neither of them was talking much. They had already said too much the previous night. And somehow, none of it seemed enough. “Take care of yourself,” Naina said.

“I will.”

“And don't skip meals.”

He smiled. “You're still giving instructions?”

“Someone has to.”

“And you?”

“I'll be fine.”

He looked at her. “Don't say that if you aren't.”

Naina smiled. “I'll learn.”

The final announcement came. Ashish looked towards the flight. Then back at her. For one moment, neither moved. Finally, he said, “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For making me go.”

Naina's eyes filled. “You'll thank me when you succeed.”

He smiled. “And if I don't?”

“You will.”

He picked up his bag. Then, almost instinctively, reached for her hand. They held it for a few seconds. Nothing more. No dramatic goodbye. Just two people trying to be brave.

“I'll call you.”

“I know.”

“And I'll message when I reach.”

“I'll wait.”

He smiled. Then he turned towards the flight. Naina watched him walk away. She didn't cry until he disappeared inside.

That evening, Avni found her sitting alone in a café. She didn't ask what had happened. She already knew. “He left?” Naina nodded. Avni sat opposite her.

“How are you?”

Naina smiled weakly. “Fine.”

Avni gave her the familiar look. “Don't.”

Naina laughed despite herself. “You always know.”

“That's what friends are for.”

For a while, they sat quietly. Then Naina whispered, “I didn't realise how much space he had taken in my life.”

Avni listened.

“Every morning, I expected his message.” “Every difficult day, I wanted to tell him.” “When something good happened, he was the first person I wanted to call.” She looked down. “Now I keep reaching for my phone.”

Avni gently said, “That will take time.”

“I know.” “I thought encouraging him to leave would make me feel proud.”

“You should feel proud.”

“I do.” Naina's eyes filled. “And I still feel completely miserable.”

Avni reached across the table and held her hand. “Both can be true.”

Naina nodded. “He wanted to stay.”

“I know.”

“I wanted him to stay too.”

“But you told him to go.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Naina looked towards the window. “Because I love him enough to want his life to become bigger.” She paused. “Even if I'm not part of that bigger life in the way some part of me secretly wished.”

Avni's expression softened. “That is a difficult kind of love.”

Naina smiled sadly. “Maybe the most difficult.”

After a while, Avni said, “Do you know what I've realised from watching you?”

“What?”

“Feelings don't always ask us to change our lives.”

Naina looked at her.

“Sometimes they just ask us to acknowledge that they existed.”

Naina was silent. Then she asked, “And Raj?”

Avni smiled faintly. “Still there.”

“In your thoughts?”

“Sometimes.”

“Do you miss him?”

“Yes.”

“Do you wish things had been different?”

Avni thought for a moment.

“Sometimes.”

“Would you change your life for him?”

“No.”

The answer was peaceful. Naina nodded. “That's exactly how I feel about Ashish.”

Avni squeezed her hand. “Then perhaps we're learning the same lesson.”

“What lesson?”

“That loving someone and choosing a life with them aren't always the same decision.”

Naina looked at her friend. “You make it sound simple.”

“It isn't.”

Avni smiled. “We're just getting better at living with complicated truths.”

Naina's phone buzzed. She looked at it.

Ashish: Reached.

Her heart lifted immediately. Avni saw her expression. “See?”

Naina smiled. “Just one message.” “Sometimes one message is enough.”

Naina typed: Good. Rest. We will talk tomorrow.

She hesitated. Then added: I'm proud of you.

The reply came quickly. Ashish: I know. That's why I could leave.

Naina read it twice. Then put the phone down. A tear rolled down her cheek.

Avni smiled gently. “Happy?”

Naina nodded. “Sad?” Another nod. “Both?”

“Yes.” Avni laughed softly. “Welcome to adulthood.”

Naina laughed through her tears. They sat together until the café began to empty. Two friends. Two complicated stories. Two women who had discovered that sometimes the heart doesn't need a new ending. Sometimes it simply needs permission to remember. And somewhere in another city, Ashish was unpacking his books in an unfamiliar room. The first thing he placed on the desk was the book Naina had once recommended. He looked at it for a long moment. Then smiled. Distance had begun. But the connection hadn't disappeared. It had simply become something they would have to learn to carry differently.

That night after reaching his home, Ashish unpacked only a few things. The room felt unfamiliar. He sat at his desk and opened his phone He had typed and deleted several messages to Naina. Finally, he stopped trying to explain. Instead, he sent her a poem.

Away From You
I had to leave you,
So, I left.
But some distances
do not disappear
when the city changes.
Your words,
your laughter,
that little question—
"Did you eat?"
still travel with me.
The moments we lived quietly,
without giving them a name,
have somehow become
the most honest pages of my life.
You told me,
"Go. Move forward."
So I came here.
But how do I teach my heart
that your absence
is supposed to stay behind?
Perhaps love
isn't always about staying together.
Sometimes,
loving someone deeply

means not holding them back,
but quietly wishing them
the courage to fly.
I won't ask you to stop me.
You won't ask me to return.
And yet, somewhere inside,
we will both remember—
There was a time
when two hearts came very close,
and still chose to protect
the worlds they had already built.
Perhaps that is enough.
Perhaps it always was.

Naina read the poem slowly. Then she read it again. Her eyes filled with tears. She smiled through them. After a long pause, she replied: "Yes... perhaps it is enough." She stared at the screen for a moment before adding: "And perhaps that's the most beautiful part of our story."

Ashish read her reply in his new apartment. He smiled. Outside, an unfamiliar city continued through the night. Inside, two people who had once wished for more were learning to treasure what they had—without asking life for something it could not give them.

Chapter Forty-Seven



Years Later

Time did not erase everything. It simply changed the shape of things. The years after Ashish left became full of ordinary life for Naina. New projects. New responsibilities. Promotions. Family occasions. Her children's growing independence. Rohan's work. Her own changing priorities. There were difficult years too—illness in the family, professional disappointments, long stretches when she barely had time to think about anything beyond the next day.

And slowly, without either of them deciding it, the daily messages between Naina and Ashish became less frequent. First, they stopped talking every day. Then every week. Then sometimes months passed. But neither completely disappeared. A birthday message. A festival greeting. A congratulations after a promotion. A photograph of a book. Small things. Safe things. Things that could never be misunderstood. Or so they told themselves.

One evening, almost two years after Ashish had left Delhi, Naina received an email. The subject was simple: Congratulations, Professor. She opened it. It was from Ashish. «I heard about your appointment. I knew you would get there eventually.»

Naina smiled. She read it twice. Then replied: «Thank you. And you were right about the book you recommended years ago. I finally finished it.»

His response arrived later that evening. «three years is a long time to finish one book.»

She laughed. For a few minutes, they exchanged messages exactly as they once had. Books. Work. Old university stories. Coffee. The familiar ease returned almost immediately. Then there was a pause. Ashish wrote: How is everyone?

Naina knew what he was really asking. She answered honestly. Good. Rohan is well. The children are doing well too.»

A few seconds later: «I'm glad.»

She stared at those two words. Then typed: «And you?»

His answer took longer. «I'm good. Life is good.»

Naina smiled. She believed him. And somehow, that made her happy. A few weeks later, they spoke on the phone for the first time in months. The conversation lasted nearly an hour. There was no awkwardness. No need to explain the silence. They talked about their careers. The changing education system. Books. Travel. Their families. Then, inevitably, the conversation became quieter. Ashish said, “Do you ever think about those days?” Naina looked out of her window. “Sometimes.”

“Me too.” A pause. “Do you regret anything?”

Naina thought carefully. “I regret hurting myself by overthinking everything.”

He laughed softly. “And us?”

She smiled. “I don't know what to call us.”

“Neither do I.”

“That hasn't changed.”

“No.”

There was warmth in his voice. “Perhaps it doesn't need a name anymore.” Naina was silent. Then she said, “Maybe you're right.”

Ashish asked, “Are you happy?”

Naina didn't answer immediately. She looked around her home. At the photographs on the wall. The books on the shelves. The little reminders of years of family life.

"Yes," she said finally.

"Good."

"And you?"

"Yes."

She smiled. "Really?"

"Yes."

"Then we've done all right."

"Perhaps."

They both laughed. It was strange. Years ago, they had believed distance would destroy the feeling. Instead, distance had transformed it. What had once been urgent had become gentle. What had once been painful had become a memory. What had once seemed impossible had become something they could carry without asking anything from it.

A few moments later, Ashish sent her a photograph. A new office. A new university. A new country. Underneath it, he wrote: "Another beginning."

Naina replied: "Proud of you."

He responded: "You taught me to go."

Naina stared at the message. Her eyes became moist. She typed: "You taught me that leaving doesn't always mean losing someone." There was no reply for several minutes. Then: "Maybe that's what we were meant to learn."

Naina put her phone down. She didn't need to say anything more. That night, she called Rohan. They talked about dinner. The weather. A family function. Nothing extraordinary. As they talked, Rohan reached for her hand between the screen. Naina held it. She felt the familiar comfort of a life built over decades. She looked at him and smiled. There were things in life that were exciting. And there were things that were home. She had learnt the difference. And she had learnt that one did not have to hate one to appreciate the other.

Far away, Ashish sat alone after finishing his work. He opened an old notebook. Inside were a few lines he had written years ago. He read them. Then closed the notebook. He didn't feel sadness. Not anymore. Only gratitude. For a woman who had once encouraged him to leave when every part of her wanted

him to stay. For conversations that had made ordinary days extraordinary. For a love that had never become a conventional relationship. For a chapter that had ended without becoming ugly. He smiled. Then turned off the light.

Years had passed. Their lives had moved forward. Yet somewhere between memory and distance, Naina and Ashish had discovered something neither had understood when they were younger: Not every person who changes your life is meant to remain in it every day. Some people stay through presence. Others stay through memory. And sometimes— that is enough.

Chapter Forty-Eight



The Last Unanswered Question

Years had passed. Life had moved forward for everyone. Not dramatically. Not with the kind of endings people write about. Just quietly—through careers, family responsibilities, children growing up, changing cities, ageing parents and ordinary evenings that slowly became years. Naina had stopped waiting for Ashish's messages. At least, that was what she told herself. Her life had settled into a comfortable rhythm. Work still demanded her energy. Family still filled her weekends. Rohan remained the person with whom she shared the practical, beautiful details of everyday life. Yet there were evenings when the house became quiet and she remembered a different version of herself. The woman who had once waited for a coffee. A message. A familiar voice. A poem. She no longer felt guilty about remembering. Perhaps that was the difference between then and now. She had finally stopped asking herself whether she should have felt what she felt.

Avni had reached the same kind of peace, though her journey had been different. Raj had become a distant but warm memory. There were occasional messages. An article he thought she might like. A festival greeting. A photograph from an old college event. Sometimes they spoke. Sometimes months passed without either reaching out. And somehow, that was okay. One evening, Avni was sitting with Naina on a balcony. Their children had grown. Their careers had changed. Even their conversations had changed. They no longer talked only about work, family and responsibilities. They talked about themselves. “What do you think we were looking for?” Avni suddenly asked.

Naina smiled. “When?”

“You know when.”

Naina understood. “The people we met?”

“Yes.” Avni looked into the distance.

“I used to think I was looking for Raj.”

“And now?”

“Now I think I was looking for the woman I had forgotten I was.”

Naina remained quiet. Avni continued. “Before marriage, before children, before being responsible for everyone… I was simply Avni.”

She laughed softly. “Maybe Raj reminded me of her.”

Naina looked at her. “And Ashish?”

Avni smiled. “Perhaps Ashish reminded you of Naina.”

The two women laughed. Then the laughter faded into silence. “Do you think we did something wrong?” Naina asked.

Avni didn't answer immediately. “I think we came close to something that could have become wrong.”

Naina looked at her. “But we stopped?”

“We tried.”

“That isn't the same thing.”

“No,” Avni said quietly. “It isn't.”

She looked at Naina. “Maybe adulthood is learning to live with the fact that sometimes you don't get a perfectly clean answer.”

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The Message

One evening, Naina received an email. It was from Ashish. Not personal. Not exactly. He was writing about an academic conference and asking whether she would consider contributing to a panel. Naina read it carefully. Then smiled. Their first conversations had begun because of work. Years later, work had found a way to bring their names into the same conversation again. She replied

professionally. He responded professionally. And then, at the very end, he added: I hope you're well.

Naina stared at those five words. She typed: I am. I hope you are too.

She almost pressed send. Then she added: And Ashish… thank you.

His reply came later: For what?

She thought for a long time. Finally: For once being a part of my life in a way I will always remember.

There was no reply for several minutes. Then: Thank you for letting me be.

Naina closed her laptop. That was all. No declaration. No promise. No dramatic reunion. Yet somehow, it felt like a farewell neither of them had been able to say years earlier.

Next evening, Naina told Avni about the message. Avni listened. “Do you want to meet him?”

Naina smiled. “I don't know.”

“That's honest.”

“I don't know what would happen if I saw him again.”

“Would you want something to happen?”

Naina thought. “No.” Then, after a pause: “I think I'd just want to know whether the feeling is still there.”

Avni smiled sadly. “And if it is?”

“I don't know.”

“And if it isn't?”

“I don't know that either.”

Avni reached for her hand. “Maybe some questions are better left unanswered.”

Naina nodded. “Maybe.”

What They Never Said

Outside the country, Ashish was standing beside a window in his office. He had received Naina's final message. He read it again. Then opened his notebook. For the first time in years, he wrote something about her. Not a love poem. Not a goodbye. Just a few lines.

What Remains

Some people leave,
but don't really go.
They become a quiet corner
of the person we became.
No promises remain,
no expectations,
no unfinished plans.
Only gratitude.
For the conversations.
For the courage.
For the version of myself
I discovered beside you.
And if we never meet again,
let it be enough to know — once,
in the middle of ordinary lives,
we found something extraordinary.

He closed the notebook. He didn't send it. That was the final act of restraint.

Raj, too, had his own unfinished page. One evening, he found an old photograph from his school days. Avni was standing in the corner, laughing at something outside the frame. He smiled. He didn't feel the old confusion anymore. He simply felt grateful. He understood now that not every person who touches your heart is supposed to become your partner. Some people become witnesses to a version of you that nobody else knew.

And perhaps that was enough.

The Question



Naina and Avni would sometimes talk about those years. Not with regret. Not with pride. Just honesty. They had both discovered something society rarely spoke about. A woman does not stop being a woman when she becomes a wife. She doesn't stop dreaming when she becomes a mother. She doesn't stop needing emotional companionship because she has a family. And she certainly doesn't become incapable of falling in love simply because she has crossed forty. But with that freedom comes responsibility. Because after forty, love doesn't arrive in an empty room. It arrives carrying history. Marriage. Children. Promises. Careers. Families. And consequences. Perhaps that is why their stories had been so difficult. They weren't young people deciding whom to marry. They were adults deciding what to do with feelings that had arrived after life had already been built.

One evening, Naina sat beside Rohan. He was reading. She was looking through old photographs. She paused at one. Ashish was somewhere in the background. Not beside her. Not touching her. Just there. She looked at it for a moment. Then continued. Rohan reached for her hand. Naina held it. She looked at him and smiled. Her life was here. Her memories were elsewhere. And somehow, both truths could exist.

Later that night, Avni received a message from Raj.

Raj: Hope you're doing well.

She smiled. She replied: I am. I hope you are too.

Nothing more. She put her phone away. And that, too, was enough.

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But perhaps the reader will still wonder. Did Naina betray Rohan? Did Ashish cross a line simply by loving a married woman? Was their restraint noble—or was it merely fear? Could their emotional closeness be called love? Or was it loneliness wearing the clothes of love? Did Avni really miss Raj? Or did she miss the person she had been when she knew him? Would society judge Naina more harshly because she was a woman? Would it have judged Ashish differently? Can a marriage remain genuine when one partner has loved someone else emotionally? Can a feeling be innocent if it is powerful enough to change the way you look at your life?

And perhaps the hardest question of all— If you were Naina, what would you have done? There is no answer here. Because perhaps there shouldn't be.

Maybe Naina and Ashish were meant to be together. Maybe they weren't. Maybe Avni and Raj had a second chance somewhere in another version of life. Maybe they didn't need one. Maybe the choices they made were right. Maybe they were simply the choices they could live with. And perhaps that is what makes their stories human. Because real life rarely gives us the clean endings that novels promise. Sometimes we choose our family. Sometimes we choose ourselves. Sometimes we choose responsibility. And sometimes— we simply choose not to choose. The heart continues anyway. It remembers. It wonders. It asks what if?

And perhaps somewhere, years from now, another woman sitting alone after a long day will read their story and recognise herself. She may judge Naina. She may defend her. She may understand Avni. She may dislike Ashish. She may secretly wish Naina had chosen differently. Or perhaps she will close the book and think of someone from her own past. Someone she loved. Someone she almost chose. Someone she never told. And then she may ask herself the question this story leaves behind: “If love arrives after you've already built your life, does choosing not to follow it make the love less real?” There is no answer. Only the silence after the question. And perhaps— that is where their story truly ends.

Chapter Forty-Nine



The Questions We Leave Behind

There are some goodbyes that don't really feel like endings. They simply become quieter. Years pass. Lives change. People move to different cities. New responsibilities fill the spaces once occupied by old conversations. And yet, somewhere beneath all of that, a question remains. What was it? Was it friendship? Was it love? Was it simply two people finding, for a brief and unexpected period of their lives, someone who understood them in a way very few people had?

Naina had stopped trying to find an answer. Ashish had too. Perhaps that was the only way they could continue living peacefully. They had chosen their families. They had chosen their responsibilities. They had chosen not to turn an emotion into a decision that could hurt people they loved. But choosing not to act on something did not mean that it had never existed. That was the difficult truth. Naina sometimes remembered the conversations. The laughter. The arguments. The coffees that lasted longer than they were supposed to. The silences that had said more than words. Sometimes she wondered whether Ashish remembered them too. Then she would close the thought before it travelled any further. Life had moved on. And so had she. At least, that was what she told herself.

Ashish had learned something similar. Distance had helped. Not because it erased anything. It simply gave everything its proper place. He had built a new life. A new university. New colleagues. New responsibilities. New friendships. And eventually, a new family. He was happy. That mattered. Yet occasionally,

when he opened an old notebook or came across something she had once given him, a familiar warmth returned. Not regret. Not longing. Just remembrance. He never reached for his phone. He never disturbed her life. Some memories deserved to remain memories.

Naina sometimes wondered whether they had been brave or afraid. Had they protected their families? Or had they simply been afraid of what might happen if they allowed themselves to cross a line? There was no answer. Perhaps both were true. Perhaps courage and fear sometimes lived in the same decision. She had once believed that love had to lead somewhere. Now she understood that it didn't always have to. Sometimes love simply changed the person who experienced it. Sometimes it taught you something about yourself. Sometimes it made you more careful about the lives of others. And sometimes... it remained a question.

Four years passed. Neither of them knew exactly how the other had changed. They knew only what could be seen from a distance. An occasional professional update. A festival greeting. A congratulatory message. Nothing more. Until one ordinary morning, Naina received a letter that changed everything. Her daughter's university admission had been confirmed.

She read the name of the university twice. Then stopped. Her daughter was going to Cambridge. And Ashish was there.

For the first time in four years, the past stood quietly at the edge of her present. Naina put the letter down. She did not pick up her phone. Not yet.

She wasn't sure whether she was afraid of speaking to Ashish— or afraid of discovering that she wasn't afraid anymore.

Chapter Fifty



Four Years Later

Four years were long enough to change a life. Long enough for children to grow into young adults. Long enough for careers to change direction. Long enough for friendships to become occasional messages. Long enough for memories to lose their sharp edges. And yet, sometimes, four years were not long enough to make someone completely unfamiliar.

Naina stared at the university admission letter lying on the dining table. She had read it three times already. Her daughter had been accepted. Not just accepted. She had received the programme she had wanted for years. The university was one of the most respected institutions in the world. Naina should have been celebrating. Instead, one name kept appearing in her mind. Ashish.

She hadn't spoken to him properly in almost four years. There had been occasional messages. Festival greetings. An occasional professional update. A congratulations when his research paper was published. Nothing more. Nothing that could reopen the past. And now her daughter was going to the very university where he worked. Naina picked up her phone. Opened his contact. Stared at his name. Then locked the screen. No. She couldn't. What would she even say? Hello, Ashish. It's been four years. My daughter is joining your university. Can you help us? It sounded too personal. Too convenient. Too much like stepping back into a door she had deliberately closed. She put the phone away.

Avni noticed her in the office. “You haven't stopped thinking about it.”

Naina looked at her. “Thinking about what?”

“Don't do that.”

“Do what?”

“Pretend I don't know you.”

Naina sighed. “She got admission.”

“I know.”

“And Ashish works there.”

“I know that too.”

Naina looked down. “I don't want to involve him.”

“Why?”

“Because it's been four years.”

“Exactly.”

Avni smiled. “Four years don't erase a friendship.”

“It isn't that simple.”

“No,” Avni agreed. “It isn't.”

She sat beside her. “But you aren't calling him because you want something from him, Naina. You're calling because your daughter is going to a new country and you know someone who can guide her.”

Naina remained silent.

“And perhaps,” Avni continued gently, “it's time you stopped being afraid of your own memories.”

Naina looked at her. “You think I should call?”

“I think you should stop making the decision for him.”

That sentence stayed with Naina. That night, she finally opened their old conversation. There were years between the last messages. She typed. Deleted. Typed again. Finally:

Naina: Hello, Ashish. It's been a long time. I hope you're well.

She stared at the screen. Then pressed send.

The reply came much sooner than she expected.

Ashish: Naina.

Just her name.

She smiled.

Then another message appeared.

Ashish: I'm very well. How are you?

And somehow, four years disappeared in a second.

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Cambridge

The university was exactly as her daughter had imagined. Ancient buildings. Stone walls. Green lawns. Students carrying books and laptops. Bicycles passing along narrow paths. A strange mixture of history and youthful energy. Naina walked beside her daughter, listening as she talked excitedly about her first lecture, her accommodation and the people she had met. She was proud. And nervous. And emotional. Her daughter was beginning a life of her own.

At the administrative office, they were busy completing the final formalities. Naina checked the documents twice. Her daughter laughed. “Mom, everything is fine.”

“I know.”

“You've checked that two times.”

“That's what mothers do.” Her daughter smiled. Then someone called her name. “Naina?”

She turned. For a moment, she couldn't breathe. Ashish stood a few feet away. Older. Slightly greyer. Calmer. But unmistakably Ashish. They simply looked at each other. Four years. Four years of distance. Four years of separate lives. And yet the first smile came naturally.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

Her daughter looked between them. “Mum?”

Naina smiled. “This is Professor Ashish Malhotra. He was an old colleague.”

Ashish smiled. “An old friend.” Naina looked at him. There was no awkwardness in his voice. Only warmth.

He helped them with the remaining formalities. Nothing extraordinary. Just practical things. Where the department was. Whom her daughter should contact. Which office handled student support. Which library would be most useful. He spoke to her daughter directly, treating her not as Naina's child but as an independent student. Naina watched quietly. She felt proud. And strangely emotional. This was the man she had once known so closely. Now he was simply a professor helping her daughter begin her life. Perhaps that was what time had done. It hadn't erased the past. It had given it a different place.

When the first lecture was about to begin, her daughter hugged her. “Mum, don't worry.”

“I won't.”

“You're going to cry.”

“I am not.”

“You are.”

Naina laughed through moist eyes. “Go.”

Her daughter walked towards the lecture hall. Naina watched until she disappeared inside. Then she turned. Ashish was standing beside her. For a moment, neither spoke.

“She's grown up,” he said.

“Yes.”

“You must be proud.”

“Very.”

He smiled. Then hesitated. “Coffee?”

Naina looked at him. “Now?”

“If you have time.”

She checked her watch. “I do.”

He smiled. “Then come.”

The coffee shop was quiet. They chose a table near the window. For a few minutes, they spoke about ordinary things. Work. Family. The university. Travel. Life. Then Naina finally asked, “How are you?”

Ashish smiled. “Good.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

She nodded. “You look happy.”

“I am.” There was no sadness in his answer.

Naina smiled. “That's good.”

He looked at her. “And you?”

She thought for a moment. “Yes.” “Good.”

The silence that followed was peaceful. Not the old silence filled with things they couldn't say. This was different. It belonged to people who had survived the things they once feared.

“Florence knows about you,” Ashish said suddenly.

Naina looked at him. “About me?”

He smiled. “About us.”

Naina's expression changed. “What did you tell her?”

“The truth.”

She remained quiet. Ashish continued. “I told her about the friendship. About the time before I came here. About the poetry.”

“The poetry?”

He laughed softly. “You remember?”

“How could I forget?”

He looked down at his coffee. “I published it.”

Naina's eyes widened. “You did?”

“Yes.”

“You actually published those poems?”

“I did.”

She smiled. “Why?”

“Because Florence encouraged me.”

Naina looked at him with surprise. “Your wife?”

"Yes."

"She knows?"

"She knows everything she needs to know."

Naina didn't know what to say. Ashish smiled. "She once told me that some poems don't belong to the person who inspired them. They belong to the person who wrote them."

Naina's eyes became moist. "She's a remarkable woman."

"She is." There was genuine affection in his voice.

And Naina understood. He had built a life. A real one. A happy one. She was glad.

"Did she read them?"

"All of them."

"And?"

"She liked them."

Naina laughed softly. "She must have wondered who the woman was."

"She knew."

Naina looked at him. "How?"

"Because I told her."

"Why?"

Ashish smiled. "Because I didn't want my beautiful past to be forgotten."

Naina looked out of the window. For the first time, she felt no jealousy. Only gratitude. Perhaps that was what healing looked like.

They spent the rest of the day walking around Cambridge. Ashish took leave from work. He showed her the old library. The gardens. The quiet streets. The places where students gathered. They stopped for lunch. They laughed about old conference memories. They remembered the ridiculous project that had brought them together. The coffee shop where they had once said goodbye. The arguments. The late-night calls. The poems. The applications. The fear. The distance. And the friendship that had somehow survived all of it. At one point, Naina stopped walking. "Do you ever think about those days?"

Ashish looked at her. "Sometimes."

"Do you regret leaving?"

He was silent for a moment. "Yes."

Naina nodded. "I regret leaving too."

They both smiled. It was perhaps the most honest answer they had ever given each other.

In the late afternoon, they sat on a bench overlooking the river. The sun was beginning to soften. Students moved around them. Bicycles passed. The world continued. Naina looked at Ashish. "Do you think we made the right choices?"

He looked towards the water. "I think we made the choices we were capable of making then."

She smiled. "That sounds like something a philosopher would say."

He laughed. "Four years abroad changes people."

"No," she said softly. "Perhaps it just teaches them to accept themselves."

He looked at her. She continued: "I used to think that if we cared about each other, one of us had to be wrong."

"And now?"

"Now I think some relationships don't need to become anything else to be real."

Ashish smiled. "I think so too."

Her daughter's first day was almost over. Naina knew she had to leave. She stood. Ashish stood too. For a moment, they simply looked at each other. There was no urgency. No unfinished confession. No need to hold on. Only affection. Deep affection. The kind that had survived distance, time, marriage, fear and change. Ashish smiled. "You'll visit again?"

"If my daughter allows me."

"She will."

Naina laughed. Then she held out her hand. He took it. A simple handshake.

But neither released it immediately. They looked at each other. And then Naina smiled. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For leaving."

Ashish's eyes softened. “And thank you for letting me go.”

They just hugged each other for one last time. They felt the warmth. Something was still between them. Never ending feelings, care and love. They finally released each other.

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That evening, as Naina walked back towards her hotel, she received a message.

Ashish: Safe journey tomorrow.

She smiled.

Then another message arrived.

Ashish: And Naina...

She waited.

Ashish: Some people remain part of your life even when they are no longer part of your everyday life.

Naina read it twice.

Then typed:

Naina: Some bonds don't need distance or closeness to prove what they were.

She put her phone away. Behind her, the university lights glowed against the evening sky. Somewhere inside those ancient buildings was a man she had once loved in a way neither of them had known how to name. He had moved on. She had moved on. Their lives had continued. And yet, something remained. Not possession. Not regret. Not longing. Just love. Unconditional, unclaimed, and finally at peace. And perhaps that was the most beautiful ending their story could have. Because they had not ended up together. Perhaps that was the answer.

Or perhaps it wasn't.

Perhaps the reader would decide.

Was it love?

Was it friendship?

Was it an emotional betrayal that never became an actual betrayal?

Was it simply two human beings finding each other at the wrong time?

There was no easy judgment.

Only two lives.

Two choices and one connection that had changed both of them.

Because sometimes the rarest ending isn't: “they ended up together.”

Sometimes it is: They loved.

They chose wisely. They let go. And they never had to pretend that the love had never existed. They had ended up whole.

And sometimes, that is the rarest kind of happy ending.