# When hearts find home

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# Chapter 1
# A Life Rebuilt



The morning began quietly at the Mehra residence. The city was only beginning to stir when Dr. Neel Mehra returned from his morning walk.

At forty-one, Neel had mastered the art of beginning his days before the rest of the world did. A renowned oncologist, he was known at the hospital not only for his exceptional skill but also for the patience with which he dealt with his patients.

Cancer had taught him many things. That life could change in a moment. That fear could make even the strongest person fragile. And that sometimes, healing had very little to do with medicine.

He stepped into the house, placed his walking shoes neatly beside the door and headed straight to the kitchen.

His mother was already there.

"You could have waited for me" she said.

Neel smiled.

"Good morning, Ma."

“Good morning. And I was asking you to wait for me.”

“I know.”

“Then why didn't you?”

“Because you were sleeping peacefully.”

His mother shook her head.

“You are forty-one, Neel. You don't have to do everything yourself.”

He picked up the kettle.

“I know that too.”

“Then?”

“Then let me make my tea.”

She sighed, though there was a faint smile on her face. This was how Neel had always been. He never liked troubling anyone. His mother had stayed with him through the hardest years of his life, and he had quietly decided that she had done enough. He wanted her mornings to be peaceful, her evenings unhurried. While the tea brewed, she prepared breakfast.

“You're making toast for Sahana again?” she asked.

“She likes it.”

“She likes everything you make.”

“Because I make it with love.”

His mother looked at him for a moment.

“You've always done that.”

Neel smiled but said nothing.

His mother watched him prepare his tea for both of them. There were certain things a mother could never stop noticing. The tiredness beneath his eyes. The faint lines that had appeared on his forehead. And the quiet strength with which her son had

rebuilt his life after it had fallen apart. Sometimes she wondered how much pain a person could carry without allowing it to change the kindness in his heart. Neel had carried plenty. And yet, he had remained Neel.

---

Years ago, she had watched her son fall in love.

Ira Ahuja had been beautiful. Stunning, in fact. A struggling model in her twenties, she had walked into Neel's life when he was still a young doctor building his career. His mother had been cautious.

"Neel, are you certain?"

He had looked at her with the foolish confidence of a man in love.

"About what, Ma?"

"About her."

Neel had smiled.

"I love her."

"That isn't what I asked."

"Then what did you ask?"

"Whether she loves you."

He had gone quiet. Then he had laughed.

"You've never even spoken to her properly."

"I am a mother. I don't always need to."

"Ma…"

"I only want you to be happy."

"I will be."

His mother had sighed.

"I hope so."

Ira married Neel. His family was well established. His father, who was alive then, was himself a renowned doctor. Neel had a promising career, financial security and a respectable family name. And Ira knew it. She left modelling after their marriage. For a while, Neel believed she had done it because she wanted to build a home with him. Then Sahana was born. Neel was overjoyed. Ira was happy too.

But somewhere along the way, the life she had imagined for herself began to feel like a life she had surrendered. And Neel became the person she blamed. One evening, after another argument, his mother had found him sitting alone in the living room.

"Neel?"

He looked up.

"Hmm?"

"What happened?"

"Nothing."

"Don't lie to me."

He smiled faintly.

"Ira is upset."

"She has been upset for a long time."

Neel lowered his eyes.

"She thinks I ruined her life."

His mother's expression changed.

"Did you?"

"No."

"Then why do you carry that guilt?"

"Because perhaps she had dreams that she gave up for me."

His mother sat beside him.

“Did you ask her to give them up?”

“No.”

“Did you stop her from working?”

“No.”

“Then?”

Neel remained silent. His mother touched his shoulder.

“Neel, you cannot spend your entire life apologising for someone else's choices.”

He looked at her.

“I just want her to be happy.”

“And what about you?”

He gave a tired smile.

“I'll manage.”

His mother hated that answer. Because Neel always said he would manage. He managed when his marriage became distant. He managed when Ira rarely involved herself in the household. He managed when he became the parent who knew every detail about their daughter's life. He managed because he had learned that love sometimes meant doing more than your share without keeping count. And then came the accident.

—

Neel was rinsing a cup when the memory returned. Not completely. Never completely. Just fragments.

A telephone ringing. A frightened voice. A hospital corridor. A tiny hand. A white hospital sheet.

And Ira standing beside the bed, staring at their five-year-old daughter as though she had suddenly become a stranger. Sahana had been sitting beside her mother in the car.

Ira had been driving. She had been talking on the phone. One moment of distraction had been enough. The car struck a pole. The windshield shattered. The glass took away more than a few seconds of their lives. It took away Sahana's sight. And it changed all of theirs. She had survived the accident physically. But something inside her had broken. Ira stayed. For a year. She tried. Or perhaps she believed she tried.

But motherhood became difficult when the child who once ran through the house needed help finding her way through it. Ira struggled with it. She struggled with Sahana's blindness. With the changes in her own life. With the responsibilities she had never imagined carrying. And one evening, she finally said what Neel had feared.

“I can't do this anymore.”

Neel had stared at her.

“Do what?”

“Live like this.”

His voice had remained calm.

“She is our daughter.”

“I know.”

“She needs us”

“I have a life too, Neel.”

He had looked at her for a long time.

“Yes,” he finally said. “You do.”

“I don't want to spend the rest of my life taking care of a child who will always need me.”

Neel's jaw tightened.

“She doesn't need you to pity her.”

“I never said I pity her.”

"You are acting as if her blindness has taken away your life."

Ira looked away.

"It has changed everything."

"Yes," Neel said quietly. "It has."

She left. She simply chose a life beyond the one that had become difficult for her.

Neel never stopped Sahana from knowing the truth. But he never allowed her mother's absence to become a wound that defined her. He stayed. He never remarried. Not because he believed love was impossible.

But because he had already found the life he wanted. It was right there. In a little girl who loved mathematics.

In the songs she sang around the house. In the chessboard that occupied half the dining table.

In the voice that called him papa. —-

"Papa?"

Neel blinked.

The memory disappeared. His eleven-year-old daughter was standing at the kitchen entrance.

Her school uniform was neatly pressed. Her hair was tied carefully, with a little help from her grandmother.

"Good morning, sweetheart."

"Good morning"

She smiled.

"Is breakfast ready?"

"Almost."

She walked towards the table with confidence, her fingers lightly brushing the familiar edge of the furniture.

Neel watched her. Six years had passed since the accident. Six years since darkness had entered his little girl's world. But Neel had never allowed it to enter her spirit.

“Your toast is ready.”

He placed it before her.

Sahana touched the plate, found the toast and picked up the butter.

“I can do it, Papa.”

“I know.”

She carefully spread the butter herself. Her movements were slow but assured. Her grandmother watched with quiet pride.

“Too much butter?” Sahana asked.

Neel smiled.

“Perfect.”

“You always say that.”

“Because it always is.”

She laughed.

“Papa, today I have mathematics test”

“I know.”

“You remembered?”

“I remember everything about you.”

She tilted her head.

“Even the things I don't tell you?”

“Those are the things I worry about most.”

She giggled.

“Papa!”

He laughed.

"What?"

"You are impossible."

"And you are late."

"I am not."

"You have seven minutes."

She immediately became serious.

"Seven?"

"Six now."

"Papa!"

He laughed as she hurriedly reached for her schoolbag.

His mother stood watching them.

This was her favourite part of every morning. The two of them. Father and daughter. A world built around small conversations and enormous love. Sahana had never asked why her mother wasn't there. Perhaps she knew. Perhaps she had learned enough over the years to understand.

Or perhaps she had simply accepted that some questions did not need answers every morning. What mattered was that she had a father who never made her feel incomplete. Neel bent down and adjusted the strap of her bag.

"Ready?"

"Yes."

"Lunch?"

"In the bag."

"Water?"

"Yes."

“Chess practice?”

“Papa!”

“Just checking.”

“I know.”

She smiled and reached for his hand.

Neel closed his fingers around hers.

“Let's go.”---

That was Neel's life.

Simple. Quiet. Complete. A beautiful little world made up of his mother, his daughter and the work he loved.

At the hospital, he was Dr. Neel Mehra, the oncologist patients trusted with their most frightening days. At home, he was simply Sahana's Papa. He encouraged her to sing. He played chess with her. He helped her with mathematics. He taught her that blindness was a challenge, not a definition.

“Papa,” she had once asked him, “Will I always need help?”

Neel had smiled.

“Everyone needs help sometimes.”

“But I want to be independent.”

“And you will be.”

“How do you know?”

“Because you have already started.”

She had smiled then. And Neel had realised something. He didn't need to save his daughter from the world. He only needed to make sure she never believed the world was beyond her reach. He had survived a broken marriage. He had watched his family change. He had lost a wife who had chosen to leave. But he had never lost himself. He had simply built a different life. A quieter one. A stronger one.

And every morning, when Sahana's fingers found his hand, Neel knew that whatever he had lost was nothing compared to what he had been given. He looked at his daughter now.

“Ready for school?”

“Always.”

She smiled.

And Neel smiled back.

Neither of them knew that life was quietly preparing to change once again.

This time, however, it would again come through an accident.

# Chapter 2
# ANOTHER LIFE REBUILT



It was not an ordinary day for Nishi.

At thirty-five, Nishi Sanyal was a successful tech lead—smart, confident, and quietly striking. There was a certain sensuality in the way she carried herself, but it was her self-assurance that people noticed first. Life had tested her in ways she rarely spoke about, yet she had learned to face every hardship on her own.

Her seven-year-old son, Palash, had already left for school. Nishi had walked him to the gate that morning and stayed there until he climbed onto the school bus. She watched until the bus disappeared around the corner before turning back towards the house.

Once inside, she poured herself a cup of black coffee. She stood by the window, taking slow sips, and looked around the familiar room.

For seven years, this house had been her home. It had witnessed Palash's first steps, his first words, his endless toys scattered across the floor, his feverish nights and cheerful mornings. It had

seen Nishi cry when no one was looking and smile when she had to pretend that everything was fine.

But now, almost everything was packed. Boxes stood against the walls. Suitcases were lined up near the door. The shelves looked strangely bare.

After seven years, she was leaving. It wasn't an impulsive decision. She had thought about it for months.

She had recently changed her job, and her new office was much closer to Palash's new school. She had bought a new house recently. It's a new beginning. That mattered more to her than anything else. Being a single mother meant that she couldn't afford to spend hours commuting every day. She couldn't be far from Palash for long.

He was the one person she could never compromise on. Nishi finished her coffee and placed the empty cup in the kitchen sink. Then she rolled up the sleeves of her T-shirt and looked at the remaining things scattered around the living room.

"Come on, Nishi," she murmured to herself. "One last round."

She picked up a stack of books and began placing them carefully into a carton.

A new job. A new house. A new neighbourhood.

Perhaps, after everything she had endured, life was finally giving her a chance to begin again.

She just didn't know yet that this new beginning would change her life in ways she could never have imagined. One last cupboard remained. Nishi had deliberately avoided it for days.

But tomorrow, she was leaving. There was no reason to postpone it any longer. She dragged a small stool across the room and climbed onto it. Reaching up, she opened the cupboard.

The next moment, a lizard suddenly leapt out. Nishi screamed. She lost her balance and fell from the stool, landing awkwardly on the floor.

"Ah!"

Pain shot through her arms. For a few seconds, she simply lay there, stunned. Then she looked down and noticed blood trickling from a cut on her arm.

There was no one to help her. No one to rush towards her. No one to ask, Are you all right?

Nishi took a deep breath and slowly sat up.

"Never mind, Nishi," she whispered to herself, trying to smile through the pain. "You have seen worse."

And she had. There had been countless moments in her life when she had fallen—sometimes literally, more often emotionally. And every single time, she had picked herself up.

She wiped the blood from her arm and began clearing the things that had fallen from the cupboard. Then she noticed a photo frame lying on the floor. The glass had shattered. That was what had cut her arm. Nishi reached for the frame and turned it over. Her fingers froze. It was a photograph of her and Vineet.

For a moment, she simply stared at it. She had tried so hard to leave the past behind. But memories had a cruel way of finding their way back.

In the photograph, she was dressed in a beautiful bridal attire, her face glowing with happiness. Beside her stood Vineet—young, handsome and smiling with the kind of innocence she had once loved so deeply.

She wondered where he was now. How did he look? Had he changed? Was he happy?

She didn't know. She hadn't seen him in years. Nishi swallowed hard. They had fallen in love during their second year of college.

Vineet had been drawn to her kindness, her compassion, the way she could never ignore someone else's pain. Their friendship had slowly deepened into a beautiful camaraderie, and somewhere

along the way, friendship had quietly transformed into love. Eventually, they had married. She remembered that day vividly.

She had been so happy. She had married the man she loved.

A lump formed in her throat.

"Why did you do this, Vineet?" her heart cried.

But the truth was complicated. Vineet had never cheated on her. There had been no other woman. No secret affair. He had loved Nishi deeply.

The problem was that Vineet had never been able to escape his past. His mother had left the family when he was thirteen. She had walked out of the marriage for another man, leaving behind a boy who couldn't understand why his mother had chosen to leave him. Soon afterwards, his father remarried, hoping the new marriage would give his son a family again.

But it didn't. His stepmother sent Vineet away to a Boarding school. And just like that, the boy learned the most painful lesson of his childhood—people could leave.

He grew up without the security every child deserved. There was no mother to hold his hand when he was frightened. No one to reassure him that he would never be abandoned. No one to teach him that love could be trusted. So, Vineet learned to survive on his own.

And then he found Nishi.

She loved him with all her heart. But love alone could not erase years of fear. Vineet's childhood had taught him to question everything. Even Nishi's love. Even her loyalty. Even the very thing he had always longed for.

He loved her, but he could never completely trust that she would stay. And slowly, painfully, that insecurity began to destroy the marriage they had once believed would last forever. Nishi closed her eyes. For a moment, she held the photograph against her chest.

Then she opened the carton and carefully placed it aside. There was no point standing there any longer.

She cleaned the shattered glass from the floor, bandaged her bleeding arm as best as she could, and finally wrapped the photograph in an old piece of cloth. She placed it inside one of the boxes.

Tomorrow, she would leave this house. And perhaps, this time, she would leave the past behind with it.

At least, that was what she wanted to believe. As she continued clearing the cupboard, Nishi came across a small bundle of clothes. She pulled it out and smiled.

Palash's baby clothes. Tiny little shirts, a pair of shorts, and several impossibly small socks that she could hardly believe had once fitted her son's tiny feet. She picked up one of the socks and held it between her fingers.

"How small you were," she murmured, smiling to herself.

For a moment, the heaviness in her heart disappeared. Then her fingers touched something beneath the clothes.

A file. Nishi's smile faded. She knew that file. She had not opened it in years. Slowly, she pulled it out.

The medical report. The report that had changed the course of her life. She sat down on the edge of the bed and opened it. Her eyes moved across the familiar words. She had read them so many times that she didn't really need to.

Yet, somehow, she read them again. Every sentence brought back memories she had spent years trying to bury.

Vineet's face. The silence that had followed. The questions. The accusations.

And the day her entire world had changed. Nishi's fingers tightened around the edges of the paper.

She quickly closed the file. At that very moment, the door opened.

Her maid had arrived.

“Madam?”

Nishi looked up.

“Yes. I'm here.”

She slipped the file back into the cupboard and closed the door. Then she stood up, composed herself and returned to packing as though nothing had happened. She picked up another box and began arranging things inside it.

“I have to move on,” she reminded herself quietly.

This time, she wasn't sure whether she was convincing herself or simply trying to survive another memory. But she had done that before. She would do it again.

# Chapter 3
# THE PAST RETURNS



Nishi's new office had a warm, welcoming atmosphere. The space was modern yet comfortable, filled with natural light and a quiet hum of activity. Her new colleagues greeted her warmly, introducing themselves with friendly smiles that slowly eased her nervousness.

Everything seemed perfect.

Until she was told to meet the person she would be reporting to.

One of the staff members led her down the corridor and stopped before a cabin.

"Your reporting manager is inside, Nishi"

Nishi nodded and stepped in.

The man sitting behind the desk was going through some documents. Hearing the door open, he looked up and turned towards her.

Nishi froze at the doorway. Her eyes widened as she stared at him. Her heart skipped a beat.

Vineet Malhotra.

For a moment, neither of them could speak. Vineet stared at her in disbelief, while Nishi stood frozen at the doorway.

Neither had expected to see the other—not here, not today.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. They simply looked at each other.

Painful memories flashed through Nishi's eyes, while outrage flickered in Vineet's. But he quickly composed himself, masking his emotions behind a calm, professional expression.

The colleague accompanying Nishi finally broke the silence.

"Sir, she is Nishi Sanyal, our new Tech Lead. She'll be assisting with the pilot batch."

He then turned towards Nishi.

"Nishi, he is the person you'll be reporting to. Mr. Vineet Malhotra."

Nishi swallowed hard. Her heart was pounding, but she forced herself to remain composed.

"Good morning, sir."

Vineet extended his hand.

"Good morning, Nishi."

After a brief hesitation, Nishi shook his hand.

The moment their hands met, a strange silence filled the room—professional on the surface, but carrying years of unspoken history underneath.

Then Nishi's eyes fell on something on Vineet's desk.

A photograph. Her photograph.

She was wearing the beautiful red gown Vineet had gifted her on their first anniversary. For a moment, the sight of it left her

stunned. She had never imagined that he would still have that photograph after all these years.

Before their colleague could notice it, Vineet quickly picked up the frame and slipped it into the drawer.

But it was too late. He had seen the way Nishi's eyes had lingered on it.

She had noticed. Their eyes met briefly, and in that fleeting moment, neither said a word. Soon after, the colleague excused himself, leaving them alone so Vineet could explain Nishi's role and responsibilities. The door closed behind him. Silence settled over the cabin.

Nishi found the situation painfully awkward. Sitting across from Vineet after all these years was the last thing she had ever imagined. She wanted to cry, to let out everything she had kept buried for so long, but she forced herself to remain composed. Vineet seemed to understand her discomfort.

"Have a seat, Nishi."

She quietly obeyed.

"Thank you, sir," she replied, her voice deliberately professional.

Vineet picked up the glass of water from his desk and offered it to her.

"Here."

Nishi accepted it with a small nod and took a sip. For a few moments, neither spoke. Then Vineet finally broke the silence.

"I never knew it was you."

Nishi looked at him.

"When did you come to Delhi? You were in Bangalore, weren't you?"

"It's been almost seven years," she replied quietly.

Vineet looked up, surprised.

"Why? You had a stable job there."

Something inside Nishi snapped.

"You know the reason, Vineet."

Her voice trembled with barely contained emotion. A bitter smile touched his lips.

"Vineet?" he corrected; his voice laced with sarcasm. "Instead of 'sir.'"

Nishi sighed. She understood exactly what he meant, but chose not to respond.

"Sorry, sir," she said quietly. Nishi sighed and lowered her gaze and returning to the professional distance between them.

Vineet continued, "Okay, fine. Let's drop the formalities when no one is around."

Nishi looked up at him but said nothing.

"Vineet, will you please explain my roles and responsibilities?"

"I will, once your team comes back. They're on a breakfast break in the cafeteria."

He paused for a moment, studying her face.

"How are you, Nishi?"

"Good."

"And your parents?"

"They're fine. They are in Bangalore"

Vineet nodded, but his curiosity only grew.

"And your family?"

"Vineet, I told you. My mom and dad are still in Bangalore."

"So, you stay here alone?"

"No. I live here with my son, Palash."

The moment the name left her lips, Nishi regretted it.

A flash of rage crossed Vineet's face.

He stared at her; his eyes suddenly hard. Nishi hadn't intended to tell him her son's name. It had simply slipped out. Vineet clenched his fists beneath the desk. For a moment, he struggled to control himself. He had a hundred questions racing through his mind, but he knew he was dangerously close to losing his composure.

He struck his fist against the desk. Nishi flinched. Vineet swallowed hard, then immediately reached for the intercom.

"Send Mayank in."

A few moments later, Mayank entered the cabin.

"Mayank, I've sent you the email. Please introduce Nishi to the team and email the details to her."

He glanced at Nishi.

"She's an intelligent and capable woman. It won't take her long to understand the process."

"I need not explain anything to her," he added, his voice carrying a faint edge of sarcasm that almost sounded like praise.

"But, sir, her team is still in the cafeteria," Mayank reminded him.

"That's alright. Show her where she'll be sitting. She can go through the process herself. In the meantime, you can explain whatever is necessary."

Nishi quietly stood up. She had been desperate to leave the cabin, and strangely, she felt relieved when Mayank arrived. For the moment, she could finally breathe.

"Sure, sir," Mayank replied.

"Thank you, sir," Nishi said softly.

The moment she stepped out of the cabin, Nishi realized just how frightened she had been.

She knew Vineet's anger. For a fleeting moment inside the cabin, it had felt as though he might actually slap her. Yet, somehow, he had managed to control himself. Perhaps the years had mellowed him.

Or perhaps he had simply learned to hide his anger better. She shook her head, trying to push the thoughts away, and followed Mayank down the corridor. Mayank led Nishi to her cabin. It was a glass-walled cabin, and from the glass door of his own cabin, Vineet could see her clearly.

He had been watching her as she walked down the corridor.

This hadn't been planned. He hadn't even realized that her cabin would be right where he could see her. Yet, for a fleeting moment, the thought brought a strange sense of comfort. He immediately brushed it aside.

Mayank introduced himself properly. He had a calm and reassuring demeanour.

"If you have any doubts or need any help, please feel free to reach out to me," he assured her. "I'm the Tech Lead for another process, so I'll be happy to help you settle in."

He patiently explained her responsibilities and walked her through the initial process. Soon after, he left.

Nishi sat at her desk, staring at the ThinkPad in front of her. But she couldn't concentrate. Her mind had already travelled back to the painful memories she had tried so hard to bury. She interlaced her fingers and sat lost in thought.

What on earth had brought her here? Of all the places, she had ended up reporting to Vineet.

She knew it wasn't going to be easy.

She had resigned from her previous job under circumstances she still found deeply embarrassing. Fortunately, she had managed to find another job quickly. Then she had bought a house in Lifeline Apartments, a residential complex built for the doctors and staff

of Lifeline Multispeciality Hospital. The apartment had been a distress sale, and she had taken the opportunity to buy it.

But now she had an EMI to pay. And a son whose future depended on her. She couldn't simply walk away.

What was she going to do now?

Nishi reached for her water bottle and took a slow sip. Then, suddenly, a thought steadied her. I got this job because of my merit. I haven't done anything wrong. She straightened in her chair.

"I won't go anywhere," she whispered to herself.

"I am not afraid of Vineet Malhotra."

With renewed determination, she turned towards her laptop and began working. What Nishi didn't know was that, from his cabin, Vineet was watching her. His eyes remained fixed on her through the glass wall, following every movement. And despite everything he had told himself, he couldn't look away.

# Chapter 4
# THE HEART HE SILENCED



The rest of the day went smoothly for Nishi.

After completing the initial formalities, she finally met the team she would be leading. One by one, the team members introduced themselves—sharing their roles, areas of expertise, and the projects they had previously worked on. Nishi listened attentively, occasionally asking a question or two. She wasn't trying to establish authority; she was trying to understand the people she would be working with.

What impressed her most was their enthusiasm.

They were a young, capable team, eager to learn and equally eager to grow. Several of them spoke about the technologies they wanted to explore and the skills they hoped to develop. Nishi could sense their curiosity—and, more importantly, their willingness to learn from someone with greater experience.

Once everyone had introduced themselves, Nishi smiled.

"Thank you, everyone. I'm really glad to be part of this team."

She paused, looking around the room.

"As your Tech Lead, I have a few expectations. But before that, I want you to know something—I don't expect you to know everything. Technology changes every day, and none of us can know it all. What matters is that we remain willing to learn."

The room grew quieter as everyone listened.

"I expect ownership. If you take responsibility for something, own it from beginning to end. If you make a mistake, don't hide it. Tell me. We'll figure it out together."

A few faces relaxed.

"And please, ask questions. There is no such thing as a stupid question. I'd rather have someone ask ten questions than make one assumption that could affect the entire project."

She smiled again.

"I also believe in collaboration. We may have different roles and different levels of experience, but when we're working on a project, we're one team. No one succeeds alone."

Her words were simple, but there was quiet confidence in them.

"I'll always be available if you need guidance. At the same time, I want each of you to think independently, challenge ideas when necessary, and bring your own solutions to the table."

She glanced around the room once more.

"I'm not here simply to manage the project. I'm here to make sure all of us grow with it."

For a moment, there was silence. Then someone smiled. Another nodded. And Nishi knew she had made the right beginning.

Her first meeting with the team had lasted less than an hour, but by the time it ended, she had already earned something far more valuable than authority. Their trust.

What Nishi wasn't aware of was that she had been observed throughout.

Standing a little distance away in the corridor, Vineet held his coffee mug loosely in one hand. To anyone passing by, there was nothing unusual about him being there. As the project manager, it was perfectly natural for him to keep an eye on the day's activities, make sure things were running smoothly, and check how the new team was settling in. At least, that was what anyone would have assumed.

The truth was far simpler. His curiosity had got the better of him.

He had noticed Nishi earlier, and now, almost without intending to, he found himself watching her.

Through the glass partition, he could hear fragments of the conversation. He listened as Nishi introduced herself, spoke about her expectations, and encouraged the team to ask questions without hesitation.

She wasn't trying to impress them. She didn't need to.

There was a quiet confidence in the way she spoke—a calmness that came from knowing exactly what she was doing. She listened when others spoke. She never interrupted unnecessarily. And when she smiled, it seemed to put everyone at ease. Vineet took another sip of his coffee, his eyes remaining on her.

He watched the way she gradually won the team's confidence—not by asserting her position as their Tech Lead, but by making them feel that their opinions mattered. Interesting. Very interesting.

He couldn't quite explain why he was paying such close attention. Perhaps it was simply because she was new. Perhaps it was because he wanted to understand the person who had suddenly become part of his professional world. Or perhaps there was another reason he wasn't ready to acknowledge. The meeting eventually came to an end. Chairs moved back, laptops were

closed, and the team members began filing out of the room. A few of them stopped to exchange pleasantries with Vineet.

“Good morning, sir.”

“Morning.”

He responded casually, maintaining the appearance of someone simply going about his usual responsibilities.

Then Nishi stepped out. She turned—and her eyes met his.

For a fleeting second, she paused. She had seen that look before.

Vineet wasn't merely standing there. He had been watching. Watching her.

She knew him well enough to recognise the difference. But Nishi quickly dismissed the thought.

I'm probably reading too much into it. She offered him a polite smile before turning away.

There was a project waiting, deadlines to meet, and an entire team depending on her. Within moments, she was back at her desk, immersed in work.

Vineet, however, remained in the corridor for a few seconds longer, his coffee forgotten in his hand. His curiosity about Nishi had only deepened.

It was lunch break.

Nishi stepped away from her desk and called home. Since it was her first day at work, Raima had promised to help her settle in. She had brought Palash home with her so Nishi wouldn't have to worry about him being alone. The call was answered almost immediately.

“Hello, Ma.”

A smile appeared on Nishi's face.

“Hello, Palash. How's my boy doing?”

“I'm fine. How is your first day, Ma?”

“Very well, son. Everything went smoothly. I met my team, understood the project, and I think I'm going to enjoy working with them.”

“See? I told you you'd be fine.”

Nishi laughed softly.

“Did you have something to eat?”

“Yes, Ma. Raima auntie made sure I did.”

“Very well, son. How was school today?”

“It was good, Ma. We had a science activity. It was actually fun.”

“That sounds nice. Did you enjoy it?”

“Yes. And I got to work with Arjun.”

“I’m glad. Did you have your lunch?”

“Yes, Raima auntie made sure I ate properly.”

She asked the question second time about his lunch.

“Good. And now that you're home, get some rest. You must be tired after school.”

“I’m okay, Ma.”

“I know you are, but you don't have to prove it. Freshen up, have some water, and then relax for a while. And don't spend the whole afternoon glued to your screen.”

“Okay, Ma.”

“And listen to Raima auntie. I’m at work today, so I want you to behave yourself.” She chuckles.

“I always behave myself.”

Nishi laughed softly.

“That is a very generous opinion of yourself.”

Palash laughed too.

“Don't worry, Ma. I'll be fine.”

“I know you will. I'll call you again when I leave the office.”

“Okay. And Ma?”

“Yes?”

“I’m happy you're enjoying your first day.”

Nishi's smile softened.

“Thank you, sweetheart. That means a lot.”

“Now go and rest.”

“Yes, Ma.”

“Love you.”

“Love you too, Ma. And break a leg!” Nishi said with a warm smile, her voice carrying a playful note of encouragement.

“Look who's giving me advice now.”

“Someone has to.”

They both laughed before ending the call. Nishi lowered her phone, still smiling.

For a moment, she simply stood there, feeling reassured. Her first day was going well. Her son was fine. Everything seemed to be falling into place.

She turned around. And froze. Vineet was standing just behind her. He had clearly not expected to be noticed.

For the first time that day, the usually composed Vineet looked distinctly uncomfortable. He had apparently walked up without realising that she was on a personal call, and now there was no graceful way to pretend he hadn't heard at least part of it.

Nishi looked at him. Vineet looked away. An awkward silence settled between them.

"I—" he began, then stopped.

Nishi raised an eyebrow.

"Were you waiting for me?"

He cleared his throat, suddenly finding his coffee mug far more interesting than the person standing in front of him.

"Yes. I mean... I was just passing by."

Nishi almost smiled.

"Of course."

Vineet nodded, visibly embarrassed. Nishi noticed Vineet standing and gestured towards the chair opposite her.

"Come, have a seat."

He accepted. Nishi opened her lunchbox, took out a small plate, and served some food onto it before offering it to him with a gentle smile.

Vineet wanted to refuse, but after a moment, reluctantly accepted.

"How is Baba?" Nishi asked.

"Oh, Baba… yes." He paused. "I'm going to Bangalore today. I'll finally bring him home."

He took a bite. For a moment, he said nothing.

It had been ages since he had tasted food cooked by Nishi. The familiar taste brought back memories he hadn't expected. Nishi noticed his expression but said nothing.

"So, you'll bring your mother too?"

Something shifted in his face. He composed himself almost immediately.

"You mean my stepmother. She passed away last month. Cardiac arrest."

"Oh…" Nishi's expression softened. "I'm sorry to hear that."

Vineet nodded.

"I'm happy for Baba, though. He was never really happy. He married again for my sake, but…" He stopped himself. "Anyway."

He took another bite.

"He's a good man," Vineet said quietly. "He deserves some peace."

"I'm glad you decided to bring him home. He's getting older. He'll need you around."

"I have a lot of respect for him."

Something in Nishi's words softened him.

For a few moments, they ate in silence. Then Vineet looked at her.

"You… I mean…"

He hesitated.

"You never remarried?"

Nishi simply shook her head.

"No. I have my son. He's my entire world."

There was no bitterness in her voice. No regret. Just quiet certainty. Something inside Vineet softened.

"And you?" she asked gently.

His expression hardened for a fleeting moment.

She had seen the photograph on his desk that morning. Surely, she knew he hadn't remarried.

Still, he answered simply.

"No. I didn't."

He looked down at his plate.

"I've been occupied with work. And now Baba will be with me. That's my life."

Nishi nodded thoughtfully. Vineet had a hundred questions he wanted to ask her. But there was no hurry.

She is here. That was enough for now.

When they finished lunch, Vineet glanced at his watch.

"I have a flight at four. I should leave."

Nishi nodded. Vineet continued

"Today is Friday. I'll join office next Friday."

"I hope you'll take good care of your team. I know you will."

He paused.

"And if there's ever an issue, call me. My number is the same."

Nishi hesitated.

"But I thought you had blocked my number."

Vineet took out his phone, opened his contacts, and quietly changed the setting.

He looked up. "Not anymore." Nishi said nothing.

"Welcome aboard," he said. "I'm sure you'll do very well. You've already started well."

He smiled faintly.

"And don't forget—we're a team."

He gently patted her shoulder. Nishi was slightly surprised by the gesture, but she knew Vineet well enough not to read too much into it. His warmth and distance had always come unpredictably.

"Alright, Vineet. I get that."

“See you next Friday.”

“Have a safe flight and take care”

“You too.”

They exchanged a brief smile before Vineet walked away. Nishi watched him leave for a moment, then quietly gathered her lunchbox and returned to work. She wasn't moved. Not yet. As Nishi headed towards the elevator, Vineet looked at her one last time. Her gentle smile. Her kind words.

The warmth with which she had spoken to him. And suddenly, memories came rushing back.

For the first time since he had seen her that morning, the composure in his eyes faltered. A quiet pain settled there—deep, familiar, and quickly concealed.

He looked away. I don't need anyone in my life. He drew a slow breath. I am enough. Whatever had happened between them belonged to the past.

He wouldn't allow it to touch him again. And he certainly didn't need anyone's pity.

I don't need pity.

With that thought, Vineet straightened himself, picked up his coffee, and walked away.

# Chapter 5
# THE CHANCE ENCOUNTER



The shift was finally over. Mayank stretched back in his chair and glanced at Nishi.

"Coffee?"

Nishi hesitated for a moment. The day had been long, and she desperately needed a break.

"Sure."

They walked down to the cafeteria and settled at a quiet table with their cups of coffee. Neither of them noticed Sheena walking in. Sheena was halfway across the cafeteria when her eyes fell on Nishi.

She stopped. For a moment, recognition flashed across her face. Nishi noticed her too. She smiled warmly.

Sheena smiled back and walked towards them. Mayank immediately rose from his seat, his face lighting up.

"Sheena!"

He hugged his wife affectionately before turning towards Nishi.

"Nishi, meet my beautiful wife—"

"We know each other," Sheena interrupted with a smile. "We were in the same batch."

"Oh!" Mayank looked surprised. "You two know each other?"

"Of course," Sheena laughed.

They exchanged a few pleasantries before Sheena pulled out a chair and sat beside Mayank.

"Nishi, Vineet works here as our Project Lead," Mayank explained. "Sheena and I are working on a different project."

Sheena looked at Nishi.

"I wanted to ask Vineet about you, but he is such a recluse. He hardly talks about anything. Moreover, he is our senior"

Nishi smiled faintly.

"So, you joined Vineet's team?" Sheena asked

"Yes."

"That's wonderful." Sheena smiled. "When husband and wife work together, they get to spend more time with each other."

She looked affectionately at Mayank.

"Totally, honey," he added.

Mayank smiled.

But Nishi remained silent. Sheena noticed.

Then Mayank said casually, "But Vineet sir... he is your husband, right?"

Nishi lowered her eyes for a moment. Then she looked at Sheena.

"No, Sheena. We are not together."

Her voice was gentle. Almost too gentle for the weight of the words. Sheena stared at her.

"What? Since when?"

"It's been eight years."

The smile disappeared from Sheena's face.

"Eight years?"

Nishi simply nodded. There was no bitterness in her expression. No anger. No accusation. Just a quiet acceptance of something that had once broken her.

Sheena knew Nishi from college. She remembered how deeply she had loved Vineet. She had always believed they were one of those couples who would grow old together. Sheena looked at her helplessly, unsure what to say.

Nishi glanced at her watch.

"I should get going. My son is waiting for me. May I take your leave?"

"Your son?" Sheena instinctively asked.

There were a hundred questions in her mind. But something in Nishi's expression told her that this wasn't the time.

"Of course," Sheena said softly. "It was really good to meet you, Nishi."

She got up and gently hugged her.

"And if you ever need anything, Mayank and I are always there for you."

Nishi smiled.

"Thank you, Sheena."

She picked up her bag and walked away. Sheena watched her retreating figure until she disappeared through the cafeteria

doors. For a few moments, she remained silent. Then she turned to Mayank.

“Sad.”

Mayank looked at her.

“I still can't believe it.”

“I always thought they were meant to be together,” Sheena continued. “I was her friend. I knew how deeply she loved him.”

She paused.

“We thought Vineet loved her just as much.”

Her voice softened.

“But I remember how possessive he used to be about her.”

Mayank sighed.

“And she has a son too.” Sheena looked at him. “Does Vineet visit them?”

Mayank gently slipped an arm around her shoulders.

“My beautiful wife... stop worrying about everyone.”

Sheena looked at him.

“I can't help it.”

“I know.”

He smiled.

“I love you, honey. And since tomorrow is Saturday, let's go out for dinner tonight.”

A smile finally appeared on Sheena's face.

“You always spoil me.”

“My beautiful wife deserves to be pampered.”

“Stop flattering me.”

She laughed softly. Then her eyes wandered once again towards the cafeteria entrance through which Nishi had disappeared. For a moment, she wondered about the woman she had once known. The girl who had loved Vineet so deeply. The woman who now walked away carrying a life of her own.

Sheena looked at Mayank.

"I am so lucky to have you."

Mayank smiled and pulled her a little closer.

"Me too."

And together, they walked out of the cafeteria.

Nishi stepped out of the office building. It had been a busy day, leaving her little time to dwell on the past. Perhaps eight years had made her stronger from within.

There were other things to think about now. They had recently moved into a new house, and the cartons were waiting to be unpacked. Raima would arrive with Palash in the evening.

Nishi smiled to herself. She had decided to take Palash out for dinner. He deserved a little treat on her first day at the new job. The next two days of her week off would be spent setting up the house.

She had it all planned. On her way home, she spotted a supermarket.

"Oh, I need groceries."

She parked the car and walked inside.

A few aisles away, she noticed a little girl with her father. The girl appeared to be around eleven. She was carefully selecting groceries while her father patiently guided her.

"This is butter, right?"

"Perfect," her father replied.

She moved towards the apples. One by one, she touched them carefully before placing them in the basket.

Nishi watched curiously.

“My little girl, all the apples you selected are fresh.”

“Really, Dad?”

“Really. Now, let’s get a few more things.”

It didn't take Nishi long to realise that the girl couldn't see. Yet there was nothing helpless about her. She confidently picked up a packet of flour, then sugar, touching and examining each packet while her father patiently validated her choices.

Nishi found herself smiling. There was something beautiful about the way he encouraged her—not doing things for her, but allowing her to do them herself. Just then, Nishi remembered the chocolate spread.

Palash will need it for breakfast. She found the familiar brand on a nearby shelf. Only one jar remained.

Just as she reached for it, the girl's father extended his hand. Their fingers almost touched. Nishi immediately pulled back.

“Oh, I'm sorry. It seems there's only one jar left. You can take it.”

The man smiled politely.

“That’s alright. You reached for it first.”

Before Nishi could respond, the little girl spoke.

“You can take it, Auntie. We still have one at home. Papa can buy another one from the grocery store in our apartment.”

Nishi's heart melted. She looked at the girl with admiration.

“Aww... your daughter is really sweet—and so brave.”

She moved closer and extended her hand.

“I’m Nishi Sanyal.”

The girl reached out uncertainly, unable to see where Nishi's hand was. Nishi gently took her little hand in hers.

"My name is Sahana Mehra."

Nishi smiled.

"You're a very smart and wise child. I was watching you select the groceries and those apples. I really liked the way you did it."

Sahana smiled.

"My dad always tells me that blindness may be a challenge, but it doesn't define who I am."

She paused.

"I want to be independent one day."

"You already are, child."

Nishi's voice carried genuine affection. She turned towards the girl's father.

"You've raised a wonderful daughter. The credit goes to you and your wife."

For a fleeting moment, Sahana fell silent. Her father simply smiled.

"Thank you."

He extended his hand.

"I'm Dr. Neel Mehra."

"Nishi Sanyal."

Their hands met. Before Nishi could take her leave, Neel's phone rang. He answered the call and began speaking about something related to work. Sahana remained beside them, occasionally making innocent observations about the things around her. Nishi listened to her patiently. Suddenly, Neel frowned.

"Your voice is breaking. One second."

He glanced at Sahana.

“Sahana, it’s an urgent call. I need to move a little to get better network. Please stay right here. Don't move. I'll be back.”

“I understand, Papa. You take the call.”

Neel still looked slightly uneasy. Nishi noticed.

“It's okay, Dr. Neel. You take your call. I'll stay with her until you come back.”

“Thank you.”

He smiled gratefully and walked a few steps away in search of a stronger signal. Before leaving, he reminded Sahana once again to stay where she was. The moment he left, Sahana turned towards Nishi.

“Auntie, before Papa comes back, I can help you select your groceries.”

“Really?”

Nishi smiled and gently caressed her hair.

“No, sweetheart. Thank you. That's very kind of you.”

Just then, Nishi's phone rang.

“One second, child.”

It was Raima.

“Hi.”

“Nishi, Palash had a stomach ache.”

Raima's voice kept breaking.

Nishi immediately panicked. She moved few steps away to get a better network.

“What happened to Palash?”

“He's fine now. He had some stomach pain, so I gave him the medicine you usually give him. He's asleep now.”

Nishi let out a breath.

“Don't worry. I just thought I should let you know.”

“Thank you, Raima. You have no idea how much you've helped me.”

“Come on, Nishi. I'm your best friend. I'll bring Palash home after you finish settling in.”

After a brief conversation, the call ended. Nishi turned around.

“Sahana?”

She was not there. She looked towards the spot where the little girl had been standing. Empty. Nishi frowned.

Perhaps Dr Neel had come back and taken her with him. She looked around. Neel was still several steps away, engrossed in his phone call. But Sahana was nowhere to be seen. Nishi's heart skipped a beat. She scanned the aisles.

Nothing. She hurried towards the next one.

“Sahana?”

No response. She checked the neighbouring aisles, then the entrance. Nothing.

A growing sense of guilt tightened in her chest. She had promised Neel she would stay with his daughter.

Where could she have gone? Sahana couldn't see. And she was alone.

Nishi's worry turned into fear. She had to find the little girl. And she had to find her quickly.

# Chapter 6
# THE FEAR HE COULD NOT SHAKE



Nishi stepped out of the shop and looked around. Something immediately caught her attention. A little distance away, in the middle of the main road, stood Sahana.

Nishi froze. For a moment, she couldn't understand how the little girl had reached there. Vehicles were rushing past from both directions, their horns cutting through the air. Sahana stood completely unaware of the danger surrounding her. And then Nishi remembered. Sahana couldn't see. Her heart lurched.

"Sahana!"

There was no time to think. Nishi ran.

At the same moment, Neel ended his phone call and slipped his phone into his pocket. He glanced around—and his blood ran cold. Sahana. Standing in the middle of the road. And coming straight towards her was a speeding car.

"Sahana!"

Neel ran towards his daughter, panic surging through him. But Nishi was closer.

She reached Sahana just as the car came dangerously near. Without hesitation, she pulled the little girl towards herself and turned her own body into a shield. Everything seemed to happen in a fraction of a second.

The screech of tyres. A blaring horn. Someone in the crowd screaming. The driver slammed on the brakes with all his strength. The car stopped abruptly—barely a moment before it could have struck them head-on. But the sudden impact was enough.

Nishi was thrown forward, her body taking the force meant for Sahana. She hit the ground hard.

For a second, the entire street seemed to fall silent. Then the crowd rushed towards them.

"Are they hurt?" "Call an ambulance!" "Move back! Give them some space!"

Neel reached them, his heart pounding violently against his chest.

"Sahana!"

He dropped to his knees beside his daughter. She was trembling, but she was safe. Completely safe.

Not a scratch. Neel's hands moved over her anxiously, as though he needed to convince himself she was really unharmed. Then his eyes shifted to Nishi. His breath caught.

She was lying a few feet away, one hand pressed against her head. Blood trickled down from a cut near her temple. Her face had tightened with pain, and a faint wince escaped her lips as she tried to move.

She had shielded Sahana with her own body. She had taken the impact.

"Ms Nishi!" Neel rushed to her side.

"Nishi, can you hear me?" She opened her eyes slowly. The pain was evident on her face, but her first words were not about herself.

"Sahana…" Neel looked at his daughter.

"She's safe," he said, his voice unsteady. "She's absolutely fine."

Only then did Nishi let out a faint breath, as though that was all she needed to hear. Neel stared at her, shaken.

He had watched his daughter stand helplessly in the middle of a busy road. And he had watched a woman who barely knew them throw herself in front of her without thinking twice.

For those few terrifying seconds, Nishi had not thought about her own safety. She had simply seen a child in danger. And she had chosen to protect her—even if it meant putting herself in harm's way.

The driver threw open the car door and stepped out, visibly shaken.

His face was pale with fright, but anger quickly replaced it.

"What were you thinking?" he demanded, turning towards Neel. "You almost got us killed!"

Neel, still shaken, looked at him. The man pointed towards the road.

"What if there had been a heavy vehicle behind me? What if I hadn't managed to brake in time? Your daughter and your wife could have been under my car!"

Neel lowered his eyes. He had no defence. The man was angry, but he was also terrified. His hands were still trembling from what had almost happened.

"And if something had happened to your blind daughter, what then?" he continued. "The police would have arrested me. My family is waiting for me at home too. I have a wife and children. I

cannot simply throw my life away because someone wasn't careful enough."

"I am sorry," Neel said quietly.

The man continued muttering, still unable to let go of his fear.

"You people need to be careful. Roads aren't playgrounds."

Neel apologised again. And again. It took several minutes before the man's anger finally began to subside. Eventually, with one last frustrated shake of his head, he turned away.

"It was indeed a bad day for me."

He walked back towards his car, muttering under his breath.

"Streets are indeed filled with idiots."

Neel watched him leave. He couldn't even be angry with him. The man was right. The mistake had been his. He should never have left Sahana alone. But before he could dwell on it any longer, his eyes went towards the bus stop.

A few women from the crowd had helped Nishi and Sahana to their feet. They had guided them to one of the benches and made Nishi sit down. Someone had brought her water.

Nishi sat there, pale and shaken, one hand pressed against her temple. Blood was slowly trickling down the side of her face. Sahana stood beside her, looking devastated.

"Are you hurt?" she asked in a trembling voice. "Are you bleeding?"

Nishi looked at her and managed a faint smile.

"No, child. I'm all right."

She winced as another wave of pain travelled through her head. Then she looked at Sahana again.

"I am just glad you are safe."

Sahana's eyes filled with tears.

“I know it is hurting you. I'm sorry.”

Nishi remained silent.

“I was just trying to impress Papa,” Sahana whispered. “It was my fault.”

“No, child.”

Nishi reached out and gently touched her arm.

“Just make sure you never do something like this again.”

Sahana nodded.

“And remember,” Nishi added softly, “it is okay to ask for help.”

The words were simple. But something about them stayed with Sahana. Nishi closed her eyes for a moment, fighting another wave of pain. That was when Neel finally reached them. One of the women from the crowd was gently wiping the blood from Nishi's temple with her handkerchief. She looked up at Neel.

“Your wife is very brave,” she said. “She risked her life for the little girl.”

Neel opened his mouth to correct her. But the words didn't come.

The woman continued, “Only a mother could do something like that.”

Then she smiled at Nishi and walked away. Slowly, the crowd dispersed. The road returned to its usual rhythm. But Neel remained still.

His eyes were fixed on Nishi. A total stranger he met some time ago. The woman who had thrown herself in front of a car for a child who was, to her, a complete stranger. He didn't understand why. He only knew that his heart was filled with gratitude. Thank you seemed like such a small, insignificant phrase.

How could two words possibly repay someone for what she had just done?

And then there was his guilt. He had been careless. He should have been watching Sahana.

He should have protected his daughter. Instead, Nishi had done it for him. And she had paid for it with her own blood. Neel crouched beside her.

"Ms. Nishi?"

She opened her eyes. He took out his handkerchief and gently wiped the blood from her temple. Only then did he notice the small cut on her lip. His expression tightened.

"Why did you do this?"

Nishi looked at him. For a moment, she didn't answer. Then, in a voice weakened by pain, she said,

"When you went to take the call, I was the one who promised to look after her until you came back."

She paused to catch her breath.

"I gave you, my word." Neel listened silently.

"But then my son was unwell. I got a call. The network wasn't working properly. By the time I came back…"

Her voice faded. She looked towards Sahana.

"It was too late."

Another sharp pain crossed her face. She closed her eyes.

"I had to act."

Then she looked back at Neel.

"Otherwise, I wouldn't have been able to forgive myself in this lifetime."

Neel stared at her. There was no heroism in her voice.

No expectation of praise. She had simply done what she believed was right.

And somehow, that made it even more powerful. His eyes fell to her right hand.

She was holding it tightly against herself.

“Your hand?”

Nishi didn't answer. Neel gently examined it. His expression changed.

“There may be a fracture.”

He looked at her.

“Let me see. I'm a doctor.”

That was all he could manage to say. Nishi didn't protest.

Neel examined her hand carefully, his movements gentle and deliberate.

“We need to get you checked.”

“I'll take a taxi home.”

“No.”

His answer was immediate.

“You're injured.”

He pulled out his phone and made a call.

“Are you there?”

A pause.

“Yes. I have someone with me.”

He glanced at Nishi.

“She is a friend, and she's injured. I'm bringing her to the hospital now.”

Nishi looked up.

“Hospital?”

"Yes."

He looked at the blood on her face.

"Look at you. You're bleeding, and there may be an injury to your hand. How are you going to manage on your own even if you get home?"

She tried to protest.

"You need to be examined properly," he continued. "We're going to Lifeline Multispeciality Hospital. It's nearby. I'm a resident doctor there."

Nishi hesitated.

Then, reluctantly, she nodded.

"All right."

Neel looked at her.

"Let me call your family."

"No."

Her answer came quickly.

"My friend is with my seven-year-old son. He's unwell. I don't want to bother them."

"And your husband?"

The question escaped him before he could stop himself. Nishi's expression changed for just a moment.

"I am a single mother."

Neel fell silent. He didn't ask anything else.

"Ms. Nishi, please don't move. I'll bring my car here."

He turned towards Sahana.

"And you—stay with Auntie. Don't move from here."

There was unmistakable anger in his voice now.

“For God's sake, Sahana.”

The little girl lowered her head. She knew she had frightened her father. And she knew she had put Nishi in danger. Neel walked quickly towards his car. When he returned, he helped Nishi rise.

She tried to stand on her own. She couldn't.

Her legs trembled beneath her. Neel immediately supported her.

“Easy.”

He examined her briefly.

“I don't think it's a fracture. It may be a bad sprain in your leg, but we'll know for sure after the examination.”

He slipped an arm carefully around her.

“Come. I'll help you to the car.”

Nishi leaned against him.

Every step seemed to cost her. But she said nothing. It wasn't that she didn't need help.

She had simply spent too many years learning not to expect it. She had learned that when life became difficult, there was usually no one coming to rescue you. You had to stand up yourself.

But today, for once, she couldn't. And perhaps, for once, she didn't have to. Neel helped her into the passenger seat and fastened the seat belt himself. He handed her a bottle of water.

“Drink slowly.”

Nishi took it.

“All will be all right, Ms. Nishi.”

He looked at her, his voice calm despite the worry in his eyes.

“Have faith.”

He started the car.

“The hospital is barely five hundred metres away. We won't have to wait. I've already spoken to my friend.”

As he drove, Neel's eyes repeatedly flickered towards her.

She was quiet. Too quiet. Blood still stained the corner of her lips. Her face was pale. And every now and then, she winced. Something tightened inside him each time he saw it.

He couldn't stop thinking about the moment on the road. The car. Sahana.

And Nishi running towards them. He had spent his entire life as a doctor learning how to save people. Yet today, a woman he barely knew had saved the person who mattered most to him.

And he still didn't know how he could ever repay her. As they approached his apartment, he called his mother.

“Ma, come outside quickly.”

A few moments later, she appeared at the gate.

“I have an urgent case at the hospital,” Neel said quickly. “Please take Sahana home.”

His mother looked towards the car and noticed Nishi. Then she looked at her son.

Neel didn't explain. There was no time. His mother simply nodded and took Sahana's hand. Satisfied that Sahana was safe with her mother, Neel turned the car towards the hospital. For the first time since the accident, he allowed himself to breathe.

Neel knew Sahana was safe with her mother, but his thoughts remained with Nishi. The sight of her bleeding had unsettled him. What if she had suffered an internal injury?

He tried to reassure himself. She was conscious, responsive, and the bleeding appeared to be from a visible wound. Nothing about her condition had suggested an internal injury. Still, he couldn't shake off the uneasiness.

He turned the car towards the hospital, hoping he was right. But the image of Nishi shielding his daughter remained etched in his mind.

He didn't know what she was to him yet. A neighbour. A friend. A stranger who had happened to be there.

But one thing he knew with absolute certainty—

he would never forget what she had done for his daughter.

# Chapter 7
# TWO DOORS APART



Two hours later, Nishi slowly opened her eyes. For a few seconds, she stared blankly at the unfamiliar ceiling. Then the sharp smell of antiseptic brought everything rushing back. The accident. She was in a hospital ward. Fear gripped her.

Her first thought was not about herself, but her son.

Palash. Where was he? Was he safe?

And Raima—she knew nothing about what had happened.

Nishi instinctively tried to move, but a dull ache throbbed through her head. She raised her hand and felt the bandage wrapped around it. Her right hand was plastered.

A nurse noticed that she was awake and came over.

"You're awake. Don't try to move too much," she said gently. "You were bleeding profusely when you were brought in. You were given medication, and you lost consciousness."

Nishi swallowed hard.

"My son… where is my son?"

The nurse looked at her reassuringly. "Don't worry. You're safe now. You need to rest."

But that was not enough to calm Nishi. Her mind was already racing.

"I need to call Raima," she whispered.

The nurse nodded and stepped out, leaving her alone. Nishi slowly sat up. Her head spun for a moment, but she steadied herself against the bed. Her handbag lay on a nearby chair. She needed her phone. Gathering her courage, she swung her legs towards the edge of the bed and tried to stand.

The moment her foot touched the floor, a sharp pain shot through her leg. She winced and immediately grabbed the side of the bed for support. Something was wrong. She looked down, frightened. She couldn't put her weight on her foot. But then, a voice broke through her thoughts.

"Relax. You're fine."

Nishi looked up.

Dr. Neel Mehra stood at the doorway, accompanied by another doctor. She noticed that Neel was holding her phone.

"Your friend called," he explained. "I spoke to her and told her about your condition. She assured me that your son is safe with her."

Relief washed over Nishi. She let out a long, trembling sigh. Her son was safe. That was all that mattered. The other doctor stepped closer.

"Ms. Nishi, you've lost quite a bit of blood, so you need complete bed rest for a few days. No exertion. However, there's no need for you to stay in the hospital. You can go home."

He glanced at her bandaged hand.

"Your right hand is fractured, so you'll need to be careful with it for the next three to four weeks."

Nishi nodded silently.

"There's also a sprain in your right leg. Avoid putting unnecessary strain on it. Take plenty of rest, and you should recover well."

He smiled warmly.

"You're going to be fine. Just take care of yourself."

Neel gave him a grateful look.

"Thank you, Alok."

"Don't mention it, Neel."

Dr. Alok gave Nishi one last reassuring smile before leaving with Neel.

A moment later, Neel returned and sat beside her.

"How are you feeling, Nishi?"

She looked at him. There were many things she could have said. Her head hurt. Her right hand was fractured. Her leg was badly sprained. And the memory of the accident still lingered somewhere at the back of her mind.

But none of it seemed important anymore.

"Relieved," she whispered.

Neel waited.

"My son is safe."

That was all she could say. Neel nodded. He understood.

"Your discharge papers will be ready soon. I can drop you home, but you shouldn't be alone in this condition. You'll need someone to help you, at least for the next few days."

"I can manage."

"I know you can," he said calmly. "But right now, your body needs rest, not another battle to fight."

She looked at him.

"I'll arrange for a nurse to stay with you, especially at night. And you won't have to worry about the expense. I'll take care of it."

Nishi immediately shook her head.

"No, that's not necessary. I can manage on my own."

"No."

The answer came quickly, but there was no harshness in it.

"I insist."

She studied his face for a moment.

"Is this because you think I saved your daughter's life, Dr. Neel?"

Neel was caught off guard. He didn't immediately know what to say.

Nishi continued; her voice softer.

"I didn't do it as an act of bravery. I did it because…"

"Shh."

The word came instinctively. Before he could think about what he was doing, his finger briefly touched her lips.

"I know."

He withdrew his hand almost immediately.

"Please don't talk too much. You need to rest."

For a moment, their eyes met. Neither said anything.

A hospital attendant soon arrived with a bowl of soup. Neel pulled the overbed table closer and carefully placed the bowl on it. He adjusted the pillows behind her back, making sure she was sitting comfortably.

"You need to eat," he said. "And then you have to take your medicines."

Nishi glanced at her fractured hand. She reached for the spoon with her left hand.

Neel stopped her. "Don't strain yourself."

"I can eat with my left hand."

"I know."

He took the spoon instead.

"I'll help."

Before she could protest, he lifted a spoonful of soup and held it out to her. Nishi hesitated for a moment, then quietly accepted it.

He fed her slowly, without making the gesture feel dramatic or intimate. It was simply something that needed to be done. When a little soup touched the corner of her lips, he gently wiped it away with a tissue.

Nishi said nothing. Neither did he. She finished the soup in silence. Neel handed her the medicines and a glass of water.

"Feeling better now?"

"Much better."

"Good."

He stood up.

"Then let's get you home."

He picked up her handbag and turned towards her.

"Tell me where do you live."

"Lifeline Apartment".

Neel paused.

"Actually, I live in the same apartment complex."

Nishi looked at him in surprise before she spoke.

“I shifted yesterday.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I just moved my things in yesterday. Today was my first day at my new office.”

A small smile appeared on Neel's face.

“So, we are neighbours.”

“Apparently.”

“Which flat?”

“A-106.”

Neel stared at her for a moment.

“I live in A-105.”

Nishi smiled.

“Then indeed, we are neighbours.”

“I shifted yesterday evening,” she said.

“I came home quite late, so I didn't really notice who had moved in next door.” Neel replied.

“For some reason, neither did I,”

There was something strangely reassuring about the coincidence. Neel couldn't explain why, but the thought that Nishi lived just next door pleased him. He looked at her for a moment before speaking.

“Well, since we're neighbours, you won't have to worry about getting help if you need it. I'm right next door.”

He paused, then added lightly,

“And now that I know you're stubborn enough to try walking on an injured leg, I suppose I'll have to keep an eye on you.”

Nishi gave him an amused look.

“I'm not that helpless.”

“I never said you were.”

Their eyes met. For a moment, neither spoke. There was an unexpected ease between them—something neither had anticipated when they had first met. Neel extended his hand.

“Friends?”

Nishi looked at his hand, then at him.

“But on one condition.”

“Condition?” Neel asked with a smile.

“You have to forgive Sahana.”

His smile softened.

“She is a child. She has already understood her mistake. Please don't make her feel guilty about what happened.”

Neel nodded.

“Of course, I'll forgive her.”

He paused before adding quietly,

“She is the reason I'm alive after Ira left.”

The words escaped before he could stop them. Nishi's expression changed.

“I'm sorry, Neel. I didn't know your wife had passed away.”

“She hasn't.”

Nishi looked at him. Neel's voice remained calm.

“She just chose to leave.”

A brief silence followed.

“I'm happy for her,” he continued. “It was her life.”

He didn't elaborate. And Nishi didn't ask. She understood from the way he looked away that he didn't want to discuss it any further. She simply nodded. Then she extended her left hand.

"Friends."

Neel took her hand.

"Friends."

A quiet sense of relief crossed his face.

"Thank God."

Nishi raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

"I honestly didn't know how I was going to send you home in this condition."

He smiled.

"But now that we're neighbours—and friends—you have a doctor nearby. So, you won't have to worry quite so much."

Nishi smiled back.

"Come on. Let's get you home."

The nurse was called to help Nishi into the wheelchair. A short while later, she was comfortably seated in the passenger seat. Neel made sure she was settled before fastening her seat belt. He did it carefully, ensuring that it didn't press against her injured hand.

"Don't worry," he said. "I'll drive slowly."

"I know."

As they pulled away from the hospital, Nishi took out her phone and called Raima.

"Raima, I'm fine. Don't worry."

She listened for a moment.

"Yes, I'm coming home. Please bring Palash with you."

Raima said something at the other end.

"No, please. Bring him home."

Another pause.

"I know you're worried, but you're already taking care of your husband. Palash will need me tonight."

Raima seemed reluctant. Nishi softened her voice.

"Please, Raima. I'll manage. Just bring him home."

Finally, Raima agreed.

"Alright, as you say."

Nishi ended the call and leaned back against the seat.

Neel glanced at her.

"But you're injured. You shouldn't be worrying about anyone else right now."

"I know."

"Then why called Palash home?"

"Because Raima's husband is ill. She has to take care of him."

Neel's expression became attentive.

"What does he have?"

"Cancer."

Neel's hands tightened slightly around the steering wheel.

"What stage?"

"Stage two, I think."

Nishi sighed.

"She is already going through so much. How can I burden her with my son's responsibility?"

Neel was quiet for a moment. Then, at the next turn, he reached towards the tray near the dashboard and pulled out a visiting card. He handed it to her.

"Ask Raima to bring her husband to me on Monday. Nine in the morning."

Nishi looked at him, puzzled.

"Why?"

"Stage-two cancer can often be treated successfully, depending on the type and other factors."

She looked down at the card. Then her eyes widened.

Dr. Neel Mehra

Consultant Oncologist

She looked at him.

"You're an oncologist?"

Neel nodded.

"And you will really help her?"

He glanced at her briefly before returning his eyes to the road.

"I'll do whatever I can."

Nishi looked at the card again. There was no trace of arrogance in his voice. Only a quiet sincerity.

"If I can be of any help to another human being," he said, "then I'll consider my education and knowledge worthwhile."

Nishi looked at him. For the first time, she saw something beyond the doctor, the single father and the man who had helped her today. There was a quiet goodness in him.

And somehow, it made her feel safe. A few minutes later, Neel turned into their apartment complex and parked the car.

He got out and walked around to her side. The nurse helped Nishi out of the car and into the wheelchair.

Neel looked towards the building. Then he stopped.

Both elevators displayed the same notice:

OUT OF ORDER.

Nishi noticed it too.

"Oh no…"

She looked towards the staircase.

"I'll manage somehow. It's just first floor"

Before she could say anything more, Neel bent down.

"What are you doing?"

"Don't even think about walking up those stairs."

"Neel, I can—"

"I know you can."

His voice was firm but gentle.

"But you shouldn't."

Before she could protest again, he carefully slipped one arm beneath her knees and the other around her back.

Nishi instinctively caught hold of his shoulder.

"Neel…"

"Just hold on."

He lifted her effortlessly. For a second, Nishi was too surprised to speak. Then she realized how close they were. She looked away, suddenly conscious of his steady presence. The nurse followed them. Neither of them spoke.

For those few moments, the distance between two strangers who had only just become friends seemed to disappear. Neel,

meanwhile, seemed completely focused on one thing—making sure she didn't hurt herself.

He began climbing the stairs. One step at a time. Carefully. Quietly.

As Neel carried her up the stairs, Nishi became acutely aware of the closeness between them. She could smell the faint fragrance of his perfume, clean and understated, lingering around her. She could feel the warmth of his body and the steady rhythm of his breathing.

Neel, too, was suddenly conscious of her presence in his arms.

He could hear her soft, slightly uneven breaths, each one strangely distinct in the quiet of the stairwell. He said nothing. Neither did she. They had met only hours ago.

A chance encounter. An accident. A hospital room. A few unexpected conversations.

And yet, something about this moment felt different. Neither of them could have known that these few flights of stairs were taking them somewhere neither had planned to go. For now, they were simply two strangers who had become friends.

Two neighbours. Two doors apart.

And perhaps, without realizing it, they had just taken their first step towards something neither of them was ready to name.

# Chapter 8
# FOR THE FIRST TIME AGAIN



Neel carried Nishi carefully up to his floor, making sure she was comfortable with every step.

By the time they reached the landing, Nishi was already feeling a little self-conscious. The moment she saw Neel's mother waiting for them, embarrassment crept across her face.

"Neel… you can put me down," she whispered.

Neel glanced at her and smiled.

"Don't worry, Nishi. Ma knows everything."

Nishi's eyes widened.

"She does?"

"Yes." His voice was perfectly calm. "While the discharge papers were being prepared, I asked her to get the room ready for you."

Before Nishi could protest further, his mother stepped forward.

"You are our guest," she said gently. "And you are going to stay here until you recover."

Nishi opened her mouth to object.

"And," his mother added, raising a hand with a faint smile, "I will not take no for an answer. I have already prepared the room."

There was such quiet certainty in her voice that Nishi found herself unable to argue. She turned to Neel helplessly. His mother immediately looked at him.

"Neel, take her to the room."

"Yes, Ma."

He carried Nishi inside and walked toward the room his mother had prepared. Only when they entered did Nishi realise something. It was Neel's room.

She looked around, slightly startled.

"Neel…"

"It's fine," he assured her. "There's an attached washroom, so you won't have to walk much. It'll be easier for you."

Nishi hesitated.

"I really don't want to inconvenience anyone."

"You're not."

The answer came so simply that she had nothing left to say. The nurse who had accompanied them settled in beside her, arranging the medicines and making sure everything Nishi might need was within easy reach. A little while later, the sound of familiar voices came from the hallway. Palash had arrived with Raima.

The seven-year-old came bounding into the house with the innocent energy only a child could possess. Nishi's face immediately brightened when she saw him.

"Palash!"

"Mamma!"

He hurried toward her, stopping only when he noticed that she was resting.

Nishi smiled and then introduced him.

"Palash, this is Dr. Neel. He is going to help Anil uncle. He is a renowned oncologist."

Raima greeted Neel and briefly explained her husband's condition. Neel listened attentively, asking a couple of questions before responding.

"I'll do my best to help," he assured her. "Bring all his reports when you come on Monday. I'll go through everything carefully, and then we'll decide the next course of action."

Raima nodded gratefully. Meanwhile, Palash had been watching Neel with unabashed curiosity. Neel noticed.

"And you must be Palash."

The little boy nodded. Neel extended his hand.

"Nice to meet you."

Palash looked at his hand for a second before confidently shaking it.

"Nice to meet you too, Doctor."

Neel smiled. There was something instantly endearing about the little boy. Raima and Palash soon left Nishi to rest, while the nurse remained with her. A little later after Raima left, Neel took Palash to meet Sahana.

The moment the two children saw each other, something changed, There was no awkwardness. No hesitation.

Within minutes, they were talking as though they had known each other forever. They spoke about school, cartoons, favourite games, funny teachers and everything else that mattered in the wonderfully uncomplicated world of childhood. Neel stood at a distance, watching them with a faint smile. His mother came to stand beside him.

She looked toward Nishi, who was resting quietly in the room.

"May God always bless that kind woman," she said softly.

Neel looked at her.

"Ma…"

"Sahana told me everything."

His mother's eyes softened.

"She saved my granddaughter."

There was immense gratitude in her voice.

"I will not let her leave this house until she is back on her feet."

Neel smiled faintly.

"Ma, I don't think she'll agree so easily. She has an immense sense of self-respect. Even in her condition, she was determined to climb those stairs herself."

His mother gave him an almost amused look.

"Then let me handle her."

"Ma…"

"Don't worry."

She glanced toward Nishi again.

"I know women like her. They don't like being looked after because they think accepting help makes them weak."

A pause.

"But sometimes, Neel, allowing someone to care for you is not weakness. It is simply trust."

Neel fell silent. His mother smiled.

"I'll convince her."

"And how exactly do you plan to do that?"

She shrugged lightly.

"Leave that to me."

Then, with absolute certainty, she added,

"I am not letting her leave this house until she recovers."

Neel knew better than to argue. He simply smiled.

For some reason, the thought of Nishi staying under the same roof no longer felt like an inconvenience. It felt strangely… right.

From the bedroom, Nishi could hear the soft hum of conversation drifting in from the dining area.

She turned her face toward the open doorway.

From where she lay, she could see Neel sitting at the dining table with Palash and Sahana. Neel's mother was serving dinner, moving around the table with the quiet efficiency of someone who had suddenly acquired one extra child to feed.

Palash looked genuinely happy. There was an ease in his laughter that Nishi had not heard in a long time. Within no time, the three of them had mingled so effortlessly that it felt as though they had known one another for years rather than minutes.

Neel's mother soon joined their conversation, entertaining the children with funny stories from Neel's childhood.

"Ma!" Neel protested from across the table.

"What?" she asked innocently. "I'm only telling them the truth."

Sahana burst into laughter. Palash was delighted.

"Tell me another one, Dadi!"

"Oh, I have plenty," she replied, laughing.

Nishi watched them quietly from the bed. There was something strangely comforting about the scene. A family gathered around a dinner table. Laughter. Warmth. The simple happiness of children.

For a fleeting moment, she felt as though she were looking at something she had once belonged to.

Then Palash announced proudly, "I'm very good at badminton!"

Neel raised an eyebrow. "Are you?"

"Yes!"

"Then we'll play tomorrow morning."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Palash grinned triumphantly. After dinner, Neel's mother turned toward Sahana.

"Sahana, take you brother Palash to your room. Let him see where you keep all your toys."

Sahana immediately reached for Palash's hand.

"Come."

Palash happily followed her.

But then he stopped. He looked at Sahana, his little face filled with curiosity. She was walking confidently despite not being able to see. He watched in amazement as she guided him down the hallway, knowing exactly where every turn was.

"How do you know where you're going?" he asked innocently.

Sahana smiled.

"I know my house."

Palash looked even more fascinated. Nishi watched the two children disappear down the hallway. A few moments later, Neel's mother entered Nishi's room carrying a tray of food. She placed it beside her.

"So, child," she announced, settling down beside the bed, "until you recover, you are not going anywhere."

Nishi smiled nervously.

"Masi…"

"I know what you are going to say."

She gave Nishi a knowing look.

"Neel told me you have immense self-respect and that you would probably refuse to stay here."

Nishi glanced toward the doorway. Just then, Neel appeared. Their eyes met. Nishi looked at him accusingly.

Neel immediately shook his head and silently mouthed,

"I didn't say anything.", Nishi almost smiled.

"But, Masi…" she began, turning back to Neel's mother, "my house is right next door. And I have to set everything up. Tomorrow is my week off. I can manage."

"No," Neel said firmly.

Nishi turned toward him.

"You have suffered considerable blood loss," he explained. "You need rest. Proper rest. Complete bed rest."

Nishi stared at him. She had expected him to support her. Instead, he had joined forces with his mother. His mother smiled triumphantly.

"And tomorrow is Neel's day off too."

She looked at her son. "So, he can set up the house for you."

"Done," Neel agreed without hesitation.

Nishi looked at him helplessly.

"Neel…"

He merely smiled.

His mother continued, as though the matter had already been settled.

"I'll also have your wardrobe arranged. We'll bring some of your clothes here so you won't have to keep going back and forth."

"Masi, that really isn't necessary…"

"And that's final."

There was such affection—and such unmistakable authority—in her voice that Nishi knew there was no point arguing. She sighed in defeat. Neel's mother smiled and gently adjusted the blanket over her.

"Now, you eat properly and get some sleep."

She left the room. Nishi turned toward Neel.

"You did that deliberately."

Neel's smile widened.

"I have no idea what you mean."

"You agreed with everything she said."

"She happens to be right."

Nishi shook her head, but a reluctant smile touched her lips. After a moment, Neel turned toward the nurse.

"Please help her with dinner and make sure she takes all her medicines afterward."

The nurse nodded. Neel looked at Nishi once more before stepping out. For the first time that evening, Nishi allowed herself to relax. Perhaps, just for a little while, she didn't have to manage everything herself.

Long after the house had fallen silent, Nishi remained awake. One by one, the voices had faded away. The children had gone to sleep, Neel's mother had retired to her room, and finally even Neel had disappeared behind a closed door.

The lights were switched off. Only the faint glow from the night lamp spilled across the room.

Nishi lay quietly, staring into the darkness. It had been an extraordinary day. It had begun with Vineet.

After eight long years, she had seen him again.

She had waited for him once. Waited until waiting itself had become a kind of humiliation. And then, when she had finally convinced herself that he would never return, he had appeared again—without warning, without explanation, as though the eight years between them had simply vanished.

And on that very same day, life had thrown something else at her. A chance encounter with Sahana. Then Neel. Then the accident.

All of it on the very first day of joining her new workplace and moving into her new home. Nishi almost smiled. What a way to begin a new chapter. She had no idea what the future had in store for her.

But strangely, she wasn't complaining. There had been something unexpectedly beautiful about the day.

The easy camaraderie between Palash and Sahana. The way the two children had bonded within minutes, laughing and talking as though they had known each other forever. And then there was Neel's mother.

The warmth with which that Neel's mother had welcomed her into her home had touched something deep inside Nishi.

She remembered the way she had simply declared,

You are not going anywhere until you recover.

Nishi closed her eyes. Seven years ago, she had desperately needed someone to say those words to her.

She remembered leaving Bangalore. She remembered the helplessness, the shame, the unbearable silence.

How she had wished her own mother would stop her. Just once. Don't go. Stay. We'll figure this out.

But her mother hadn't. Perhaps she had been embarrassed.

Perhaps she had been afraid of what people would say. Perhaps she simply hadn't known how to stand beside her daughter when the world had turned against her.

She had never asked Nishi to leave. But she hadn't stopped her either.

And somehow, that silence had hurt just as much. Even after all these years, Nishi had never truly understood what her fault had been. What had she done to deserve it? Why had destiny punished her for something she hadn't done? Why had she been made to carry the burden of someone else's suspicion?

For years, those questions had followed her. But somewhere along the way, she had stopped looking for answers.

Eight years had passed since Vineet had walked out of her life. Eight years in which she had slowly found herself again. She had raised Palash alone. She had built a life. She had learned to stand on her own feet without waiting for anyone to hold her up. And perhaps that was the greatest thing those years had given her.

She had finally understood the truth. She was not weak. She had never been weak. She had survived too much to ever believe that about herself again.

And yet, some memories did not need permission to return. A sudden image flashed through her mind. Vineet. That night. The door closing behind her.

His face—cold, angry, unwilling to hear another word. The way he had thrown her out as though everything they had shared meant nothing.

She could still hear her own voice. Broken. Desperate.

"Please, Vineet… just listen to me."

She had begged him. She had cried until there were no tears left to shed.

She had held on to his arm, trying to make him believe her, trying to make him understand that she had not betrayed him. But he had pulled away.

And then came the humiliation. The unbearable moment when she realised that the man she loved had already decided she was guilty. Outside, the storm had raged with terrifying fury.

Rain had drenched her within seconds, soaking her clothes, her hair, her tears—until she could no longer tell where one ended and the other began. She had stood outside his house that night, shivering, alone, carrying a pain far heavier than the rain-soaked clothes clinging to her body.

She remembered looking back at the closed door. Waiting. Hoping. Just once, she had wanted it to open. It never did. Her lips had trembled as she whispered his name one last time.

"Vineet…"

Nothing. Only the thunder answered.

The rain came down harder, almost cruelly, as though the entire sky had chosen that night to break with her. Nishi's chest tightened. Eight years had passed. Eight years.

And yet, for one terrible moment, she was that same woman again—standing helplessly in the rain, begging the person she loved not to abandon her.

She opened her eyes abruptly. Her breath had become uneven. Nishi sat up, pressing a trembling hand against her chest. The memory had hurt more than she had expected. Much more. She looked around the unfamiliar room.

The quiet. The darkness. The faint light from the bedside lamp. She took a slow breath.

"No," she whispered to herself.

That woman was not her anymore. She had survived that night. She had survived him.

But somewhere deep inside, perhaps a small part of her had never stopped hurting. The movement disturbed the nurse sleeping on the sofa-cum-bed.

"Ma'am?"

The nurse stirred and immediately sat up.

"Do you need something? Are you feeling uneasy?"

Nishi took a slow breath.

"No. I'm fine."

She reached for the glass of water on the bedside table and took a few sips.

"Please go back to sleep."

The nurse studied her for a moment before lying down again. Nishi settled back against the pillows. She closed her eyes. It was only a nightmare. That was all.

A memory. A wound from another lifetime. She was not that woman anymore. She was not the frightened woman who had stood in the rain, begging someone to believe her.

She was Nishi. A woman who had survived. A woman who had raised her son alone. A woman who had built herself again from the pieces someone else had left behind. She would not allow Vineet to break her again. She could face him.

She could deal with him. She would. Slowly, her breathing steadied. But as she closed her eyes, her mind refused to remain in the past. Instead, it drifted back to the latter half of the day. Palash's laughter.

Sahana's innocent voice. Neel's quiet smile. His mother's affectionate insistence. You are staying here until you recover.

For the first time in years, the memories that filled Nishi's heart before sleep were not entirely painful. There was something else among them now. Something warm. Something unfamiliar. Something that felt remarkably like hope. She closed her eyes

Neel made himself comfortable on the diwan in the drawing room, but sleep was nowhere near him.

His mind drifted back to that day—the day he had first encountered Nishi.

A complete stranger. And yet, she had risked her life for his daughter.

She had promised to keep an eye on Sahana until he arrived, and she had lived up to that promise without a second thought. She had no obligation toward them. If something had happened to Sahana, no one could have held Nishi accountable. Yet she had put herself in danger anyway. Neel closed his eyes.

And, almost inevitably, another woman appeared in his memory.

Ira. Sahana's mother.

"Neel, I am leaving."

He could still hear the exhaustion in her voice.

"My status has been reduced to that of a governess for your daughter—an unpaid governess. I have no life of my own."

"And you spend the whole day outside, leaving me alone to deal with everything."

"I have to work for us, Ira," he had protested.

"And I help you with Sahana. You can't deny that."

She had looked at him bitterly.

"No, Neel. I am stuck. I feel as though my life has stopped."

He had never denied her freedom. He had given her every opportunity to live the life she wanted. With his mother's support, he had tried to make sure Sahana was never entirely dependent on Ira either. But after Sahana's accident, everything had changed.

Sahana needed her mother more than ever. And Ira resented that dependence. The truth, Neel had eventually discovered, was far

more painful. There had been another man. When Ira finally told him she had made up her mind, Neel hadn't stopped her.

Perhaps somewhere inside, he had already understood that a marriage could not be held together by force. But before leaving, she had made one final demand. She wanted alimony.

And if he refused, she threatened to tell the police that she had been tortured for dowry. Neel remembered the shock that had frozen him that day. He had never tortured her. He had never even raised his voice at her in anger. But he had been too broken to fight.

So, he had sold his ancestral land in Prayagraj and paid the alimony. Ira left. And soon after, she moved in with the man who had been waiting for her. He sighed and reached for the glass on the table, taking a slow sip.

Then he leaned back against the cushions of the diwan. For years, he had carried a question he had never been able to answer. What had he done wrong? He had worked hard. He had tried to provide for his family.

He had loved his daughter. And yet, he hadn't been able to keep his family together. Somewhere along the way, he had started believing that perhaps he simply wasn't good enough.

Not good enough as a husband. Not good enough to protect the people he loved. That was why, after Ira left, Neel had never remarried. He had convinced himself that perhaps marriage wasn't meant for him.

Perhaps he was incapable of making someone happy. Neel had never spoken about it. Not even to his mother.

But tonight, something was different. He thought of Nishi. Of the way she had stood beside him.

Of the way she had fought to protect Sahana without expecting anything in return. And then he remembered holding her in his arms. For the first time in years, being close to a woman hadn't felt like a mistake. It hadn't felt like a responsibility.

It hadn't felt like something he had no right to want.

It had simply felt... right. Neel opened his eyes.

There had been something in Nishi's eyes that he couldn't explain. So much warmth. So much innocence.

And perhaps, for the first time since his marriage had fallen apart, Neel wondered if he had been wrong about himself all these years. Maybe he wasn't incapable of love. Maybe he had simply never met someone who made him believe in it again.

# Chapter 9
# THE STRENGTH BEHIND HER SMILE



The next morning arrived quietly.

After several restless days, Nishi had finally slept peacefully. The medicine had helped her exhausted body surrender to sleep. When she opened her eyes, warm sunlight streamed through the window, bathing the room in a soft golden glow. For the first time in days, she felt genuinely refreshed.

Her eyes wandered towards the badminton court outside. A smile appeared when she spotted Palash playing with Neel. Palash was taking the game with the seriousness of a professional, while Neel seemed to be enjoying himself just as much. Whenever Palash made a good shot, he jumped excitedly, only to protest when Neel deliberately returned a difficult one.

Nishi watched them for a while, comforted by the simple sight. Just then, light footsteps sounded at the door.

Sahana appeared.

"Good morning, Auntie."

Nishi's face brightened.

"Good morning, baby. Come here."

Sahana walked over, and Nishi gently touched her head.

A moment later, Neel's mother entered with a steaming cup of tea.

"Good morning, child. How did you sleep?"

"Very well, Masi. I think the medicine finally did its job."

"Good. You needed the rest."

She placed the tea beside her.

The simple gesture touched Nishi more than she expected. She had spent years taking care of herself and managing everything alone. Being looked after, even in small ways, felt unfamiliar yet deeply comforting.

Soon, the two women fell into an easy conversation. Neel's mother asked about her family, her work, and her friends. Nishi found herself laughing as she recalled little incidents and funny memories. For a while, she forgot about the accident, the office, and everything else weighing on her mind.

The morning passed quickly. After the nurse came to sponge her and change her dressing, Raima arrived with her children. By then, Neel and Palash had returned from the court. Palash immediately introduced Sahana to Raima's children with the pride of someone presenting his closest friends. Nishi watched them with amusement. Children had a remarkable way of making everything seem simple. Later, Raima settled beside Nishi.

"So," she asked, "tell me about your first day at the office."

Nishi's smile faded slightly.

She told her everything—the new office, her first day, and most importantly, her unexpected encounter with Vineet. Raima listened silently.

"Vineet?" she finally asked, stunned.

Nishi nodded.

"Yes."

"What will you do now?"

"What else can I do?" Nishi sighed. "I'll continue with the job. I have responsibilities. I'm not going to give up my career because he happens to be there."

Her voice carried quiet determination. After a moment, she added, "But I need to tell him about my condition. I have no idea how he'll react." Raima thought for a moment.

"You told me about Mayank. Why don't we speak to him? Perhaps he can arrange for you to work from home until you recover."

"That would be perfect," Nishi agreed. "I don't want to take unnecessary leave."

Raima nodded.

"I'll speak to him."

She picked up Nishi's phone.

"And now, I'm taking this away from you."

Nishi looked at her in surprise.

"Raima…"

"No arguments. You need rest, not office calls and endless notifications."

She slipped the phone into her bag.

"Let the world manage without you for a few hours."

After breakfast, Raima decided to help Neel and his mother unpack some of the boxes still lying around Nishi's house.

"You don't have to do this," Neel protested. "Your husband is unwell."

"My in-laws are at home with him," Raima replied firmly. "And my husband was the one who insisted I come and help Nishi. So don't even try to stop me."

Neel smiled helplessly.

"All right. Come on, then."

The three of them went to Nishi's house. Neel stopped downstairs to buy some fresh vegetables while Raima and his mother began sorting through the boxes. They were halfway through unpacking when Nishi's phone rang.

Sheena.

Raima answered.

"Hello?"

"Hi. Is Nishi there?"

"No, she's getting some rest. I'm Raima, her friend."

Sheena explained that she had called to ask Nishi out sometime because they hadn't met in ages.

"I'm afraid that will have to wait," Raima said gently. "Nishi had an accident yesterday."

"What? Is she all right?"

"She's fine now, but she has been advised complete rest."

Raima then told her about Nishi's concern regarding work and her intention to speak to Mayank.

"Oh, yes. Please talk to him," Sheena said.

Raima put the phone on speaker as she continued unpacking.

A few moments later, Mayank came on the line.

“Hey, Raima. We’re really sorry to hear about Nishi. Is she okay?”

“She’s recovering, but she's worried about work.”

“Tell her not to worry. She can work from home. I’ll take care of everything here.”

Relief washed over Raima.

“Thank you, Mayank. That means a lot.”

“And Vineet boss is in Bangalore right now,” Mayank added. “He can be difficult, but I'll handle him.”

Raima glanced towards the bedroom.

“She’s mostly worried about how he'll react when he finds out about her condition.”

“Don't worry,” Mayank assured her. “I'll manage it.”

Then Sheena’s voice came through the speaker.

“Raima?”

“Yes?”

“I know what kind of man Vineet is,” Sheena said quietly. “He can be a sadistic person. But Mayank knows how to deal with him. Just tell Nishi to rest and not worry about work.”

“Thank you, Sheena.”

The call ended. Raima placed the phone on the table and returned to unpacking. Only then did she notice Neel’s mother standing behind her. The older woman looked thoughtful. She had heard everything. Especially one name. Vineet.

“Child,” she asked gently, “Who is Vineet? Her boss?”

“Yes, Auntie. She joined only yesterday.”

“But why would he be upset? Nishi has had an accident. He should be considerate.”

Raima's hands slowed. She wasn't sure how much she should reveal. This wasn't her story to tell. But Neel's mother looked at her with quiet concern.

"You may say nothing, child, but your face is saying quite a lot. Is Nishi in some sort of trouble?"

Raima remained silent. That silence was answer enough.

"So… he is harassing her?"

"No, Auntie. Not yet. But he is a difficult man."

"A sadistic man?"

The old woman looked at her in surprise.

"Yes."

The older woman sighed.

"Then tell me what happened. If someone is troubling her, we shouldn't simply stand by."

Something in her voice reassured Raima.

"Auntie… promise me you won't tell Nishi that I told you."

"I cannot promise that before I know what you're asking me to keep secret," the old woman replied. "If it is serious and I can help her, I may have to speak. But I promise I will not judge her."

Raima took a slow breath.

"Vineet is Nishi's ex-husband."

The older woman froze.

"What?"

"I thought she was a widow," she admitted. "When she said she was a single mother, I assumed…"

"She isn't a widow. Her marriage ended years ago. And yesterday, on her first day at the new office, she discovered that Vineet was her boss."

“So that's why she's afraid of his reaction.”

Raima nodded.

“Was he cruel to her? Did he hurt her?”

“No. That's the strange part. According to Nishi, he was once a wonderful husband.”

“Then what happened?”

“He had deep-rooted wounds of his own,” Raima explained. “His mother left his father for another man when he was very young. Later, his stepmother abandoned him too. He grew up believing that people leave and that no one can truly be trusted.”

She paused.

“When Nishi came into his life, he loved her. But his insecurities followed him into the marriage.”

“He began checking her phone, reading her messages and emails, and questioning every interaction she had with male colleagues.”

“That must have been unbearable.”

“It was. But Nishi kept trying. She believed that if she loved him enough, eventually he would overcome his fears.”

The older woman sighed.

“And after Palash was born?” The old woman asked

Raima's expression hardened.

“He never met Palash.”

She hesitated before continuing.

“Vineet believed Palash wasn't his son.”

The older woman stared at her.

“I don't believe that. Nishi is not that kind of woman.”

“I know,” Raima said quietly. “None of us would believe it, but her husband did”

She took a breath.

“Nishi and Vineet had been trying to have a baby. When she didn't conceive, they underwent medical tests. They discovered that Vineet had a very low sperm count, while Nishi was perfectly fertile.”

The old woman's expression softened.

“That must have been difficult for him.”

“It shattered his confidence. He even told Nishi she was free to leave if she wanted.”

“But she stayed.”

“She loved him.”

Raima’s eyes grew distant.

“Then, one day, Nishi discovered she was pregnant. She thought it was the happiest day of her life. A miracle”

Her voice broke.

“But Vineet couldn't believe the child was his.”

Raima sighed

“He threw her out.”

The older woman's eyes filled with tears.

“While she was pregnant?”

Raima nodded.

“She had stood beside him through his darkest moments. She accepted his insecurities and tried to understand his pain. And when she needed him most, he humiliated her and sent her away.”

For a moment, neither woman spoke.

“I sometimes wish I could give that man a piece of my mind,” Raima whispered.

“Don't waste your anger, child,” the older woman said gently. “God sees everything.”

Raima wiped her eyes.

“I just hope Nishi never finds her way back to him.”

She paused.

“Although… Nishi wasn't entirely blameless.”

The older woman frowned.

“What do you mean?”

“She should have stopped him much earlier. When he began checking her phone and questioning every interaction, she kept forgiving him. Perhaps she thought she could love the insecurity out of him.”

The older woman looked at her thoughtfully.

“That was not her weakness.”

Raima looked up.

“It was her love.”

She gently touched Raima’s hand.

“She tried to heal wounds she had never caused. His inability to trust her was his burden, not hers.”

Neither woman noticed the faint movement from the adjoining kitchen. Neel had returned some time ago.

He had quietly entered the kitchen with the vegetables. At first, the women's voices had been little more than background noise.

Then he heard a name. Vineet. He hadn't intended to listen.

But one sentence followed another, and slowly, Nishi's past unfolded before him. Her husband's childhood wounds. His suspicion. The accusations. The pregnancy. And finally, the moment he had thrown her out.

Neel stood silently at the counter, putting away the vegetables as though he hadn't heard anything.

But something inside him had changed. The woman he had known as his gentle, composed neighbour suddenly seemed very different. Not weaker. Stronger. Much stronger.

For years, after Ira had walked out of his life, Neel had questioned his own worth. He had wondered what was wrong with him and why he hadn't been enough to make someone stay. But Nishi had endured something far worse.

Vineet hadn't simply walked away from her. He had repeatedly questioned her character, invaded her privacy, and forced her to prove a loyalty she had never betrayed. And still, she had stayed. Not because she was weak. Because she loved him.

She had seen the wounded child behind his anger and insecurity and tried to understand him, even when his wounds began hurting her. Until he crossed a line no love should ever be expected to cross.

He doubted the child she carried. He doubted the woman who had stood beside him. And finally, he threw her out while she was carrying his baby.

Neel's jaw tightened. Now he understood that her calm smile wasn't the absence of pain. It was what remained after she had survived it.

And somewhere between admiration and concern, Neel felt something deeper taking root inside him.

Something he wasn't yet ready to name.

# Chapter 10
# THE BEGINNING OF BELONGING



Neel, his mother, and Raima spent the entire day setting up Nishi's new house while the children kept themselves occupied and the nurse stayed with Nishi, making sure she took her medicines and got enough rest. By evening, everything was finally in place.

They returned to Neel's house, and soon afterward, Raima left with her children. Nishi still had no idea that Raima had revealed her secret. Neither Neel nor his mother mentioned it. Neel and his mother walked into Nishi's room. With a warm smile,

Neel asked, "So, how are you feeling now?"

"Much, much better. I took rest the whole day. I think the sprain has improved too, and the medicines are working wonderfully. I think I can go back home tomorrow," Nishi said with a smile.

"We'll see about that tomorrow," Neel replied, giving her a look that left little room for argument.

His mother gently caressed Nishi's head before stepping out. Neel sat beside her and asked the nurse about her medications and

recovery. The nurse assured him that everything was progressing well.

Nishi smiled. "She's taking very good care of me."

"I know," Neel said simply. "That's her job, and she takes it seriously."

A little while later, his mother returned carrying two steaming cups of tea and a plate of savouries.

"Have something, child. You must be hungry."

Nishi looked at her, overwhelmed. She knew they had spent the entire day arranging her house—Neel, his mother, and Raima—while she had simply rested here. And now this elderly woman was standing before her with tea and food, looking after her as though she belonged to the family. Nishi swallowed the lump in her throat.

"Masi, I don't know how to thank you…"

"There is nothing to thank me for," the older woman interrupted gently. "Now that we're neighbours, we have to look after each other."

She handed Nishi the cup and smiled.

"And once you recover, we'll have tea together every evening after your office. You'll make it."

Nishi laughed softly.

"Done, Masi."

Just then, Palash appeared at the doorway.

"Mumma, I have homework to finish. And I have a science project too."

"Of course, child. Bring your schoolbag—"

"Ah, no," Neel interrupted immediately. "I'm still your doctor, remember? You need rest."

Then he turned toward Palash.

"Come. I'll help you. It's study time for Sahana too."

Palash happily followed him. As they disappeared down the hallway, Nishi watched them with a smile.

Something about the scene touched a place inside her that she hadn't known was still capable of feeling this way. It felt… like home.

She looked at the older woman sitting beside her. For the next hour, they simply talked. About the new house. The children. Food. Neighbours. Little things that had nothing to do with pain or the past. And throughout their conversation, Neel's mother carefully avoided mentioning what Raima had told her. She could have asked questions. She could have offered sympathy. She could have told Nishi that she understood her pain. But she didn't. Because she didn't see a broken woman sitting beside her. She saw a young woman who had survived something painful and still managed to smile, work, raise her child, and begin again. There was no pity in the older woman's eyes. There was admiration. And perhaps that was why Nishi felt so comfortable with her.

For the first time in years, she felt accepted—not for what had happened to her, but for who she had become.

Their conversation naturally drifted from one subject to another until, almost casually, Nishi asked about Sahana.

"May I ask you something, Masi? About Sahana…"

Neel's mother looked at her.

"I hope you don't mind me asking. I noticed that she… can't see."

There was no curiosity in Nishi's voice, nor any trace of pity. It was simply the concern of someone who had come to care about the little girl. The older woman was quiet for a moment. Then, perhaps because she had been holding the story inside for too long, the words began to flow.

"She lost her eyesight in an accident when she was very young," she said softly. "Her mother, Ira… was careless that day. And Sahana paid the price." Her voice trembled.

"Ira couldn't handle it. Instead of staying beside her daughter, she chose to leave." Nishi listened silently.

"By then, Neel's marriage had already fallen apart in every way that mattered. After Ira left, she demanded a huge sum as alimony. My son never fought her. He simply settled it and let her go."

She paused, wiping at the corner of her eye.

"She moved on with her life. Neel never complained. Not once." Her voice grew softer.

"He buried himself in his child and his hospital. He never asked anyone to feel sorry for him. Never wanted sympathy." A faint, proud smile appeared through her tears.

"He is such a positive human being. Somehow, he has this strange ability to make people around him feel good about themselves. That's why his patients love him so much. He gives them hope even when he is carrying his own burdens."

Her eyes filled again.

"My son deserved to be loved," she whispered. "He never deserved what Ira did to him."

She looked down at her hands.

"I don't regret the money she took. Money can be earned again. What hurts me are the precious years she took away from him."

Her voice broke.

"That woman…" She stopped herself, then whispered bitterly, "I only hope she never gets the peace she took away from my son."

She wiped her tears with the corner of her saree. Nishi didn't immediately respond. Her eyes had unconsciously moved toward the dining table.

Neel was sitting there with the children. He was completely unaware of their conversation.

He was patiently explaining something to Palash, occasionally pointing at his notebook. Sahana sat beside them, contributing her own suggestions with absolute confidence. Every now and then, Neel smiled at something she said. There was no bitterness on his face. No trace of the man who had once lost a marriage, endured betrayal, paid a price he hadn't deserved, and watched his little daughter lose something that could never be returned. He was simply there. Present. Giving his daughter his time. Giving his patients his strength. Giving everyone around him the comfort of believing that things could still be okay. Nishi watched him quietly. She had known this man for barely twenty-four hours. Yet something inside her had shifted. She had spent years believing that strength meant surviving pain. But Neel had shown her something different. Strength could also mean refusing to let pain define you. He had every reason to become bitter.

He hadn't. He had every reason to see himself as a victim. He hadn't. Instead, he had chosen to become the author of his own life.

And for the first time, Nishi realized that she was proud of him. Proud of a man she had only just met.

She gently placed her hand on Neel's mother's shoulder.

"Masi…" The older woman looked at her.

"Please don't curse anyone."

There was no judgment in Nishi's voice.

"I know it hurts. And perhaps some wounds never completely stop hurting. But Neel isn't a victim."

She glanced once more toward him.

"He is a hero, a superhero"

Her voice softened.

"He is a doctor who has saved so many lives. A father who never allowed his daughter's darkness to become the darkness of his own life. He chose to keep moving forward."

She squeezed the older woman's shoulder gently.

"So don't feel sorry for him. Be proud of him. I think that will give him far more strength than anyone's sympathy ever could."

Neel's mother nodded slowly. Then Nishi looked toward Sahana.

"And that little girl…"

Her smile softened.

"She too never chose to become a victim. She is living her life with so much courage. Masi, you should be proud of your upbringing."

The older woman's eyes filled again. This time, however, there was something warmer in them. She placed her hand over Nishi's. For a moment, neither woman said anything. Then the older woman rose.

"I'll go and make the rotis before everyone starts complaining that they're hungry."

Nishi smiled.

"Okay, Masi."

The older woman left, and Nishi remained quiet for a while. Her eyes returned to the dining table. To Neel.

She didn't know why she was looking at him differently now. Perhaps because she had seen a part of him that he never displayed. The world saw a confident doctor. His patients saw a compassionate healer. His daughter saw her father.

But Nishi had glimpsed the man underneath all of that—the man who had been hurt deeply and had still chosen kindness. And somehow, that touched her. Perhaps more than she was ready to admit. A few minutes later, Neel returned to the room. He dropped into the chair beside her with a satisfied smile.

"So, the homework is done, and the children have managed to play for most of the day as well. I've sent them off to read now."

Nishi looked at him. There was something different in her eyes.

"Thank you, Neel."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, really?"

She smiled faintly.

"No. I mean…" She hesitated, searching for the right words. "I don't have the words to thank you."

His expression softened.

"Hmm."

He didn't press her.

"Now you get some rest. I'll help my mother with dinner. And tomorrow, if you're feeling better, we'll take you to see your new home."

Nishi smiled.

"My new home…"

The words felt strangely comforting.

Neel called the nurse and gave her a few instructions before leaving. Nishi watched him disappear through the doorway. She didn't know when it had happened. Somewhere between his kindness, his patience, his strength, and the way he cared for everyone without expecting anything in return, something had begun to change inside her.

She wasn't in love. Not yet. But she had begun to admire him. And perhaps admiration was the first quiet step toward something neither of them had yet imagined.

The next morning, Nishi was finally able to walk without much difficulty. With Neel beside her, she slowly made her way to her

new home. The moment she stepped inside, she stopped. Everything was in place.

The furniture was neatly arranged, the curtains fell softly against the windows, and warm sunlight filtered into the rooms, filling them with a gentle glow. Her books had been placed carefully on the shelves, the kitchen was organized, and even the smallest details seemed thoughtfully taken care of. Nothing looked extravagant. Yet everything felt right.

It didn't feel like a house that had just been set up. It felt like a home that had been waiting for her. Nishi stood quietly in the middle of the living room, taking it all in.

A small smile touched her lips. For the first time in a long while, she felt she had a place she could truly call her own. Her new home was exactly as she had imagined—warm, simple, beautiful, and perfect.

Nishi smiled softly. She wanted to thank Neel, but somehow the words felt too small for everything he had done for her and Palash over the past two days. So instead, she simply said,

"Tea. I make wonderful tea. I want to try my hand in my new kitchen."

"Sure."

Neel followed her into the kitchen. Her wrist was still fractured, so he quietly helped whenever she needed him.

As she prepared the tea, Nishi mentioned that she had visited the house briefly a month ago for the 'Grihapravesh pooja'.

"You weren't here then," she said.

"We were out of town," Neel replied.

Their conversation wandered naturally from one thing to another—the apartment complex, their busy lives at work, and the simple pleasure of returning home after a long day. Neel was pleased that the hospital was so close.

“And I'm happy my new office isn't far either,” Nishi said.

Then they discovered that Palash and Sahana attended the same school.

“I'll drop Palash to school tomorrow,” Neel offered.

Nishi smiled. “Thank you.”

One cup of tea became another, and conversation kept flowing effortlessly until Neel's mother finally called them for breakfast. By evening, Neel took everyone to the nearby playground.

Nishi settled comfortably on a bench with Sahana while Neel played badminton with Palash.

“You really play well,” Neel said, impressed. “Who taught you?”

Palash proudly pointed toward his mother.

“My mom. She plays well too.”

Neel looked at Nishi with a grin.

“We'll see about that once she recovers. We can have a match.”

“Done,” Nishi replied.

While the boys continued their game, Nishi and Sahana talked.

Nishi told her stories of brave people who had faced extraordinary challenges without allowing their limitations to define them.

“Life itself is a blessing, Sahana. You have a mind that can think, a heart that can dream, and the freedom to decide who you want to become. Life may throw challenges at you, but you are always stronger than the challenges.”

There was no pity in Nishi's words. Only belief. And Sahana felt it. She listened eagerly, asking questions and sharing her own thoughts. Nishi found herself enjoying the conversation more than she had expected. Sahana didn't want the evening to end.

“Auntie,” Sahana finally asked, “May I sleep in your room tonight? We can talk a lot.”

Before Nishi could answer, Neel protested.

"Child, Auntie needs rest. And Palash will be alone in his room."

"Don't worry about me," Nishi interrupted with a smile. "It would be my pleasure. I love her company. Your bed is king-sized; there's plenty of room for both children."

"But I want to sleep next to Neel uncle!" Palash protested.

Neel laughed.

"Fine, champ. The diwan outside is big enough for both of us."

As the sun began to set, the children ran ahead toward the building.

Neel gently helped Nishi rise from the bench. Her feet had stiffened after sitting for so long, and he steadied her carefully, holding her left hand firmly.

"Easy. One step at a time. There's no hurry."

"Fortunately, the lift is working," Neel joked.

Then she added casually, "Even if it wasn't, I wouldn't have to worry. You'd carry me. It's only the first floor, and my friend is quite well-built."

The words slipped out before she could think about them. She immediately felt embarrassed. But Neel only smiled.

"That would be my pleasure."

Nishi smiled back. And together, slowly and unhurriedly, they walked toward the building as the evening quietly came to an end.

# Chapter 11
# THE MEASURE OF A MAN



Slowly, Nishi began finding her feet again.

The following week, Neel continued dropping Palash at school, while Nishi remained at his home. Her sprain had not completely healed, but she was determined to regain her independence. Mayank and her team made sure she had nothing to worry about. He assured her that she could continue working from home for another week and return to the office the following Monday. Everything else, he promised, would be taken care of.

With the nurse around and Neel's mother treating her like family, Nishi gradually began to feel at ease.

Evenings brought a different kind of warmth. Neel returned home, helped the children with their studies, and then joined them in their games. At night, Sahana slept beside Nishi, while Neel and Palash moved into the children's room. Somehow, the house had changed.

It was filled with laughter, small hopes, and new dreams. For Sahana, it was slowly becoming the warm, secure home she had

been missing. For Palash, it was beginning to feel like home too. And somewhere amidst it all, Neel and Nishi had found something neither had expected—a friendship that felt strangely comforting.

Neel told Nishi that there was hope for Raima's husband and that he could make a full recovery. Raima called soon after, her voice filled with renewed optimism. Dr. Neel's assurance had given her something she had almost forgotten how to feel—hope.

By the end of the week, Neel and Nishi had become very good friends. They had no name for what existed between them yet. Only immense respect, quiet understanding, and the inexplicable comfort of having found each other. For now, that was enough.

Nishi continued working from home with the same sincerity as always. She attended meetings, handled client calls, and guided her team. Though everyone assured her that they would manage without her, she refused to step back from her responsibilities.

A presentation was due on Friday, and Ravi, one of her team members, offered to present it himself.

"You don't need to come to the office, ma'am. I'll handle it."

Nishi was touched. Perhaps she had finally learned that the world was also filled with kind people. She patiently explained everything to Ravi, grateful that she could count on him.

That Thursday evening, Neel's mother greeted him with troubling news. A close cousin in Lucknow—the son of her brother—had met with a terrible accident.

"I don't know how they are managing," she said, her voice heavy with worry. "My brother is abroad with his other son, and Chetna is handling everything alone. The children are still so young."

Nishi quietly sat beside her and held her hand. Neel listened before speaking gently. "Ma, you should go and help Chetna. It must be very difficult for her."

His mother nodded. “When Ira left, Chetna came and stayed with us. She was newly married then, but she never hesitated to help us.”

Neel looked at Nishi. “They are more than cousins. They are family. We can count on them.”

Nishi smiled thoughtfully. “Then you should go too, Neel.”

“I will take care of Sahana and we have the nurse around”

Neel smiled but he shook his head. “I know you will but I can't leave my patients. One of our doctors is already on leave. If I leave, there will be no one to manage the department. And if something happens in my absence, I won't be able to forgive myself.”

His mother immediately reassured him. “Don't worry, son. I'll take care of Chetna and her children.. You stay with your patients. Chetna needs me there.”

Neel went inside to book her tickets. Watching him leave, his mother turned to Nishi with quiet pride.

“As I told you, he is devoted to his patients. I know how much they need him.”

Nishi nodded. “He truly is.”

Then she smiled and stood up.

“Masi, come. I'll help you pack.”

The next morning, after dropping his mother at the railway station and the children at school, Neel returned home, expecting to find the house quiet. Instead, the aroma of freshly prepared breakfast greeted him. On the dining table were sandwiches, omelettes, and glasses of milk.

He looked at Nishi in surprise. For a moment, he assumed the house help had prepared everything. But before he could ask, Nishi explained that the house help was unwell and wouldn't be coming that day.

Then Neel noticed something else. The nurse was missing too. And Nishi was still limping.

"Where is the nurse?" he asked, his expression changing. "Don't tell me you managed everything yourself."

Nishi smiled reassuringly. "Relax. It's only sandwiches and omelettes. I couldn't do much. The nurse had to take a day off because her in-laws are visiting. Besides, I can manage. The children have left, and it's an easy Friday."

Neel wasn't convinced.

"So, you mean to tell me that in this condition, you're going to manage everything by yourself? Are you kidding me? You're still limping."

Without another word, he called the hospital. Unfortunately, no replacement nurse was immediately available. The earliest they could send someone was around noon.

Neel turned to Nishi.

"Someone will be here by noon. Until then, you're going to rest. No unnecessary work, no stress. Understood?"

His voice was gentle, but firm.

Nishi nodded. They sat down and had breakfast together. As soon as they finished, Neel gathered the plates and headed towards the kitchen. Nishi followed him, still limping, and began making tea.

Neel glanced at her but said nothing. He started chopping vegetables.

"Neel, I've already cooked something for us."

"I'm just going to pack it for you," she replied.

Then he looked towards the kitchen counter.

Lunch was already prepared—enough for him and the children.

He stared at it, then at Nishi.

"Are you out of your mind?" he exclaimed. "You really are a stubborn woman. You haven't even recovered properly."

There was irritation in his voice, but his eyes betrayed the real reason behind it. He was worried.

"And you did all this with one hand? Seriously?"

Nishi sighed. "Neel, I cook every morning before I go to the office. And I've recovered completely."

"Hmm." He gave her a pointed look. "I can see that."

The sarcasm made her smile despite herself.

"I'll pack the lunch myself. Come with me."

"It's time for your medicines."

Before she could argue, Neel gently guided her towards the bedroom and settled her comfortably on the bed.

"Now, you're not getting up."

"But Neel, you need to go to the hospital. I can manage. Everything is already—"

"Sshh."

He gently placed a finger over her lips.

"Medicines first. Then I'll leave. The nurse will be here in three hours."

Nishi looked at him for a moment.

This time, she didn't protest.

She simply took her medicines and quietly settled back against the pillows. And Neel finally allowed himself a small, relieved smile. Just then, Nishi's phone rang. It was Vineet.

With her right hand still injured and her head bandaged, she couldn't hold the phone properly, so she put it on speaker. Neel immediately recognised the name, Vineet—the man who had once been her husband and was now, unfortunately, her boss.

Neel quietly moved around the room, arranging things within Nishi's reach while she answered.

"Hello."

"Hello, Nishi. How are you doing now?"

"Much better, Vineet. I should be able to join from Monday."

"Oh, really? Monday?" His voice carried an unmistakable edge. "Why strain yourself? You can continue working from home. We'll manage everything here and send your pay check home."

Nishi fell silent for a moment.

"Vineet, I—"

He cut her off.

"You've been absent from duty ever since I left for Bangalore. Do you think that's acceptable? Your team has been managing everything for you while you sit back and relax, despite being paid as an Assistant Manager."

Nishi took a breath and composed herself.

"Vineet, that's exactly what an Assistant Manager is supposed to do. I've been mentoring and guiding my team. I prepared the presentation myself, and Ravi has assured me that he'll present it because—"

"So now you're going to teach me what an Assistant Manager should do?" His voice hardened. "Don't forget, Nishi. I'm your boss."

A bitter silence followed.

"You know, we were in the same batch," Vineet continued, "but it's your callous attitude that has kept you, my junior. You think success comes that easily?"

Neel stopped what he was doing.

He wanted to intervene. Every instinct in him told him to tell this man that he had no idea what Nishi had endured, or how hard she

had worked to build a life for herself and her son. He had no right to judge her.

But he remained silent. This was Nishi's workplace. Vineet was her boss. And Neel knew the last thing she needed was for him to make her situation more difficult. Vineet continued.

"There's a presentation at ten-thirty. I want you here within half an hour. Not Ravi. You will present it."

"But, Vineet—"

"No excuses. I returned at three this morning with my father. You know he's seventy and unwell. Yet I still came to the office because this is an important client. And you couldn't even be bothered to show up. You've been with us for barely a week, and this already tells me everything I need to know about your attitude."

Nishi's expression changed.

"What happened to Baba? Is he better now?"

"That's not your concern. Your concern is the presentation."

She swallowed.

"Vineet, my right hand is still hurting and I—"

"What nonsense! If you can work from home, you can come to the office."

"I want to see you here in half an hour," he said coldly. "And if you try to avoid this, I'll take it up with the board as a case of absconding from duty."

The call ended. For a few seconds, Nishi simply stared at the phone. Neel was furious, but he said nothing. He could see what Vineet was doing. This wasn't about the presentation. Vineet wanted to assert his authority. He wanted to punish her, and he had found an excuse.

Nishi knew it too.

She had done her work. She had prepared the presentation herself. Mayank had surely tried to explain the situation. But once Vineet made up his mind, nothing seemed capable of changing it.

She looked down at her injured hand. She couldn't change by herself. She couldn't manage her clothes. The nurse wasn't there. And yet, somehow, she had to go. She slowly swung her legs towards the edge of the bed and tried to place her feet on the floor.

Before she could stand, Neel gently stopped her.

"Nishi."

His voice was calm. But there was something in his eyes that made her pause.

"No, Neel. I have to go. I can't risk my job."

Her voice was quiet, but there was determination in it.

"Will you please call a cab for me? And close the door behind you when you leave. I need to change."

She glanced at the clock.

"I still have thirty minutes. I can make it."

Neel looked at her—her bandaged head, her injured hand, the way she was still struggling to walk.

"Nishi, how will you change? You've always needed the nurse."

"Don't worry. You should not go. I'm sure the board will understand. You have all the medical reports. And if Cynova Technologies tries to fire you, I'll stand by you. There are laws to protect employees. They can't simply fire you because you're injured."

Nishi shook her head.

"No, Neel. I have to go."

He understood then. Perhaps she wasn't afraid of losing her job alone. She was afraid of giving Vineet another reason to accuse her.

"Alright," he finally said. "Then I'll drop you at the office before I go to the hospital."

He brought her clothes into the room and placed them neatly on the bed. He packed her laptop into her bag and turned towards the door. Nishi looked at the clothes.

How was she going to put them on with one injured hand? She would need help. But she had no choice. She would find a way. Neel seemed to understand what was going through her mind, but he didn't say anything. He simply left the room and closed the door behind him. In her haste, Nishi forgot to lock the door.

Time was running out. She was still wearing her nightgown. Slowly, she removed her robe, leaving the satin chemise beneath it. Her eyes kept drifting towards the clock.

Twenty-five minutes. She tried to change quickly.

Then she made one careless movement. A sharp, unbearable pain shot through her injured wrist.

A scream escaped her before she could stop it.

"Ah!"

The sound was so sudden and shrill that Neel rushed into the room without thinking. And then he stopped. For one brief moment, he saw her standing helplessly in her satin chemise, her face twisted with pain, her injured hand trembling. But he didn't see a beautiful woman.

He saw someone fighting desperately to hold herself together despite everything life had thrown at her. Nishi was conscious of how vulnerable she suddenly was. She immediately grabbed her robe and pulled it around herself. Neel took a step towards her.

Her heart began pounding. Why was he coming closer? The house was empty. She had trusted him completely—as a friend, as a good man.

But in this moment of helplessness, a fleeting fear passed through her mind. Neel quietly removed his rimless glasses and placed them on the table.

Nishi watched him, puzzled. She couldn't understand why he had taken them off.

She had trusted him completely—as a friend, and as a man she believed to be good. But in that moment, with no one else around and with herself so helpless, a sudden, fleeting fear slipped into her mind.

It was irrational, perhaps. Yet vulnerability had a way of making even the safest places feel uncertain.

Neel took a step towards her. Nishi instinctively pulled the robe closer around herself.

"Neel…" Her voice trembled slightly. "I'll manage."

She wasn't accusing him. She was simply frightened by her own helplessness.

And Neel, seeing the fear in her eyes, stopped.

"You don't have to."

He reached for the robe. Nishi instinctively tightened her hold on it.

"No, Neel…"

But then he did something she hadn't expected.

He took the belt from the robe, turned away from her, and tied it gently over his own eyes.

"I'll help you get dressed," he said calmly. "You won't be late."

Nishi stared at him. His eyes were completely covered. He wasn't looking at her.

He had understood her vulnerability before she had even voiced it—and had found a way to help without compromising her dignity. Her fear slowly dissolved.

"Tell me what you need me to do," he said.

With her heart still unsettled, Nishi began guiding him.

"Take the dress from the bed."

He did exactly as she instructed.

"Now give it to me."

He placed it in her hand without turning around.

Whenever she needed something, she told him. Whenever he had to move closer, he did so only when she guided him. Not once did he remove the blindfold. Not once did he make her feel uncomfortable. There was nothing hurried or awkward in his movements. Only patience, restraint and respect. Slowly, with his help and her instructions, Nishi managed to change.

"I'm ready," she whispered.

Only then did Neel remove the blindfold. He looked at her briefly, then picked up her comb.

"Sit."

He gently combed her hair, careful not to disturb the bandage on her head. Then he helped her put on her shoes.

"Done."

Nishi looked at him.

A few minutes ago, she had been afraid. Now, she couldn't find even a trace of that fear. Instead, there was something deeper. Respect. Perhaps character wasn't revealed by grand gestures or powerful words.

Perhaps it was revealed in moments when someone had every opportunity to cross a boundary—and chose, instead, to protect it. Neel had seen her at her most vulnerable and had made her feel

safe. And as they walked out together towards the office, Nishi realised that she had discovered something she hadn't expected to find in him.

Not merely a kind friend. But a man of extraordinary character.

# Chapter 12
# A FAMILIAR KIND OF CARE



Nishi tried her best, but despite rushing, she was still fifteen minutes late. Her injuries had made even the simplest task—changing clothes and getting ready—painfully slow. Fortunately, there was still enough time before the meeting began.

But Vineet was furious. From the boardroom, he happened to glance towards the reception area just as an Audi stopped outside. A tall, handsome man stepped out and helped Nishi from the car.

Vineet froze. The man gently took her hand and guided her towards the elevator. He carried her laptop bag for her, walking beside her with an ease that suggested familiarity. From where Vineet stood, he couldn't see the extent of Nishi's injuries. He could only see her face—and the man beside her. The colour drained from his face.

Nishi had told him only a few days ago that she had never married again. Then who was this man?

He couldn't wait for the elevator to reach the boardroom floor.

A few feet away from Vineet, the British clients were completely at ease. They were chatting, laughing over coffee, in no particular hurry. They had no idea of the turmoil unfolding just outside.

The elevator doors finally opened. Nishi stepped out. Vineet's anger vanished instantly as he saw her.

She was dressed in a formal business suit, her head wrapped in a bandage. Her right arm was in a plaster cast, and she was walking with visible difficulty. Yet she carried herself with remarkable composure, her laptop bag resting securely on her uninjured arm. Vineet stepped towards her.

"You… you're injured. So badly injured."

His voice had changed. There was no anger in it now—only shock and genuine concern.

"Why did you come? You should have told me. I thought it was just a minor injury."

Nishi looked at him calmly.

"How did the accident happen?" he asked.

There was no accusation in his voice this time.

"Vineet, let's just get this done and over with."

"But how did it happen?"

"That doesn't concern you," she replied softly. "Your concern is the presentation we have today."

Before he could say anything, one of the British clients in her fifties stepped forward.

"Hello, Nishi. I'm Emma. Vineet told me that you would be presenting today."

"Hello, ma'am."

Emma looked at her in disbelief.

“My child, you're badly injured. How are you going to present? I don't think you should. You should have been on paid leave.”

Ravi immediately stepped forward and took the laptop bag from Nishi.

“Let me handle it, Nishi ma’am”

“No, Ravi,” Nishi said gently. “I'll do it.”

Vineet stood there, already feeling increasingly uncomfortable. Emma smiled sympathetically at Nishi.

“You really don't need to prove anything. We have plenty of time.”

Nishi returned her smile.

“I'm fine, ma'am. I can manage.”

There was no self-pity in her voice. No attempt to make anyone feel sorry for her. Just quiet confidence. Ravi turned to Emma. “Emma ma'am, please finish your coffee and settle down comfortably. We'll begin shortly.”

Emma nodded with a warm smile.

“No worries. We have plenty of time.”

Ravi walked ahead with Nishi's laptop bag. Shweta, another member of Nishi's team, came forward to support her as they made their way towards the boardroom.

Nishi didn't even look back at Vineet. Her attention was already on the presentation. Vineet remained where he was, watching her disappear through the boardroom doors. Mayank had tried to tell him about the accident.

He had dismissed him. He had been angry with Nishi, determined to punish her—to humiliate her, insult her, and make her regret standing up to him.

But now, seeing her walk into that room with a fractured hand, a bandaged head and barely enough strength to walk, something inside him shifted.

He felt ashamed. She hadn't complained. She hadn't asked for sympathy. She hadn't even used her injuries as an excuse. She had simply shown up. And somehow, that quiet strength made his own cruelty look even smaller.

The presentation began. Before Nishi could take the lead, one of the British clients looked at her concernedly.

"Are you sure you can manage?"

Nishi smiled with quiet confidence. "I'll manage."

And she did. Despite her fractured wrist and the slight limp in her step, she stood before the room with remarkable composure. Her voice remained steady, her explanations clear, and her confidence never faltered. Whenever she struggled to stand for too long, one of her team members discreetly stepped in, taking over a portion of the presentation before handing it back to her.

There was no fuss, no sympathy—only seamless teamwork. By the time they reached the final slide, Nishi had led the presentation with the same grace and professionalism she always carried. The clients were impressed. And her team couldn't have been prouder.

Vineet had watched everything from his seat in the boardroom. When his turn came, he presented his part, and soon the meeting drew to a close. The team members exchanged smiles and handshakes with Emma and the other British clients before leaving the boardroom. As the room quietened, Emma picked up her glass, removed the coaster over it, and offered it to Nishi.

"My child, I must say, I salute your grit and determination. You presented remarkably well."

Then her expression hardened as she turned towards Vineet.

"But Vineet, I'm truly disappointed with you. How could you let a team member present in this condition? Her teammates could easily have handled it, although I must say, she has done a commendable job."

She shook her head.

"We cannot appreciate such a policy. If your company doesn't care about its employees, how can we trust that it will care about its clients? I don't think we should continue doing business with you."

One of the other clients immediately nodded.

"I agree. This is completely immoral. We should discuss this with your senior before proceeding any further."

Vineet's face tightened. He knew he was in trouble. Before he could respond, Nishi spoke.

"No, Emma ma'am. That isn't true."

Everyone turned towards her.

"I had my accident last Friday. My team asked me to stay home, and I managed everything from there. They supported me throughout, even though I had joined only seven days ago."

She paused before looking at Vineet.

"Vineet wasn't even aware of my condition. He was in Bangalore. His father isn't well, yet he came here early in the morning. He came because he wanted to support his team."

Her voice remained calm.

"Cynova Technologies has always been dedicated to its clients. We are a team, and we help one another"

Emma studied her for a moment before finally nodding.

"I understand."

The tension slowly dissolved. After exchanging a few more pleasantries, Emma and the other clients left.

Only then did Nishi sink into a chair, exhausted. Vineet looked at her quietly.

"Thank you, Nishi."

She glanced at him.

"But why did you defend me? You had every opportunity to let them complain to my senior. I could have—"

"No, Mr. Vineet Malhotra."

She cut him off gently but firmly.

"I didn't do it for you."

Her eyes softened for a moment.

"This company and the people here genuinely helped me when I was going through a difficult time. My team worked hard. They didn't deserve to suffer because of something that wasn't their fault. My team did nothing wrong. They worked incredibly hard. If we lose a client because of this misunderstanding, they will suffer too."

She paused.

"So yes, I did it for them."

Something in Vineet softened. He pulled a chair beside hers and sat down.

"Nishi, until you recover, you don't have to come to the office. Work from home. Get some rest."

She gave him a restrained smile.

"Thanks, but no thanks, Mr. Vineet Malhotra. I'm very well aware of your hot-and-cold behaviour."

Her voice remained composed, but her determination was unmistakable.

"I came today, and I'll come regularly from Monday."

Vineet gently reached out and touched her shoulder. Nishi flinched.

His hand immediately fell away.

"Nishi… how are you managing like this? You have a child. Is there anyone around to help you?"

"I told you, Vineet. That doesn't concern you."

She slowly rose from the chair. Vineet stood as well.

"I'll drop you home. You don't have to spend the whole day here."

Nishi looked at him, and a bitter smile touched her lips.

"Vineet…"

The memories came rushing back.

"Amidst torrential rain and a thunderstorm, you threw me out of your house. I was two months pregnant."

Her voice remained steady, though her eyes betrayed the pain.

"I pleaded. I cried. I waited outside your door the entire night, but you never opened it."

She picked up her things.

"Who knows? You might remember that day again and throw me out of a moving car."

Her eyes met his.

"I'm already injured. I won't give you that opportunity."

Vineet's expression changed. He opened his mouth to defend himself, but Nishi had already gathered her belongings. Just then, Emma returned.

"Sorry, I forgot my phone."

She picked it up, then noticed Nishi struggling with her things. Without hesitation, she gently took hold of her uninjured hand.

"Come, my child. We'll have lunch together. It was lovely meeting you."

Nishi gave her a grateful smile and allowed Emma to lead her away.

Vineet remained standing there, watching them leave—helpless, silent, and unable to find a single word that could undo the past.

By the time Nishi's shift ended, Neel was waiting for her outside. He walked towards her and gently took her bag.

"There's someone to help at home, and the nurse is there too," he assured her. "The children aren't alone. I've managed everything."

Nishi nodded, reassured. Neel carefully helped her settle into the passenger seat of his car. He fastened her seat belt himself, then reached into the back seat, brought out a cushion, and gently placed it beneath her injured arm.

"I'll drive slowly," he promised.

"I know," Nishi replied softly.

A faint smile appeared on Neel's face.

"And tonight, we're all going out for dinner. I promised Palash"

There was an unmistakable affection in his voice when he said the child's name.

Neel closed the door, walked around to the driver's side, and drove away. Neither of them noticed Vineet standing nearby. He had seen everything. He had heard the conversation. His eyes remained fixed on the car as it disappeared from view.

Who was this man?

So considerate. So attentive. So effortlessly caring towards Nishi.

For a fleeting moment, Vineet remembered a time when he had cared for her that way—when fastening her seat belt, making her comfortable, or worrying about her smallest discomfort had once

felt like the most natural thing in the world. Then the memory turned bitter. His jaw tightened.

Who could he be?

And suddenly, another thought surfaced. Could he possibly be Palash's father?

# Chapter 13
# PERHAPS, JUST PERHAPS



That night, sleep refused to visit Vineet. But then, it had been eight years since he had truly known what peaceful sleep felt like. For eight years, he had deliberately kept Nishi out of his life. He had never tried to find out where she was or what had become of her. He had never searched for her, never followed her on social media, never asked anyone about her. He didn't want to know. At least, that was what he told himself.

Somewhere along the way, he had convinced himself that Nishi must have moved on. She had always wanted to move on, hadn't she? That was why she had betrayed him.

That was the story he had repeated to himself for eight long years—so many times that the lie had slowly begun to feel like the truth. And whenever a small, unwanted doubt surfaced, he buried it beneath the same bitter certainty. She chose to leave. She betrayed me. She moved on. He had built his life around those three beliefs.

Because if they weren't true…

then he would have to face the possibility that perhaps he had been wrong about Nishi all along.

He remembered how his mother had once called his father a loser before walking away with another man. He remembered his father standing there, shattered, while he watched everything he knew as a family fall apart.

Then came his stepmother. She had convinced his father that boarding school would be good for him—that he needed discipline, a better education, a better environment. His father had believed her. And he had gone.

Only much later did he understand what he had truly needed back then.

Not discipline. Not distance. He had needed his family. He had needed someone to tell him that he was not being abandoned again. But no one had. And then Nishi came into his life.

He had been a second-year student when he first met her.

She had been everything he wasn't—bubbly, cheerful, effortlessly alive and a free-spirited girl. There had been an innocence in her eyes, in the way she smiled, in the way she looked at the world as though it still had so much goodness left to offer. And strangely, that innocence was still there.

He could see it in the way she carried herself now—the quiet confidence, the grace, the strength she had built around herself. She was no longer the girl he had known, yet somewhere beneath the woman she had become, that same Nishi still existed.

There had been a time when she was the most precious person in his world. And he had been terrified of losing her. Because he had already learned, far too young, that people leave. Mothers leave. Fathers become distant.

Families fall apart. And the people you love can simply decide that they no longer want you in their lives.

So, he had loved Nishi deeply, desperately, almost fearfully. Tonight, every memory of her came rushing back.

Her beautiful, innocent face. The way she used to look at him. The way she cared for him without making a show of it. She remembered everything about him—his favourite food, the things he liked, the things he disliked, the little habits even he wasn't conscious of.

Back then, he had believed they were soulmates. Perhaps, in his heart, some part of him still did. He remembered resting his head in her lap while her fingers moved gently through his hair. He remembered holding her from behind, his head resting softly against her shoulder, feeling a peace he had never known anywhere else.

He could still remember the fragrance of her hair. The perfume she wore. The way her eyes widened whenever something surprised or delighted her. The tiny expressions that appeared on her face without her realizing it.

Every little detail. Eight years had passed. And yet, tonight, he realized something that frightened him. He had forgotten many things about his own life. But he had forgotten almost nothing about Nishi.

Nishi had always loved children. She had often spoken about having a family of their own someday. Vineet wanted the same. He had even chosen names for the children they dreamed of having.

If it was a boy, Vineet had decided, he would call him Palash. And if it was a girl, she would be Piya.

They had laughed over those names, imagined their little home filled with children's voices, and built an entire future around a dream that had seemed so certain. But every time Nishi took a pregnancy test and saw the single line, her face would fall. Vineet remembered those moments clearly.

He would pull her into his arms and remind her that he didn't need a child to complete their family. She was enough. She had always been enough. Then came the medical report that changed everything.

The doctor had told him that his chances of becoming a father were considerably low. His sperm count was extremely low. He remembered the silence that followed. The helplessness. The shame he hadn't known how to name. When they returned home that day, he had turned to Nishi, not expecting to be the one comforting her.

But somehow, she had been the one holding him together. Just as she had always done. He remembered looking at her and forcing the words out.

"Nishi, you have a life. The doctor said you are fertile. You have a choice. You can leave me. I will bear it."

He had said it as though he was giving her freedom. As though he was being selfless. But deep down, he knew the truth. He hadn't meant it. Not even for a moment. He couldn't imagine a life without her. And Nishi had looked at him with those same gentle eyes and said,

"Vineet, you are my entire world. I don't need children to complete my family. We are enough for each other."

He had believed her. He had held on to those words as though they were a promise. A promise that no matter what happened, she would stay.

Vineet suddenly sat upright in bed as the memories crashed over him. His breathing grew uneven. For years, he had told himself that Nishi had betrayed him. That she had wanted a family. That she had wanted children. That she had eventually chosen a life he could not give her.

But tonight, for the first time, another question rose from somewhere deep inside him.

Why? If she had loved him so deeply...

If she had once told him that he was her entire world...

Why had she left?

His eyes burned as a terrible thought took shape. Was it because I couldn't give her a family?

He lowered his head, his fingers tightening against the bedsheet. Was I the reason she walked away?

And then, almost unwillingly, another thought followed. Was I simply not enough for her anymore?

The question hurt more than he expected. Because for eight years, he had believed that Nishi had been the one who abandoned him. Tonight, for the first time, he wondered if he had misunderstood everything.

But he brushed the thought aside.

No. He didn't want to go there.

Another memory came rushing back instead—the pregnancy report.

He could still see it. He remembered turning the pages of the medical file, his hands trembling as the doctor's words echoed in his mind.

"Five years you've been trying for a baby... and now, suddenly, a miracle."

A miracle. He had been incapable of believing it.

After everything they had been through, after years of disappointment, Nishi was pregnant.

For one brief moment, he had almost allowed himself to believe that the impossible had happened. But then, he doubted his fate.

And then—

The memory shifted. He saw himself coming home to the dining table covered with sweets.

Nishi had prepared them. She had been waiting for him. Perhaps she had been waiting to spend the happiest day of her life with the man she loved. Instead, he had overturned the table.

The sweets had scattered across the floor. And so had whatever remained of their life together.

He remembered his own voice, harsh and vicious, demanding to know who the father of the child was.

He remembered Nishi crying. Pleading. Trying desperately to make him listen. But he hadn't listened.

He had been consumed by suspicion, humiliation and rage. So much rage that, for one terrible moment, he had wanted to destroy everything—including the woman he had once loved and the unborn child he believed was not his.

The memory made his stomach twist. Vineet closed his eyes, but the past refused to disappear. That night. Her tears. Her pleas. His cruelty. His words. He opened his eyes abruptly.

The photograph of Nishi lying beside his bed suddenly felt unbearable. He grabbed it and threw it across the room. The frame struck the floor with a sharp crack.

"Go away!" he had shouted that night.

"Get lost from my life! I don't want anyone in my life!"

And then, with all the bitterness of a man convinced he had been betrayed, he had said the words he would one day wish he could take back.

"I am enough for myself."

Vineet stared into the darkness now. Eight years later, those words came back to him differently. He had thought he was rejecting her. He had thought he was protecting himself. But perhaps, without realizing it, he had been giving Nishi exactly what he had told her to do.

Leave. Go away. Get out of my life. And she had. For eight years.

The shattering of the frame woke his father. A few moments later, the old man appeared at the doorway, still half-asleep.

"Son, why are you awake?"

"Nothing, Baba. The frame just fell. You go back to sleep."

His father looked at him for a long moment.

"Don't lie to me. I know you too well. You threw the frame. It was right beside your bedside table."

Without waiting for an answer, the old man walked in and settled himself beside him.

For a few moments, there was silence. Then he spoke softly.

"Son, till today, I have never believed that Nishi could betray you. But you never listened to me."

"Baba, please go back to sleep. I don't want to discuss this."

But Vineet still continued even though he was the one who wanted to end the discussion.

"And she has the nerve to name her son the very name I had chosen for my son."

Vineet's jaw tightened.

"She has someone in her life," Vineet went on. "A man who cares for her deeply. Yet she told me she never married." Vineet's breathing grew heavier.

"Baba... I asked her to leave."

His voice broke slightly.

"But she stayed. Why?"

He looked at his father, years of hurt suddenly spilling through his eyes.

"Was it sympathy? Mercy? I never needed either."

His father lowered his gaze. “Son, I was equally responsible for what happened to you.”

Vineet looked at him. “I believed your stepmother, and she ruined both our lives. I should never have remarried. I should never have sent you away to boarding school.”

His voice trembled.

“You needed me, son. And I wasn't there for you.”

Vineet's anger softened.

He gently patted his father's shoulder. The old man placed his hand over his son's.

“There is no point crying over spilled milk now.”

He paused before adding quietly,

“But perhaps life has given you another opportunity.”

Vineet looked at him questioningly.

“Maybe... just maybe... Palash is your son.”

Vineet immediately shook his head.

“No, Baba.”

His voice was firm.

“Not another hope again.”

“I am infertile.”

His father frowned.

“The doctors never said you were infertile, son. They only said—”

“No, Baba.”

Vineet cut him off.

“No more discussion.”

His eyes hardened.

“I have shut that door.”

“Really?”

The old man's question was gentle, almost knowing. Vineet didn't answer. His father patted his shoulder again.

“Son, I never believed Nishi could cheat on you.”

He took a slow breath.

“Back then, your stepmother was alive. I didn't have the courage to bring Nishi into my house. And perhaps she wouldn't have accepted my help anyway. All these years even I didn’t know where she was.”

He looked at his son.

“But now destiny has brought her back into your life after eight years.”

His voice became firmer.

“All I will say is this—don't judge what you don't know.”

Vineet remained silent.

“Keep calm when she is around you, especially at the office. Don't let your anger speak for you.”

The old man squeezed his shoulder.

“Before you assume anything, find out the truth.”

He paused.

“Sometimes, son, the truth is very different from the story we have spent years telling ourselves.”

# Chapter 14
# ALMOST LIKE HOME



A couple of weeks passed, and slowly, Nishi found her feet again.

She returned to her house next door, while Neel's mother came home after a week. Yet, despite living under separate roofs, the two families seemed to have forgotten where one home ended and the other began.

As she had promised, every evening Nishi walked into Neel's house and prepared tea. She would sit with his mother, sharing steaming cups and easy conversation. What had once been a simple promise had quietly become a cherished evening ritual. After tea, the two women prepared dinner together. Nishi cooked not only for herself and Palash but for Neel and his family as well. No one questioned it. No one found it unusual. It had simply become a part of their lives.

When Neel returned from work, he helped the children with their studies. Once the books were put away, Sahana and Palash would pull him outside to the playground, their laughter filling the evening air.

Then came the badminton sessions.

First, it was Neel and Palash, turning the court into their little battlefield, each determined to prove that he was the better player. Then came Neel and Nishi, with Nishi refusing to let Neel have an easy win and Neel pretending to be terribly serious about the competition.

And when Sahana joined them for mixed doubles, all rules went out of the window.

It was hardly a match then. There were crooked serves, dramatic misses, shameless cheating, mock arguments over whether the shuttle had landed in or out, and plenty of laughter. Sahana would celebrate every point as though she had just won a championship, while Neel and Nishi would accuse each other of deliberately losing just to make her happy.

The scores were forgotten almost as soon as they were made. What mattered was the laughter, the teasing and those carefree moments when the four of them simply enjoyed being together. The badminton court wasn't just where they played—it was where they made some of their happiest memories.

Eventually, Neel's mother would call them in for dinner, and they would all gather around the same table.

In those ordinary moments, something extraordinary was taking shape. Nishi had grown especially close to Sahana. They often went for long walks together, talking about everything and nothing. Whenever Nishi sensed the little girl was troubled, she knew how to lift her spirits. She encouraged Sahana to be independent, to stand on her own feet and believe in herself—but she always reminded her to be careful and stay safe.

Somewhere along the way, Sahana had found a safe place in Nishi. A place where she could laugh freely, speak without hesitation and simply be herself. From the outside, Neel, Nishi, Sahana and Palash looked like a family.

Perhaps, without realizing it, they had begun to feel like one too.

Neither Neel nor Nishi could remember when the boundaries between their lives had quietly disappeared. There had been no grand moment, no declaration, no conscious decision. Their worlds had simply begun to intertwine—one ordinary day at a time. They called themselves friends. The best of friends.

But friendship had taken on a different meaning now. They knew each other's moods, understood each other's silences, teased one another mercilessly and laughed over the smallest things. They could spend an entire evening talking, or sit together without saying a word, and neither ever felt the need to fill the silence.

Life had quietly changed. It was no longer about two neighbours living next door. It was about shared meals, evening walks, children's laughter, playful arguments and the quiet comfort of knowing that someone would always be there. For Nishi, who had spent so long believing that she had to face everything alone, this new warmth felt almost unfamiliar. For Neel, it felt just as precious. Neither of them knew what the future held.

For now, they were simply happy. And perhaps that was how happiness was meant to arrive—not with a grand announcement, but quietly, gently, almost unnoticed. Through a cup of tea. A shared dinner. A child's laughter.

And the presence of someone who, little by little, had begun to feel like home.

Neel and Nishi both knew that they knew about each other's past. But neither of them ever deliberately brought it up. There was an unspoken understanding between them—a quiet respect for the wounds the other carried. They did not need explanations or confessions to understand that some chapters were better left untouched until the person carrying them was ready to open them.

At work, Neel remained the same calm and composed doctor everyone knew. His professionalism had not changed, nor had his patience. But there was one small difference. He smiled more.

Perhaps it was because life had begun to feel lighter. Nishi, too, returned to the office and faced Vineet.

His moods continued to swing, and his temper remained unpredictable. But Nishi no longer allowed his behaviour to get under her skin. She understood that Vineet was fighting a battle within himself—a battle he had never truly healed from. She would not become a part of it. She had learned to let people heal at their own pace.

So, she remained focused on her work. Their personal lives were never discussed between them, though Vineet occasionally tried to steer their conversations in that direction. Nishi would simply and calmly dismiss the subject. Not out of arrogance. Out of self-respect.

She knew Vineet had convinced himself that she had betrayed him. She had once tried everything to prove otherwise when she was his wife. She had remained loyal to him throughout their marriage, endured his doubts and held on even when his faith in her had begun to disappear. And if five years of loyalty had not been enough to make him believe her, then perhaps the problem had never been with her. It had been with him.

Over the years, Nishi had learned to deal with everything on her own. She no longer needed Vineet's approval, his understanding, or even his acceptance of her truth. What he chose to believe about her was his decision.

If one day he wanted to believe her, that was his choice. And if he never did, that was his choice too. Either way, Nishi had stopped carrying the burden of it. She had finally understood that peace did not always come from being understood by others. Sometimes, it came from no longer needing to be.

Yet Vineet remained curious about Nishi's life. He told himself it was anger that made him want to know. He wanted answers—or perhaps an opportunity to accuse her, to punish her for the betrayal he still believed had happened. But beneath that anger lay something he refused to acknowledge.

He was still watching her. He often wondered how Nishi managed everything on her own. How had she rebuilt her life after everything that had happened? Who was the man who seemed to be a constant presence around her? He had noticed him several times, often waiting outside the office to pick Nishi up.

There was something about the man that unsettled him. Vineet began keeping an eye on Nishi, hoping that sooner or later he would discover something that would confirm what he had already convinced himself was true. He watched. He waited. He searched for answers in every little detail. But so far, he had found nothing.

Not a single piece of evidence. Only more questions.

It was an ordinary Saturday evening but fun filled for Neel, Nishi and the children.

Neel and Nishi had brought the children to the mall, and the evening had passed in laughter, shopping, and far too much ice cream. For a few hours, life felt wonderfully uncomplicated.

When it was time to leave, they walked towards the parking area together. The parking lot was some distance away, so Neel handed the children over to Nishi.

"Wait here. I'll bring the car."

The moment he disappeared towards the parking area, Sahana looked at Nishi hopefully.

"Can we have one more ice cream?"

Nishi laughed.

"One more. But that's the last one."

They had barely finished when Nishi glanced at her watch. Neel should have been back by now.

Meanwhile, as Neel reached the parking lot, he noticed a small crowd gathered around an elderly man lying motionless on the ground. He immediately hurried towards them.

"What happened?"

"He suddenly collapsed," someone replied. "We think he's having a heart attack."

Neel crouched beside the man. Years of medical training took over.

"Everyone, please step back and give him some space."

He quickly assessed the man's responsiveness and breathing. There was no meaningful response.

He checked for a pulse and immediately began CPR.

Positioning his hands correctly over the centre of the man's chest, Neel began firm, rhythmic chest compressions. His arms remained steady, each compression deliberate and controlled, allowing the chest to recoil before the next. "Come on," he murmured under his breath. "Stay with me."

Someone brought an AED from the mall security team. Neel continued compressions while they prepared it, following the device's instructions and ensuring everyone stood clear when required.

The crowd watched in silence. For several tense moments, there was no response. Neel did not stop. He continued the cycle of compressions and reassessment, refusing to give up. Then, finally, the man gasped. A faint breath. Neel immediately checked him again. The man's breathing had returned.

"That's it," Neel said softly. "Stay with me."

The old man's eyelids fluttered. He was still weak and disoriented, but he was conscious. Relief moved through the crowd. Neel remained beside him, monitoring him carefully. Back near the mall entrance, Nishi was beginning to worry. Neel was taking far longer than usual. She called him. No answer. She tried again. Still nothing.

A growing uneasiness made her turn towards the parking area.

"Come on," she told the children. "Let's go see where Papa is."

They hurried towards the parking lot. And then Nishi saw him.

Neel was kneeling beside an elderly man, surrounded by a small crowd. Her heart tightened. She moved closer, trying to see the man's face. And then she froze.

"Baba…"

The word escaped her. Neel looked up.

"Nishi?"

Her eyes remained fixed on the old man.

"Neel…" Her voice trembled. "He is Vineet's father."

For a moment, neither of them spoke. The coincidence was almost impossible to comprehend. Neel looked back at the elderly man. He was conscious but still extremely weak and not fully oriented. Without wasting another moment, Neel carefully supported him and helped him sit up.

"I'm taking him to the hospital," he said. "It's not far from here. He needs to be monitored."

He turned to Nishi.

"You take the children home. And please inform Vineet."

Nishi nodded, still shaken.

"Sure. I'll drop the children at Masi's and come straight to the hospital."

Neel gave her a reassuring look. "Go. I'll take care of him."

And with that, he helped the old man towards the car—never knowing that this unexpected act of kindness was about to bring two very different chapters of Nishi's life face to face.

After dropping the children home, Nishi called Vineet. It was Saturday evening, and once again, Vineet was alone with his memories.

He had been drinking. Perhaps he had intended to numb the old wounds, but the alcohol had only loosened the grip he usually kept over them. His mind kept returning to the past, replaying the same moments over and over—their marriage, the accusations, Nishi leaving, the life he had once imagined with her.

He sat there, lost in memories, with a glass in his hand and bitterness weighing heavily on his heart. His phone rang. He stared at the screen for a few seconds before finally answering.

"Why… why have you called?" His words were thick and slightly slurred.

"Vineet, just listen to me and stay calm. Everything is under control…"

"Then don't… don't disturb me." He abruptly disconnected.

Nishi immediately called again.

After several rings, he picked up.

"Vineet…"

"Why have you called me again?" His voice was irritated, uneven. "Haven't you… haven't you moved on already?"

"Vineet, please listen to me first."

But he was no longer listening.

"Why did you betray me in the first place?" His voice cracked. "I loved you. I loved you so deeply…"

He paused, struggling to gather his thoughts.

"And I still love you."

A bitter laugh escaped him.

"That's the worst part. My love turned into hate… and that only proves…" He swallowed hard. "That you still have a place in my heart."

"Vineet, you're drunk. You're not even speaking properly."

"I broke your photographs…" he continued as though he hadn't heard her. "So many times. I broke them… and then I repaired them. Why?"

His voice became quieter.

"Why do I still love you, Nishi?"

Nishi closed her eyes for a moment.

"Vineet, please listen to me. Baba—"

"Tell me!" he suddenly snapped. "Why did you cheat on me?"

"Vineet—"

"Who is the father of your son?"

His words were becoming increasingly incoherent.

"It's been so many years…" he muttered. "At least tell me now. Just tell me the truth…"

"Vineet, Baba had a cardiac arrest. He is in the hospital. Neel—"

But Vineet was no longer responding.

There was a faint sound on the other end, followed by silence.

"Vineet?" Nothing. "Vineet, are you there?" She waited. "Vineet?"

Still nothing.

Nishi realised that he had either dropped the phone or passed out.

She called his name a few more times, but there was no response. Finally, she sent him a message, hoping he would see it when he regained consciousness.

Vineet, Baba suffered a cardiac arrest. My friend Neel performed CPR and thankfully he is out of immediate danger. We are at Lifeline Multispeciality Hospital. I'll send you the location. Please come as soon as you can.

At Neel's house, his mother quietly packed dinner for Nishi and Neel. Nishi thanked her and left for the hospital, leaving Palash

and Sahana in her care. When she reached the hospital, she found Neel near the emergency ward.

"I tried calling Vineet," she told him quietly. "But he was drunk. He could barely speak, and then he stopped responding. I don't think he understood what I was saying."

Neel nodded.

"Don't worry about that now. You stay here with Baba. I'll make sure you know if there is any change."

A little later, the cardiologist came out.

"He is stable at the moment," the doctor explained. "But we need to keep him under observation. The next few hours are important."

Nishi looked through the glass towards the elderly man lying inside. Despite everything that had happened between her and Vineet, she couldn't leave his father alone. Not tonight. Not when he was fighting for his life.

Nishi decided to wait outside the ICU. She lowered herself carefully into one of the cold metallic chairs and stared at the closed doors, her thoughts wandering between the old man inside and the memories she had spent years trying to leave behind. A few minutes later, Neel joined her. Neither of them said much.

They simply sat beside each other and quietly ate the dinner his mother had packed for them. The hospital corridor was unusually still, broken only by the occasional footsteps of a nurse or the soft beeping of distant monitors. After they finished eating, Nishi looked at him.

"You should go home now, Neel. The children are alone."

"They aren't alone," he assured her. "I called home. Ma is there, and the children have already fallen asleep."

"You should still go. You've been here for so long"

Neel shook his head gently.

"I'll stay."

Nishi knew there was little point arguing with him. After a moment, she looked through the glass doors of the ICU.

"Baba is a good man," she said quietly. "He always supported me. He was kind to me even when everything else around me was falling apart."

She paused.

"He got trapped in a difficult marriage. He married again because he wanted a mother for Vineet, but that marriage was terrible too."

Her voice softened.

"At this age, he deserves some peace."

Neel listened without interrupting. Then, without saying anything, he gently reached for her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. Nishi looked at their joined hands for a moment before turning her gaze back towards the ICU. There was nothing more to say.

The hours passed slowly. The old man remained inside the ICU under careful observation, while Neel and Nishi waited outside. Several times, Nishi urged him to go home.

"There are doctors here. There is a whole team looking after him. You don't have to stay."

Neel only smiled. "I know."

"Then why are you still here?"

He looked at her.

"Because you're here."

The simple answer left her quiet. He wasn't staying because he was the doctor who had saved the man's life. He was staying because she shouldn't have to spend the night alone. And somehow, that meant more to Nishi than he could have known.

As the night deepened, the hospital corridor grew quieter. The harsh brightness of the lights seemed softer against the stillness. Nishi's eyelids gradually became heavy.

She fought sleep for as long as she could, sitting upright in the uncomfortable chair. But exhaustion finally won. Her head slowly tilted to one side. Neel noticed.

Without waking her, he gently shifted closer and offered his shoulder for support. Carefully, he guided her head onto it, making sure she was comfortable. Nishi didn't stir.

For the first time that night, her face looked peaceful. Neel remained still, afraid that even the slightest movement might wake her. But the long day had exhausted him too. After some time, his own eyes began to close. His head rested lightly against hers, and eventually, he too drifted into sleep.

Outside the ICU, beneath the soft hum of hospital lights and the distant footsteps of the night staff, they slept side by side. There were no promises. No declarations. No questions about tomorrow. Just two tired hearts finding comfort in each other's presence. And for that one long night, the world was quiet. Peaceful. Almost like home.

# Chapter 15
# WHEN LOVE KNOCKS AGAIN



The night was cold and quiet. A new nurse passing through the corridor noticed Neel and Nishi asleep beside each other on the metallic bench. Nishi's head rested peacefully on Neel's shoulder. Assuming they were husband and wife, she smiled to herself. She gently covered them with a blanket and walked away.

"Such a lovely couple," she thought.

In the morning, Vineet arrived at the hospital after seeing Nishi's message. The staff directed him towards ICU 3.

But the moment he reached the corridor, he stopped. Nishi was still asleep against Neel's shoulder, both of them covered by the same blanket. Vineet stared at them. His face hardened, but his eyes betrayed something else—hurt, disbelief, and an insecurity he could not hide. His breathing became uneven. He looked away immediately.

"May I see my father?" he asked a nurse.

"Visiting hours begin at ten, sir. You'll have to wait."

Vineet nodded and quietly moved away.

He simply could not bear to look at them again.

A little later, Neel woke up. He glanced at his watch. It was six in the morning.

Then he realized that he and Nishi were wrapped in the same blanket. He looked at her.

Her face was serene in sleep. A few strands of hair rested gently against her cheek, carrying a faint fragrance that made him linger. He could hear her soft breathing, feel her warmth beside him, and suddenly the noisy hospital corridor seemed to disappear. He simply couldn't stop looking at her. He had never felt this way with Ira. Whatever this feeling was, he didn't have a name for it yet. Their faces were close, their lips almost within reach. His eyes rested for a moment on her beautiful lips, and his heart skipped a beat.

Neel immediately looked away. He gently pulled the blanket higher around Nishi and called a nurse for a cushion. The nurse returned with one and smiled.

"Sir, your wife is beautiful."

Neel looked at Nishi and smiled. For a fleeting moment, he wished it were true.

He didn't correct her. He carefully placed the cushion beneath Nishi's head and eased her onto the bench. She remained asleep. He looked at her affectionately before turning to the nurse.

Behind a pillar, Vineet watched silently. He noticed everything—the way Neel cared for Nishi, tucked the blanket around her and smiled when he looked at her. Soon, Neel took Nishi's phone and dialled Vineet's number.

"Hello?"

"I'm Dr Neel Mehra. Your father was admitted here last night. He is under observation."

Vineet remembered Nishi mentioning the friend who had saved his father.

"So, you are Dr Neel Mehra. I'm very grateful to you."

"That's all right, Mr Malhotra. I only did what I was supposed to do."

"We're at Lifeline Multispeciality Hospital, outside ICU 3."

"I'll be there soon."

Soon after, Nishi woke up.

"Good morning," Neel said.

"Good morning, Neel. How is Baba?"

"The nurse said he slept well. His observations are stable. Nothing to worry about."

Nishi folded the blanket and looked at Neel.

"I think I should go home for a while. Sahana will need me."

For the past couple of months, Nishi had quietly become part of Sahana's morning routine. She would tie the little girl's hair, help her get dressed and make sure she was ready for the day. She had never done any of it out of pity. She genuinely loved those little moments with Sahana—the conversations, the smiles, and the simple comfort of being needed.

"It's Sunday, Nishi. Relax," Neel said gently. "But yes, you should go home and freshen up. I have rounds. I'll also go home and take a shower."

He smiled.

"Our children will need us."

Soon after, another doctor called Neel away for a discussion. Nishi carefully folded the blanket and called the nurse who had brought it during the night.

"Here, you can take this," she said, handing it back.

The nurse accepted it with a warm smile, her eyes briefly moving towards the corridor where Neel had disappeared.

There was something knowing in that smile—something that made Nishi wonder what she was thinking. "Ma'am, your husband didn't move an inch last night. He was afraid he would wake you."

"My husband?" Nishi looked puzzled.

"Yes, Neel sir. He kept you comfortably against his shoulder the whole night."

Nishi blushed.

"He did?"

"May God bless you both. Anyone can see how much he loves you."

Before Nishi could correct her, the nurse was called away. Nishi stood there quietly, remembering that she had slept on Neel's shoulder all night—and strangely, the thought didn't embarrass her.

It made her blush. Behind the pillar, Vineet had heard everything.

So, she lied to me. He stepped forward. Their eyes met.

"Good morning, Vineet."

"Baba is better?"

"I heard. Your husband told you?"

"My husband?"

Nishi understood.

"Vineet, Neel is my best friend. He was the one who saved Baba."

"I'm grateful to him."

"Why?" He asked. His tone carried a unmistakable note of sarcasm.

"Why not?

"He is my Baba too," Nishi said quietly. "He always treated me like his daughter. I should be here."

Then her voice hardened.

"Yesterday night, you were intoxicated. You had no idea where he was. If Dr Neel hadn't reached him in time…"

She stopped. She couldn't bring herself to finish the sentence.

Vineet lowered his eyes. He knew she was right. He knew he had been wrong.

"So, you stayed here the whole night?"

Nishi nodded.

His expression softened.

"So, Neel is just your friend? And who is Sahana?"

"Neel's daughter. And now she has become a very important part of our lives."

"Our lives?"

"Yes," Nishi said softly. "Palash and I."

"And he is fond of Palash?" Vineet asked.

Nishi nodded.

"I saw the affection in his eyes. He truly cares for you." Vineet continued

He paused, then added quietly, "Once, I carried that same affection for you."

"You never realized it."

Nishi looked at him.

Something inside her snapped. She could feel him slipping back into the same old Vineet—the one who always turned every conversation towards himself.

"Not here, Vineet. Not again," she said firmly. "You are here to see Baba."

She picked up her handbag.

"You go and meet Baba. I need to go home for an hour. I'll be back soon."

Without waiting for a response, Nishi turned and walked away. As she drove home, Nishi's thoughts returned to Vineet. Vineet is still struggling. That is his problem.

He was still playing the victim, still carrying wounds he had never healed. Somewhere inside him, the frightened child who had learned to distrust love was still alive. He needed help—professional help.

She knew Vineet had never cheated on her. He had been a good man in many ways. But his insecurity had slowly poisoned their marriage.

If only he had trusted me… perhaps today we would have had a beautiful family.

The thought brought no bitterness anymore. She had no regrets. She had moved on, rebuilt her life and found peace.

But Vineet?

She worried that if he continued refusing to confront his fears, he would eventually destroy his own life.

Will he ever realise that he needs help? she wondered.

Then her thoughts drifted to Neel. She wondered how he had picked himself up after Ira left. He hadn't allowed his life to fall apart. He had rebuilt not only his own life but his daughter's as well.

Nishi had immense respect for him as her best friend. Yet, she found herself smiling as she remembered what the nurse had told her that morning. Gradually, memories began flooding back—the first day she had met Neel, the way he had introduced himself, the

way he had patiently fed her soup after the accident. She blushed at the memory. His expressions. His smile. The quiet warmth in his eyes.

Somehow, he had begun occupying her thoughts far more than she wanted to admit.

Am I falling in love again?

The thought frightened her.

She reached her apartment, parked the car and sat there for a moment.

Once again, her thoughts returned to Neel.

She wondered if she still had the courage to fall in love—if love ever knocked on her door again.

# Chapter 16
# MY LAST WISH



Nishi reached home and stepped out of the elevator. The moment the doors opened, she noticed a woman sitting near the staircase, just a few steps away from Neel's apartment.

She was frail and slender, dressed in a light-green chiffon saree. A simple handbag rested beside her. There was something miserable about her appearance—as though she had been waiting for a door to open that had remained firmly shut. She kept glancing towards Neel's house. Nishi walked towards her.

"Hi. Are you waiting for someone?" she asked gently. "If they're not at home, you can wait at my place."

The woman looked confused, almost frightened. She seemed unsure of what to say. Her eyes instinctively drifted back towards Neel's door.

Nishi assumed she must be one of Neel's patients.

"So, you're waiting for Dr. Neel?"

The woman nodded. There was something about that nod that made Nishi uneasy.

"Come," Nishi said. "Let's ring the bell."

The woman hesitated for a moment before following her. Nishi pressed the doorbell. Neel's mother opened the door. Her face immediately lit up when she saw Nishi.

"Come in, child."

But the warmth disappeared the instant her eyes fell on the woman standing behind Nishi. Her face went pale. She stared at the woman for a few seconds before speaking.

"So, you're still waiting here. What do you expect?"

Nishi looked from one woman to the other, completely bewildered. The woman lowered her eyes.

"Ma… may I please see Sahana just once?" she pleaded. "I haven't come back to harm anyone."

Her voice trembled.

"You have already harmed Neel and Sahana enough," Neel's mother replied coldly. "Somehow, they have managed to come to terms with what you did. I won't let you do this to them again."

Before the woman could say anything more, Neel's mother took Nishi gently by the hand and pulled her inside.

She shut the door firmly. It didn't take Nishi long to understand who the woman was. Ira. Neel's wife. Or, more accurately, his estranged wife. Nishi had heard enough about her to understand why Neel's mother reacted with such bitterness. Inside, the older woman tried to put the incident behind her. She affectionately served Nishi a cup of tea.

"Thank you, Masi," Nishi said softly.

She hesitated before asking, "Masi… is she Ira?"

The older woman nodded.

"She came here last night, after you left. She wanted to see Sahana. I told her to leave, but she has been sitting outside since then."

"What?" Nishi stared at her. "Since last night?"

"I don't know what she wants, and frankly, I don't care."

There was unmistakable anger in her voice.

"Maybe her lover threw her out and she has nowhere else to go," she added bitterly. "And now she wants to create a scene here, in front of the neighbours, hoping Neel will eventually give in and let her inside."

Nishi remained silent.

"She already took enough money as alimony," the older woman continued coldly. "We are under no obligation to her."

"But, Masi…" Nishi hesitated. "Perhaps we should at least listen to her."

"No, child."

"Sahana is sleeping. She won't even know if—"

"No." The older woman shook her head firmly. "I will not let that woman into this house."

Her voice softened, but the pain behind it became more evident.

"She hurt my son. She threatened to drag him to the police on account of domestic violence. She hurt Sahana in ways a mother should never hurt her own child."

She paused.

"And then she left."

Nishi said nothing.

"She made Sahana believe that her mother had abandoned her because she wasn't good enough to be loved. Do you know what that did to my granddaughter?"

Her eyes filled with tears, but she quickly looked away.

"I won't allow her to come back and disturb their lives again."

Nishi understood. Whatever Ira had done, Neel's mother was deeply wounded by it. Her refusal was not simply anger. It was the instinct of a mother who had watched her son and granddaughter suffer. Nishi decided not to press her any further. She quietly helped Masi prepare breakfast. A little later, the milkman arrived.

"I'll get the milk," Nishi said.

She stepped outside. Ira was still sitting on the staircase. She hadn't moved.

Her handbag remained beside her, and tears were rolling silently down her cheeks. Nishi stopped. For a moment, she simply watched her. She knew nothing about this woman beyond what she had heard from Neel and his mother. She knew Ira had hurt them. She knew she had caused immense pain. But Nishi also couldn't ignore someone sitting hungry, thirsty and alone outside a house for an entire night. Her compassionate nature took over. She returned inside.

"Masi…"

The older woman looked at her.

"I want to know why she has come here."

Masi immediately shook her head.

"Child, don't get involved."

"May I take her to my house and talk to her?"

The older woman looked at her carefully.

"That woman isn't nice, Nishi. Don't fall for her tears."

"I know you are kind-hearted," she continued, "and that's why you feel sorry for her. But you have no idea what she is truly capable of."

Nishi smiled gently.

"Masi, don't worry. I won't let her manipulate me. I just want to understand why she has come."

She glanced towards the doorway.

"And I think she must be hungry. She has been sitting there since last night."

The older woman sighed.

"Alright."

She pointed towards the kitchen.

"Take some breakfast to her. But make sure she leaves soon."

Nishi nodded. She prepared a plate and walked towards the door. For the first time, she wondered what could possibly have brought Ira back after all these years. And, more importantly, why had she chosen to come back now?

Nishi walked out with the breakfast plate. The moment Ira saw her, she quickly rose from the staircase.

"Come," Nishi said, signalling towards her apartment. "Let's talk over a cup of tea."

Ira looked uncertain.

"You must be hungry too."

"Are you… are you Neel's wife?" Ira asked hesitantly.

"No," Nishi replied. "I'm his best friend."

She smiled gently.

"Come."

Ira followed her quietly.

Nishi took her inside, made her sit at the dining table and placed the breakfast in front of her.

"Please eat."

Ira didn't need to be told twice. She was famished. She ate quickly, almost desperately, as though she hadn't had a proper meal in days. Nishi watched her silently before pouring her a cup of tea. Ira finished that too.

"Would you like something else?" Nishi asked.

Ira shook her head.

"No."

Nishi felt a wave of pity for her, but she remained cautious. She hadn't forgotten what Ira had done to Neel and Sahana. Compassion did not mean forgetting the past. For a few moments, neither woman spoke. Then Ira lowered her eyes.

"I have cancer."

Nishi's expression changed.

"The man I was living with threw me out of his house."

There was no anger in her voice. Only exhaustion. Nishi felt a heaviness in her chest.

"Don't worry," she said softly. "Neel is an oncologist."

Ira immediately looked up.

"Despite everything that happened between you and him, I know Neel will treat you. He is a benevolent doctor."

Ira shook her head.

"No. Please don't misunderstand me."

She took a slow breath.

"I didn't come here for treatment. I won't put Neel under any obligation to treat me."

Her fingers tightened around the cup.

"I have decided to pay for my sins."

Nishi remained silent.

"My girl lost her sight because of me."

Her voice broke.

"My own daughter…"

She swallowed hard.

"I cannot undo what I did to her. I know that."

Tears welled up in her eyes.

"But there is one thing I can still do."

She looked at Nishi.

"I want to donate my eyes before I am gone."

Nishi stared at her.

"I want Sahana to have them."

Her voice trembled.

"This is the one thing I want to rectify before I leave this planet."

She wiped her tears.

"My last wish."

Nishi's heart ached.

She gently placed a hand on Ira's shoulder and offered her a glass of water. Ira took it with trembling hands.

For the first time, Nishi wondered whether Ira had truly come to take something from Neel—or whether she had come to give something back. Perhaps she had suffered enough for the choices she had made. Perhaps she wasn't here to reclaim her old life. Perhaps she had come to make one last attempt to repair something she had broken. Before Nishi could say anything, the front door opened. Neel walked in. The door had been left unlocked. The moment he saw Ira, his entire expression changed. He slammed the door shut. There was unmistakable anger in his eyes. His gaze shifted to Nishi.

"Has she had her breakfast?"

Nishi nodded. Neel then turned towards Ira.

"Now leave."

He pointed towards the door.

Ira stood up.

"Neel, please. At least listen to me. I will leave after that."

"Just get out. Now."

His voice was sharp.

"Enough of your manipulation."

Nishi had never seen Neel like this.

The calm, patient doctor she knew had disappeared. In his place stood a man whose old wounds had suddenly been ripped open. Ira was trembling. She picked up her handbag and hurried towards the door. Neel's voice had frightened her. She didn't say another word. The door closed behind her. Almost immediately, Neel's expression softened.

He turned towards Nishi.

"Nishi, I'm going to take a shower. You should also grab something to eat."

He paused.

"Vineet's father is perfectly alright, but the doctors want to observe him for another twenty-four hours."

Nishi nodded.

"Sure. I'll also come to the hospital and see him."

"Okay, then."

Neel was about to walk away when he stopped. He could see that Nishi wanted to say something.

"Go on, Nishi."

She hesitated.

"Neel… she has cancer."

He remained silent.

"She told me that she came here because she wants to donate her eyes to Sahana."

Neel's expression hardened again.

"I know, no amount of words can lessen the pain she has caused you and Sahana," Nishi continued carefully. "But if she really is on her deathbed, maybe she has come to repent."

Neel shook his head. His expression made it clear that he wasn't moved.

"Nishi, first of all, every cancer isn't fatal. Early diagnosis and proper treatment can save lives."

He glanced towards the closed door.

"And she looks perfectly fine to me."

"Maybe she came here for treatment," he added.

Nishi remained quiet.

"I'm not the only oncologist in the world. She has enough money. She can go anywhere she wants. There are plenty of renowned oncologists who can treat her."

He paused.

"And finally…"

His voice became colder.

"Even if she is dying, I don't want her to do a favour to my daughter."

Nishi looked at him. Neel's eyes were filled with years of hurt. He had made his decision. The discussion was over. Without saying anything more, he walked away. Nishi remained where she was. She understood that there was no point pursuing the matter any

further. But somewhere deep inside, Ira's words continued to echo.

My last wish.

# Chapter 17
# THE WOMAN HE COULD NEVER HATE



Neel and Nishi entered the parking area of their apartment complex. Nishi suddenly stopped.

"Neel…"

He followed her gaze.

Ira was lying on the floor a few feet away. She was unconscious, her face turned towards the ground.

"Look at her. She is seriously unwell."

Neel stared at Ira for a moment, but his expression remained cold.

"Nishi, she was my wife. I know what she is capable of."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that the moment we leave, she'll probably get up and walk away."

He started moving towards his car.

"We have better things to do."

Nishi didn't move. She looked at Ira again. She wasn't convinced.

"Neel…"

He turned around.

"What, Nishi? Don't you trust me?"

"It's not about trusting you. She's lying unconscious on the floor."

Neel sighed.

"Really?"

He gave a humourless smile.

"She knew someone would find her here. Or perhaps she saw us coming and simply collapsed there."

Nishi frowned.

"I won't fall for it," he continued. "She is perfectly fine."

His voice hardened.

"I won't fall for this last-wish drama either. Maybe she doesn't even have cancer."

Nishi looked at Ira again. Something didn't feel right. Neel noticed her hesitation.

"Alright," he said. "You want to find out? Go and find out."

Just then, Neel spotted the apartment secretary standing near the entrance.

"I need to speak to him about some maintenance issues."

He walked towards him. Nishi remained behind. She approached Ira cautiously.

"Ira…"

There was no response. Nishi knelt beside her and gently turned her over. The moment she saw Ira's face, her heart lurched. There was blood around her mouth.

"Oh God…"

She quickly took out a handkerchief and wiped the blood from Ira's lips.

"Ira…"

She gently shook her shoulder. No response. Nishi immediately pulled out her phone and dialled Neel.

He answered almost immediately.

"Yes, Nishi. Let's get started."

"Neel, I want you to come here. Now."

There was something in her voice that made him pause.

"What happened?"

"She is bleeding from the mouth."

Silence.

"Nishi…"

"If she has cancer, then she needs medical attention. Call any renowned oncologist."

"Neel—"

"I am calling a renowned oncologist. You come here. Now."

There was an authority in Nishi's voice that Neel couldn't dismiss. He turned away from the secretary and hurried towards them. The moment he reached Ira, his entire demeanour changed. He knelt beside her.

"Move aside."

Nishi stepped back. Neel checked her responsiveness and breathing. Then he saw the blood. His professional instincts took over.

"She's unconscious."

He carefully lifted Ira into his arms. For a brief moment, the woman he had spent years trying to erase from his life no longer mattered. She was simply a patient. A human being who needed help. He carried her to the car and gently placed her in the back seat. Nishi immediately got in beside her.

"I'll sit with her."

Neel nodded and started the engine. Nishi sprinkled a little water on Ira's face.

"Ira… can you hear me?"

There was no response. Neel glanced at her through the rear-view mirror.

His jaw tightened. Whatever his feelings towards Ira, he couldn't ignore what was happening.

He accelerated towards the hospital. For the first time since Ira had returned, doubt crept into Neel's mind. Perhaps Nishi had been right. Perhaps this wasn't a drama. Perhaps there was something seriously wrong with Ira after all.

As soon as they reached the hospital, Neel took Ira to the ICU.

"Nishi, you go and see Vineet's father. I'll take care of this."

Nishi nodded and hurried towards the other ICU. Vineet's father was delighted when he saw her.

"Child, you stayed the whole night for me. The nurse told me."

Nishi folded her hands modestly. The old man smiled and gently placed his hand on her head.

"God bless you, child."

Vineet was also there, speaking to the cardiologist.

"Your father is absolutely fine," the cardiologist assured him. "You should be thankful to Dr. Neel Mehra. He reached him in time and managed the situation well. We'll observe him for another twenty-four hours. If everything remains stable, you can take him home tomorrow."

He turned towards the nurses.

"We can shift him to the ward now."

The old man was soon transferred to a private room.

Nishi and Vineet followed him. A little later, a nurse brought a bowl of soup.

Nishi sat beside the bed and gently fed the old man while Vineet arranged the pillows behind his back.

The old man watched them quietly. There was something deeply comforting about seeing the two of them together—his son and the woman he still thought of as his daughter-in-law, caring for him as though nothing had changed. After finishing his soup, he looked at Nishi.

"Child, I want to see my grandson."

Nishi's hand stopped for a moment.

"Palash."

The name hung in the air.

"I have never met him," the old man continued. "It's been so many years since you left Bangalore."

Nishi slowly looked at Vineet.

Their eyes met. His expression hardened immediately.

"Baba, you need to rest," he said. "Right now, you are my priority."

But the old man shook his head.

"No, child. I want to see him."

He took a slow breath.

“I don't know how many breaths I have left.”

Nishi's heart sank.

“Baba…”

“No.”

The old man's voice was gentle but firm.

“He is my grandson. I want to meet him.”

Vineet suddenly spoke.

“Baba, Palash is not your grandson.”

Nishi looked up. She remained composed, but her heart tightened. Not here. Not in front of his father.

Vineet had always struggled to control his instincts when Palash was mentioned. The words had escaped him before he could stop them. The old man looked at him in disbelief.

“I would still like to meet him.”

He turned towards Nishi.

“That is my wish.”

Nishi lowered her eyes.

“No, Baba,” she said softly.

“Why, child?”

Nishi struggled to find the right words.

“Because… I don't know what I am going to tell him.”

The old man remained silent.

“His father disowned him,” she continued quietly. “How am I supposed to tell him that his grandfather suddenly wants to see him?”

She looked towards Vineet.

"And what if he asks about his father?"

Vineet looked away. The silence in the room became unbearable. After a moment, Vineet picked up his phone.

"Baba, I'll get your medicines."

His voice was controlled, but there was unmistakable anger underneath it. He turned and walked out. Nishi watched him leave. The old man sighed.

"Child…"

Nishi turned towards him.

"I understand."

He smiled sadly.

"Alright. Someday, I will come to your place myself and see him."

Nishi tried to protest, but he continued.

"You don't have to tell him who I am."

A faint smile appeared on his face.

"You can simply tell him that I am an old neighbour."

Nishi looked at him. There was such longing in his eyes that she couldn't refuse.

She nodded quietly.

"Alright, Baba."

After some time, Vineet returned with the medicines.

His father was asleep again, perhaps because of the medication. Vineet stood beside the bed for a moment and watched him sleep. Guilt washed over him.

He had been so consumed by his own anger and troubles that he had neglected his father the previous night. The old man had needed him, and yet he hadn't been there. He wanted to make it up to him. He also wanted to thank Neel properly. If Neel hadn't

reached his father in time, things could have been very different. Vineet looked towards Nishi.

She was gently arranging the blanket over his father. Once she was satisfied that he was comfortable, she drew the curtains around the bed and quietly settled herself on the sofa nearby. Vineet walked towards her.

"Have you had something to eat?" Vineet asked.

Nishi looked up.

"Should I get something for you?"

"No, Vineet. I had breakfast."

"You can go and have your breakfast. You came so early in the morning."

He looked at her for a moment.

"How do you know I haven't had breakfast?"

Nishi gave him a faint smile.

"You still know me so well."

She immediately looked away. All I know is that you hate my son. The thought remained unspoken. Vineet seemed to sense the silence.

"Don't worry," she said quietly. "I will never bring Palash before you or Baba."

Nishi looked away

"Nishi…"

"I know it's not the child's fault," he continued. "I shouldn't have behaved that way."

Nishi shook her head gently. She didn't want to discuss Palash here. Not today.

"Vineet, please have your breakfast. I'll look after Baba. I'm here all day."

"No, Nishi."

His voice was unusually humble.

"I was a careless son yesterday. So, I'll stay here today."

He glanced towards his sleeping father.

"I won't leave him alone."

Nishi didn't argue.

Instead, she opened her tiffin box and took out a sandwich.

"Have this."

Vineet looked at it. Then at her. He took it quietly.

"Thank you, Nishi."

He hesitated.

"Would you like to—"

Nishi gently cut him short. She put in her earphones and opened her audiobook.

"I'm fine, Vineet. Don't worry about me."

Vineet fell silent. There were no words left. Her kindness touched him more deeply than he wanted to admit.

She had every reason to resent him. She had every reason to walk away from his problems. Yet she was sitting there, looking after his father, offering him food and making sure he ate. Vineet lowered his eyes.

Why was life testing his limits like this?

Why did it keep putting Nishi before him, again and again?

He stole another glance at her. Nishi was completely absorbed in her audiobook, one hand resting casually on the arm of the sofa. There was something peaceful about her. Something familiar. Something he had once taken for granted. Vineet watched her

silently, admiration slowly replacing the anger he had carried for so long.

And for the first time, he wondered whether losing Nishi had been the greatest mistake of his life.

# Chapter 18
# SOMETHING STIRRED INSIDE



In the afternoon, Neel stood in the hospital corridor, giving instructions to one of the interns when he noticed his mother approaching him.

"Hey, Ma! What are you doing here?"

"You have been so busy that you have forgotten to eat," she said, holding up a lunch box. "I brought lunch for you and Nishi."

A warm smile spread across Neel's face. He gently hugged her.

"Thank you, Ma."

Before she could say anything more, Vineet appeared at the end of the corridor. The moment he spotted Neel, he walked towards him.

"Dr. Neel."

Neel turned around. Vineet stopped in front of him, his expression filled with gratitude.

"I want to thank you from the depth of my heart. What you did for me yesterday... I can never repay you."

Neel smiled gently.

"Friend, I only did my job."

"That's your humility, Dr. Neel."

"Then don't repay me," Neel replied. "If you truly believe I did something extraordinary, do one thing for me. Whenever you get a chance, pour some of the goodness in your heart into the world. This world needs it."

Vineet looked at him, slightly taken aback.

"But I'm not a doctor. What could I possibly do?"

Neel placed a hand on his shoulder.

"We all have some goodness stored within our souls. All we need to do is open our hearts and let it out."

With that, Neel turned towards his mother.

"Ma, he is Mr. Vineet Malhotra. Nishi's boss."

Vineet folded his hands respectfully. The moment she heard his name, the warmth disappeared from the old woman's face. Her jaw tightened.

Neel, unaware of the sudden change in her expression, excused himself and walked away.

His mother remained where she was, her eyes fixed on Vineet. Vineet noticed her prolonged stare and gave her a polite smile, wondering what had suddenly changed. Then she spoke.

"So, you are Vineet... Nishi's estranged husband?"

Vineet's smile faded. He nodded.

"Yes."

"My son is a humble man," she said quietly. "He tries to find goodness in everyone. Perhaps that is why he doesn't know what kind of man you are."

Vineet frowned. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me right, Vineet."

Her voice remained calm, but there was unmistakable anger beneath it.

"How could a man be so insensitive?"

"Masi, I think you have misunderstood me for someone else."

"No. I have understood you perfectly."

She took a step closer.

"You are the man who used to doubt his wife's fidelity."

Vineet lowered his eyes.

"You doubted her loyalty," she continued, "when the truth is that all you ever received from her was loyalty."

He remained silent. "You checked her phone. You questioned her every move. How could someone be so cruel to the woman who stood beside him?"

Vineet swallowed hard.

"And as if that wasn't enough, you threw her out of your house when she was carrying your child."

He sighed deeply.

"So, Nishi told you all this?"

"No," the old woman replied immediately. "She is a refined woman. She never complains about anyone. She never speaks ill of people, even when they have hurt her."

She paused.

"Raima told me."

A flicker of irritation crossed Vineet's face.

"Oh... those intrusive neighbours in Bangalore."

"Someone had to look out for her," the old woman replied firmly.

Vineet looked at her but said nothing. Her expression softened for a moment, but her words remained firm.

"Vineet, you may have your reasons for what you did. Perhaps you have convinced yourself that you were right. But remember one thing—Nishi never betrayed you."

Vineet looked away.

"You hurt a woman who had given you nothing but loyalty," she continued. "And one day, when the noise of your anger dies down, you may finally understand what you lost."

She held his gaze.

"You will never find peace by carrying suspicion and harbouring resentment in your heart. Remember, God is watching."

For a few seconds, neither of them spoke.

Vineet finally shook his head, unwilling or unable to answer. Without another word, he turned and walked away. The old woman watched him disappear down the corridor.

Her eyes softened.

"Poor Nishi," she whispered. "How much she must have suffered alone."

After her conversation with Vineet, Neel's mother went in search of Nishi.

She found her a little later and followed her to Neel's cabin. Nishi immediately made her comfortable on the sofa and asked one of the hospital attendants to bring her some tea. Vineet had already arrived at the hospital to look after his father. Noticing that Neel's mother was shivering slightly, Nishi walked over to the air conditioner and switched it off.

"Masi, you have caught a cold. I thought you might feel uncomfortable with the AC on."

The old woman looked at her for a long moment. There was such tenderness in Nishi's gesture that something inside her softened.

"You are an angel, child."

Nishi lowered her eyes, suddenly feeling shy.

"Masi, your tea is here."

The attendant placed the cup on the table and left.

"Come, sit beside me," the old woman said.

Nishi sat down next to her.

The old woman held her hand gently.

"I always wished my Neel would find someone like you."

Nishi smiled, but words failed her.

Her heart, however, understood exactly what those words meant. Something warm fluttered inside her. Her heart rejoiced at the thought before her mind hurriedly intervened, reminding her to be careful. She composed herself.

"Nishi, look at me."

Nishi turned towards her. The old woman studied her face for a few moments before asking the question that left Nishi completely speechless.

"Will you marry my son?"

Nishi stared at her. For a moment, she couldn't find a single word.

"Masi... your tea is getting cold," she finally murmured, pointing towards the untouched cup.

The old woman smiled faintly.

"I know. Let it get cold."

Then her expression became serious.

"I wanted to speak to Neel about this, but before I do that, I want to know what is in your heart."

Nishi looked down. The warmth in her eyes slowly disappeared, replaced by an old, familiar pain.

"Masi... I don't know."

The old woman waited patiently.

"My husband doubted my character," Nishi whispered. "He made me feel as though I was guilty of something I had never done."

Her voice trembled.

"I don't believe that hogwash," the old woman said firmly. "I believe in your character. I believe in your integrity."

Nishi looked at her. "Vineet was unfortunate," the old woman continued. "He had a good woman beside him and didn't know her worth. I know everything, child. Raima told me."

Nishi remained silent.

"Masi..." Her voice broke slightly. "I'm scared."

The old woman squeezed her hand.

"I don't know if I'll ever be able to love again. I don't know if I'll ever be able to give someone my whole heart without being afraid."

She took a shaky breath.

"Neel is a wonderful man, Masi. He deserves someone who can truly love him... completely and selflessly."

The old woman gently interrupted her.

"And that woman is you, child."

Nishi looked at her. There was no judgment in the old woman's eyes—only affection and understanding.

Nishi's eyes grew moist. She wanted to believe her. She wanted to believe that perhaps love could be kind. That perhaps not every

relationship had to end in betrayal and pain. But fear had built a wall around her heart, and she didn't know how to bring it down.

What if she could never love Neel the way he deserved? What if she tried and failed?

Wouldn't that be another injustice—to a man who had done nothing but give her kindness, respect and patience? Neel was a good man. He deserved someone who could love him without hesitation, without fear, without the ghosts of the past standing between them.

And yet, beneath all her doubts, one truth remained impossible to deny. Neel had found a special place in her heart. Perhaps she wasn't ready to call it love. Perhaps she wasn't even ready to admit it to herself.

But it was there. The old woman seemed to see it in her eyes. She smiled gently.

"Take your own time, child. Don't force yourself into anything." She patted Nishi's hand.

"Until you are ready, I won't discuss this with Neel. I give you, my word."

Nishi looked at her gratefully.

"Thank you, Masi."

The old woman rose slowly and left the cabin. Nishi remained seated for a while, staring at the closed door.

Then, gathering herself, she walked towards Vineet's father's ward.

She busied herself with his care—checking on him, adjusting his blanket, speaking softly to the nurse and making sure he was comfortable. But even while her hands remained occupied, her mind kept returning to the old woman's words.

Will you marry my son?

For the first time in years, someone had asked her to think about love again.

And somewhere deep inside her heart, beneath all the fear and all the scars, something stirred. Something she wasn't yet brave enough to name.

# Chapter 19
# WHEN JEALOUSY TAKES ROOT



Vineet entered the ward a little later, carrying a glass of lemonade for Nishi.

"Here, have it."

"Thanks." Nishi took the glass from him.

The old man had just finished his lunch. After a brief pause, he looked at Nishi curiously.

"Child, how do you know Dr. Neel?"

"Actually, he is a neighbour and a friend. He lives next door," Nishi replied.

Vineet then asked casually, "What about his wife? Is she also a doctor?"

He asked the question as though it were merely a matter of fact, but Nishi could sense the curiosity behind it. He wanted to know more about Nishi's personal life.

"His wife was a model. They are not together."

"So, she passed away?"

"No, she is alive. In fact, she is admitted here."

"So, they got separated?"

"Yes."

"What happened?"

"All I know is that she left her husband and daughter after her daughter lost her sight in an accident."

Nishi answered simply. There was no judgment in her voice. Vineet sighed.

"Same old story. Why do women cheat?"

He said it softly, but there was a trace of bitterness and sarcasm in his voice. Nishi looked at him. The old man shook his head gently.

"True, son. The same old story."

Then he looked at Vineet.

"Your mother cheated in the same way, but that doesn't mean every woman is like that. Don't judge them all by one person's actions."

His voice was gentle, but his words carried weight. Then he turned back to Nishi.

"You said she is hospitalized here. What happened?"

"She has cancer. Neel brought her here. He is treating her."

"Really? Despite everything she did, he is still treating his wife?", Vineet asked

"Because he is a benevolent doctor, Vineet," Nishi said softly.

"And he is just your friend?"

Nishi understood why Vineet was asking. Still, she answered without hesitation.

"Yes. He is my best friend."

"A solid friend you can always count on"

Nishi took another sip of her lemonade. A little later, Neel entered the ward and immediately asked about the old man's health.

"How are you feeling now?"

"All good, child. All because of you, I survived. May God always bless you."

Neel folded his hands with a warm smile. Then he turned towards Nishi.

"Come, let's have lunch. Ma has brought some food."

"Sure."

Nishi glanced at the glass of lemonade in her hand.

"Give that to me," Neel said.

"But I've already sipped from it."

Neel took the glass from her hand and finished the remaining lemonade in one go.

"You've sipped from it, so it's perfectly fine for me."

Nishi stared at him for a moment.

"I was really thirsty. My throat was parched." Neel said

Something stirred quietly inside Nishi. There was an effortless intimacy in his behaviour that touched her more deeply than she wanted to admit. Vineet, however, found the whole exchange rather awkward. Neel hadn't hesitated for even a second. He had casually drunk from Nishi's glass as though sharing food and drinks with her was the most natural thing in the world. He turned towards Vineet.

"Come, Vineet. Join us for lunch."

"No, thank you, Dr. Neel. I had some sandwiches Nishi brought for me. You please carry on."

"All right."

Soon, Neel and Nishi left the ward together. Vineet watched them disappear through the doorway. Yet the simple gesture of Neel drinking from Nishi's half-finished glass stayed in his mind. It was such a small thing.

And yet, somehow, it didn't feel insignificant. The old man noticed his thoughtful expression.

"He is a good man," he said quietly. "A benevolent doctor."

"Hmm."

Vineet nodded, but his thoughts remained elsewhere.

Nishi opened the lunch box and served some food onto Neel's plate before asking, "How is Ira?"

"She has leukaemia."

Nishi paused.

"Oh! Is it serious? Is it curable? Which stage?"

"Leukaemia isn't usually classified into stages like other cancers. It depends on the type, her test results and how she responds to treatment."

"Then… is it curable?"

"In many cases, yes. We have already started her treatment. It won't be easy, but we are giving her the best possible chance. Our immediate goal is to get her into remission." Nishi nodded slowly.

"She'll need chemotherapy?"

"Yes. We have already started. We have a long road ahead, but I am hopeful."

Nishi looked at him. Neel lowered his eyes for a moment.

"Despite everything that happened"

"She is still the mother of my daughter, Nishi. Whatever happened between us belongs to the past. Right now, she is my patient—and I want her to live."

Nishi gently squeezed his hand. "You are a good man."

"Don't worry. She will be fine."

Neel placed his hand over hers.

"So are you, Nishi."

Nishi smiled.

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Back in Vineet's father's ward, Neel's phone rang. He had accidentally left it behind.

Vineet glanced at the screen. Sahana. He answered, intending only to tell her that Neel had left his phone there.

"Hello?"

"Palash here."

Vineet's expression changed.

"Where is Neel Uncle? I want to know when he'll come home. It's Sunday. We haven't had our match yet."

There was such innocent disappointment in the child's voice that Vineet couldn't help but smile faintly.

"Your Neel Uncle left his phone here. I'll give it to him. I'll ask him to call you back."

"Okay."

The call disconnected. Something about the child's voice stayed with Vineet.

So, this was Palash—Nishi's son. He stepped outside, asked a nurse where Neel's cabin was and walked towards it. Inside, Nishi and Neel were talking casually.

"By the way," Nishi said teasingly, "what makes you think I'm a good woman?"

Neel smiled.

"You shared your lemonade with me."

Nishi laughed. Neel watched her with quiet admiration.

"Seriously, Neel? Was that the only reason?"

"Well, there are plenty."

"Such as?"

"You cook well. You care deeply. You love wholeheartedly."

"Love?"

Neel smiled.

"Everything you do has love poured into it. Even the way you served this simple lunch."

Nishi gave him an amused look.

"Stop flattering me and finish your lunch."

Neel took another morsel, still looking at her.

"You are a good man too, Neel."

"I am flattered. That's the second time you've said it."

Nishi sighed.

"There is one thing about you that I remember very clearly."

"What?"

"When you helped me change my clothes after I was injured and Vineet called me to the office. There was no one at home, and you helped me so effortlessly."

"Sshh…"

Neel gently placed a finger over her lips. Then he took her hand in his and pressed a soft kiss against it.

"You should know what you mean to me by now."

He released her hand and continued eating as though he hadn't said anything extraordinary. But Nishi sat quietly for a moment. Something stirred deep inside her. He had said it so effortlessly.

And somehow, that made the words even more powerful. At that moment, Vineet entered the cabin.

He silently held out Neel's phone.

"Your phone."

"Oh! Thank you, Vineet."

Neel took it from him. Vineet nodded and walked away without even looking at Nishi. He didn't say another word. But as he walked back towards the ward, Nishi's earlier words kept echoing in his mind.

"When you helped me change my clothes…"

He stopped for a moment, his jaw tightening.

"How could you, Nishi?"

For the first time, something darker than jealousy began taking root inside him. And he had no idea how dangerous that thought would become. Nishi returned to the ward and quietly resumed taking care of his father. She gave him his medicines on time, made sure he was comfortable, and even spoke to the cardiologist, carefully noting down the precautions he would need to follow after discharge. Vineet watched her. He decided to wait until his father fell asleep. He wanted to speak to Nishi when they were alone. But waiting was becoming increasingly difficult. His eyes followed her almost unconsciously.

He watched the way she smiled at his father, the calmness with which she adjusted his pillow, the ease with which she handled

every little responsibility. She seemed completely unaware of the turmoil inside him.

He still couldn't believe what he had heard. Neel had helped Nishi change her clothes. The thought returned.

Again. And again.

No matter how hard he tried to push it away, his mind kept replaying those words, adding details that he had never actually witnessed. Each time, the image in his mind became more vivid, more disturbing.

Why had Neel been there? Why had Nishi allowed him to help her? And why did the thought of another man being that close to her make something inside him burn with such intensity? Vineet clenched his fists. He knew he was thinking too much. He knew there could be a perfectly innocent explanation. But knowing that did little to quiet the voice in his head. His gaze settled on Nishi again. She smiled at something his father said.

Vineet stared at her smile for a long moment. He had always thought Nishi was beautiful. But now, for reasons he could not explain, that beauty seemed to possess him. And somewhere deep inside him, a dangerous thought began to take shape. If she truly loved him, then no one else had the right to come that close to her.

# Chapter 20
# THE LINE HE CROSSED



Soon after, Vineet was certain that his father had fallen into a deep sleep. He walked towards Nishi and suddenly grabbed her injured right hand.

"Aah… Vineet, it hurts!"

He didn't loosen his grip. Instead, he held her wrist tightly and pulled her towards a corner of the room. Once they were there, he drew the curtains around his father's bed.

"What are you doing, Vineet?"

He took a deep breath, trying to compose himself.

"Just answer what I ask you."

Nishi stared at him, puzzled and increasingly uncomfortable.

"Go on."

"How long have you known Neel?"

"Almost six months."

"Six months?" His voice carried a bitter edge. "You joined Cynova Technologies six months ago, right?"

"Yes. You know that."

"That was the very day I met Neel."

Vineet frowned.

"And then I left for Bangalore that same day. I came back a week later and called you to the office. You were injured, yet you still managed to come. How?"

"Vineet, you didn't leave me any choice."

"How did you change your clothes?"

Nishi looked at him in disbelief, then disgust.

"That shouldn't concern you, Vineet. I tried to tell you that I was injured, but you didn't listen."

He gave a bitter smile.

"Wow. If I'm not wrong, you'd known Neel for barely seven days, and he helped you change your clothes."

"Vineet!"

Nishi's eyes widened.

"I thought you had a great sense of self-respect," he continued, his voice dripping with accusation. "But apparently I was wrong."

"That's enough."

"You allowed a complete stranger to help you change. He saw you when you weren't fully dressed, touched you—"

"Stop it!"

"Just to make sure you didn't face any action from me."

Nishi stared at him, stunned by the cruelty of his words.

"So, saving your job was clearly more important than your dignity, wasn't it?"

For a moment, Nishi couldn't even find words. Then her expression hardened. “You have no right to question my chastity.” Vineet's eyes narrowed.

“Don't I?”

“No, you don't.” Her voice was low but firm. “You were the one who refused to listen when I told you I was injured. You forced me to come to the office. And now you're blaming me for what happened?”

Vineet said nothing. Nishi pulled her wrist away from his grip.

“And don't ever touch me like that again.”

“Yes, saving my job was important to me,” Nishi said, her voice trembling with anger. “I am a single mother. I am accountable for my son. I couldn't afford to lose my job.”

She looked directly at him.

“But I have never crossed the line of decency. I have never done anything immoral.”

She paused.

“Neel had blindfolded himself.”

Vineet was still trembling with anger.

“Oh, shut up, Nishi! Enough of your lies!”

“They aren't lies.”

“You think I'm an idiot?”

His voice rose, forcing Nishi to glance nervously towards his father's bed.

“A beautiful woman takes off her clothes, and Neel suddenly becomes a saint?” Vineet continued bitterly. “That too when there was no one else around?”

"Yes, Vineet. He is a decent man. The day he helped me change, he made sure he didn't see anything he shouldn't. He helped me dress, fixed my hair, and then dropped me at the office."

Her voice became firmer.

"He never crossed the line. That's who Neel is."

Vineet shook his head, refusing to accept her explanation. Then he looked at her.

"Nishi, I haven't blindfolded myself. I can see everything clearly."

"You know something, Vineet?" Nishi replied coldly. "I don't care what you choose to see."

She turned to leave. But Vineet caught her hands again.

"Let go of me."

"I won't let you leave until I get this frustration out."

"Vineet, you're hurting me."

"You always do this!" he said, his voice breaking. "You always leave me like this—alone with my insecurities. You never understand what goes on inside my head."

Nishi stared at him, frightened by the desperation in his eyes. Then he asked, in a voice filled with bitterness, "Tell me, Nishi… what was Neel like?"

Her face hardened.

"Shut up, Vineet!"

"You're insulting me."

"No. You're insulting yourself."

She tried to pull her hands free, but his grip tightened.

For the first time, Nishi wasn't merely angry.

She was afraid. She looked towards his sleeping father, then back at Vineet.

Vineet continued; his voice thick with resentment.

"You told Neel's mother that I threw you out of the house in the torrential rain."

"I didn't tell her. Raima did," Nishi replied. "But wasn't it true?"

He gave another bitter smile.

"True? That's only half the truth."

Nishi stared at him.

"The truth is that you slept with another man and got pregnant."

Her eyes filled with anger and tears.

"You didn't tell that old woman that you were sick and tired of me because you thought I was impotent."

"Stop it, Vineet."

"But you know how to gain sympathy for yourself, don't you? By defaming me."

"That's not true."

"Neel fell for it. Your innocent face always misguides men."

Nishi shook her head in disbelief.

"I wanted to kill you that night," he said quietly. "But I restrained myself. So, I just threw you out of my house."

He paused.

"Now I regret that decision."

Nishi struggled against his grip.

"Let me go, Vineet."

"Enough! I can't take this anymore."

"You're a sick man."

Vineet's expression changed.

"You know something, Nishi? Today I heard the innocent voice of your son."

Nishi looked up.

"It melted my heart."

His voice softened for a moment.

"And the way you took care of Baba… it softened my heart too. But you always prove me wrong. The truth always finds a way to reveal itself, and somehow you end up getting exposed. And I feel like an idiot every single time."

"Vineet, you always want to believe your own lies," Nishi said, tears running down her face. "You've created an entire world around yourself, and you love playing the victim."

His expression hardened again. His grip tightened around her injured hand.

"Vineet! You're hurting me!"

He smiled coldly.

"You know how much pleasure I get from hurting you?"

He twisted her wrist.

"Aah… Vineet!"

"Tell me, Nishi. How did Neel treat you?"

She looked at him in horror.

"You told me Neel was your best friend. You told me he still cared about his wife. But you still slept with him, didn't you?"

"Stop!"

"Tell me, Nishi… does Neel take precautions?"

"Vineet!"

Unable to bear it any longer, Nishi slapped him hard with her free hand.

"Enough!"

Vineet stared at her in stunned silence.

"Not again," she whispered.

Then, in a sudden flash of rage, he clenched his fist and struck her across the face. The impact sent Nishi stumbling backwards. She lost her balance, her legs giving way beneath her, and she crashed hard onto the floor, stunned and breathless.

Her head hit the sharp corner of the table beside the sofa, and for a moment, everything went hazy. Vineet grabbed her and roughly pulled her to her feet.

"Get up!"

He gripped both her arms and forced her upright, his fingers tightening around them as she struggled to steady herself. Nishi could barely understand what was happening. Fear had taken over her completely. She knew this side of Vineet—the side that emerged when his anger became uncontrollable.

He seized her jaw and forced her face towards him. And then a hand stopped him.

"Let go of her, Vineet."

Neel.

His voice was calm, but there was steel behind it. Vineet turned towards him.

"Go away. This is between us."

"Real men don't hurt women," Neel said

Neel didn't raise his voice.

"Leave her alone, Vineet, unless you want me to call the police."

Vineet glared at him. Nishi stood frozen, trembling. Neel immediately moved between them and gently pulled her into his arms.

"It's all right," he whispered. "You're safe."

Vineet protested.

"She was my wife."

Neel looked at him steadily.

"Not anymore."

His voice remained calm.

"Stay away from her."

He paused.

"If you ever behave like this again, you will regret it."

Behind them, Vineet's father had awakened. He had heard the commotion and opened his eyes just in time to see Neel standing between his son and Nishi.

Before he could say anything, Neel turned towards him.

"It's all right, Uncle. Please get some rest."

Then he held Nishi close and guided her out of the room. The door closed behind them.

Vineet stood there helplessly.

He had lost not only control of the situation—but control of himself.

# Chapter 21
# In the Arms of a Friend



Neel brought Nishi into his cabin. She was still trembling. The anger, humiliation and fear of the last few minutes had left her emotionally exhausted. Her nose was bleeding, and there were small bruises on her face and arms. But somehow, the physical pain seemed insignificant compared to what was happening inside her. Neel guided her gently towards the sofa.

"Easy, Nishi."

She sat down, but her hands continued to tremble. Neel brought the first-aid box and sat beside her. Without asking unnecessary questions, he gently cleaned the blood from her nose and dressed the small injuries.

He didn't lecture her. He didn't tell her to be strong. He didn't tell her that everything would be fine. He simply stayed. When he finished, he sat beside her in silence. For a few moments, Nishi tried to hold herself together.

Then her lips trembled. And she broke down. Neel opened his arms without saying a word.

Nishi leaned into him.

He held her gently, like a friend who understood that sometimes words only made grief heavier.

She cried. She cried for the years she had spent defending a man who never trusted her. She cried for the marriage she had desperately tried to save. She cried for the family she had lost. And she cried for the woman she had once been before suspicion and humiliation slowly wore her down. Neel simply held her and let her cry her heart out.

After a long while, Nishi finally spoke.

"Neel…"

Her voice was barely audible.

"I remember the first time I found him checking my phone."

Neel remained silent.

"It felt like a slap on my character. But I convinced myself that he was insecure. He had a past. I thought perhaps he was afraid of losing me." She wiped her tears.

"But it didn't stop there."

"When I slept at night, he would secretly check my laptop. I knew what he was doing. I knew."

Her voice cracked.

"But I ignored it."

She took a shaky breath.

"He stopped me from meeting my old college friends. At first, I understood why. I thought perhaps he was uncomfortable."

"I gave in."

"He would read messages from my colleagues and interpret every little thing. He would twist innocent conversations and find meanings that weren't there."

She lowered her eyes.

"They were harmless messages, Neel. Completely harmless."

"Yet he saw betrayal everywhere."

"I never told anyone."

"Do you know why?"

Neel looked at her.

"Because it would have brought shame to my husband."

She gave a bitter little smile through her tears.

"I was protecting his reputation while he was destroying mine."

Neel's expression softened. He gently put an arm around her and kissed the top of her head. There was no judgment in the gesture. No expectation. It was simply a quiet way of telling a wounded friend—I'm here.

Nishi closed her eyes.

"But the last straw was that allegation."

Her voice shook with disbelief.

"How could he think I would sink so low?"

She looked at Neel, tears filling her eyes again.

"How could he?" Neel didn't interrupt.

"After he threw me out of the house…"

She swallowed.

"In one of the weakest moments of my life, I wanted to kill myself."

Neel's expression changed, but he allowed her to continue.

"I wanted to end everything."

She placed a trembling hand over her abdomen.

“Even the baby inside me.”

A tear rolled down her cheek.

“But I didn't.”

“How could I?”

“How could I take the life of my own child just because his father believed that the child didn't belong to him?”

Her voice broke completely.

“I always wanted to become a mother.”

“Our child…”

She closed her eyes.

“Vineet's and my child.”

A long silence followed.

“Why did Vineet ruin everything, Neel?”

There was no anger in her voice anymore. Only exhaustion.

“My brother and sister-in-law doubted my character.”

“My mother was ashamed of me.”

She shook her head.

“And I had no idea what I had done wrong.”

“No one believed me.”

Her tears began falling again.

“No one.”

She paused.

“Except Raima and her husband.”

“They stood by me when everyone else turned away.”

Neel tightened his embrace slightly. This was the first time Nishi had told anyone the whole truth.

She had carried these wounds silently for years. She had smiled when she wanted to scream.

She had worked when she wanted to collapse. She had raised her child when she herself desperately needed someone to hold her. And now, for the first time, she had finally allowed herself to fall apart.

Neel gently held her.

"Nishi…"

She looked at him.

"You are much stronger than you know."

She shook her head.

"No, I'm not."

"You are."

His voice was quiet but firm.

"It takes an extraordinary amount of courage to raise a child alone."

He paused.

"You did it."

"When Ira left me, I had my mother."

His eyes became distant for a moment.

"She was there when I was falling apart. She helped me get back on my feet. I had someone to hold my hand."

He looked at Nishi.

"But you…"

"You dealt with all of this alone."

Nishi lowered her eyes.

Neel reached for the glass of water on the table and handed it to her.

"Drink."

She took it with both hands and slowly drank.

After a moment, Neel spoke again.

"Nishi, look at me."

She hesitated before meeting his eyes.

"I have enormous respect for you."

She stared at him.

"You've earned it."

Something in his words touched her more deeply than she expected. For years, she had been made to feel as though she had something to prove. As though her character needed to be defended. As though she needed permission to believe in her own goodness. But Neel wasn't asking her to prove anything. He already believed her.

"Nishi…"

He hesitated.

"I never told you this before."

She waited.

"You are my peace in the storm of my life."

Nishi looked up.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. Neel realized how deeply personal those words had been, but he didn't take them back.

Instead, he continued softly.

"Vineet is a sick man, Nishi."

"He is deeply troubled."

"He never recovered from the trauma of his childhood. His fears, his insecurities… they've consumed him."

Neel's voice remained calm.

"But you cannot keep punishing yourself for his condition."

"He needs help."

"He needs therapy."

"And perhaps, more than anything, he needs to accept that he has a problem."

Nishi listened silently.

"You loved him," Neel said. "You were faithful to him. You tried to save your marriage. You protected his dignity even when he was questioning yours."

"You did your part."

"What happened after that wasn't your failure."

Nishi's eyes filled again.

"But I lost everything."

Neel looked at her.

"No."

She frowned slightly.

"You lost a marriage," he said gently.

"You didn't lose yourself."

"You're still here."

"And that's what matters."

For the first time that day, Nishi felt something other than pain.

She felt safe. Not because Neel had promised to solve her problems. Not because he had told her what she wanted to hear.

But because, for the first time in years, someone had listened to her without judging her.

And perhaps that was all she had needed. Someone to believe her. Someone to stay. Someone to simply say—

You were never the woman they made you believe you were.

# Chapter 22
# A PLACE TO HEAL



Later that day, Neel and Nishi were driving back home. The roads were relatively quiet, and the fading sunlight streamed through the car windows.

After a few moments of silence, Nishi finally spoke.

"Neel, where would Ira stay? I don't think she has anywhere to go."

"Hmm." "I've been thinking about it."

Neel glanced at her briefly before returning his eyes to the road.

"There are some one-room apartments for patients near the hospital. I can arrange for a nurse to stay with her. And if her condition worsens, she can call me immediately." Nishi remained silent for a moment.

"Ma won't let her stay in the house, and I won't press her either," Neel added quietly.

Nishi looked at him.

"You know, Nishi…" Neel's voice softened. "This cancer took my father's life. I couldn't save him back then. It was diagnosed far too late."

Nishi's eyes became moist. She gently rested her hand on his shoulder.

"Oh, Neel… I'm so sorry."

He gave her a faint smile.

"Whenever I see someone suffering from this disease, I try to help in whatever way I can."

"I know."

"You helped Raima's husband recover completely," Nishi reminded him.

"I'm glad I could."

Neel drove in silence for a few moments before continuing.

"You know, there was a patient I treated about five years ago."

Nishi turned towards him.

"Her daughter never told her that she had cancer. She simply told her that if she followed the treatment properly, she would recover completely."

"What? She wasn't aware that she had cancer?"

"No."

"And she recovered?"

"She did. Completely. She found out about the cancer only after she had recovered."

Nishi stared at him in disbelief.

"When someone hears the name of the disease, it can shake their confidence," Neel explained. "Sometimes, the fear becomes more overwhelming than the disease itself. So, as a doctor, my first

responsibility is to restore that confidence—to give the patient enough hope to fight the battle."

"I understand."

Nishi hesitated. Neel noticed it immediately.

"Come on, Nishi. Say it. You don't have to think twice before saying anything to me."

She took a breath.

"Neel, I was wondering… what if I keep her at my house?"

He looked at her.

"You can still arrange the nurse. She can stay with me."

"Why?" Neel asked gently. "I mean, I know you're trying to help her, but…"

"Neel, you just told me that hope helps a person fight. If she is left alone in an unfamiliar place, she might feel rejected and become depressed. If we really want to bring her back to life, then let's give her hope."

Neel remained quiet.

"If she stays with me, she'll be able to see Sahana," Nishi continued. "And if she needs medical attention, you're right there. Our apartment isn't far from the hospital."

She paused before adding softly,

"I know Masi will be upset, but I'll talk to her."

Neel looked at her for a long moment and then turned his attention back to the road.

After a few seconds, he smiled.

"Nishi…"

"Hmm?"

"You love this, don't you?"

She looked at him, puzzled.

"Love what?"

"Getting involved in other people's problems."

Nishi smiled.

"No. I get pleasure from lessening other people's pain."

Neel's smile deepened. Nishi looked out of the window before speaking again.

"Pain is a part of everyone's journey, Neel."

She paused, gathering her thoughts.

"It is that very pain that sometimes makes us better people. Sometimes it helps us heal, and sometimes it helps us grow." Neel listened quietly.

"We can't lessen somebody else's pain," she continued. "We can only assure them that we understand."

She turned towards him.

"And who would understand that better than you, Neel?"

For a moment, neither of them spoke. Neel smiled and continued driving.

After a while, he reached for her hand and gently held it.

"Nishi, I don't have the words to express what I'm feeling."

He gave her hand a gentle squeeze.

"All I can say is… I have a friend, and we are on the same page."

Nishi smiled. Their hands remained intertwined as they drove home in comfortable silence.

For both of them, it wasn't merely about giving Ira a roof over her head. It was about giving a broken woman a reason to believe that she still had a place in this world.

On the way home, Nishi suddenly remembered something.

"Neel, there is Sahana's performance at the Annual Day. She is participating in the singing competition. You should be there."

Neel glanced at her and smiled.

"Nishi, you keep track of everything concerning Sahana. Thank you for reminding me."

"Oh, really?" Nishi teased. "Then just make sure you are there."

"I will. I promise."

By the time they reached home, the evening had settled in. Palash came running towards them the moment they entered.

"Neel Uncle!"

Neel bent down, lifted him into his arms and hugged him warmly. At the same time, Nishi went towards Sahana and pulled her into a loving embrace.

"I told Papa about your performance," she said. "He will definitely be there."

Sahana's face lit up.

"Really, Papa?"

"Of course," Neel replied. "How could I miss it?"

Neel's mother watched them with a fond smile.

"You really boosted her confidence," she told Nishi. "She was so nervous earlier. But look at her now. She's so excited."

Nishi smiled.

"I only reminded her that she already knows how to sing beautifully."

Neel's mother then noticed the injury on Nishi's nose.

"By the way, child, how did you get this injury?"

Nishi instinctively looked at Neel. Neel answered before she could.

"Ma, she just fell from the staircase."

His mother frowned with concern.

"Aww, child! You are so prone to accidents."

She gently touched Nishi's arm.

"After dinner, I'll prepare turmeric milk for you. It will help."

Nishi smiled politely.

"Thank you, Masi"

Before anyone could say anything else, Palash suddenly reminded Neel of their usual game.

"Neel Uncle, what about our badminton?"

Nishi turned towards the boy.

"Child, Neel Uncle has had a very difficult day. Let's spare him today."

Neel laughed softly.

"That's perfectly all right, Nishi."

He looked at Palash affectionately.

"Playing badminton with him actually rejuvenates me. I look forward to it."

He gently kissed the boy's forehead.

"We'll play after dinner."

"Yeah!" Palash rejoiced, his face lighting up.

Sahana then tugged at Nishi's hand.

"Nishi Auntie, will you check my school project and help me make it?"

"Of course, child. Let's get it done."

She was about to follow Sahana when Neel's mother interrupted them with a smile.

"All right, but first of all, everyone is having dinner."

Palash groaned dramatically.

"But, Grandma…"

"No excuses," she said firmly. "Dinner first, badminton and school projects later."

The children reluctantly agreed. Neel watched them all with a quiet smile.

Home, with all its ordinary conversations, teasing, children's laughter and familiar routines, had given him something he desperately needed—a few moments where life felt normal again.

After the children had been put to sleep, Neel and Nishi remained in the living room, discussing Ira. The house had grown quiet, but the tension between them and Neel's mother was still palpable.

The old woman was furious.

"No. That is simply not acceptable," she said firmly. "I cannot let her stay here."

Neel remained calm.

"Ma, she won't be staying here. Nishi has offered to keep her at her house."

"Not even in Nishi's house!" his mother snapped. "She is a dangerous woman."

Neel turned towards his mother and tried to reason with her.

"Ma, she has cancer."

"So what?" she replied bitterly. "She is paying for her sins."

Neel took a deep breath.

"Ma, you know me. I cannot simply let her die. I am a doctor."

His mother stared at him.

"That is all I have to say."

He then turned towards Nishi.

"Good night, Nishi."

Nishi nodded quietly.

Neel walked towards his mother and gently hugged her.

"Good night, Ma."

She softened slightly and placed her hand on his back.

"Good night, son."

Neel left the room.

Nishi knew the old woman was still far from convinced. She walked over and sat beside her.

"Masi…"

The old woman looked at her.

"Nishi, I know you want to help her, but she is not a good woman."

She paused, her voice filled with years of resentment.

"She has never been a good mother."

Nishi looked at her thoughtfully before answering.

"Masi, she is ill. She will leave after she recovers."

The old woman remained silent.

"Right now, she needs help," Nishi continued gently. "And she needs hope."

"She doesn't deserve our sympathy."

"Perhaps not," Nishi said softly. "But this isn't about what she deserves."

The old woman looked at her.

“It is about what we choose to do.”

Nishi placed her hand over the woman's.

“Masi, she will leave after she recovers. Trust me.”

The old woman sighed.

“Right now, she is alone, helpless and sick,” Nishi continued. “She has nowhere to go. She will stay in my house. I will make sure she gets the care she needs.”

“But what about Sahana?” the old woman asked anxiously. “I don't want her to feel that pain again. She is only a child.”

Nishi nodded.

“I understand, Masi. And we will be careful. We will manage everything. Please don't worry.”

The old woman looked away, still struggling with the decision. Nishi continued softly.

“Moreover, she came here to donate her eyes. She didn't come asking for anything. She didn't demand a place in Neel’s life. She only wanted to give something to someone else before she left.”

The old woman's expression changed, but she said nothing. Nishi took a breath.

“We don't know what the future has in store for any of us, Masi.”

She looked directly into the old woman's eyes.

“But we can choose how we conduct ourselves today.”

Her voice became gentler.

“Let's play our part well, so that when the time comes for us to leave this planet, we don't have to stand before God and answer for the kindness we failed to show.”

The old woman stared at her for a long moment. Nishi squeezed her hand.

“Sometimes, Masi, helping someone doesn't mean forgetting what they did. It simply means refusing to become cruel because someone else was cruel.”

The old woman's eyes softened. She still wasn't ready to accept Ira.

But perhaps, for the first time, she was willing to let compassion have a place beside her anger.

# Chapter 23
# SOMETHING THAT UNSETTLED HER



The next morning, Nishi went to the office with a strange mixture of apprehension and determination.

She felt a wave of relief when she reached her desk and saw that Vineet had not arrived yet. She immediately immersed herself in work, unwilling to let the memories of the previous evening disturb her. A little later, she gathered her team and briefed them about their new project. She explained the requirements, divided the responsibilities and answered their questions with her usual confidence.

For a few moments, everything felt normal. Then she saw Vineet entering the office.

As always, his transformation was remarkable.

There was no trace of the man who had intimidated her the previous evening. He smiled at his colleagues, exchanged

pleasantries and greeted everyone with his usual polished professionalism. When his eyes met Nishi's, he smiled.

"Nishi."

"Good morning, sir."

"Will you please come inside my cabin?"

Her heart immediately began to pound. The memories of the previous evening came rushing back. She knew exactly what he was capable of. Yet she refused to show her fear. She followed him into his cabin.

"Good morning, sir."

"Very good morning, Ms. Nishi Sanyal."

His voice was unnaturally pleasant. He settled into his chair and looked out of the glass window.

"It's a bright, sunny day, isn't it?"

Nishi stared at him for a moment. She couldn't understand why he was behaving so pleasantly. Then, within minutes, the reason became clear.

They discussed the new project. Vineet asked several questions, made a few suggestions and appeared completely professional. And then he calmly dropped the trap.

"I need the presentation by the end of the day."

Nishi looked at him.

"Today, sir?"

"Yes. Before office hours end."

"But we have just started working on the project."

"I understand," he replied smoothly. "That's why I'm giving you the entire day."

There was a faint smile on his face.

"If you can't finish it within office hours, you may have to stay back."

Nishi immediately understood what he was doing. He knew she had responsibilities outside the office.

She knew she had promised to be there when Ira returned home. And she didn't want to tell Neel that her manager was deliberately making things difficult for her. Vineet leaned back in his chair.

"Is there a problem?"

Nishi swallowed her anger.

"No, sir."

"Good."

She looked directly at him.

"It will be done."

She walked out of his cabin.

There was no argument. No pleading. No explanation. She simply returned to her desk and began working.

For the next several hours, Nishi barely looked up. She skipped lunch. She ignored the evening tea.

Mayank noticed her struggling and offered to help several times.

"Nishi, let me take care of some of this."

"No, Mayank. I'm fine."

"You've been working since morning."

"I know. But I'll finish it."

She didn't want Vineet to have another reason to accuse her of being incapable. From his cabin, Vineet watched her through the glass partition. He saw her working continuously. He saw her refuse Mayank's help. He saw her skip lunch. And he smiled. He had wanted to make her uncomfortable. He had wanted to remind

her that he still had the power to make her life difficult. For a while, he believed he had succeeded. But he had underestimated her. A few minutes before six, Nishi finally leaned back in her chair.

The presentation was complete. She checked it one last time before printing it.

Then she walked into Vineet's cabin and placed the file on his desk.

"Sir, the presentation is ready."

Vineet opened it. He went through the first few slides. Then the next.

His expression slowly changed. There was nothing wrong with it. In fact, it was excellent.

And that seemed to irritate him even more. Nishi stood quietly before him.

"Is there anything else, sir?"

Vineet looked up.

"No."

Nishi nodded.

"May I take your leave, sir?"

For a moment, he said nothing. Then he gave a reluctant nod. Nishi turned and walked out.

She knew this wasn't over. Tomorrow, there would probably be another task. Another accusation.

Another attempt to corner her. But as she walked out of the office that evening, something inside her had changed. Vineet could create obstacles. He could try to frighten her. He could make her work harder than necessary. But he could no longer control her mind. Nishi had finally understood something important.

She didn't have to defeat him today. She only had to refuse to be broken by him. And with that newfound confidence, she stepped out of the office, ready to face whatever challenge tomorrow brought.

That evening, Nishi stood at the doorway as Ira arrived. There was a faint hesitation in Ira's steps. She looked nervous, almost frightened, as though she wasn't sure whether she truly belonged there. Nishi stepped forward with a warm smile.

"Welcome, Ira. Please feel at home."

Ira nodded quietly and stepped inside. Before she could say anything, Palash appeared in the living room.

"Ma, who is she?"

Nishi looked at him.

"Child, she is a friend of Mumma's. Say hello."

Palash looked at Ira curiously.

"Hello, Auntie."

Just then, Sahana came into the room. Palash turned toward her.

"Sahana, come here. She is Mumma's friend. Say hello."

Sahana approached with her usual cheerful smile.

"Hello, Auntie." Ira stared at her.

For a moment, something inexplicable stirred inside her.

Ira listened to the girl's voice, and her heart ached. She knew exactly who she was. Sahana. Her own biological daughter.

The child she had abandoned, the child whose life she had only known from a distance. Yet Sahana had no idea that the woman standing before her was her biological mother.

And because Sahana was blind, she could never recognize Ira by her face. She knew her only as Nishi's friend. Ira fought back her tears as she listened to Sahana's innocent voice.

She wanted to reach out and tell her the truth. But she couldn't. Not now.

Instead, she quietly listened as Sahana welcomed her with the warmth and kindness she had never expected to receive from the daughter she had abandoned. Nishi and Neel exchanged a silent glance.

Nishi moved closer to Neel and spoke softly.

"Neel... if Sahana is around her, she will have a reason to hope."

Neel nodded. He understood exactly what Nishi meant. Sahana had a way of bringing warmth into a room without even trying. Palash looked at Ira curiously.

"Auntie, you're Mumma's friend? We've never heard about you before."

Ira opened her mouth to answer. Before she could say anything, Nishi gently intervened.

"Son, Auntie is unwell. She needs someone to take care of her, so she will be staying with us for some time."

"Oh."

Palash immediately accepted the explanation. Sahana, however, had already moved closer to Ira. She gently touched Ira's face.

"What happened to you?"

Ira's eyes filled with tears.

"Child... I have cancer." Sahana's expression changed.

For a moment, she looked worried. Then she smiled reassuringly.

"Oh, I see. Don't worry, Auntie. My papa will treat you. You'll be fine."

"My papa is a wonderful doctor."

Palash nodded enthusiastically.

"Yes, Auntie. Neel uncle is the best."

Sahana smiled.

“So, you don't have to worry.”

Something broke inside Ira. She looked at the two children standing before her—their kindness so pure, so effortless.

Her eyes welled up. Without thinking, she pulled both children into her arms. Sahana and Palash were surprised, but neither moved away. Ira held them tightly, silently fighting her tears.

After a few moments, she released them and looked at Sahana.

“Even if I don't recover... I have no regrets.”

Sahana's smile faded.

Ira gently touched her cheek.

“I only have one wish.”

“What wish?”

“I want you to see the world through my eyes.”

She leaned forward and planted a gentle kiss on Sahana's forehead.

Sahana smiled.

“Auntie, you don't worry about me. Papa will help you recover.”

Ira looked at Neel. Then back at Sahana. The child's faith in her father was absolute.

“And as far as I'm concerned,” Sahana continued, “my life isn't incomplete.”

Neel's expression softened. Sahana smiled proudly.

“Papa taught me that.”

Neel felt a quiet surge of pride.

His daughter had grown into someone who understood life far beyond her years. But Sahana wasn't finished.

“And Nishi Auntie taught me something too.”

Nishi looked at her with surprise. Sahana smiled.

“She taught me that courage isn't the absence of fear.”

She paused.

“It is walking with the fear... but having the confidence that you can deal with it.”

The room fell silent. Nishi's eyes glistened. Neel looked at his daughter, then at Nishi.

There was unmistakable pride in his eyes. He reached over and gently patted Nishi's shoulder.

Nishi looked at him. Neither of them said a word. They didn't need to. That single gesture said everything.

And across the room, Ira watched them quietly. She had entered the house frightened and uncertain.

Yet for the first time in a long while, she felt something she had almost forgotten existed.

Hope. She didn't want the little girl who had just comforted her to know was her own daughter.

She didn't know that the family standing around her was connected to a truth she had never imagined.

All she knew was that, somehow, in this house, she no longer felt completely alone.

However, Neel’s mother didn’t pay her a visit. Neel settled him in one of the rooms Nishi has prepared for her.

Neel gently pulled the blanket over Ira and tucked it around her shoulders. Then he took her hand in his.

“Don't be afraid, Ira,” he said softly. “It's going to be a long journey. There will be difficult days, and there may be moments when you feel exhausted and want to give up.”

Ira remained silent, her fingers tightening around his.

"But you don't have to face any of it alone," Neel continued. "Have faith in me. We'll take it one day at a time. We'll fight every setback, every difficult report, every painful treatment together."

He paused, looking at her with quiet determination.

"I can't promise that the road will be easy, Ira. But I can promise you this—I won't give up on you."

Her eyes filled with tears.

"Whatever it takes," Neel whispered, gently squeezing her hand, "we'll fight this together. And we'll keep fighting until we have won."

Ira nodded slowly, tears glistening in her eyes.

"I completely believe you, Neel. With you by my side, I know I can fight the world."

Nishi stood a little distance away, holding the tray of food. Something about the scene unsettled her. She didn't know why. A strange heaviness settled in her chest, followed almost immediately by guilt.

Why am I feeling like this? She looked away.

Ira is Sahana's mother. She is Neel's estranged wife. And Neel is her oncologist. He is only trying to give his patient hope. That was all. There was nothing more to it. Nishi took a slow breath and tried to push the uncomfortable feeling aside. Of course, he would comfort her. Anyone in his position would do the same.

She repeated the thought silently, almost as though she were trying to convince herself.

Then she stepped forward with a faint smile. "I brought dinner for you, Ira."

# Chapter 24
# The ordinary evenings



That night, after Ira finished her dinner, Neel wished everyone good night and went to his room. Nishi stayed back to make sure Ira was comfortable.

"Don't worry, Ira. I'm in the next room with the children. I'll keep my phone right beside me. Call me if you need anything."

She placed her phone on the bedside table, smiled reassuringly, and quietly closed the door behind her.

Neel was waiting outside.

"Neel, I thought you had gone to bed."

"I was about to. I just wanted to say thank you, Nishi. Thank you for everything."

She smiled gently. "Neel, please don't be so formal."

"I know, Nishi. But what you're doing means a lot to me."

Nishi looked toward Ira's closed door.

"You're trying to give her hope. And right now, hope itself is enough."

Neel nodded, his eyes filled with quiet determination.

"I'm sure we'll win this battle."

Nishi smiled. "Together."

The next morning, after taking a bath, Nishi entered the kitchen. She found Ira already there, preparing breakfast.

"Ira, what are you doing?"

"Making breakfast for all of you."

"But you're not well. Your therapy is about to begin."

"No, I insist. Otherwise, I'll feel like a burden."

Nishi walked over and gently patted her shoulder.

"You are not a burden, Ira. You are Sahana's mother, and you are here to recover. Please don't lose hope. Trust Neel and help him help you get better."

She pointed towards the stove.

"So, no exertion. Understood?"

Ira nodded.

"Okay. I'll take rest. But let me help you with breakfast today. I've already started."

She smiled faintly.

"I will make the potato-stuffed sandwiches Neel used to love. I'm sure Palash and Sahana will love them too."

Nishi smiled and joined her.

"Tell me what I should do."

"I'll add some green peas."

Nishi began shelling the peas while Ira remained quiet for a moment.

"Sahana was five years and eleven months old when I left her," she finally said.

Nishi looked at her but said nothing.

"I was already in a relationship with another man before Sahana lost her eyesight. In fact, I was talking to him on the phone when the accident happened."

Nishi continued shelling the peas, listening without judgment.

"You know, Nishi, Neel loved me with all his heart. But I never understood what love was."

Her voice trembled.

"I was barely sixteen when I entered the modelling world. There was nothing wrong with the profession, but my mother wanted me to become rich quickly. We came from a humble background, and I thought taking shortcuts was the easiest way."

She paused.

"Even before marrying Neel, I had affairs. I didn't marry him because I loved him. I married him because he gave me security."

Nishi remained silent.

"But Neel was different. He gave me the love I never deserved. He gave me a family. Even when my mother kept asking for money, he helped her."

Pain filled Ira's voice.

"Then I met another man—a business tycoon. I cheated on Neel with him. He was fascinated by my beauty and youth, and after my divorce, I moved in with him."

Her eyes filled with tears.

"That was the biggest mistake of my life."

Nishi gently placed a hand over hers.

"Later, I discovered that he was already married and had two children. I still stayed with him for six years. I worked as a model in his company and lived under the same roof as his mistress"

"He promised me he would divorce his wife. He kept telling me that he didn't love her."

Ira wiped her tears.

"But when he found out I had cancer, he asked me to leave."

She broke down.

Nishi didn't know what to say. She poured Ira a cup of tea and placed it in front of her.

After a moment, she asked gently, "He told you he didn't love his wife and that he would marry you. But why did you stay for six years when he never actually left her?"

There was no accusation in her voice. She was simply giving Ira a chance to speak. Ira sighed.

"Because I was greedy. I wanted his wealth. I thought that if I married him, I would live a luxurious life."

She lowered her eyes.

"Later, I discovered that he had always been happy with his wife."

A bitter smile touched Nishi's lips.

"Happy with his wife… while having an affair with you."

Neither woman noticed the old woman standing just outside the kitchen.

"She is no saint either, Nishi."

Both women turned. The old woman stepped into the kitchen, her expression hard.

"She stayed with a married man for six years and now speaks of it as though she has won a medal."

"Masi, tea is ready," Nishi said softly, trying to defuse the situation.

But the old woman raised her hand.

"Wait, Nishi."

She turned towards Ira.

"What are you doing here? You are a guest. Don't think you can win my son back."

"Ma, I just—"

"Don't call me Ma. I know exactly what you are trying to do."

She took a step closer.

"First you entered Neel's friend's house. Then the kitchen. Then you will enter Neel's house. And then Neel's bedroom."

Her voice hardened.

"Isn't that your plan, Ira?"

"Ma…", Ira's eyes glistened.

"Stop it. I understand your intentions very well. Go back to your room."

Ira quietly put down what she was holding and walked towards the door.

"And remember," the old woman added, "as long as I am alive, you are not welcome back into my son's life."

Ira stopped for a moment. Her eyes were filled with tears. She nodded silently and left. The old woman turned towards Nishi.

"I told you she isn't a good woman. She has already started her game."

Nishi tried to calm her.

"Masi, don't worry. Her chemotherapy will start soon. Once she recovers, she will move out of this house."

She paused.

"But right now, she needs our moral support. Your son is a doctor. Let's help him get her back on her feet."

The old woman looked at her anxiously.

"I'm scared, child. What if she wins Neel back?"

She swallowed.

"Neel loved her once."

Nishi remained quiet for a few moments.

"Masi, Neel is a wise man. If Ira ever wins him back, it should only be because he believes she has genuinely changed. And if that happens… what is wrong with it?"

The old woman shook her head.

"No. She is a disgrace to womanhood. She admitted it herself."

Nishi sighed and handed her the cup of tea.

"Masi, whatever she was in the past, she is facing something very different today. She is fighting cancer."

"I don't care what she is fighting."

The old woman's voice softened.

"I want my son to marry you. I want him to build a beautiful life with you, Sahana and Palash."

Nishi blushed and quickly looked away.

"Masi, we are good friends. I mean… he is a really good friend. A solid friend. I trust him."

The old woman smiled knowingly.

"I know, child. You need time."

She touched Nishi's hand.

"Take your time. I will wait before I speak to Neel."

Nishi looked at her curiously.

"Yesterday, I had a beautiful dream," the old woman continued.

Her eyes brightened.

"I saw Sahana could see. I saw you as Neel's wife. Palash was happy with Neel. And you and Neel had built a beautiful family together."

She smiled wistfully.

"Will this ever happen, Nishi?"

Nishi looked down at her tea. For once, she had no answer. Because somewhere deep inside, the question had touched a place she had been trying very hard not to look at.

The next few days passed uneventfully, at least on the surface. Nishi went to the office every day, and Vineet always found one reason or another to make her life difficult. Sometimes, he burdened her with unnecessary work. Sometimes, he picked apart the way she managed her team. At other times, he found faults in her presentations—criticising things that had never mattered before. Nishi swallowed it all.

Even her team had begun to notice. They could see that Vineet was becoming increasingly paranoid and unreasonable. His behaviour had started affecting his credibility as a deputy manager, but he seemed completely unconcerned. He wasn't trying to manage the team anymore.

He was trying to torment Nishi. And somewhere inside, he seemed to derive a cruel satisfaction from watching her struggle. But Nishi refused to give him that satisfaction. She reminded herself every day:

This man cannot harm me.

He was unhappy with himself, dissatisfied with the life he had built, and carrying years of anger he had never learned to let go of. Perhaps that was why he kept hurting others. All he has stored inside him is hatred, Nishi thought. And hatred is all he knows how to give back to the world. So, she stopped taking his words personally.

She did her work, protected her team, and walked away from every confrontation with her dignity intact.

Vineet could try to break her. But Nishi had already survived worse.

Ira's chemotherapy had already begun. The treatment left her extremely weak, and although a nurse was there to care for her, she needed something no medicine could provide—constant emotional support.

Every evening, after returning from the office, Nishi would spend some time with Ira. She talked to her, encouraged her, and reminded her that she wasn't alone. Meanwhile, Neel took care of the children.

Once everything settled down, Neel and Nishi would sit together with their cups of coffee.

It was never for very long. Sometimes, barely half an hour. But somehow, those few minutes were enough.

Neither of them realised when those quiet moments had become something they both started looking forward to.

They talked about everything and nothing. Sometimes Neel shared stories about his patients—the ones who had fought against impossible odds and walked out of his hospital smiling. Sometimes their conversations revolved around the children: their studies, academic curriculum, chess classes, and the endless little things that came with raising them. And sometimes, Nishi found herself laughing as she narrated the antics of her team members at the office. There was one thing she never spoke about.

Vineet.

She didn't tell Neel about his unreasonable behaviour, the constant criticism, or the way he seemed determined to make her work life difficult. It wasn't because she didn't trust Neel. She simply didn't want Vineet to occupy any space in their conversations—or in her life beyond what was unavoidable.

She had made up her mind. He cannot get under my skin. So, when she came home, she left Vineet at the office.

And in those precious few minutes over coffee, she allowed herself to simply be Nishi. With Neel, she didn't have to defend herself, prove herself, or pretend to be stronger than she was. She could just talk. And somehow, without either of them noticing when it happened, those ordinary evenings had begun to feel like the best part of their day.

# Chapter 25
# WHEN FRIEND TURNED FOE



The downpour was heavy that evening. Nishi had just finished her shift when Mayank and Sheena asked her to join them for a cup of coffee. She agreed, happy to unwind for a few minutes before heading home. They chatted about the usual office gossip and everyday things. Soon, they finished their coffee, exchanged pleasantries, and went their separate ways. Nishi was about to leave when her phone rang.

It was Palash.

"Hey, son!"

"Mumma, you forgot! I have a birthday party to attend. It's Rishabh's birthday."

Nishi smiled.

"No, son, I haven't forgotten. The party starts after two hours. I'm on my way home. And I packed the gift yesterday and kept it in the wardrobe."

"You're a great Mumma!"

"I know I am," she teased.

"Anything else, son?"

"Mumma, Rishabh's mom invited Sahana too."

"That's good. I'll drop both of you there. They live in the same apartment complex as us."

"But, Mumma…" Palash sounded disappointed. "He wanted me to come early. Sahana and I are excited. Can we go now? I'm really excited. We can help plan the games before the other children arrive. I'll hold Sahana's hand carefully. Please, Mumma."

"No, Palash. I'll be home soon, and then I'll drop you both. It's not safe. You're still a child, and Sahana can't see. Neel uncle isn't around either."

"Mumma…" he pleaded innocently.

Before Nishi could respond, Neel's mother spoke from nearby.

"Nishi, I'll drop them. They live only a few blocks away. You don't worry at all."

Nishi hesitated for a moment.

"Are you sure, Masi?"

"Absolutely. You finish your work and come home safely."

Reassured, Nishi finally gave in.

"Thank you, Mumma! Love you."

"Love you too, my son. And don't climb all over the sofa. Please behave yourself there"

"Sure, Mumma!"

"And take care of yourself and Sahana."

"I will."

Nishi smiled as she disconnected the call. She slipped her phone into her bag and was about to leave when something caught her attention. A pen drive was lying on the table where she, Mayank, and Sheena had been sitting. She picked it up and examined it. It wasn't hers. Maybe it fell out of Sheena's bag.

Nishi immediately called Sheena. The phone was switched off. She tried again. Still switched off.

Nishi was about to leave when her teammate, Shweta, stopped her.

"Ma'am, could you spare a few minutes? I wanted you to look at the PPT I've prepared."

"Of course."

Shweta opened the presentation on her laptop. Nishi went through it carefully.

"It's brilliant, Shweta. But I still want you to work on a few things."

She pointed out the areas that needed improvement and explained the finer nuances of the presentation. The discussion lasted another fifteen minutes before Nishi finally headed out. She reached her car, opened the door, and slipped into the driver's seat.

There were already a dozen things running through her mind. Ira seems better today.

Green groceries… I already have those.

The children won't be home for a while. They're at the birthday party. She reached for the car keys.

And then she saw it again.

The pen drive. The steel-grey pen drive lay beside her phone.

Nishi picked it up and frowned.

She should probably inform Mayank. What if Sheena was desperately looking for it? What if there was something important on it?

She called Sheena first. No answer. She tried again. Still nothing. Finally, she called Mayank.

"Hey, Nishi!"

"Mayank, I found a pen drive. It's steel grey in colour. Does it belong to you or Sheena?"

There was a brief pause.

"Oh yes… that pen drive."

His voice suddenly sounded different.

"Sheena has been looking for it everywhere."

"Really?"

"Thank God, you found it."

Nishi felt relieved.

"Alright, then. I'll give it to her tomorrow morning."

"Wait…"

Mayank hesitated.

"I mean… where are you right now?"

"I'm about to drive home. Is it really that important?"

"Yes. Very important. She wants it now."

Nishi frowned. Mayank continued

"How far have you moved from the office?"

"I live in Sunshine Apartments, a few blocks away from Lifeline Hospital. It isn't far from our office."

She hesitated. Sheena needed the pen drive urgently. There was no reason to keep it overnight if she could return it now.

"Alright, Mayank. Can you come outside the gate of your apartment?"

"Come on, Nishi! It's pouring outside. Why don't you come inside instead? Have another cup of coffee with us."

Nishi hesitated again. Standing outside in this rain just to hand over a pen drive didn't make sense.

"Alright, Mayank. But I won't stay for coffee. I'll just give you the pen drive and leave."

"Alright, alright. I won't trouble you. I'll come outside the gate—even though I've got a terrible cold."

He sounded deliberately offended. Nishi smiled despite herself.

"Fine, Mayank. I'll have the coffee with you and Sheena. And I'll finally meet your little munchkin too."

"Now that sounds better! Please come over." Nishi ended the call.

It was only coffee. And the children weren't at home so it was not really a rush. She had no reason to feel uncomfortable. Besides, Mayank was a friend, Sheena was there, and she was only going to return a pen drive.

With that thought, Nishi started the car and drove towards Sunshine Apartments, unaware that the seemingly insignificant pen drive had already set something in motion.

Nishi had barely reached Sunshine Apartments when, just as she was about to park, her car suddenly sputtered and stopped. She tried restarting it. Nothing. She tried again. Still nothing.

"Not now," she muttered.

She needed a mechanic, but the rain was coming down heavily, making it almost impossible to step outside.

Then her eyes fell on the building across the road. Lifeline Hospital.

Neel's shift must be over by now. It was safe to call him. She picked up her phone and dialled his number.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Nishi!"

"Neel, can we talk?"

"Of course. What happened?"

"My car broke down."

"Alright. I'll pick you up from the office. Give me ten minutes."

"No, actually…" Nishi glanced around. "I'm at Sunshine Apartments. I came here to meet a friend."

"Oh! Sunshine Apartments is right opposite the hospital. I'll be there in five minutes."

"Alright, Neel. Can you come inside? B-501 is the flat number."

"Of course, I'll come inside. It's pouring outside. Don't come out of the tower. I'll come and pick you up."

"Okay."

"Take care. I'm coming."

"You too, Neel."

She ended the call and looked through the rain-streaked windshield.

For some reason, knowing that Neel was coming made her feel a little less stranded. She picked up the pen drive from the passenger seat and slipped it safely into her bag. Then she stepped out of the car and hurried towards the apartment entrance, completely unaware that the evening was about to take an unexpected turn.

Mayank opened the door.

"Hey, Nishi! Come inside. Come right in."

Nishi stepped inside, shaking the rain from her umbrella.

"Where is Sheena?"

Mayank hesitated.

"Actually, Sheena isn't at home. Her mother is unwell, so she decided to stay there tonight."

Nishi's expression changed.

"But…"

She had spoken to Mayank barely ten minutes ago. Perhaps her mother really was unwell.

Mayank seemed to sense her hesitation and added reluctantly, "She has just left with our daughter."

Nishi wasn't convinced, but she didn't want to jump to conclusions. She reached into her bag, took out the steel-grey pen drive and handed it to him.

"Here, I found this at the cafeteria."

Mayank gently touched her shoulder.

"Thank you, Nishi. It really means a lot."

"Don't mention it. May I take your leave now?"

"Oh, not at all. Look at the rain. It's already pouring. At least wait until it slows down."

"I don't want to trouble you."

"Trouble me? Never." He smiled. "Till then, enjoy a cappuccino with me. Please, allow me."

Nishi reluctantly nodded. She couldn't bring herself to say no to his familiar, friendly demeanour.

Mayank handed her a towel.

"Please make yourself comfortable. I'll get the coffee. Just give me five minutes."

Nishi smiled faintly. Mayank disappeared into the kitchen. A few moments later, her phone rang.

It was Sheena.

"Hey, Sheena!"

"Hi, dear. I just saw that you called. My phone was switched off."

"That's alright. How is your mother?"

"She's doing very well. I came here to celebrate her anniversary with my daughter. Mayank dropped me here after work."

Nishi froze.

"Sheena…"

"Yes?"

"I found a steel-grey pen drive on the cafeteria table. I came here to return it to you."

"Oh, that one?"

Sheena sounded puzzled.

"That's not important at all. In fact, it doesn't even work. You came all the way to my home in this terrible weather just to return it?"

Nishi's heart skipped a beat.

"I thought it was important. Mayank told me you needed it urgently."

"What?"

Sheena's voice changed.

"Why would I need it? Why did Mayank say that?"

Before Nishi could answer, someone called Sheena from the other end.

"Nishi, I'll call you back. This is important. My daughter is crying."

The call ended. Nishi slowly lowered the phone. Something was wrong.

She didn't know what. But something was definitely wrong. She looked towards the kitchen.

Why had Mayank lied?

She had known him for several months. He had always been calm and helpful. He had supported her many times, especially when Vineet was rude to her. He had encouraged her when she felt demoralised at work.

It was difficult to reconcile that man with the uneasy feeling now rising inside her. Her instincts were telling her to leave. Immediately. Nishi stood up.

Just then, Mayank returned with two steaming cups of cappuccino.

"Here you go."

Nishi forced a smile.

"Mayank, I'm sorry, but I really must leave. I just remembered something important."

Mayank looked at her carefully. He seemed to notice the discomfort in her voice.

"Relax, Nishi. Finish your coffee first."

She remained standing. Mayank smiled.

"I spoke to Sheena. She's grateful that you returned the pen drive."

"She said she won't be here until morning. Her mother is stable now."

Nishi stared at him. Another lie. What is Mayank up to?

He looked directly into her eyes.

"Nishi, don't you trust your friend?"

She didn't answer.

She slowly picked up the coffee mug, but instead of drinking it, she walked towards the window.

Outside, the rain was still coming down relentlessly. Her eyes searched the road. She was looking for Neel.

He had said he would come. She looked back at the window.

She knew she was being rude. She knew Mayank had always been kind to her. And yet, something deep inside her was screaming at her to leave. Trust your instinct. Nishi placed the untouched coffee on the windowsill.

She had made up her mind. Whatever the rain, whatever the circumstances, she wasn't going to stay there any longer.

# Chapter 26
# LET'S FIGHT BACK



Nishi turned towards the door—and froze. Mayank was standing behind her.

Her face went pale.

"Mayank…"

She took a step back.

"I want to go home. I'm not feeling well."

He stepped closer and gently placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Hey, Nishi. What happened, dear?"

He picked up the coffee and held it out to her.

"Have this. You'll feel better."

Nishi took the cup and immediately placed it on the windowsill.

"I don't want it."

Mayank's expression changed.

"Why?"

"I just want to go home."

Her heart was pounding. He moved closer. Nishi instinctively stepped backwards.

"Mayank, you're intimidating me."

"Am I?" he asked softly. "Really?"

There was something unsettling in his eyes now. Something that made every instinct in Nishi scream that she was in danger. He reached towards her face. Nishi turned away.

"Don't."

"Why are you so frightened?" he whispered.

Then he said something that made her blood run cold.

"Don't worry. Sheena will never find out what happens between us."

Nishi stared at him.

"What did you say?"

She immediately moved towards the door, but Mayank caught her by the arms.

"Let me go!"

"Just calm down."

"You misunderstood me!"

His grip tightened.

Nishi struggled to free herself.

"I said let me go!"

Mayank let out a low, unsettling laugh. There was something deeply disturbing in the sound.

"I understood you perfectly."

He looked at her with contempt.

"Vineet is your ex-husband. You have a child. Everyone knows the story."

Nishi's face burned with humiliation.

"I even know why you left your last job."

He smiled.

"People talked, Nishi. And eventually, it became difficult for you to stay."

"Stop it."

"You're a woman with a questionable character."

The words cut deep. Then he added quietly,

"Do you even know who your child's father is?"

Something inside Nishi snapped. She slapped him hard across the face.

"You bastard!"

For a moment, Mayank stared at her in disbelief.

Then his expression hardened. He caught her arms again as she tried to move away.

"Mayank, leave me!"

"Go ahead," he said coldly. "Scream."

Nishi struggled against him.

"Scream as loudly as you want. What are you going to tell the police—that I raped you?"

She stared at him.

"Who do you think they'll believe?"

Nishi's breathing became ragged.

"You came to my house willingly," he continued. "You walked in yourself."

He leaned closer, his voice dropping to a whisper.

"Who is going to believe that you didn't want this?"

Nishi looked at him, terrified. Mayank smiled.

"Come, my queen. Let me take you to my bedroom."

He reached for her and tried to lift her.

"No! Don't!"

Nishi stumbled backwards, desperately looking around the room for something—anything—that could help her.

Her eyes darted across the room. And then she saw it. The steaming cup of coffee. It was still sitting on the windowsill beside her. Her eyes fixed on it.

Mayank stepped towards her. He grabbed her tightly again, his eyes cold.

"There's no one coming to save you, Nishi"

Nishi's other hand moved slowly towards the cup. He didn't notice. She grabbed it.

And, with every ounce of strength she had left, threw the hot coffee straight at his face.

Mayank recoiled with a cry, releasing her. Nishi didn't wait. She took her handbag and ran towards the door. She didn't look back. Not once. All she knew was that she had to get out. Now.

Nishi ran towards the elevator and frantically pressed the button. The indicator showed that it was on another floor. She couldn't wait. Turning towards the staircase, she ran.

Five floors. Five endless flights of stairs. She was still wearing her high heels, but she didn't stop. She stumbled more than once, gripping the railing as she hurried down. Her breath came in short, uneven gasps.

Her heart was pounding so hard that she could barely hear anything else. By the time she reached the ground floor, her legs were trembling beneath her. She pushed open the stairwell door and stumbled into the lobby.

For a moment, she simply stood there, trying to breathe. She was dazed. Terrified. Then she felt a gentle hand touch her shoulder. Nishi froze. Her blood ran cold.

Mayank.

She spun around, ready to scream. But the face before her wasn't Mayank's.

It was Neel.

"Nishi…"

The moment she recognised him, the fear she had been holding inside finally broke.

"Neel…"

And she collapsed into his arms.

"Nishi, what happened?"

Neel immediately embraced her.

It wasn't a romantic embrace. It was the instinctive embrace of a friend who could see that someone he cared about was terrified. Nishi clung to him, trembling uncontrollably.

"Neel, I… I went to Mayank's house…"

Her voice broke.

"Take your time," Neel said softly. "You're safe now. Just breathe."

Nishi took a shaky breath and began to speak. Slowly, haltingly, she told him everything.

Neel listened without interrupting. Not once.

But with every word, the calmness in his face disappeared. His jaw tightened, his hands curled into fists, and his eyes filled with barely contained rage. When she finally finished, he gently released her.

Without saying a word, he turned towards the building. Nishi immediately caught his hand.

"Where are you going, Neel?"

"To teach him a lesson he will never forget."

"No, Neel. Please."

He turned around.

"He tried to molest you, Nishi. His place is behind bars."

"Neel, please let's just go home."

"Why?"

"Because nobody will believe me."

Neel stared at her.

"Sheena will think I'm lying."

"She won't."

"You don't know that."

Her voice trembled.

"It's been eight years, Neel. Eight years of people questioning my character. Eight years of people making assumptions about me."

She looked down at her hands.

"My chastity is intact. That's more than enough for me now."

Neel's expression softened.

"Nishi, look at me."

She reluctantly raised her eyes.

"You are not responsible for what other people believe about you."

She remained silent.

"You know the truth. Your conscience knows the truth. That is what matters."

She shook her head.

"It isn't that simple."

"I know."

"This won't be easy for me, Neel."

Her eyes filled with tears again.

"Mayank will say I went to his house willingly. At the office, Vineet will find another opportunity to malign my character. I'm tired, Neel."

Her voice cracked.

"I'm so tired of having to prove that I'm not the person they make me out to be."

Neel didn't interrupt.

"I was still trembling when I came downstairs. I keep thinking about what could have happened if I hadn't thrown that coffee."

She covered her face with her hands.

"I don't even know what would have happened."

Neel stepped closer.

"Nishi."

She looked at him.

"Do you think it will become easier if you keep running from people like him?"

She said nothing.

"Do you think you'll be able to face Mayank at the office if you let this go?"

Her eyes dropped.

"You're already dealing with Vineet. Now you want to carry this fear as well?"

"I don't want to carry anything anymore," she whispered.

"I know."

Neel's voice was gentle.

"But if you let him go because you're afraid of what people might say, then he wins."

Nishi looked at him.

"And tomorrow, he may do the same thing to someone else."

She swallowed hard.

"You don't have to protect yourself by carrying his shame."

His voice grew firmer.

"The shame belongs to him, Nishi. Not you."

A tear slipped down her cheek.

"What do I do, Neel?"

He gently held both her hands.

"You do what you should have been allowed to do from the beginning."

He looked straight into her eyes.

"You tell the truth."

Nishi stared at him.

"You have done nothing wrong. You went to return a pen drive. You trusted someone you believed was your friend. He abused that trust."

Neel paused.

"You survived it."

His voice softened.

"And now, Nishi, let's fight back."

For a moment, she simply looked at him. Then her phone began to ring. Nishi glanced at the screen. Sheena. Her fingers froze.

She looked at Neel. He gave her a quiet nod.

"Tell her everything."

Nishi took a deep breath. She was about to answer when Neel turned towards the building.

Then he stopped and looked back.

"B-501, right?"

Nishi nodded.

Neel turned towards the entrance. This time, Nishi didn't stop him.

She pressed the answer button.

"Hello, Sheena…"

And for the first time that evening, Nishi was ready to tell the truth.

# Chapter 27
# NO OLD FEELINGS RESURFACING



Mayank was beaten black and blue by Neel. Still shaken, Nishi told Sheena everything—every detail of what had happened

To her surprise, Sheena believed her. Without wasting another moment, Nishi called the police. Mayank was arrested and taken into custody.

He tried to defend himself, insisting that Nishi was lying and that he had done nothing wrong. But the burn marks on his face told a different story. His injuries became a silent witness to the violence he had unleashed.

Mayank had never imagined that Nishi would fight back. He had always believed she was too afraid to stand up to him. This time, he was wrong.

The next morning, Nishi went to the office.

Neel insisted on dropping her himself. She sat quietly in the passenger seat, staring ahead. She knew the news had already spread, and the thought of facing her colleagues made her

nervous. Neel noticed her hesitation. He gently patted her shoulder, reassuring her.

"You have done nothing wrong, Nishi. Go and face them."

She looked at him.

"You've seen worse," he continued softly. "This time, you fought back."

Nishi took a deep breath and opened the car door. For the first time, she stepped into her office not as a victim—but as someone who had found the courage to stand up for herself.

When Nishi reached her cabin, she found her entire team waiting for her. The moment she stepped inside, they broke into applause.

Nishi stopped, surprised. A small smile appeared on her face, but she couldn't understand why they were applauding her. A young woman stepped forward.

"Ma'am… thank you."

Nishi looked at her, puzzled.

"He had been harassing me too," the woman continued, her voice trembling. "But I never had the courage to speak up. He threatened me. I was so scared that I had even decided to resign."

Nishi's heart sank. She gently pulled her into a hug.

Another woman came forward.

"He knew I was a widow," she said quietly. "Many times, he tried to touch me inappropriately. When I warned him, he threatened me and said no one would believe me."

She wiped her tears.

"But you stood up to him, Nishi. You stood up for all of us."

Nishi was overwhelmed. She looked around at the women standing before her, each carrying a story she had never known. Neel had been right. She had thought she was fighting only for herself.

But if she hadn't fought back, she would never have known that her courage had given so many other women the courage to speak. For the first time, Nishi understood that her fight had never been hers alone.

Then Nishi's gaze shifted to Vineet. He stood at a distance, watching her. To her surprise, there was no anger in his eyes this time—only something that looked like compassion.

Nishi quickly looked away.

She never knew when Vineet's emotions could turn against her. After everything she had been through, she had learned to be cautious around him. Just then, she noticed Sheena standing nearby.

Everyone was looking at her as the wife of the man who had been arrested. Nishi understood her discomfort immediately.

"Come with me," she said gently.

She took Sheena into her cabin.

Vineet watched them disappear inside. He wanted to speak to Nishi, so after a moment, he followed them. He stopped outside her cabin, just as he heard Nishi's voice.

"Thank you, Sheena, for believing me."

"No, dear. I knew who he was," Sheena replied softly.

Nishi looked at her.

"Several women, especially my house helps, had complained about him. At first, I ignored it. But then I started noticing things myself. When you told me he had called you to his house, I had a feeling something was wrong. But my child was sick, and I had to rush back."

Her voice trembled.

"I had no idea he would sink so low. He tried to molest you…"

Vineet's expression hardened outside the door.

Sheena continued, "He thought you were weak. He thought you wouldn't fight back. But you did."

Nishi gently placed a hand on her shoulder. She continued;

"I'm educated, Nishi. I'll raise my child. I don't need his support."

Sheena broke down.

"I'm sure you will," Nishi said softly. "You're brave."

Sheena shook her head.

"No, Nishi. You are brave. Your courage is contagious."

She gave a bitter smile.

"I thought Vineet was a sick man. Now I realise… so is my husband."

Nishi's expression softened.

"Sheena, I'm so sorry you had to go through this."

"But there is a big difference," she continued.

Sheena looked at her.

"Vineet is a wounded man. A troubled man, perhaps. But I know one thing—he was never a predator."

Vineet looked up sharply. Nishi continued, unaware that he was standing outside.

"He never even looked at another woman. Not during our marriage, and not even after eight years of separation. That's not his character."

Sheena looked confused.

"Nishi, he treated you terribly. Everyone here knows that. He always seems to find an excuse to insult you. And yet… you're still defending him."

Nishi smiled faintly.

"I'm not defending him. I'm only telling you what he is not."

She paused.

"He never treated any woman like that. I was his wife, Sheena, he never ever forced himself on me."

Her voice softened.

"He is still fighting his own wounds. He has made mistakes. He has hurt me, deeply. But he is not characterless."

Outside the door, Vineet stood completely still. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. After everything he had said and done to Nishi, after eight years of bitterness and harbouring resentment, she still chose to see the good in him.

She still believed in the man he had once been. For a moment, he closed his eyes. Then, without saying a word, Vineet turned and walked away.

Vineet sat quietly in his cabin for a while. By the time he had arrived at the office, he had already learned that Mayank had been arrested—and why. He felt sorry for Nishi. Despite everything that had happened between them, he had once loved her deeply.

He didn't know what to make of what he had heard. Was he actually a sick man?

Did he need help? Therapy?

The thought unsettled him, and he quickly pushed it aside.

His eyes drifted towards Nishi. She was engrossed in her work, as usual, completely focused on her screen.

Vineet decided to let her settle in before speaking to her. After a while, he picked up the intercom.

"Hello?"

"Hello?"

"Nishi, could you please come inside?"

Before she could say anything else, he placed the receiver down.

Nishi stared at the phone for a moment. Maybe it's time for another accusation, she thought.

Still, she took a deep breath and walked towards his cabin.

"May I come in?"

"Please come in, Nishi."

She stepped inside.

"Please, have a seat."

Nishi sat down, slightly surprised by his unusually gentle tone. Why was he being so different today?

Vineet got up and quietly drew the curtains. Then he returned to his seat and lowered his eyes.

"Nishi… are you alright?"

She nodded.

"Yes."

"When I found out what happened, I wanted to kill that bastard," Vineet said, his voice tight with anger. "I had no idea he was capable of something like this."

"Vineet, he is already behind bars," Nishi reminded him gently.

Vineet nodded.

"Nishi… I…"

He stopped, struggling to find the right words. Seeing his hesitation, Nishi gently placed her hand over his.

"That's okay, Vineet. Don't dwell on this episode. He has already paid for what he did."

Vineet looked down at her hand and then gently placed his own over it.

"Nishi, I don't know what's happening to me. Sometimes, I feel like I'm losing myself."

His voice cracked.

"I don't know where I'm going or what I'm doing anymore."

For a moment, his vulnerability was impossible to hide. Nishi sighed softly.

"Vineet, now that you've confronted your fear and spoken about it, I really think you need help."

He looked at her.

"Please consider therapy. There are many good psychiatrists who can help you work through what you're going through."

She paused.

"Don't punish yourself like this. And please don't ruin the rest of your life."

Vineet looked at her. Their eyes met, and for a few seconds neither spoke.

"May I take your leave, Vineet?"

"No."

The answer came so quickly that even Vineet seemed startled by it.

Nishi looked at him, surprised.

"I mean…" He cleared his throat. "There's no urgent work today."

He composed himself.

"You told me Neel's wife is unwell and undergoing chemotherapy. And you've already put in a lot of hard work at Cynova this week. If you want, you can take the rest of the day off and get some rest."

Nishi shook her head.

"No, Vineet. I'll finish my work before I leave."

She stood up and walked towards the door. Just before she opened it, Vineet spoke again.

"Nishi…"

She turned.

"Neel is a good man. I'm grateful to him for yesterday."

Nishi simply nodded.

"Thank you."

She left the cabin. As she walked back to her desk, Nishi felt a strange calmness.

Whatever she felt for Vineet now was compassion. Nothing more.

There was no love returning, no old feelings resurfacing.

She could understand his pain without wanting him back in her life.

# Chapter 28
# NOT EVERYONE WOULD EVENTUALLY LEAVE



The next few days passed peacefully. Vineet did not trouble Nishi or find any reason to humiliate her. Their relationship remained strictly professional and cordial.

At home, Nishi cherished her time with Neel and the children. For a while, life felt calm and almost normal.

A few days later, a miracle happened.

One of Neel's patients passed away, but before his death, he had expressed his wish to donate his eyes. His family honoured his final wish, giving someone else the gift of sight. After a couple of days, the bandages were finally removed from Sahana's eyes.

She blinked. For the first time in years, the world came into focus.

She could see again. Clearly.

The faces she had known only through voices and touch were suddenly right in front of her. The world she had once lost had been returned to her.

Neel took Sahana into his arms, his eyes brimming with tears.

"My child… this is the happiest day of my life."

Neel's mother wiped away her tears and pulled Sahana into a warm embrace. Across the room, Nishi stood with Palash beside her. Sahana turned towards her and smiled.

"You must be Nishi Auntie." Nishi smiled through her tears. Neel gently signalled her to come closer.

Nishi walked towards Sahana and hugged her tightly.

A moment later, Sahana noticed Palash standing beside her. He was smiling at her.

"And you must be Palash, my little brother."

Palash stepped forward excitedly.

"You can see everything now?"

"Yes. Everything!" Sahana beamed. "Now I can play badminton with you and Papa too."

"Of course, my child," Neel said with a smile. "But only after you get some rest for a couple of days."

Sahana nodded happily. A few steps away, Ira watched them silently.

She was overwhelmed with happiness that her daughter could see again. Yet, she was afraid to step forward and face her. She knew she had no right to disturb this beautiful moment. So, without saying a word, Ira quietly walked away.

Inside, Neel, Nishi, his mother and the children continued chatting, sharing their happiness. They even began planning a beautiful family vacation. Now that Sahana could see again, they

wanted to show her the world she had been waiting so long to see.

Vineet, too, began considering therapy. His father encouraged him gently.

"I know, son. All these years, you have lived under a lot of darkness. Just don't keep thinking about who did what to you. See a therapist. You deserve peace."

Vineet looked uncertain.

"But Dad, what if they just give me sedatives? I have no idea how these things work."

"Let me talk to Dr Neel, then."

Before Vineet could protest, his father dialled Neel's number. Although Neel was not a psychiatrist, his father trusted him deeply after Neel had once saved his life.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Dr Neel. Vineet's father this side."

"Hello, Uncle. How are you?"

They exchanged a few pleasantries before Vineet's father came straight to the point.

"Doctor, Vineet is thinking about seeing a therapist, but he is afraid that a psychiatrist will simply give him medicines and send him home."

He put the phone on speaker. Vineet shifted uncomfortably in his chair. He felt embarrassed discussing his personal struggles with Neel. But Neel did not judge him.

"Vineet, first of all, there is nothing embarrassing about asking for help," he said calmly. "And your concern about medication is understandable. But therapy and psychiatric treatment are not simply about giving someone sedatives."

Vineet remained silent, listening.

"Let me explain something," Neel continued. "Suppose a person has experienced trauma during childhood—neglect, rejection, abuse, prolonged insecurity or the fear of being abandoned. Even when the danger is gone, the brain may continue behaving as though it is still under threat."

Vineet slowly looked up.

"They may become extremely sensitive to rejection. A small disagreement can feel like abandonment. They may constantly look for signs that someone is going to leave them. They may struggle to trust people, become defensive very quickly, or react with anger when they actually feel hurt or afraid."

Neel paused.

"Sometimes such a person develops a deep belief that they are not worthy of love or that people will eventually betray them. Because of that fear, they may try to control situations or people around them. It gives them a temporary feeling of safety, but it doesn't actually heal the wound underneath."

Vineet swallowed hard. Neel continued gently.

"Imagine someone who has spent years believing that they could be abandoned at any moment. Their reactions in adulthood may look unreasonable from the outside, but there is often a history behind them. That doesn't excuse harmful behaviour, but understanding where it comes from can be the first step towards changing it."

Vineet lowered his eyes.

"And therapy can help with that?"

"Absolutely," Neel replied. "A psychiatrist or psychologist will first try to understand what the person is experiencing—what triggers them, how they think, how they respond emotionally, whether they have anxiety, depression, sleep problems, anger issues or symptoms related to trauma."

"And then?"

"Then they decide what kind of treatment would help. Psychotherapy is often a major part of treatment for trauma-related difficulties. Depending on the person's symptoms, a therapist may use approaches such as trauma-focused CBT or other evidence-based therapies. The aim is to help the person understand their patterns, regulate their emotions, challenge unhealthy beliefs and gradually feel safe without constantly expecting abandonment." Vineet listened carefully.

"And medication?"

"Medication is not automatically prescribed," Neel explained. "If someone has severe anxiety, depression, panic attacks, serious sleep problems or other symptoms that require medication, a psychiatrist may consider it. But medication is only one possible part of treatment. And sedatives are certainly not the universal answer."

He added softly, "Good psychiatric care is not about silencing a person with medicines. It is about helping them function better and, when possible, addressing the underlying problem."

There was a long silence. Then Neel said, "And Vineet, therapy doesn't mean you are weak or that something is wrong with you. It means you are willing to understand yourself and change what is hurting you and the people around you."

For the first time, Vineet felt less defensive. His father looked at him hopefully.

Neel continued, "I can recommend someone excellent. Dr Suhani Mathur is a highly regarded psychiatrist. She is experienced in trauma-related emotional difficulties and would be a good person for you to speak with. You don't have to decide anything today. Just meet her once. Talk to her. Take the first step."

Vineet finally nodded.

"Thank you, Dr Neel."

"You're welcome, Vineet. Give yourself a chance."

The call ended. For a moment, Vineet simply sat there, staring at the floor.

Perhaps healing did not mean forgetting the past. Perhaps it meant finally understanding it—and learning not to let it control the rest of his life. His phone beeped. He looked at the screen.

A visiting card had arrived from Dr Neel Mehra.

Dr Suhani Mathur

Consultant Psychiatrist.

Vineet stared at the name for a few seconds. Then, for the first time, he allowed himself to consider that life could be different.

Nishi knew that Vineet had started therapy. She knew because she had been there when Neel had spoken to him. But she never mentioned it to Vineet. Neel was a professional. He respected patient confidentiality deeply. He would never discuss a patient's personal struggles with anyone—not even his mother or Nishi.

So, Nishi simply carried the knowledge quietly. At the office, she remained composed and professional. She treated Vineet exactly as she always had, never making him feel that she knew about his therapy.

One afternoon, Vineet himself brought it up.

"I've started therapy," he said, almost hesitantly.

Nishi looked at him calmly.

"I hope it helps, Vineet. You deserve peace, and I genuinely pray that you find it."

Vineet looked at her for a moment. There was no accusation in her eyes, no judgment—only sincerity.

"I know you do."

That was all Vineet could say. But for the first time, those words carried something different.

Perhaps it was gratitude. Perhaps it was regret. Or perhaps it was simply the beginning of faith.

After office hours, Vineet began asking Nishi if she would join him for a cup of coffee in the cafeteria.

Nishi always said yes. She knew Vineet was trying to put the pieces of his life back together. He needed hope, and she felt that ten minutes over a cup of coffee could not hurt anyone. Gradually, it became a small ritual between them.

They would sit across from each other with their coffee, and Vineet would talk about his therapy. He spoke about the things he was beginning to understand about himself—his fears, his anger, his insecurities and the wounds he had carried for years. Nishi listened patiently.

She never interrupted him. She never judged him. And she never reminded him of the pain he had once caused her. For the first time in many years, Vineet began to notice something he had never expected.

He was beginning to trust Nishi. It frightened him.

He had spent so long believing that people could not be trusted that even this small change felt dangerous. Yet, sitting across from her, he slowly realised that he could speak without constantly waiting for betrayal or rejection.

He wanted to meet Palash. The thought had been growing quietly inside him.

He wanted to know the little boy Nishi had raised, to see the child who was now such an important part of her life. But Vineet didn't know how to ask. So, he didn't.

He decided to let therapy take a few more steps before drawing any conclusions. He wasn't ready to trust his own emotions

completely yet. For now, he was simply learning. Learning to trust. Learning to forgive.

And, perhaps most importantly, learning that not everyone who came close to him would eventually leave.

# Chapter 29
# THE BRIEFEST KISS



Sahana could now see everything clearly. For the first time, the world was no longer something she had to imagine through voices and touch. She could run, play, laugh, chase butterflies and watch the clouds drift across the sky. She could finally be the innocent child she had always been.

Her vision had only just returned, but Neel had never once made her feel helpless because she couldn't see. He had protected her without making her feel protected. He had encouraged her to be independent, never allowing her blindness to become the definition of who she was. And then, barely eight months ago, Nishi had entered her life.

In those few months, she had brought so much warmth, laughter and positivity into Sahana's world. She had treated her like any other child—never with pity, never with unnecessary sympathy, but with affection, patience and complete acceptance.

Now Sahana could finally see the people who had stood beside her all along. And she was determined to make up for all the moments she had missed.

That evening, after Nishi and Neel returned home, Neel's mother had some news for them.

"Chetna needs me again."

Neel looked at her.

"What happened, Ma?"

"Her husband is still recovering from his spinal injury. All these months, her parents were there to take care of the children, but now they have a commitment they simply cannot avoid. Chetna has asked me to stay with them for another six months."

Neel nodded immediately.

"Then you should go, Ma. She needs you."

His mother remained silent for a moment. She was reluctant—not because she didn't want to help Chetna, but because of Ira. Ever since Ira had returned, she had carried a quiet fear that if she left the house, Ira might try to find a permanent place in Neel's life again.

But she said nothing. She didn't want to burden Neel or Nishi with her fears. Nishi gently placed her hand on the older woman's shoulder.

"Masi, you should go. Chetna is family, and she needs your help. And now that Sahana can see, things will be much easier."

"I'll be here for Sahana," Nishi assured her. "You don't have to worry about her."

"And I'll make sure someone is home when Sahana and Palash return from school," Neel added. "We'll manage everything."

Before Neel's mother could respond, Ira spoke.

"There is no need for that, Neel. I can take care of the children until Nishi comes home."

Neel's mother immediately stiffened.

"No, thank you, Ira. You are a guest here. You should just take care of yourself."

Ira's expression changed slightly.

"Neel and Nishi will manage the children very well," his mother added, the sarcasm unmistakable.

The atmosphere suddenly became uncomfortable. Nishi quickly stepped in.

"Masi, please. Everything will be fine. You should go without worrying about us."

Ira quietly stepped back, sensing that she had crossed a line. It took some more convincing, but eventually Neel's mother agreed. Neel booked her ticket for the following morning. None of them realised that her departure would set something else in motion.

Sahana had seen Ira several times since regaining her sight. Yet, she had never recognised her. Ira had left when Sahana was very young. By then, Sahana had already been blind for almost a year, and although she knew why her mother had left, the face she remembered from those early years had faded into a vague impression.

She simply couldn't connect that faint memory with the woman now living in their home. But some truths have a way of finding their own path. That very day, Sahana's teacher assigned the students a family-tree presentation.

She needed photographs of her family. Especially one of her mother. Sahana didn't tell Neel.

She wanted to find the photograph herself. That evening, she began searching through the old family albums. When she couldn't find what she needed, she remembered the servant room where old belongings were stored.

She quietly walked there and began looking through the boxes. Dusty trunks. Old photographs. Forgotten memories. Then she found an old family album. Sahana carefully opened it.

She turned the pages slowly, searching for the face she had never been able to see.

She had no idea that somewhere inside those old photographs was a truth that had been waiting years to reveal itself.

Everyone in the house was busy with one thing or another. They assumed Sahana was occupied with something related to school. Their attention was focused on Chetna's situation, and no one thought to check on her. They knew she was somewhere in the house and, most importantly, safe.

Ira was in her room.

Palash was doing his homework while Neel gave him a few instructions before turning his attention to Nishi. She was ironing clothes for his mother, so Neel decided to help her.

He walked into the room where Nishi was ironing. Meanwhile, his mother was in the prayer room, performing her evening rituals. Neel entered the room and found Nishi neatly folding the clothes that had to be packed into the suitcase.

"May I help?" he asked.

Nishi looked up with a smile. "Yes. I need the suitcase from the upper shelf."

Neel glanced towards the shelf. He was tall, but even he would need the stool to reach it. Then he remembered that his mother was using the stool for her evening worship. He looked around, thinking of another way.

Nishi understood immediately. "Alright, Neel. Let me try."

Before he could stop her, she climbed onto the bed and stretched towards the suitcase. Her fingers brushed the edge, but it was still beyond her reach. The gap between the bed and the upper shelf above the wardrobe was wider than she had anticipated. Neel watched her with amusement.

She rose onto her toes and stretched farther, dangerously close to losing her balance.

"Wait!" he exclaimed, reaching out instinctively.

"Let's wait for Ma to finish her worship." Nishi said

"No," Neel said. "I need to get a few things for her from the market. If we wait too long, the shops might close."

She looked at him helplessly. "But how do we get it down?"

A mischievous smile appeared on Neel's face.

"Fine. I have an idea."

He bent down until he was almost on all fours.

"Come on. Climb up."

Nishi stared at him, then laughed.

"You want me to?"

"Yes. Quickly."

Still smiling, she carefully stepped onto his back, holding onto his shoulder for balance. From there, she was finally able to reach the suitcase. The moment she pulled it forward, a cloud of dust rose from it and fell straight into her eyes.

"Ouch!"

She quickly climbed down, rubbing her eyes. Neel immediately straightened. "What happened?"

"Dust got into my eyes."

He gently guided her to the bed.

"Sit down."

Nishi sat, blinking repeatedly as her eyes began to water. Neel crouched in front of her and carefully examined them.

"Keep them open."

She tried, though the irritation made it difficult. Neel gently blew air into her eyes.

"Better?"

"A little."

He waited and did it again. Gradually, the discomfort eased, though her eyes remained slightly red.

"Still hurting?"

"Not much."

He stayed where he was, quietly watching her for another moment. Then something changed.

Perhaps it was the silence. Perhaps it was the closeness neither of them had noticed until then. Nishi looked into his eyes. Neel was already looking at her. Neither moved.

She became suddenly conscious of how close they were—the warmth of his presence, the softness in his eyes, and the quickening rhythm of her own heartbeat.

Her gaze dropped briefly to his lips before returning to his eyes. Neel noticed.

For a few seconds, neither of them spoke. There was no need for words anymore.

Nishi's lips parted slightly, her breath unsteady. Neel leaned towards her, slowly enough for her to pull away if she wanted to. She didn't.

His lips gently touched hers. The kiss lasted barely a fraction of a second—a fleeting, tender brush of his lips against hers.

And yet, in that tiny moment, everything seemed to stand still.

Neel pulled back slowly, their eyes meeting again.

There was no embarrassment in his expression. No awkwardness. Only a quiet tenderness, as though he himself was trying to understand what had just happened. Nishi remained still, her eyes fixed on him, her heart beating faster than before. Neither of them said a word.

It had been the briefest of kisses. But it had changed something between them. Neel gently held Nishi's hands. He looked into her eyes and opened his mouth to say something. Before he could speak, a piercing shriek came from the other room.

"Why have you come back? Go away!"

Neel and Nishi froze.

"Sahana!"

They rushed outside. Sahana was nowhere to be seen. Then they heard the voice again—coming from Nishi's house, where Ira was staying. Neel and Nishi ran towards the house. Neel's mother and Palash followed close behind.

They entered the room and stopped in shock. An old family album lay open on the floor. Photographs were scattered everywhere.

Nishi's eyes fell on them. There were pictures of Ira with a little girl.

A baby Sahana. Photographs of Ira holding her, feeding her, smiling at her. Memories from a time Sahana could barely remember. Sahana stood among the scattered photographs, staring at them.

She had been searching for a photograph of her mother. Instead, she had found the truth. Her fingers trembled as she picked up one photograph.

There was no doubt. She recognised the woman. The face she had carried in the deepest corners of her memory was standing before her. Ira. Her mother.

Sahana slowly looked at Ira, her eyes filled with shock and fury.

"You…"

Ira could not speak. Sahana's face hardened.

"Why have you come back? Why don't you leave us alone"

Ira took a step towards her. "Sahana, please—"

"No!"

Sahana turned away, tears filling her eyes. She looked towards Neel and Nishi for a moment, but said nothing.

Then she ran. She rushed out of the house and into her own, leaving everyone stunned behind her.

Neel immediately followed.

"Sahana!"

But she had already disappeared into her room. Nishi stood frozen, looking at Ira and then at the photographs scattered across the floor. The truth they had all been trying to protect had finally found its way into Sahana's hands. And now, there was no hiding it.

# Chapter 30
# A HOPE TO SURVIVE THE STORM



Neel's mother stared at Ira for a moment before turning and heading towards her house. Nishi was puzzled. She looked at Ira, trying to comfort her with her eyes. Tears rolled down Ira's cheeks.

Then she followed Neel's mother. Ira followed them as well.

In Neel's house, Sahana had gone to her bedroom. She was upset, and Neel didn't know how to handle the situation. Palash quietly went inside to comfort her. Neel's mother barged into the living room.

"Neel, this is what I always feared."

Her voice trembled with anger.

"This woman came back into your life because she wanted to donate her eyes, but you decided to treat her. Now our granddaughter can see the world, so there is no obligation to honour her last wish. Moreover, we never really needed her obligation, did we?"

"Mom, it was never about obligation. She came here because she thought she didn't have much time left, and I am an oncologist. I am simply doing what I believe is right."

His mother was still furious.

"The right thing? There are plenty of oncologists in this country. Send her away. She took a hefty amount in alimony. She can get herself treated anywhere. I am afraid she will set your house on fire again."

Neel tried to calm his mother, but Ira spoke before he could respond.

"No, Neel. She is right. I must leave now."

She wiped her tears.

"Sahana can see the world. I came here because I thought I would donate my eyes to her, not because I expected you to treat me. I don't want to ruin the peace of this house."

"That's better," his mother said coldly.

Nishi stood silently, unsure whom she should convince.

"Sure, Ma. I will leave the house. I still have the money I received as alimony."

Ira turned towards Neel. "Neel, don't stop me this time. I don't deserve this family again."

She took a step towards the door. Suddenly, she felt dizzy. Nishi quickly reached out and caught her.

"Ira, are you okay?"

She helped Ira sit on the sofa and handed her a glass of water. Neel's mother looked away. She clearly didn't believe what she had just witnessed.

"She clearly knows how to grab everyone's attention. I knew she would do this." Neel's mother said

Neel turned towards his mother.

"Ma, I will talk to you. Just wait."

Then he turned to Ira. She had begun to feel better.

"I'm fine, Neel. I think the medication made me uncomfortable for a moment. I know I am recovering."

Nishi sat beside her. Neel gently took Ira's hand.

"You will be fine. Don't worry."

Ira looked at him through tear-filled eyes.

"Neel, I never came here to ruin the peace of your house. Trust me. I will speak to Sahana myself. I will tell her that I am leaving. She can hate me if she wants."

Neel gently placed his hand on her shoulder.

"Ira, I know that. Don't think like that."

He paused for a moment.

"You are not the woman you were years ago. I have seen that. You made mistakes, and you have paid for them in ways no one else can understand. But I also know that you have changed."

Ira looked at him silently.

"You came back when you thought you had nothing left. You were willing to give Sahana something that could have changed her entire life. That doesn't make you a bad person. It tells me that somewhere along the way, you found the courage to become a better one."

Ira's eyes filled with tears again.

"You are a fighter, Ira. I have seen you fight through pain, fear and everything your illness has thrown at you. Don't let one difficult moment make you believe that you don't deserve hope."

Ira lowered her eyes, struggling to hold back her tears.

"And as your doctor, I will fight this disease with you. But as someone who has known you for years, I want you to fight for

yourself too. You deserve a chance to live the life you are trying to rebuild."

A faint smile appeared on Ira's face.

"Thank you, Neel."

Nishi watched them quietly, touched by his words.

But Neel's mother stood near the doorway, her expression growing harder.

She had expected Neel to send Ira away. Instead, she had just heard him defend her—and, worse, acknowledge that he believed Ira had changed. She said nothing. But her uneasiness was unmistakable.

Nishi called the nurse, who helped Ira back to her room.

After the nurse left with Ira, Neel's mother turned towards him.

"Seriously, Neel? She is a fighter?"

"Yes, Ma," Neel replied calmly. "She is fighting cancer. For herself."

Neel remained composed. He helped his mother sit comfortably on the diwan before crouching beside her so they were at the same level.

"Ma, please listen to me."

She looked away.

"Just send her away. I don't want to listen to anything."

Neel sighed softly.

"You may have forgotten what she did to you, but I haven't. I have seen you shed tears. I have seen my granddaughter suffer. I have seen what her presence did to this family."

His voice softened.

"But she is suffering too, Ma. And this time, I cannot turn away."

His mother remained silent. Nishi gently placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Masi, at least listen to what Neel is saying."

The old woman looked at Nishi for a moment. Then she placed her hand over Nishi's and turned towards Neel.

"Alright. Go on."

Neel took a breath.

"Ma, I am a doctor. Her chemotherapy is progressing well. I know what her condition is, and I know there is hope."

He paused.

"If I know that a person is drowning and I have a boat that can take her to safety, how can I simply turn away and watch her drown?"

His mother looked at him.

"I cannot leave a patient in the middle of an ocean when I know I can be the boat that rescues her. As a doctor, I can't step back—not when I know I can help."

His voice grew firmer.

"I have survived my past, Ma. Ira cannot ruin my life again because I won't allow the past to control my present."

He glanced briefly at Nishi.

"I have Nishi by my side now."

Nishi's heart swelled.

She lowered her eyes, unable to hide the small smile that appeared on her face. Neel's mother noticed it. Something in her expression softened. Neel continued gently.

"I am not asking you to forget what happened. I am not asking you to accept Ira as part of our family. I am only asking you to let me finish what I started as a doctor."

He squeezed his mother's hand. "Once her treatment is complete and she is strong enough to leave, she will leave. I promise you."

His mother studied his face for a long moment.

"And after that?"

Neel smiled faintly.

"After that, Ma, Ira will choose her own path. But until then, I will not abandon her."

His mother sighed. She still wasn't completely comfortable with Ira staying under the same roof.

But seeing the quiet confidence in her son's eyes—and the way Nishi sat beside him—she knew Neel wasn't acting out of old feelings. He had already moved on.

And perhaps, for the first time, she allowed herself to believe that Nishi truly was the person standing beside her son now.

After Nishi comfortably settled Neel's mother in her room, it was time to talk to Sahana.

Neel and Nishi walked towards her bedroom. Sahana was standing near the window, her face turned towards the fading evening light. Palash sat quietly on the edge of the bed, watching her. Before Neel could say anything, Nishi walked towards Sahana and gently sat beside her.

Sahana spoke without turning around.

"Why has she come back, Nishi auntie? I hate her. She left me because she felt I was a burden, and now she has conveniently come back."

Neel stood silently. He had no words.

How could he explain this to a twelve-year-old who had spent years believing that her own mother had abandoned her? It had been easier to convince his mother. But Ira was Sahana's culprit too. Sahana had every reason to be angry. Words failed him. Nishi reached for Sahana's hand.

"Sahana, baby, just look at me."

Slowly, Sahana turned towards her.

"You are strong. You are brave. You survived so much. Even without your sight, you found your way through life. You studied, made friends, laughed, fought, and lived. You were never weak."

Sahana's expression hardened.

"Seriously, Nishi auntie? Are you trying to convince me that I should forgive her?" Palash rested his chin on both his palms and listened curiously.

"No, Sahana," Nishi said gently. "I am not asking you to forgive her."

Sahana looked surprised.

"But your dad needs your help."

"My help?"

Nishi nodded.

"You know your dad. He is an oncologist. Right now, he is trying to treat your mother. And sometimes, medicine alone isn't enough. A patient needs hope too."

Sahana remained silent.

"Your dad has fought many storms with you, Sahana. But do you remember who helped him keep going when he was tired?"

"You?" Sahana whispered.

Nishi smiled.

"No. You."

Sahana's eyes filled with emotion.

"You became his strength. You taught him that losing one thing doesn't mean losing everything."

She gently squeezed Sahana's hand.

"And now your mother is fighting her own battle. She is dying, child. But she still has a chance. And sometimes, a little hope can give someone the strength to keep fighting."

Sahana looked down.

"But she hurt me."

"I know."

"I can never forget what she did."

"You don't have to."

Sahana looked up again.

"You don't have to forgive her today. You don't even have to forgive her tomorrow. That decision belongs to you."

Nishi paused.

"But if you can lend her a little of your positivity, perhaps she will find the courage to fight."

Sahana remained quiet for a long moment.

"Do you know something?" Nishi said softly. "Strong people don't carry hatred forever. They learn to let it go when they are ready."

She brushed a strand of hair away from Sahana's face.

"Revenge keeps you tied to the person who hurt you. Forgiveness sets you free."

Sahana swallowed hard.

"I don't know if I can forgive her."

"You don't have to force yourself."

Nishi smiled.

"But you can choose not to hate her anymore."

Sahana's face softened. For the first time, Neel saw the anger in his daughter's eyes give way to something else.

Compassion. She stepped forward and hugged Nishi tightly. Neel stood there, watching them, his heart filled with pride.

Sahana finally turned towards him.

"Papa, you go ahead and fight her cancer."

Neel smiled through his emotions.

"We are on the same page?"

Sahana nodded.

"Same page."

Neel looked at Nishi. Their eyes met. He didn't need to say anything. His expression said it all. Nishi smiled back.

Later that evening, Sahana went to Ira's room.

Ira was sitting quietly on the bed when she heard the door open. Sahana walked in. Ira froze. The little girl stood in front of her for a moment.

Then she said softly,

"I have no grudges against you, Mom."

Ira's eyes widened. Sahana continued,

"You fight your battle with cancer. We are with you."

Ira's eyes immediately welled up. She reached out with trembling hands. Sahana stepped into her arms.

Ira held her tightly, tears streaming down her cheeks. For years, she had believed that she had lost the right to call herself Sahana's mother. But in that moment, the little girl had given her something she thought she would never receive again. A chance.

# Chapter 31
# Especially When You Are With Me



Neel's mother had left to help Chetna, while Ira's condition had improved considerably. With winter vacations around the corner, Neel and Nishi decided it was the perfect time to take the children on a short holiday to the hills.

Palash was turning eight, and Sahana would soon celebrate her twelfth birthday. They wanted to make the occasion special—something the children would remember for years. After discussing several options, they finally chose Kasauli.

The excitement was infectious. Neel and Nishi planned the trip together, discussing the hotel, sightseeing, meals and everything the children might enjoy. In Kasauli, they had booked a deluxe suite spacious enough for everyone, where Palash and Sahana could spend their time together.

Finally, the day of the trip arrived. Nishi was up early, preparing snacks and packing their bags. She had even decided to cook some of Neel's favourite food for the journey.

As she worked in the kitchen, she caught herself smiling. Somewhere along the way, something had changed inside her.

She had finally accepted what she had been trying to ignore for so long. She loved Neel.

It wasn't friendship. It wasn't merely respect or gratitude. What she felt for him was deeper—something warm, tender and frighteningly precious. But admitting it aloud was another matter. Nishi was still afraid.

She didn't want to rush things or misread what existed between them. If there was ever going to be something more, she wanted Neel to take the first step. Perhaps that was why she had chosen to keep her feelings to herself.

With Neel's mother away, there was no one she could confide in except Raima. Even with her, Nishi had revealed only a little.

For now, she had decided to keep things to herself. She would simply enjoy the trip. Enjoy the children's happiness. And perhaps, secretly, enjoy every moment she got to spend beside the man she had slowly, and unexpectedly, fallen in love with.

As soon as Nishi began preparing breakfast, she noticed that everything had already been taken care of.

Ira had woken up early, cooked their breakfast and packed the tiffins. Everything was neatly arranged and ready for the journey. Nishi stared at the packed food, her disappointment difficult to hide.

She found Ira's involvement a little intrusive. Just then, Ira walked into the kitchen.

"I woke up early this morning, cooked everything and packed the tiffin. I'm ready too."

Nishi looked at her in surprise.

"You're coming?"

Ira smiled.

"Of course. Neel knows how much I wanted to visit Kasauli."

Nishi had imagined this trip differently—a quiet vacation for the four of them, with Neel, the children and herself. Nishi's face fell but she didn't say anything. Neel walked in.

"Good morning, Nishi."

"Good morning, Ira."

"Morning, Neel," Nishi replied softly.

Neel then turned towards Ira.

"Ira, the weather in Kasauli may not be suitable for your condition. I've already made arrangements for two nurses here. They'll take care of you while we're away."

Ira's expression fell.

"But I thought you planned this vacation to celebrate the children's birthdays. I want to be a part of Sahana's birthday. I've already missed so many of them. I don't want to miss another one."

She paused before adding innocently,

"And if I need you while you're in Kasauli, who will help me?"

Nishi found the question unsettling. Neel looked at Ira gently.

"Ira, we'll be back in seven days. After that, we can celebrate again and cut another cake with you. You're doing much better now, and there's still time before your next chemotherapy session. So please stay here, rest and take care of yourself."

He smiled reassuringly.

"We'll plan another vacation together some other time."

Ira wasn't completely convinced, but after a moment, she nodded.

"All right."

She returned to her room. A few minutes later, the children joined them, their excitement filling the house.

“Papa, can we start now?” Palash asked eagerly.

Nishi looked at Neel, surprised.

Papa?

Neel immediately understood her expression. He came closer and whispered,

“I told him he could call me that.”

Nishi looked at him, surprised. Neel continued innocently,

“He told me that I possess all the qualities of a dad. So, I told him he could call me his dad.”

He said it so simply that Nishi didn't know how to respond. Before she could say anything, Sahana spoke up.

“Well, if Palash can call my dad his dad, then I also want to call Nishi auntie my Mommy.”

Nishi froze. A warm blush spread across her cheeks. Neel looked at her for a moment before turning towards Sahana.

“Why not, child?”

Sahana immediately walked over to Nishi and wrapped her arms around her.

“I’ll call you my Mommy”

Nishi's eyes softened.

She gently held Sahana close, overwhelmed by the little girl's affection. Sahana then planted a soft kiss on her cheek.

Nishi smiled, her heart filled with emotions she couldn't quite put into words. Soon, their bags were loaded into the car, the children settled in, and Neel started the engine.

Their road trip to Kasauli had begun. The highway stretched ahead as the car moved steadily towards the hills.

Palash and Sahana were seated in the back, busy with a game on Sahana’s tablet. Their laughter occasionally filled the car, while

soft music played in the background. Nishi sat beside Neel, watching the scenery change outside the window.

For the first few hours, they barely spoke. But there was a quiet comfort between them.

As they crossed the plains and the first signs of the hills appeared in the distance, Nishi opened the food container Ira had packed.

“Neel, you haven't eaten anything.”

“I'll eat later.”

“No. You won't.”

She handed him a sandwich.

“You always forget to eat when you're driving.”

Neel glanced at her and smiled.

“You've started noticing my habits.”

Nishi looked away.

“Someone has to.”

He smiled again but said nothing. After a while, they stopped at a scenic viewpoint for tea. The children immediately got out of the car, excited to stretch their legs.

Nishi stepped out too. A cool breeze swept through her hair. She instinctively wrapped her shawl around herself. Neel had walked up beside her.

“Cold?”

“A little.”

Without saying anything, he took off his jacket and placed it around her shoulders.

Nishi looked at him.

“Neel, you'll be cold.”

“I'll survive.”

"But—"

"Just wear it."

Their eyes met. For a moment, neither of them looked away. Nishi's heart began beating faster.

She lowered her eyes.

"Thank you."

Neel's voice softened.

"You don't have to thank me for everything."

She looked up.

"Why?"

"Because sometimes…" He paused, choosing his words carefully. "I just want to take care of you."

Nishi went quiet. The words stayed with her. Before she could respond, Palash called from behind them.

"Papa! Come here! Sahana found a pine cone!"

Neel laughed.

"Coming!"

He started walking towards the children but stopped after a few steps and looked back at Nishi.

She was still standing there, wrapped in his jacket. He smiled. Nishi smiled back. And, she didn't look away.

Later, as they continued their journey, the children eventually fell asleep in the back seat. The car grew quiet. Nishi rested her head against the window, watching the winding mountain road.

After a few minutes, Neel noticed her struggling to stay awake.

"You can sleep."

"I'm not sleepy."

“You've said that three times.”

She smiled.

“I just want to see the hills.”

“You'll see them tomorrow too.”

“Maybe.”

She hesitated before adding softly,

“I just don't want this journey to end.”

Neel glanced at her.

“Neither do I.”

Their eyes met briefly.

Neither said anything more. But something had changed. The journey to Kasauli was no longer just a family vacation.

For both of them, it had quietly become the beginning of something neither was ready to name yet.

After eight hours on the road, they finally reached their destination. They checked in, freshened up, and changed into comfortable clothes. As soon as they entered the room, Nishi opened their luggage and took out Neel’s winter clothes.

“You’ll need these,” she said, handing him a warm sweater and jacket. “It’s much colder here.”

Neel smiled. “You’ve packed everything for me, haven’t you?”

Nishi simply rolled her eyes. “Someone has to take care of you.”

By then, it was well past lunchtime. They decided to have a late lunch before heading out for sightseeing.

Neel picked up the menu and handed it to her.

“You order.”

Nishi looked at him hesitantly. “But, Neel…”

"Come on, Nishi. You know what I like to eat. At home, I eat whatever you serve me. So why not here?"

His simple words touched her. She looked at him carefully. His voice sounded slightly hoarse, and there was a faint redness around his nose. She suddenly realized that he had caught a cold.

Her eyes fell on the jacket he had removed earlier on the way.

My fault. She remembered how he had taken off his jacket to give it to her when she felt cold.

Without saying anything, she ordered his favourite soup along with the rest of the meal.

Neel noticed. "Soup?"

"You need something warm."

"I'm perfectly fine."

"Of course, you are," Nishi replied, giving him a knowing look. "That's why you sound like this."

Neel laughed.

Soon, their table was filled with steaming food, warm soup and even warmer conversation. They teased each other, laughed over little things and talked about everything they had seen along the way. For a while, there was no past to worry about and no future to fear. There was just the four of them, sitting across from each other, enjoying the simple comfort of being together. Once lunch was over, Nishi picked up her bag.

"Ready?"

Neel stood up and smiled.

"Always. Especially when you're with me."

Nishi looked away, hiding the smile that had already appeared on her face.

Together, they stepped out to begin their sightseeing.

# Chapter 32
# HIGH IN THE MOUNTAINS



By the time they returned to the hotel, the evening had slipped away. The children were full of excitement, recounting everything they had seen during the day. Nishi and Neel listened, laughing at their exaggerated descriptions and joining in whenever the conversation turned to food.

"What should we have tomorrow?" Nishi asked. "We have the birthday celebration to plan."

They began discussing the menu, the cake, the decorations and how they would plan for the children. Every suggestion led to another story, and every story somehow turned into laughter. Eventually, the children disappeared into their bed. The sudden quiet felt almost strange. Neel switched on the room heater, and he and Nishi settled down beside it. The warmth slowly spread through the room. They were sitting unusually close, their shoulders almost touching. Nishi glanced at him mischievously.

"So, you're not cold?"

"Not when you're around," Neel replied innocently.

Nishi raised an eyebrow.

"Seriously? I'm not a room heater. You were the one who said I'm calm in your storm."

"You can be both."

She laughed.

"Then why do you need the room heater?"

"To protect you," Neel answered with complete innocence.

Nishi stared at him for a moment before laughing. They both knew exactly what they were doing. It was harmless teasing, but neither wanted it to end.

Nishi ordered two coffees. When they arrived, she took a sip. Neel's eyes remained fixed on her.

Nishi noticed.

"What?" she asked, trying to hide her smile. "What do you want to say?"

She already knew he had feelings for her. She had sensed them in the little things—the way he looked at her, the way he cared for her, the way his voice changed when he spoke to her. And perhaps, somewhere inside, she wanted him to say it. Maybe tonight was the night.

Neel cleared his throat.

"Nishi, I was just wondering…"

He stopped.

"Wondering what?"

He looked at her seriously for a moment.

"I was just wondering when you sip coffee, that little moustache makes you look like an old woman."

Nishi's mouth fell open.

"Seriously, Neel?"

He burst out laughing, and soon she joined him. But when her laughter softened, she noticed that his eyes were still on her. She knew he was hiding something.

"Come on, Neel," she teased. "You actually wanted to tell me that I look beautiful when I laugh."

"What? Why would I say that?"

"I was wondering…"

He deliberately left the sentence unfinished. Neel looked away, suddenly finding the room very interesting.

Nishi smiled. For a few moments, neither said anything. They finished their coffee.

Then Neel ordered another. And somehow, one coffee became two, conversations became stories, and stories became memories. They lost track of time completely.

"It's the first time I've come here for a vacation since Palash was born," Nishi said quietly.

"For me too," Neel replied. "It's been ages. I was always occupied with work and Sahana. And after she lost her eyesight…" He paused. "How could I take her somewhere new and expect her to enjoy what she couldn't see?"

Nishi gently placed her hand over his.

"You gave her something more important than sightseeing, Neel. You gave her a father who never made her feel that she was missing anything."

Neel looked at her, touched. After a moment, Nishi smiled.

"Our children's birthdays fall in December. We should come here every winter vacation."

"Done," Neel said immediately.

“And what happens when they grow up and go to college?” she asked.

Neel smiled.

“Then you and I will come here and enjoy our coffee just like this.”

Nishi's heart skipped a beat. She looked down at their hands, still resting together.

The moment became a little too tender, so Neel quickly lightened it.

“Although, I wonder how you'll look with salt-and-pepper hair.”

Nishi burst into laughter.

“Hey, Dr. Neel Mehra! You will also grow old with me.”

“That's true.”

“And don't think you'll escape those wrinkles either.”

“I never said I wanted to.”

They laughed again. Their laughter filled the quiet room until they finally glanced at the clock.

It was already three in the morning.

“Oh God,” Nishi whispered. “It's three!”

Neel shook his head, smiling.

“We really lost track of time.”

Reluctantly, they got up.

There were two double beds in the room. Nishi settled down beside Sahana, while Neel took the other bed with Palash. The room slowly fell silent. But even after the lights were switched off, Nishi couldn't stop thinking about their conversation. “Then you and I will come here and enjoy our coffee just like this.”

She smiled to herself in the darkness. Across the room, Neel was awake too. And he was smiling for exactly the same reason.

The next morning began with laughter and celebration.

They cut the birthday cake, sang for the children, clicked countless photographs and spent the day exploring the beautiful surroundings. By afternoon, they decided to take a ride on the trolley car.

The children were thrilled.

"Look, Papa! We are going so high!" Sahana exclaimed excitedly.

Palash pressed his face against the glass, fascinated by the view below.

Nishi smiled at them but didn't say a word. She had always been afraid of heights and suffered from vertigo.

But she couldn't bring herself to tell anyone. The children had been waiting for this moment. She didn't want her fear to take away even a second of their happiness. As the trolley car began climbing, Nishi held the railing tightly. She tried to look straight ahead. Don't look down. She repeated it silently.

But when the trolley moved higher, the ground seemed to disappear beneath them. Her breathing became shallow. Her fingers tightened around the railing. Neel noticed.

He didn't say anything at first. He simply watched her. The woman who had been laughing moments ago was suddenly sitting unnaturally still, her face pale.

"Nishi…"

"I'm fine," she whispered immediately.

Neel knew she wasn't. Another gentle movement of the trolley made her close her eyes. That was enough. Without asking another question, Neel reached for her hand. She opened her eyes.

"Don't look down," he said softly.

Nishi swallowed.

"I… I'm not."

"You don't have to be brave with me."

Before she could respond, Neel gently pulled her towards him. Nishi stiffened for a moment. Then she surrendered to his embrace. His arms wrapped securely around her, shielding her from the open view outside.

"Just look at me," he whispered.

Nishi rested her forehead against his chest. For the first time since the trolley had started moving, she felt herself breathe normally.

"I didn't want the children to miss this," she whispered.

Neel's arms tightened around her.

"They won't."

His voice was soft.

"And neither will you."

She looked up at him.

"You knew?"

"I've been watching you since we started."

A faint smile appeared on her face.

"You should have told me to get down."

"And let you miss this?"

He smiled.

"Never."

Nishi's eyes became moist.

She had spent so much of her life convincing herself that she could handle everything alone. Yet here she was, frightened of something as simple as a trolley ride, and somehow Neel had understood without her having to say a word. The trolley continued its journey through the hills.

Around them, the other passengers had noticed the couple. An elderly woman sitting across from them smiled warmly.

"Such a caring husband," she whispered to her companion.

Another passenger smiled at them.

"They look lovely together."

Nishi heard it and immediately became conscious. She tried to move away. Neel gently held her back.

"Stay," he whispered.

She looked at him.

"I think everyone is watching."

"Let them."

His answer made her smile.

The children were still busy admiring the scenery, completely unaware of the little world their parents had created around themselves. Nishi slowly relaxed in Neel's arms.

Outside, the mountains stretched endlessly beneath them. Inside, she felt strangely safe.

Perhaps it wasn't the height that frightened her anymore. Perhaps what frightened her was how easily she had begun to depend on the man holding her. And Neel seemed to understand that too. He didn't say anything.

He simply held her a little closer as the trolley carried them higher into the mountains.

# Chapter 33
# He is a child I love



By evening, Mall Road was glowing with warm lights.

The chilly mountain air carried the aroma of roasted corn, hot chocolate and freshly baked cakes from the little cafés lining the street. Tourists moved through the crowded road, wrapped in colourful jackets and woollen caps. Palash and Sahana walked ahead, excitedly stopping at every shop.

"Papa, look at that!"

"Can we go there?" Sahana said

Neel laughed.

"One at a time!"

Nishi followed behind them, smiling at the children's excitement. Suddenly, Palash spotted a small shop selling woollen caps.

"Mamma! Come!"

He grabbed Nishi's hand and pulled her inside. A few minutes later, he emerged wearing a ridiculous oversized woollen cap.

Nishi burst out laughing. Neel looked at her instead of Palash. There it was again. That laugh. The one he had teased her about the previous night. Nishi caught him staring.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"You're doing it again."

"Doing what?"

"Looking at me like that."

Neel smiled.

"Maybe I like watching you laugh."

Nishi's smile faded for a second. Her heart skipped.

"Maybe?"

Neel pretended to examine one of the caps.

"I'm still deciding."

She shook her head.

"You're impossible."

They continued walking.

The children ran ahead, stopping every few steps to look at something new. At one point, Sahana slowed down, and Palash immediately took her hand.

"I'll tell you what we're looking at," he announced proudly.

Nishi watched them with a smile. Neel came to stand beside her.

"They've become quite a team."

"They have."

Nishi looked at the children.

"They're lucky to have each other."

Neel glanced at her.

"So are we."

Nishi turned towards him.

"What?"

But before he could answer, a group of tourists crossed between them.

Neel smiled.

"I said, they're lucky to have each other."

Nishi knew perfectly well that wasn't what he had said. She didn't question him.

Instead, she smiled quietly and continued walking beside him. A few minutes later, they stopped at a roadside stall selling hot coffee. Nishi wrapped both hands around her cup.

Neel noticed her fingers were cold.

Without saying anything, he took one of her hands and slipped it into the pocket of his jacket.

Nishi looked at him in surprise.

"Neel…"

"Your hands are freezing."

"I can manage."

"I know."

He looked at her.

"But you don't always have to."

She stared at him.

The crowd moved around them, the lights flickered above them, and the distant sound of laughter filled the evening. Yet for those few seconds, everything seemed strangely quiet. Nishi slowly smiled.

“You know, you're becoming very possessive about keeping me warm.”

Neel smiled.

“Maybe I am.”

“And what if I don't want you to?”

He leaned slightly closer.

“Then you'll have to convince me.”

Nishi's cheeks turned pink.

Before she could answer, Palash called from ahead.

“Mamma! Papa! Come quickly!”

Nishi immediately pulled her hand from his pocket.

“Coming!”

She hurried towards the children. Neel followed, smiling to himself.

As they walked through the glowing Mall Road, their hands brushed against each other once.

Then again. The third time, neither moved away.

Their fingers slowly intertwined. Neither of them said a word.

They simply kept walking, hand in hand, beneath the winter lights.

The vacation seemed to pass too quickly.

Every day brought something new—long walks through the hills, lazy breakfasts, laughter over silly arguments, photographs the children insisted on taking, and evenings spent together over cups of steaming coffee.

For Nishi, it felt almost unreal.

She had come to Kasauli expecting nothing more than a family vacation.

Instead, she had found herself laughing more freely than she had in years. On the morning of the last day, everyone was busy getting ready for another outing.

Nishi was standing in front of the mirror, tying her hair, when Palash suddenly appeared at the door.

"Mamma, come quickly!"

"Why?"

"Just come!"

She followed him downstairs.

The moment she entered the dining area, the lights went off. It was very early in the morning.

Nishi stopped.

Then—

"Surprise!"

The lights came on.

A small cake sat on the table, surrounded by flowers and balloons. Nishi stared at it in confusion. Then she saw the words written across the cake.

Happy Birthday, Nishi!

Her eyes widened.

"My birthday…"

She looked at Neel.

"You remembered?"

Neel smiled.

"How could I forget?"

Nishi covered her mouth, suddenly emotional. She genuinely hadn't remembered. With everything happening—the trip, the

children, work, life—her birthday had simply slipped her mind. Sahana came forward and hugged her.

"Happy birthday, Mumma!"

Palash wrapped his arms around her waist.

"Happy birthday, Mamma!"

Nishi bent down and hugged both children tightly.

"Thank you."

She looked at Neel again.

"Did you plan all this?"

Neel shrugged.

"Maybe."

"You even remembered the date."

"I remember important things."

Their eyes met for a moment.

Nishi quickly looked away. The cake was cut amid laughter and teasing. Palash smeared a little icing on her cheek, and Nishi chased him around the dining area while everyone laughed. For those few minutes, it felt like the happiest family in the world.

Later, they went out for a walk. The children ran ahead while Neel and Nishi followed.

"This was the best birthday I've had in years," Nishi said softly.

Neel smiled.

"Then I'm glad you forgot about it."

She laughed.

"You deliberately didn't remind me?"

"I wanted to surprise you."

Nishi looked at him.

"Thank you, Neel."

There was something in her voice that made his smile disappear for a moment. He wanted to tell her something.

How much she meant to him. How much he had come to depend on her presence.

How somewhere along the way, she had become an important part of his life. But he wasn't ready.

Not yet.

So, he simply said,

"Happy birthday, Nishi."

She smiled.

"Thank you."

And they continued walking.

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A little later, they reached a scenic spot overlooking the valley. Palash was excitedly running around, trying to get the perfect photograph.

"Palash, don't go too close!" Nishi called.

"I won't, Mamma!"

Neel was watching him carefully. Suddenly, Palash's foot slipped.

"Palash!"

He lost his balance and tumbled towards the edge.

Nishi screamed.

"PALASH!"

Everything happened in seconds. Neel ran. He didn't think. He didn't hesitate. He threw himself forward and caught Palash just before he could fall over the steep edge. But Neel's own footing gave way.

"Neel!"

Nishi watched in horror as Neel struggled to hold onto Palash with one arm while gripping the edge with the other. Sahana was crying. Palash was dazed.

"Papa!"

"Don't be scared," Neel said through clenched teeth. "I've got you."

Nishi rushed towards them.

"Neel, give me your hand!"

He looked up at her.

"Nishi, take Palash first."

"Nishi!"

His voice was firm.

"Take him."

She lay down and reached for Palash.

"Give him to me!"

Neel carefully pushed Palash towards her. Nishi grabbed her son and pulled him to safety.

The moment Palash was out of danger, Neel's grip weakened.

"Neel!"

Nishi caught his wrist. He looked at her. For a terrifying second, neither spoke. Then Nishi pulled with everything she had.

"Don't you dare let go!"

Neel managed a faint smile.

"I'm not planning to."

With the help of the others, she finally pulled him back to safety. Nishi immediately dropped beside him.

“Are you hurt?”

Neel shook his head.

“I'm fine.”

She slapped his shoulder through her tears.

“You call that fine?”

Neel looked at her.

“You're crying.”

“Of course, I'm crying!”

Her voice broke.

“You could have died!”

Neel looked towards Palash, who was clinging to Nishi.

“I couldn't let anything happen to him.”

Nishi stared at him.

“You risked your life for my son.”

Neel's eyes softened.

“He's not just your son, Nishi.”

She looked at him, stunned.

Neel gently placed his hand on Palash's head.

“He's a child I love.”

Nishi's eyes filled again. She didn't know what to say. Palash suddenly threw his arms around Neel.

“Papa, don't ever do that again.”

Neel hugged him tightly.

“First you promise you will not be careless”

“I promise”

Nishi watched them.

Something inside her shifted. She had known Neel was kind. She had known he cared. But today she had seen something much deeper.

He hadn't stopped to think about his own safety. He had simply seen Palash in danger and acted. And for the first time, Nishi wondered whether perhaps she wasn't the only one slowly falling into something she was afraid to name. Neel looked up and met her eyes. Neither spoke. Neither looked away.

# Chapter 34
# THE JOURNEY HOME



The children had fallen asleep early. Exhausted by the day's excitement, they had surrendered to sleep, and the room had finally grown quiet. But Nishi couldn't sleep.

She sat on the edge of the bed, staring into the darkness, her arms wrapped tightly around herself. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw Palash falling. Then she saw Neel throwing himself after him.

She had almost lost her son. And she had almost lost the man she loved. The realization frightened her more than anything else. Neel was awake too.

He watched her silently for a moment before getting out of bed. Without saying a word, he switched on the heater in the adjoining room, gently took her hand and led her to the carpet. He sat beside her. Nishi looked at him. Her eyes were wet.

"I thought I was going to lose you."

Neel's expression softened.

"You didn't."

"But I could have."

He reached for her hand. Nishi held it tightly. Then, almost without realizing it, she moved closer. Neel opened his arms, and she slipped into them. He held her firmly against his chest, as though he needed to reassure himself that she was there—that she was safe.

Nishi buried her face against him. His hand moved slowly through her hair. Neither of them spoke.

Only the soft hum of the heater filled the silence. The table lamp cast a warm pool of light across the room, leaving the rest in gentle shadows. After a while, Nishi lifted her face. Their eyes met. Something changed.

Neel's fingers brushed her cheek. Nishi didn't pull away. Instead, she leaned into his palm. His eyes searched hers. There was no uncertainty in them now. Only the feelings he had been trying so hard to hide. Nishi raised her hand and touched his face. Neel closed his eyes for a moment beneath her touch. When he opened them, he moved closer. Their foreheads touched. Nishi's breath trembled.

"Nishi…"

She didn't answer. She simply closed the remaining distance between them. Their lips met.

The kiss was gentle at first. Then it deepened, carrying all the fear, tenderness and longing they had kept buried for so long. Neel pulled her closer. Nishi's hands tightened around his shoulders. He kissed her again, more intensely this time, and she responded without hesitation. For a few precious moments, the world outside disappeared. There was only the warmth of his arms, the quiet of the room and the certainty that neither of them wanted to let go. Slowly, they sank onto the carpet beside the heater, still wrapped in each other's arms.

The table lamp remained their only light. Nishi looked at him with complete trust. Neel touched her face again. She closed her eyes. He leaned towards her—but then stopped.

For a moment, he simply rested his forehead against hers, gathering himself. Neither of them needed to say anything. Then Sahana stirred in the other room. The sound brought them gently back to reality.

Neel helped Nishi sit up near the heater and carefully covered her with her stole. He brushed a strand of hair away from her face and kissed her forehead.

"Sleep," he whispered.

And he stayed beside her. Nishi closed her eyes. Neel was close. That was enough.

She didn't realize when sleep finally came. She simply drifted off in his arms, feeling safe in a way she hadn't felt in years. Nothing happened between them that night. But something had changed. Something deep had been stirred awake. For the first time, Nishi understood what Neel had been unable to say aloud. He had expressed everything without words. And she had understood every word.

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The next morning, Nishi was still fast asleep. Her face was completely peaceful. She was dreaming.

In her dream, she stood beside Neel, one hand resting protectively over her large, round belly. Neel stood behind her, his arms gently supporting her, his hands resting over hers.

She looked down at her belly and smiled. There was something warm and reassuring about the moment.

No fear. No uncertainty. Just the quiet happiness of knowing that a new life was growing between them.

Neel leaned closer, his smile reflected in her eyes.

Nishi's smile grew wider.

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In the real world, Neel sat beside her bed. He had been watching her for a while. He didn't know what she was dreaming about, but the beautiful smile on her face made him smile too.

He gently moved a strand of hair away from her forehead.

"Nishi…"

She slowly opened her eyes. For a few seconds, she remained still, trying to hold on to the dream. Then reality returned. She looked at Neel. He was smiling.

"Good morning," he whispered.

Nishi smiled back.

"Morning."

She didn't tell him about the dream. Perhaps she was afraid that saying it aloud would make it too real. Or perhaps, somewhere deep inside, she wasn't ready to admit how much she wanted that future. Neel stood up.

"You overslept."

Nishi suddenly sat up.

"What? What time is it?"

"Late enough that everyone else is ready."

She looked around in embarrassment.

"Why didn't you wake me?"

"You looked peaceful. I didn't have the heart to disturb you."

His words made her pause. And suddenly, the memories of the previous night returned.

The closeness. The tenderness. The way Neel had understood her fear without forcing her to explain it.

Nothing about him had felt demanding. He had simply been there—patient, protective and gentle.

Nishi lowered her eyes. Her respect for him had deepened. She knew now that Neel loved her. Perhaps he had loved her for longer than she had allowed herself to believe. And that realization frightened her almost as much as it comforted her. A knock came at the door.

"Ma! Are you ready?" Palash called.

Nishi quickly got out of bed.

"Yes! Give me five minutes."

Neel smiled.

"Five?"

She gave him a look.

"Okay... ten."

He laughed softly.

"That sounds more believable."

Soon, the room was filled with the hurried sounds of packing and getting ready. Neel had already packed everything. The children were dressed and waiting, excited about the next part of their journey. Within a short while, Nishi came out with her bag. Neel looked at her.

"Ready?"

She nodded.

"Ready."

They checked out, loaded their bags into the car and finally set off.

As the morning sun streamed through the windows, Nishi sat quietly beside Neel. She glanced at him. For a moment, she

remembered her dream. Almost unconsciously, her hand moved towards her stomach.

Then she quickly lowered it. Neel noticed. He said nothing.

He simply reached across and held her hand. Nishi looked down at their intertwined fingers.

She smiled. No words were needed. Somewhere between the silence of the previous night and the warmth of that simple gesture, she had finally understood. They were in love.

And perhaps they had been falling in love long before either of them had found the courage to admit it. The children, meanwhile, had no interest in the adults' silence. Palash and Sahana began sharing stories, arguing over which one was funnier, and laughing at their own jokes.

Soon the car was filled with their voices. The journey became lighter. Warmer. Happier. By lunchtime, they stopped at a roadside motel. The children eagerly climbed out, and everyone settled around a table.

Neel seemed unusually cheerful. He laughed at Palash's exaggerated story, listened patiently to Sahana's endless questions and even joined in when the children began teasing each other.

Nishi watched him quietly. Throughout the trip, Neel had been happy. But today felt different.

There was a lightness in him she hadn't seen before. As if something inside him had finally settled.

At one point, Nishi caught herself staring at him. Neel noticed. Instead of looking away, he smiled.

Nishi immediately lowered her eyes. A few moments later, she looked up again. He was still smiling.

Under the table, his hand found hers. His fingers slipped gently around hers and gave a small, reassuring squeeze. Nishi's heart

fluttered. She looked at him. He said nothing. Neither did she. But she understood. After lunch, they returned to the car.

Neel made sure the children were comfortably seated in the back before fastening their seat belts himself.

"Comfortable?" he asked.

"Yes!" they replied together.

Neel closed the door and walked around to the driver's side.

But as he bent slightly to get in, he suddenly winced.

Nishi noticed immediately.

"Neel, are you okay?"

He raised a hand reassuringly.

"Yes. I'm fine."

But she knew he wasn't. He sat down carefully, one hand briefly going to his lower back.

Nishi frowned.

"You're not fine."

"It's just a strain."

"You shouldn't drive."

He looked at her.

"Nishi—"

"May I drive while you get some rest?"

"Are you sure?"

She smiled.

"One hundred percent."

Neel hesitated for a moment before handing her the keys.

"Okay."

Nishi took the driver's seat. Neel settled beside her after taking a medicine for the pain. Gradually, the discomfort began to ease. The children were soon busy with their own conversations again. Nishi drove steadily along the highway. After some time, she glanced at Neel. He was sitting comfortably, his head resting against the seat.

Then he began humming softly. Nishi smiled. The children heard him. Sahana joined in first. Then Palash.

Within minutes, the car had turned into an impromptu little concert.

Neel laughed. Nishi laughed too. She kept her eyes on the road, but her heart felt strangely full.

She had spent years believing that happiness was something fragile—something that could disappear the moment she reached for it. But now, driving beside Neel, listening to him hum while Palash and Sahana sang from the back seat, she felt something different.

Perhaps happiness didn't always arrive dramatically. Perhaps sometimes it came quietly.

In a warm hand beneath a restaurant table. In a smile across a room. In someone letting you take the wheel when they were tired. And sometimes, perhaps, it came in the form of a man who simply stayed beside you.

By the time they finally reached their destination, the sun was beginning to soften in the evening sky.

Nishi parked the car. Neel looked at her and smiled.

"Thank you."

"For driving?"

"For everything."

Their eyes met.

Again, neither said what was really in their hearts.

They didn't need to. Some feelings, once understood, no longer needed a name.

# Chapter 35
# NOTHING IS GOING TO HAPPEN TO YOU



They finally reached home. The moment Nishi opened the door, Ira was there to welcome them.

A warm smile appeared on her face.

"Welcome back!"

Before Neel could say anything, Ira stepped forward and embraced him. Nishi stopped.

For a moment, she simply stood there.

Even Palash and Sahana turned around and looked at them, visibly surprised.

Neel, however, remained composed. He gently pulled himself back from the embrace.

"Hi, Ira."

Ira smiled at him as though nothing unusual had happened. Then she turned towards the children.

“Children, why don't you go and take a bath? I saw you coming, so I switched on both the geysers in the two bathrooms.”

Palash and Sahana exchanged a quick glance.

“Little later, Ira Auntie,” Palash said, dropping onto the sofa. “We want to relax for a while.”

Sahana settled beside him. Ira looked at them affectionately.

“Alright. But don't stay like that for too long.”

Then she turned towards Neel.

“You go and take a bath.”

Neel raised an eyebrow.

“Relax, Nishi. I took a bath in the morning.”

Nishi rolled her eyes.

“I wasn't talking to you.”

Neel laughed softly. He realised he addressed Ira as Nishi.

For a moment, the atmosphere became lighter. But then Ira noticed the way Neel was moving.

Her expression immediately changed.

“Neel, you're not well?”

“I’m fine. Just a little pain in my back.”

Ira stepped closer, her concern instantly intensifying.

“Pain? How did that happen?”

“It's nothing. I probably strained it.”

“You should have told me.”

Neel gave her a reassuring smile.

“I’m okay.”

But Ira wasn't convinced.

"You never take care of yourself properly." She looked him over anxiously. "Did you take any medicine? Is the pain still there? You should lie down."

"I'm fine, Ira."

She shook her head.

"No, you're not."

Then, without hesitation, she said,

"Take off your shirt. I'll give you a hot compress. That will help."

Nishi's eyebrows lifted slightly. Palash stopped looking at his phone.

Sahana slowly turned her head towards Ira. There was an unmistakable discomfort on both their faces.

Ira noticed their expressions and quickly added,

"Come on. It's just a hot compress."

Then, almost as though reminding everyone of a right she still believed she had, she added softly,

"I was your wife."

The room fell silent for a moment. Neel simply smiled.

"I know."

His voice was calm. Neither harsh nor encouraging.

"But I'm good, Ira. Really."

Ira still looked dissatisfied.

"You should have taken me with you. I would have cared for you on the way. You wouldn't have had to drive with that pain."

Nishi remained silent. She had noticed everything. The hug. The excessive concern. The assumption that she still had a place beside Neel that entitled her to care for him in such an intimate way. But Nishi didn't react.

She wasn't going to compete with Ira. She didn't need to. Instead, she quietly watched Neel.

He wasn't encouraging Ira. He wasn't reciprocating her expectations. He wasn't being rude either.

He was simply maintaining a calm, respectful distance. Then Neel looked towards Nishi.

A small smile appeared on his face.

"Nishi drove us home. And I'm feeling much better."

Ira turned towards Nishi.

For a moment, her expression became unreadable.

"Thank you, Nishi."

The words sounded strangely formal—as though Nishi had merely performed a duty that belonged to someone else.

Nishi smiled politely.

"You're welcome."

Nothing more.

She didn't explain herself. She didn't seek recognition. She didn't remind Ira that she had spent hours driving because Neel was in pain.

She didn't say that she had been the one sitting beside him throughout the journey.

She simply let it go. Palash looked at his mother. He seemed irritated. Sahana, too, remained unusually quiet.

They both understood more than the adults realized.

Nishi noticed their expressions and gently shook her head at them—a silent request not to say anything. She knew Ira was hurting.

Perhaps somewhere inside, Ira was still holding on to the life she had once had with Neel. Her excessive concern wasn't simply

about his back pain. It came from a deeper place—a place that hadn't yet accepted that things had changed. And Nishi felt sorry for her. Because she knew that expectations like these could eventually hurt Ira even more. Nishi had no intention of becoming the woman who stood between Ira and her healing.

She wasn't going to fight for Neel. She didn't have to. She knew where she stood in his life.

And, more importantly, she knew where he stood. So, she remained composed.

She picked up her bag and smiled at the children.

"Come on. Let's freshen up"

Palash immediately got up. Sahana followed.

As they walked away, Nishi glanced back once at Neel.

He was still standing where he was, calm and thoughtful.

Then his eyes met Nishi's. There was no grand gesture.

No declaration. Just a quiet understanding passing between them.

Nishi smiled faintly. She knew she didn't need to compete with the past.

Because what she and Neel were building belonged to the present.

Soon after they freshened up, dinner was ready on the table. Ira had already prepared everything. Nishi turned to her gently.

"Ira, you need to get some rest before your second session of chemotherapy begins."

"I'm fine, Nishi. If you, being his friend, can do so much for him and his daughter, then I was once the love of his life. I should be able to do this much for them."

"Why would I not do it for him?"

"I've cooked Neel's favourite food."

Nishi didn't say anything. She simply smiled and began arranging the plates.

But Sahana had been listening. She turned towards Ira.

"Mom, all I remember is that you never cooked. So how do you know about Papa's favourite food?"

Ira looked at her, momentarily surprised.

Sahana glanced at the table.

"And, by the way, Papa doesn't like spicy food anymore."

She paused.

"So, you better take some rest and let Nishi Mom manage everything."

Ira smiled, completely missing the sarcasm.

"Nishi Mom? She is not your mom, child. I am your mom. Don't embarrass her by calling her that."

She reached out and gently caressed Sahana's cheek. Sahana immediately pulled away.

Nishi intervened before the moment could become uncomfortable.

"I don't get embarrassed. I actually love it when she calls me Mom," she said softly.

Then she added with a smile, trying to make her remark sound innocent,

"Children are so trusting nowadays. They trust anyone so easily."

The words were polite. The meaning was not. Nishi remained composed, but Sahana immediately understood.

"Excuse me?"

She turned towards Ira.

"She is not just anyone."

At that moment, Neel walked in. Sahana immediately composed herself.

Neel took his seat at the dining table and looked at Nishi.

"Nishi, why did you order food? I told you we could have enjoyed those muffins we bought. We had decided to order pizza."

Before Nishi could answer, Ira spoke.

"Actually, I made it. Your favourite curry is here. You love it with rice, don't you?"

Nishi remained quiet.

After all, Ira had cooked. Perhaps she was simply trying to be thoughtful. Why did Nishi have to make an issue out of everything? She knew Ira was being intrusive, but she convinced herself that perhaps this was simply her way of caring for Neel and Sahana. Neel looked slightly uncomfortable.

"Actually, Nishi, now that Ira has made it, I'll have it."

Sahana immediately interrupted.

"Papa, but you don't eat rice at night."

"Yes, child. But we don't want the food to go to waste. So, let's relish it."

Sahana shook her head.

"Papa, I've lost my appetite. I'm really tired, and school starts tomorrow."

She turned towards Nishi.

"Mom, could you please make those signature sandwiches of yours and the muffins? And a hot cup of coffee?"

She smiled faintly.

"I want to read before I go to sleep."

"Sure, child."

Sahana left the dining area. The contempt she felt for Ira was impossible to miss to anyone who understood her.

Ira, however, seemed completely unaware. She quietly placed a plate in front of Nishi and another for Palash.

Palash joined them, but Nishi didn't.

"I'll make Sahana's sandwiches first. Then I'll have dinner."

Neel immediately said,

"I'll wait for you."

Ira too decided to wait, gently serving some food onto Palash's plate.

"Child, you should eat. You have school tomorrow."

Palash looked at Neel. Neel nodded.

"She's right, Palash. I'll wait for your mom."

A few minutes later, Sahana returned and stood in front of Ira.

"Why have you shifted to my room?"

Her voice was calm. But inside, she was furious. Ira looked at her innocently.

"Child, actually, Nishi auntie's house was very cold. I'm not well, and I was feeling cold. Your room was warmer and more comfortable."

"Then you should have used the room heater."

Ira said nothing. Sahana continued;

"You unsettled my room. My books. My stuffs."

Nishi looked at Sahana, trying to calm her.

"Sahana…"

"No, Nishi Mom," Sahana interrupted. "Isn't it basic decency to ask before shifting into someone else's room?"

Neel intervened.

"Sahana, calm down, child. I'll set your room right now."

"No, Neel," Ira said quickly. "I'll fix it for her."

"No, thanks."

Sahana's voice rose.

"You've already been trying to fix so many things."

Neel stared at her, taken aback.

"Sahana, just calm down. Why are you losing your temper?"

She looked at him, her eyes filling with frustration.

"Sorry, Dad. But I'm not you. And I'm not Nishi Mom either."

She took a breath.

"I don't have the tolerance to let someone intrude into my privacy."

She turned and walked away. Palash looked after her, confused.

At eight, he was too young to understand the complicated emotions unfolding around him. He couldn't understand why Sahana was so upset. But Sahana was twelve. She understood more than the adults realized.

She understood that Ira was being intrusive. She also understood that her father was trying to remain patient because Ira was ill. Perhaps that was exactly why she needed to control her anger. But she was still only twelve.

And sometimes, understanding something did not make it easier to accept. Ira turned towards Neel and Nishi.

"Actually, after you left for the vacation, I realised Nishi's house was too cold. So, I shifted to Sahana's room. It was comfortable and cosy."

Nishi continued cutting the edges of the bread while Neel suggested,

"That's okay, Ira. You can use my room if you find this house more comfortable."

Nishi looked at Neel. He continued;

"I'll shift to Ma's room. She isn't here."

Nishi understood immediately. He was simply being considerate towards Ira, especially because she was undergoing chemotherapy.

"In fact, Nishi," Neel continued, "most of the time, Sahana sleeps beside you and Palash sleeps beside me. So, I can sleep with Palash in Ma's room, and you can sleep beside Sahana in her room."

Nishi placed the sandwiches into the sandwich maker.

"I don't have a problem," Palash announced.

Sahana, who had been listening from the hallway, immediately walked back in.

"That's a brilliant idea, Nishi Mom."

Ira looked at them, clearly unconvinced.

"But why would she sleep in your house, Neel?"

Everyone turned towards her. She quickly corrected herself.

"No, I mean… she has her own house. She has her privacy. She might be uncomfortable."

Sahana smiled.

"Ira Mom, you don't know our family yet."

The emphasis on our family was unmistakable.

"Nishi Mom and Papa have been best friends for almost a year. Our kitchens are practically the same. We barge into each other's houses all the time."

She paused.

"We're family."

Then she added sweetly,

"It's been six years, so clearly, you have no idea."

Ira fell silent. Neel, either unaware of the tension or choosing not to acknowledge it, continued casually.

"In fact, Nishi, I was wondering if we should break the wall between the two houses."

Nishi looked at him.

"We could make one big house. The children would have more space. Palash and I could even play badminton in the hall." Ira let out a small laugh.

"Now that was hilarious, Neel."

Palash, however, looked excited.

"Papa, are you serious?"

"One hundred percent."

Sahana immediately joined in.

"Actually, I like the idea too, Papa."

She looked around thoughtfully.

"With my new collection of books, I really do need more space."

Then she turned towards Nishi.

"What do you say, Nishi Mom?"

Nishi smiled.

"Well, Sahana, I totally agree. You definitely need more space for your books."

"And Mommy and I can play badminton with Papa in the living room," Palash added.

Nishi knew why Neel had mentioned it. He wasn't just talking about breaking a wall; somewhere in his mind, he was already imagining a future where they would share a home—and a life together.

And for the first time, that future felt natural to her. Palash immediately high-fived Neel. Nishi placed the sandwiches and milk on a tray.

Around them, the conversation continued normally. Everyone seemed relaxed. Everyone except Ira.

She sat quietly, suddenly aware that she was standing on the outside of something she had once believed still belonged to her. Nishi noticed. She understood Ira's discomfort. But she held no grudges against her. She knew this wasn't easy for Ira either. She simply wanted to help her recover. That was the promise she had made to herself.

That night, Ira decided to sleep in Ma's room. The nurse stayed with her, while Neel and Palash settled into Neel's bedroom and Nishi went to Sahana's room. Just as Nishi was about to retire for the night, Ira stopped her.

"Nishi, may I please talk to you?"

"Of course. Go on, Ira."

Ira hesitated before speaking.

"I know Sahana doesn't like me, but I hold no grudges against her."

She took a slow breath.

"I don't know how much time I have left. I just want to make the most of whatever time I have. That's why I cooked for everyone. I never meant to upset anyone."

Her voice softened.

"There were so many things I could have done as Neel's wife, but I didn't. I didn't love him the way he deserved. And now that

death is standing right in front of me, I realise how badly I failed him."

She lowered her eyes.

"It's too late now. So, I just want to make the most of whatever time I have left. Maybe I appeared a little intrusive, but…"

Nishi gently cut her short.

"Ira."

She turned towards her; her voice firm yet warm.

"You are going to live. Nothing is going to happen to you."

Ira looked at her silently.

"Now go and get some rest."

With that, Nishi left the room and walked towards Sahana. Ira watched her go, grateful that, somehow, Nishi had understood what she had been trying to say.

# Chapter 36
# TWO CUPS OF TEA



The next day, when Nishi returned home from the office, she found Ira waiting for her.

"Come, you must be tired."

Before Nishi could say anything, Ira placed a cup of tea and a plate of savouries in front of her.

There was already another maid in the house to look after the children, yet Ira continued to take care of them herself whenever she could. She helped Sahana with her things, made sure Palash had eaten, and somehow managed to keep the household running with an ease that sometimes-left Nishi strangely unsettled. Sahana was however still indifferent towards her. But today, Nishi said nothing.

She sat beside Ira, they quietly drank her tea and ate a few savouries. For a while, they spoke about ordinary things—the children's schedules, Sahana's upcoming examinations and what needed to be bought from the market.

Then Nishi got up.

“I'll just check on the children.”

As she reached the doorway, Sahana returned from outside with her cross bag.

“Mom, I have exams coming up. I should hit the books.”

Ira smiled.

“Of course. But first, finish this.”

She handed Sahana a glass of milk. Sahana took it with a reluctant smile before heading towards her room.

Nishi walked towards the playground where Palash usually played in the evening. She spotted him almost immediately. But he wasn't alone. Someone was playing football with him.

From a distance, Nishi couldn't make out the person's face. He was dressed formally, completely out of place among the children running around the playground.

It certainly wasn't Neel. Nishi slowed down. Something about the man's posture seemed familiar.

She moved closer. And stopped. Vineet. Her heart gave a strange, involuntary jolt.

Vineet was standing in his formal office clothes, his sleeves slightly rolled up, playing football with Palash as though he had forgotten everything else around him. Palash kicked the ball towards him.

Vineet blocked it and laughed. Palash laughed even louder. For a moment, Nishi simply stared.

Why was he here? Had he been following Palash? Did he know that Palash was her son?

Or perhaps he had come here to meet someone else and had simply happened to find the boy playing?

She remained where she was, watching them. There was something unsettling about the sight. Yet, strangely, there was something beautiful about it too.

For years, before she had finally moved on with her life, Nishi had imagined this scene in the privacy of her own mind. Vineet accepting Palash. Vineet playing with him. Palash calling him something affectionate.

She had once dreamed of it because, somewhere inside, she had desperately wanted her son to be with his father who would love him without conditions. But Vineet had ruined everything and those dreams had eventually faded. She had built another life.

A life with Neel. And now, when she least expected it, Vineet was standing right there with Palash. As though one of her forgotten dreams had suddenly stepped into reality. Nishi slowly walked towards them. Vineet noticed her first. His expression changed. He stopped playing and walked towards her. Palash followed, running towards his mother. "Mommy! "He pointed excitedly at Vineet.

"He's Vineet uncle! He plays really good football. He taught me some new moves."

Nishi looked at Vineet. She wanted to ask the obvious question. How do you know my son?

But before she could say anything, Vineet reached into his pocket.

He took out a small wallet. Nishi immediately recognised it. Her wallet.

"You dropped this in your cabin," he said quietly. "I thought you might need it."

Nishi took it from him.

"Thank you, Vineet."

She looked at the wallet for a moment. He could have returned it the next morning at the office. He could have called her. He could

have sent a message. Instead, he had come all the way to her apartment.

And somehow, he had ended up playing football with Palash. The explanation suddenly felt less convincing.

Vineet seemed to sense the question in her eyes.

"Actually, I didn't know your exact address," he said. "I only knew the apartment complex. It's not very far from our office, so I thought I'd come here."

Nishi said nothing. Vineet continued, almost defensively,

"I wanted to call you when I reached. But then I found him here. He was playing alone, and he told me you hadn't come home yet."

He glanced at Palash.

"So, we started playing."

Nishi looked from Vineet to her son.

"Have you met him before?"

Vineet nodded.

"We met today for the first time. I recognized him. I had seen his photograph in the frame near your workstation."

There was no hesitation in his voice.

"Your son is very sweet."

He bent slightly and gently placed a hand on Palash's head. Palash looked up at him with complete trust. Nishi watched them silently. For the first time, she wondered whether Vineet's unexpected presence wasn't really about the wallet at all.

Nishi hesitated for a moment before speaking.

"Would you like to have a cup of tea?"

It was basic courtesy. Vineet had come all the way to return something she had misplaced. Whatever history existed between

them; she couldn't simply let him leave without offering him something.

To her surprise, he nodded.

"Sure."

"Please, come."

Palash had already found another friend and was eager to continue playing.

"Don't be late, Palash. Your exams are coming up," Nishi called out.

"Okay, Mommy!"

Nishi led Vineet towards her apartment. She deliberately chose her own home rather than Neel's.

Ira was there, and bringing Vineet into that house would only create an unnecessary situation. Besides, Sahana had her examinations and needed peace.

Once inside, Nishi went into the kitchen and prepared tea. Vineet sat quietly in the living room. He looked around the house. When she brought the cup to him, he accepted it with a faint smile.

"Your house is tastefully decorated"

"Thank you, Vineet"

Vineet recalled the days they had spent together—the home they had built and the life they had once shared.

He took a slow sip. "How was your vacation with Neel and the children?"

Nishi looked at him. There was no accusation in his voice. No hidden question. No trace of the old Vineet who had once scrutinised every word and action of hers. He knew Neel was her best friend now. And, more importantly, he seemed to have finally stopped doubting her over meaningless things.

Nishi could sense the difference. Therapy had changed him. He was calmer now. More measured. As though he had finally learned to pause before allowing his insecurities to speak for him.

"It was good," she replied. "The trip was brilliant."

Vineet smiled.

"And how is your therapy going?", Nishi asked

"Excellent."

"That's good."

They continued talking about little things—the office, the children's studies, the trip, the weather. Nothing important. Nothing heavy. And yet, Nishi noticed that she wasn't uncomfortable anymore.

Then the door opened. Neel walked in. He didn't knock.

He was usually an impeccably mannered man, but somewhere along the way, he had apparently forgotten that he needed to be formal with Nishi. He stopped when he saw them. Nishi looked up. Vineet stood immediately.

"Neel."

"Vineet."

They shook hands and exchanged polite greetings. Neel already knew why Vineet had come. There was no awkwardness in his manner, no suspicion, no territorial discomfort. After a few minutes, Vineet rose.

"I should leave."

He turned towards Nishi, then paused.

"Can I come and see Palash sometimes?"

Nishi's expression changed slightly. She wasn't ready for that question. Before she could answer, Neel spoke calmly.

"Of course, Vineet. Whenever you want."

Nishi looked at him. Vineet gave them both a grateful smile.

"Thank you."

He said goodbye and walked out.

The door closed behind him. Nishi turned towards Neel.

"Seriously, Neel?"

"Whenever he wants."

Neel remained completely composed. He gently took her hand and guided her back towards the sofa.

"Nishi, I thought you would understand."

"What should I understand?" she asked, still unsettled. "He wants to spend time with Palash now."

Neel sat beside her.

"It is the very reason we gave Ira another chance. Why not Vineet?"

Nishi sighed.

"Vineet accused me of cheating. He believed Palash wasn't his son. And now he wants to spend time with him."

She looked at Neel.

"It isn't the same case as Ira."

Neel gently shook his head.

"Nishi, it is."

She stared at him.

"Ira is fighting cancer," he continued softly. "And Vineet is fighting his insecurities. Both of them are wounded in different ways."

He paused.

"Let's help him recover."

Nishi's voice hardened.

"I'm happy for him, Neel. Truly. I'm glad he's trying to recover. But Palash is my son. If tomorrow he raises those allegations again—if he makes my son feel unwanted or questions his identity—I won't tolerate it. I swear, I would—"

"Neither would I.", Neel said

Neel's voice was quiet but firm. Nishi stopped. Her expression softened.

Neel gently cupped her face.

"Look at me, Nishi."

She did.

"If Vineet was Palash's culprit, then Ira was Sahana's."

Nishi lowered her eyes.

"You once told Sahana that revenge is for the weak. Strong people forgive."

He brushed his thumb gently across her cheek.

"You have survived the worst."

His voice became softer.

"Maybe it's time to let Vineet heal from his wounds too."

Nishi remained silent.

"We have moved on," Neel said. "Let Vineet recover as well."

There was conviction in his voice. Not pressure. Not pity. Just understanding.

After a long moment, Nishi nodded.

"Okay."

Neel smiled.

"Now, can we have a cup of tea?"

She smiled faintly.

“Sure. Let's go to your house.”

Neel tightened his hold on her hands.

“No.”

She looked at him, puzzled.

“First, you will make the tea for me here.”

Nishi smiled.

“And then, we'll go there.” Neel said.

She understood. He wasn't really asking for tea.

He was asking for a few precious minutes with her. The little ritual that had once belonged only to them.

Tea made by Nishi. Neel sitting beside her. The quiet comfort of being together without the rest of the world demanding anything from them. For a moment, neither of them spoke.

Nishi simply held his gaze. And then she got up.

“Fine.”

Neel smiled.

“That's my Nishi.”

She walked towards the kitchen, and he followed her.

For those few minutes, the past, the worries , Ira, Vineet and every complication waiting outside seemed to disappear. There were only two cups of tea.

And the two of them.

# Chapter 37
# WHY DID HE DO THIS



A couple of days later, Ira's chemotherapy began again.

As before, the treatment left her exhausted and weak. Nishi took a few days' leave from work to look after her, and Vineet cooperated without making things difficult. Nishi wanted to help Neel in whatever way she could.

But while Nishi was doing everything, she could to make things easier for Ira, Sahana was finding it increasingly difficult to have her around. One morning, while Ira was getting some rest in her room, Sahana sat at the breakfast table with Neel. Nishi was in the kitchen preparing breakfast for them.

"Papa, how many more chemotherapy sessions will Ira Mom need before she gets completely well?"

Neel looked at her as he tore another piece of paratha.

"Maybe another three or four sessions. It depends on how she responds to the treatment."

Sahana was quiet for a moment.

"Then where will she go after her treatment is over?"

Neel paused.

"I don't know, child. Let's just focus on her treatment for now."

Sahana nodded, though the answer clearly hadn't satisfied her. After breakfast, she picked up the dirty plates and carried them to the kitchen. Nishi was standing near the stove. She looked at Sahana and smiled.

"Hey, Sahana. Why do you look so upset?"

Sahana placed the plates on the counter.

"Mom, I want Ira Mom to leave."

Nishi's smile faded slightly.

"I know she is unwell," Sahana continued, "but I still don't want her here. She is so intrusive. I don't know why, but I feel that something is off about her."

Nishi turned off the stove and faced her.

"Sahana, she is going through a lot right now. Chemotherapy is not easy. It drains a person completely."

"But she can stay somewhere else and continue her treatment, can't she?"

Nishi gently shook her head.

"She could, but right now she needs people around her. And Sahana…" She paused for a moment. "She is your biological mother."

Sahana lowered her eyes.

"I know."

Nishi reached out and gently touched her shoulder.

"At least let her recover first. Whatever happens later, you can decide how you feel about her. But right now, she needs treatment

and care. Sometimes, we have to help someone simply because they are suffering."

Sahana remained silent for a few seconds. Then she looked up at Nishi.

"I don't know, Mom. I just want you as my mom."

The words came without hesitation.

Nishi's expression softened. She gently caressed Sahana's hair, but before she could respond, Palash called from the dining room.

"Mom! One more paratha, please!"

Nishi smiled faintly.

"Coming."

She picked up a fresh paratha and walked out of the kitchen, leaving Sahana standing there, still trying to understand feelings she couldn't quite put into words.

Vineet often visited Palash and spent time with him. Neel didn't mind. Palash knew him simply as Mumma's boss and was comfortable around him. Vineet enjoyed those visits more than he admitted.

After the therapy he had been receiving, something inside him had changed. He no longer hated Nishi. In fact, he had never really been able to hate her, not even after all these years. Whenever he spent time with Palash, he found himself wishing he had a son like him. Palash was cheerful, curious and full of energy. Vineet enjoyed listening to his endless questions and watching him play. Yet, ironically, Palash seemed to have found a better playmate in Neel.

Vineet couldn't help smiling whenever he saw the two together. Still, one question remained.

Why had Nishi cheated on him? Why had she chosen another man? Or perhaps something untoward happened to her-something she was too afraid or ashamed to tell him.

No, that couldn't be true. Not Nishi. He could not even bring himself to imagine something so terrible might have happened to her. How could he have let such a thought cross his mind? She had been genuinely happy about the pregnancy.

He had spent years believing that she had betrayed him, yet something about that explanation had never felt complete. He could be angry with her mother because, in his mind, she had genuinely abandoned him. But Nishi was different. She had never stopped caring for him even after he treated her badly.

And Nishi certainly didn't need anyone's financial or emotional support anymore. She had built a life for herself. She was independent, successful and, by all appearances, doing well. Why would she cheat then?

So, what had really happened between them? Vineet had begun thinking about a DNA test.

The thought had crossed his mind more than once. But he didn't have the courage to ask Nishi. He knew what it might mean to her. She would probably refuse, not because she had anything to hide, but because she might see the request as another questioning of her dignity. Yet Vineet needed answers.

One evening, Nishi brought lemonade for Neel, Palash and Vineet. Neel had just returned from the hospital and exchanged a few polite words with Vineet before settling down. They were chatting casually when Palash suddenly knocked his glass over.

The glass slipped from the table and shattered on the floor.

"Palash!"

Before Neel could reach him, the boy bent down instinctively, trying to help. A sharp piece of glass caught his hand

"Ouch!"

Nishi rushed towards him at once. Neel was already there.

"Don't move," he said gently.

He picked Palash up and examined his hand. There was a small cut, but it was bleeding.

“Easy, boy. How many times have I told you to be careful with glass?”

Palash looked at him sheepishly.

“Sorry papa”

Vineet knew that Palash called Neel his papa because he adores him. He never questioned it. Neel cleaned the wound and carefully dressed it.

“It's okay. Just be more careful next time.”

Nishi stood beside them, watching anxiously until she was certain Palash was fine. Vineet, meanwhile, had said nothing. His eyes had fallen on the floor. Among the broken pieces of glass was one smeared with Palash's blood.

He bent down, picked it up carefully and wrapped it in a tissue. No one noticed.

A few minutes later, after exchanging a brief goodbye, Vineet left. He carried the tiny piece of glass with him.

For the first time, the question in his mind was no longer about Nishi.

It was about Palash.

A couple of days passed, and Ira slowly began to regain some of her strength. The chemotherapy had left her weak, but the worst of the exhaustion was beginning to ease. She was able to sit up for longer periods and walk a few steps without feeling completely drained.

Neel was often beside her. He never made her feel that she was a burden. That evening, Ira was sitting near the window when Neel walked in with a cup of warm water.

“You should drink this,” he said, placing it beside her.

“I don't feel thirsty.”

“You don't have to feel thirsty. You still need to keep yourself hydrated.”

She looked at him and smiled.

“You haven't changed.”

Neel pulled a chair beside her.

“Maybe some things don't change.”

Ira looked at him for a moment.

“Do you remember how you used to sit beside me like this?”

Neel didn't answer immediately.

“I remember.”

There was something in his voice that made Ira's heart beat a little faster.

She looked away, trying to hide the small smile that had appeared on her face.

“You still know exactly what I need.”

“You're not eating properly,” he said. “That's why you feel weak.”

He picked up the bowl from the bedside table.

“Have some soup.”

“I don't want it.”

“Ira.”

She looked at him.There was a familiar firmness in his eyes.

“Just a little.”

She reluctantly took the bowl from him.

“Happy?”

“A little.”

She laughed softly.

For a few moments, neither of them spoke.

Then Ira said quietly, "Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if things had been different."

Neel looked at her.

"What do you mean?"

"If we hadn't separated."

He remained silent. Ira continued, almost afraid of her own words.

"Would we have been happy?"

Neel lowered his eyes.

"We can't change what happened."

"I know."

She looked at him again.

"But do you ever think about it?"

Neel's silence lasted a little longer this time.

"No"

"But, I care about you"

That five words were enough for Ira. She had been trying not to hope. But hope had a way of returning when she was least prepared for it. Neel reached out and gently adjusted the blanket around her shoulders.

"You should rest now."

Ira caught his hand.

"Neel."

She looked at him.

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For being here beside me."

He gave her a quiet smile.

"I'll be here until you're better."

Her fingers slowly loosened around his hand.

"Until you're better."

She repeated those words silently. But somewhere in her heart, she found a new hope.

Perhaps he wasn't staying only because she was ill. Perhaps there was still something left between them. Something neither of them had been able to erase completely. Neel stood up and walked towards the door.

Ira watched him leave. For the first time since she had returned to his life, she allowed herself to believe that perhaps she hadn't lost him completely.

And that small belief was enough to make her smile.

It was two o'clock in the morning. Nishi was fast asleep beside Sahana, who had been studying late for her exams and had finally fallen asleep. The room was quiet except for the soft hum of the air conditioner.

Suddenly, Nishi felt someone gently shake her shoulder.

"Nishi… wake up."

She opened her eyes. Neel was standing beside the bed. There was something unusual in his face.

"Neel? What happened?"

He glanced at Sahana, careful not to wake her.

"Come with me."

He held Nishi's hand and quietly led her out of the room. Still half asleep, Nishi followed him into the living room.

“What happened?” she whispered.

Neel looked at her for a moment before speaking.

“Vineet's father just called.”

Nishi's sleep vanished instantly.

“Why? Is everything all right?”

Neel shook his head.

“Vineet tried to take his own life.”

“What?”

Nishi was completely awake now. She stared at Neel, unable to process what she had just heard.

“Is he…?”

“He's alive,” Neel said quickly. “They've taken him to the hospital. The doctors are treating him.”

Nishi pressed a hand against her chest.

“But why would he do that?”

“I don't know. His father couldn't explain much. He was crying on the phone.”

Nishi stood frozen for a moment. Vineet's father had always been kind to her. Despite everything that had happened between her and Vineet, he had never treated her with bitterness.

“What about Vineet?” she asked.

“Doctors are treating him”

Nishi lowered her eyes.

“Is he okay?”

Neel didn't answer immediately.

“I don't think anyone is okay tonight.”

Nishi looked towards the bedroom where Sahana was still sleeping.

"She mustn't wake up," she whispered. "Her exams…"

"I know."

Neel gently placed a hand on her shoulder.

"We'll handle this. But you need to get ready. We should go to the hospital."

Nishi nodded. Only one thought kept running through her mind.

Why would he do this?

# Chapter 38
# It's your call Nishi



Neel and Nishi reached Lifeline Hospital within minutes. The emergency department was unusually crowded at that hour. Nurses moved quickly between the treatment rooms, stretchers were being pushed through the corridor, and the harsh white lights made the whole place feel even more tense.

Vineet's father was sitting on one of the cold metallic benches outside the emergency room. He looked shattered.

His hands were trembling, and tears kept streaming down his face. The moment he saw Neel and Nishi, he stood up but almost lost his balance.

"Neel…"

Neel immediately went to him. "Please sit down. Try to calm yourself. The doctors are treating him."

But the old man could barely control himself.

"He… he did this to himself."

Nishi stood beside Neel, her face pale.

"What happened Baba?"

Vineet's father looked at her, and for a moment he couldn't speak. Then he broke down again.

"Vineet brought a sample…"

Neel frowned.

"A sample?"

"A piece of glass," he managed to say. "A piece of glass smeared with Palash's blood."

Nishi and Neel exchanged a stunned glance. Neither of them spoke.

"He got a DNA test done," Vineet's father continued, struggling to get the words out. "He compared it with his own blood sample."

His voice trembled.

"And the report…"

He wiped his face with both hands.

"The report proved that he is Palash's biological father."

Nishi's breath caught. For several seconds, she simply stared at him. Palash. Vineet finally found out.

The truth she had carried alone for so many years had suddenly returned in the most unexpected way.

Vineet's father continued.

"He couldn't forgive himself."

He lowered his head.

"He kept saying that he had destroyed your life. That he had spent nine years believing you had betrayed him when you hadn't."

Nishi's eyes filled with tears.

"He locked himself inside his room."

Neel listened silently.

"We heard something was wrong, but he wouldn't open the door. I called the neighbours. Then the neighbours noticed blood coming from underneath it."

The old man's voice broke.

"We forced the door open."

Nishi instinctively covered her mouth. "He had hurt himself badly. He didn't want to live."

Neel placed a reassuring hand on the man's shoulder. He had learnt from a doctor friend that Vineet had survived but had suffered significant blood loss.

"Your son is alive. That's what matters right now.

"But the doctors aren't telling me anything."

He looked towards the emergency room doors.

"I've been standing here and nobody is telling me whether he will survive the shock."

Just then, the doors opened. A doctor hurried out, followed by two nurses.

Inside the emergency room, Vineet lay unconscious on the bed while the medical team worked around him.

One doctor was checking his vital signs while another was monitoring the blood pressure and oxygen saturation. An IV line had already been secured, and fluids were running steadily. The nurses moved quickly, preparing medication and checking his blood tests.

"His pressure is still low," one doctor said.

"Keep the fluids running. Repeat the haemoglobin and coagulation profile."

Another nurse adjusted the oxygen support. The team worked with quiet urgency. There was no panic in their movements—only concentration.

Outside, Vineet's father watched through the small glass panel in the door.

"My son…"

Neel held him firmly by the shoulders.

"They are doing everything they can."

The old man turned towards Nishi.

"I am sorry child"

Nishi shook her head.

"Please don't say that now Baba"

"But he did this because he couldn't live with what he had done to you."

Nishi looked through the glass at the doctors working over Vineet.

She didn't know what she felt. Anger. Pity. Pain.

And somewhere beneath all of it, the strange realization that the man she had spent years trying to forget had finally discovered the truth. He had a son. Their son.

But that truth had come far too late. A nurse came out of the emergency room.

"Family?"

Vineet's father immediately stepped forward.

"How is he?"

"He is responding to treatment," she said. "The doctors are still working on him. We need to monitor him closely."

The old man closed his eyes in relief.

"Will he survive?"

"We're doing everything necessary. Please wait here."

The nurse returned inside. Neel remained beside Nishi, watching through the glass. He quietly reached for her hand. She looked at him.

For years, she had imagined that if Vineet ever learned the truth, she would feel vindicated.

But standing there in a hospital corridor at three in the morning, watching him fight for his life, she felt no satisfaction at all. Only sadness. Because the truth had finally reached him. And it had nearly destroyed him.

By morning, Neel called his senior and explained that there was an emergency at home and that he needed to take the day off. After ending the call, he turned towards Nishi and gently patted her shoulder.

"Nishi, Sahana has her exam tomorrow, and Palash has a maths quiz today. I'll drop him at school and manage everything at home."

He glanced towards the emergency ward before looking back at her.

"Vineet might want to see you."

Nishi remained silent.

"So, you stay here," Neel said softly. "I'll take care of everything at home."

Nishi nodded. They had become used to taking care of each other without needing to say much. A little later, a doctor came out of the emergency ward.

"Mr. Vineet is out of danger now. We'll shift him to a ward shortly. But before anyone speaks to him, the family needs to talk to his psychiatrist. He is emotionally very vulnerable at the

moment, and there is a possibility that he may attempt to harm himself again."

Nishi listened quietly. For the first time that night, she allowed herself to breathe a little easier.

Till noon, Vineet's father remained at the hospital while Vineet was kept under close observation. Despite his own exhaustion, the old man kept asking the nurses about his son's condition and refused to leave until he was assured that Vineet was stable. The doctors had advised the family to speak to Vineet's psychiatrist before allowing anyone to meet him.

Dr. Suhani Mathur was already expecting them.

Vineet's father slowly got up from the bench when Neel arrived. He stood beside him, quiet and thoughtful.

"Let's go," Neel said gently.

The three of them walked down the corridor towards the psychiatric department. None of them spoke much. There was too much to say, yet no one knew where to begin.

They finally stopped outside Dr. Suhani Mathur's cabin. Neel knocked softly.

"Come in," came a calm voice from inside.

They entered the cabin and closed the door behind them. Dr. Suhani Mathur stood up and shook hands with Dr. Neel Mehra before gesturing towards the chairs.

"Please, sit."

They settled down quietly. Dr. Mathur looked at Vineet's father.

"Do you know why Vineet decided to have a DNA test done?"

His father shook his head.

"No, Doctor. I had no idea. He arranged it himself."

Dr. Mathur nodded thoughtfully.

"His therapy was progressing well. He had started opening up and confronting some of the issues he had carried for years. But I don't think the DNA test should have been done at this stage."

Nishi looked at her attentively.

Dr. Mathur continued.

"Vineet's childhood scars run very deep. He has learned to function extremely well on the outside. He is educated, successful and appears very composed. But beneath that, there is a considerable fear of abandonment."

She paused.

"He finally found the courage to seek therapy, which was a very positive step. But the DNA test brought him face-to-face with something he wasn't emotionally prepared to handle."

Nishi lowered her eyes.

"I had suspected something," Dr. Mathur said gently. "When Vineet first told me that Nishi had betrayed him, I wondered whether he had misunderstood what had actually happened between them. But he had no evidence. Only his own interpretation of events."

Nishi looked up.

"But I didn't suggest a DNA test back then," she said quietly. "I was afraid that if his assumption turned out to be wrong, it might affect him even more deeply. I never thought he would eventually do it himself." Dr Mathur said.

Nishi nodded. "I understand."

Dr Mathur folded her hands on the desk.

"Right now, we have to begin again. His immediate physical condition is stable, but emotionally, he is extremely vulnerable. We may need everyone's support—and we may need yours, Nishi."

Nishi remained silent.

"I met him briefly," Dr. Mathur continued. "He isn't angry anymore. He isn't even blaming anyone but himself. He is devastated."

She looked at Nishi.

"He cannot forgive himself for what he believes he did to you and for losing all those years with his son. At the moment, his guilt is overwhelming him."

The room fell silent.

"We have to help him understand that what happened cannot be undone," Dr. Mathur said softly, "but his life doesn't have to end because of it."

Dr. Mathur turned towards Nishi.

"But before we go any further, Nishi, I would like to ask you something. I want you to answer me honestly."

Nishi looked at her.

"Vineet has hurt you deeply. He was your husband, but he was also the person who wronged you. And I am a woman too. I can understand if, despite everything, you haven't been able to forgive him."

Nishi remained quiet for a moment. Then she spoke softly.

"But Doctor, I have forgiven him."

Dr. Mathur looked at her with a hint of surprise.

"I always knew he needed help. What happened between us was painful, but I never believed that hurting me was the whole of who he was."

A gentle smile appeared on Dr. Mathur's face.

"That is remarkable, Nishi. You are truly a rare kind of woman."

Nishi shook her head.

"No, Doctor. I am just another human being."

She glanced towards Neel.

Without saying anything, Neel gently squeezed her hand. Nishi understood what he meant. He understood her.

She looked back at Dr. Mathur.

"I have survived the storm," she said quietly. "If I can help him rebuild his life, then I will help him in whatever capacity I can."

Dr. Mathur listened silently for a moment before nodding.

"Then perhaps he is luckier than he realizes."

"All right," Dr. Mathur said gently. "We'll begin his treatment soon. For now, however, there is something more important."

She looked at Nishi.

"Vineet wants to see you."

Nishi's expression changed slightly.

She instinctively looked at Neel. Neel looked back at her. For a moment, neither of them said anything. Neel gently patted her shoulder.

The gesture was quiet, reassuring—a reminder that whatever she chose, he would stand by her.

Nishi looked at him for a moment, then turned back to Dr. Mathur. She took a slow breath.

"All right," she said softly. "I'll meet him."

# Chapter 39
# HOW TO LIVE AGAIN



Nishi entered the ward quietly.

The door closed behind her with a soft click. Vineet was still awake, lying on the hospital bed, his injured wrist heavily bandaged and resting beside him. He turned his face away as soon as he saw her.

The ward was dim and unusually quiet. A pale fluorescent light hummed above them. The faint smell of antiseptic lingered in the air. Curtains separated the beds around them, and somewhere in the distance, a nurse's footsteps echoed along the corridor.

Nishi came closer and dragged a chair beside his bed. She sat down without saying a word.

For a while, neither of them moved. Then she noticed the tears gathering in Vineet's eyes. His face remained turned away, but the tears slowly slipped down his cheek. Nishi simply sat there, quietly sharing the silence with him.

Then Vineet spoke, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Nishi, I don't want you to forgive me. I deserve your hatred. Please hate me for the rest of your life."

He swallowed hard.

"I will live with it. My fate is sealed. I chose it for myself."

Nishi said nothing. She simply looked at him. Vineet continued, his voice breaking.

"I know you have forgiven me, but I will never forgive myself."

He turned his face away.

"I ruined our beautiful world."

Tears trickled slowly down his cheek. Nishi reached out and gently wiped them away.

"No, Nishi," he whispered. "Don't sympathise with me."

"I wronged you. I wronged Palash."

Nishi remained silent.

There had been a time when she had imagined this moment countless times. She had imagined that one day, when Vineet finally understood the truth, she would tell him everything. She would tell him about the years of humiliation, the accusations, the loneliness, and the pain she had carried silently. She would make him understand what his actions had done to her and to their son.

But now that the day had finally come, there was no anger in her eyes. No accusation. No desire to make him suffer. She had forgiven him. And it had nothing to do with Neel. Her forgiveness had begun long before Neel had entered her life. It had begun on the day she realised that no one was coming to save her.

No one was going to rebuild her life for her. No one was going to protect her or raise Palash in her place. If she wanted a future for herself and her son, she would have to build it with her own hands. So, she did.

She picked herself up when she had every reason to remain broken. She worked hard, raised Palash, faced every difficult day and slowly learned to stand on her own. Somewhere along the way, the woman who had once waited for Vineet to understand her had disappeared. In her place stood a woman who no longer needed anyone's apology to prove that her suffering had been real. She had become strong. She had moved forward.

And she had learned that forgiveness did not mean forgetting what had happened. It meant refusing to let what had happened control the rest of her life. Nishi looked at Vineet quietly. There was sadness in her eyes, but no hatred.

"You don't have to punish yourself for the rest of your life, Vineet," she finally said softly. "You just have to accept what you did… and make sure you never become that person again."

Vineet gently reached for her hands and held them tightly. Nishi did not pull away.

"Promise me you'll stay by my side," he whispered. "Don't leave me alone. Not now."

"I'm here, Vineet," Nishi said quietly.

He lowered his eyes.

"I know I have hurt you deeply."

His voice trembled.

"That's why I punished myself."

He took a shaky breath, struggling to hold back his tears.

"But how am I going to face Palash?" he asked. "How can I look into his innocent eyes after everything I did?"

Nishi remained silent.

"I should have been there," Vineet continued, his voice breaking. "I should have been the one to hold him when he first came into this world. I should have been there when you needed me."

Tears finally escaped his eyes and rolled down his cheeks. Nishi reached across and gently wiped them away.

Vineet closed his eyes for a moment, overwhelmed by the kindness he felt he no longer deserved.

"I lost so many years," he whispered. "And I can never get them back."

Nishi looked at him steadily.

"No," she said softly. "You can't get them back."

Vineet looked at her.

"But you can choose what you do with the years that are still left."

For a moment, his eyes remained fixed on her face. Then his memories drifted back to the past—to the night when everything had begun to fall apart.

"That night…" he whispered. "It was raining relentlessly."

Nishi's expression changed slightly.

"I came home after visiting the doctor. He had just told me about your pregnancy."

He paused, his fingers tightening around hers.

"The doctor congratulated me. He called it a miracle."

A bitter, broken smile crossed his face.

"But I had already made up my mind."

"Please, Vineet," Nishi said softly. "Let go of the past."

"No, Nishi. Let me speak." His voice trembled. "I want to let it out. Just once."

Nishi said nothing, but her eyes held compassion.

"That night, you had set the dining table beautifully. You had prepared everything to celebrate the beginning of our new journey."

His eyes filled again.

"And I overturned that table."

Nishi lowered her gaze and sighed.

"I questioned your character. I assumed everything without knowing anything."

He swallowed.

"I remember you telling me that you wouldn't leave our house. You never wanted to leave me."

His voice cracked.

"But I mercilessly dragged you out."

Nishi remained still.

"You resisted. You begged me to listen. And I dragged you across the floor."

He closed his eyes.

"I threw you out of the house in that torrential rain."

A tear slipped down his cheek.

"You knocked on the door again and again. You kept asking me to open it."

He took a shuddering breath.

"And I turned a deaf ear."

"I opened a bottle of wine, thinking it would somehow lessen the pain."

His face twisted with shame.

"And you waited outside in the rain… believing I would eventually open that door."

Nishi looked at him.

"I was so cruel," Vineet whispered. "So merciless."

He wiped his face with his free hand.

"You tried to convince me that I was the only man you had ever loved. You pleaded with me. You cried."

His voice became barely audible.

"I still remember your pleas."

He looked down at his bandaged wrist.

"And yet that night, I treated you inhumanely. I slapped you. I became so consumed by suspicion and rage that I wanted to kill you."

He shook his head, unable to understand his own past self.

"How could I do that to you?"

Silence filled the room.

"That one moment of suspicion destroyed our life, Nishi."

His tears flowed freely now.

"I lost you. I lost Palash."

"I lost the family we could have built."

He looked at her helplessly.

"Had I not fallen weak that night… perhaps today we would have been living a completely different life. A happy married life. You, me and our son."

His voice broke.

"I would have been a proud father. A husband."

He began to sob.

"I was an animal, Nishi. Please hate me."

His shoulders shook.

"I was a savage."

Nishi reached for his hand, but Vineet broke down completely.

"I don't want to live, Nishi."

His voice rose suddenly.

"I want to end this life."

The nurse hurried into the room after hearing him cry.

"Please calm down, Mr. Malhotra," she said gently. "You've endured significant blood loss. You need to rest."

But Vineet could barely hear her.

"I don't want to live!" he cried. "I want to end this life!"

The nurse immediately called for the doctor. Within moments, Dr. Suhani entered the ward.

She approached the bed calmly and spoke to him in a steady voice.

"Mr. Malhotra, you've said enough for today. You needed to let all of this out, and you have. But you cannot punish yourself by destroying what remains of your life."

Vineet lowered his head, exhausted.

Dr. Suhani glanced at Nishi before continuing. She turned to Vineet.

"Your condition is stable now, but you've lost a significant amount of blood. We will continue your treatment gradually. There is no need to force anything tonight."

She turned to the nurse.

"Keep a close watch on him."

Then she looked back at Vineet.

"You will be here for another twenty-four hours for observation. After that, if everything remains stable, you may be discharged. But you must not be left alone for some time."

Vineet said nothing.

"A nurse can stay with you if necessary," Dr. Suhani added. "And we will also arrange the appropriate psychological support. What happened tonight cannot simply be dismissed because your physical condition has improved."

Nishi listened quietly.

Then she spoke, her voice gentle.

"Vineet, I have no grudges against you. Let bygones be bygones."

Vineet looked at her, unable to say anything.

"It's time to forgive yourself," she continued. "It's time to be kind to yourself."

She paused before adding softly,

"Think of Baba."

Vineet's expression changed.

"What was his fault?" Nishi asked. "How would he live if something happened to you?"

She held his gaze.

"You were the very reason he is alive today. You brought him back to life when everyone thought they were going to lose him."

Vineet lowered his eyes, tears gathering once again.

"He needs you, Vineet. And perhaps you need him too."

For a long moment, there was only silence.

Then Vineet finally looked at her.

His eyes were exhausted, swollen from tears, but for the first time that night, there was a small flicker of acceptance in them. He had confessed his guilt. Nishi had heard him without hatred. Now he would have to learn something far more difficult than admitting his mistakes. He would have to learn how to live with them.

And, slowly, how to live again.

# Chapter 40
# THE LITTLE THINGS



That night, Nishi and Neel sat together, quietly discussing everything that had happened that day. Nishi told him about Vineet's reaction—his exhaustion, his guilt, and the way he seemed unable to forgive himself. Neel listened patiently, without judgment. After a while, he got up and returned with two cups of steaming hot coffee.

He handed one to Nishi and settled beside her.

"Nishi, I want to know what you think."

She looked down at the coffee in her hands.

"I don't know how to help him, Neel."

"He is devastated," Neel said softly.

Nishi nodded.

"Wounds take time to heal," Neel continued. "Gradually, things will get better."

Nishi looked at him.

"It was different in your case, Neel. Ira had walked out of your life."

Neel remained silent for a moment.

"But in Vineet's case, he knows that he ruined his own life," Nishi continued. "That makes it much harder for him."

She took a slow sip of coffee.

"I just want him to understand that I have forgiven him. He doesn't have to keep punishing himself. He should start living his life again and, gradually, learn to move on."

She paused before adding quietly,

"He is only thirty-seven, Neel. His life is still full of possibilities."

Neel sighed.

"Nishi, it will happen."

He looked at her reassuringly.

"Gradually, it will happen."

A faint smile appeared on Nishi's face. Neel continued

"But today, I am happy that he finally found out the truth," he said. "I know he had been struggling for answers all these years. He was seeking help, even if he didn't know how to ask for it."

"Hmm," Nishi murmured.

Neither of them spoke for a while.

They simply sat together, finishing their coffee in silence—the kind of silence that needed no explanation.

Eventually, they called it a night.

The next few days passed quietly.

Neel and Nishi managed everything in the house, the exams of the children, the playtime and also Neel continued to care for Ira—not only as her doctor, but also as a friend who understood

how frightening it was to face an uncertain future alone. He remained by her side through the difficult days of treatment, answering her questions, reassuring her whenever fear overwhelmed her, and making sure she never felt abandoned.

And while Neel remained devoted to his responsibility toward Ira, life around him continued to move forward, carrying each of them toward a truth that none of them could yet fully see.

Nishi had her own responsibilities to carry. Vineet had stopped coming to the office altogether. The truth had shaken him so deeply that, for a while, he seemed ready to give up—not just on work, but on himself. His responsibilities, however, could not simply disappear.

So, Nishi quietly took over his part of the work as well.

There were days when she stayed late, going through his files, answering questions from the team, and making sure that nothing he had been handling was left unattended. She knew she was already carrying enough, but she also knew that Vineet needed time. More than anything, she wanted him to return. Not for the company.

Not for her. For himself.

She kept calling him, gently reminding him about pending work, asking him to attend meetings, sending him updates so that he would not feel completely disconnected. She never forced him.

She simply kept pulling him, little by little, back towards ordinary life.

One evening, after another long day at the office, Nishi sat alone at her desk and looked at the unfinished work in front of her. She was tired.

But somewhere inside, she understood why she was doing it. This is what strong people do. They don't abandon someone simply because that person has fallen. They help them find their feet again. Her thoughts drifted to Neel.

That was exactly what he had been doing too.

He had been standing beside Ira through her illness, even when it was emotionally complicated for everyone around him. He continued to care for her because she needed a doctor, a friend, and someone who would not let her lose hope.

Neel never ran away from difficult situations. He faced them. Perhaps that was what strength really meant—not being untouched by pain, but still choosing to do what was right despite it. Nishi took a deep breath.

"If Neel can do it," she whispered to herself, "so can I."

She looked at Vineet's files once more and began working. She would help him get back on track.

Not because she owed him anything. Not because she had forgotten what he had done. But because she had forgiven him. And sometimes, forgiveness meant more than letting someone go.

Sometimes, it meant helping them learn how to live again.

When Nishi finally returned home, she was expecting another evening filled with unfinished chores and a tired mind. Instead, she found that Neel had quietly made everything easier for her.

The maid was on sick leave, so someone had to step in. Neel had helped the children with their studies, prepared dinner, and somehow managed to keep the house running without making a fuss about it. As Nishi entered, Neel walked towards her with a steaming cup of tea.

"Here. You must be exhausted."

She accepted it with a grateful smile, the warmth of the cup spreading through her tired hands. Before she could say anything, Palash came running towards her.

"Ma! I got full marks in Maths!"

Nishi's face lit up.

"Really? Full marks?"

He nodded proudly.

"And guess what? I got the exact same questions Papa taught me!"

Nishi looked at Neel. He simply smiled. Then he turned towards Palash and said gently,

"Son, you scored so well because you are sincere and hardworking—just like your mom."

Something tightened inside Nishi's chest. She looked at Neel for a moment, overwhelmed by the simple tenderness in his words. Before she could respond, Sahana came rushing towards them.

"Mom, something very interesting happened at chess today!"

Nishi laughed.

"Alright, tell me."

Sahana lowered her voice dramatically.

"A fourteen-year-old boy proposed to me."

Nishi froze. So did Neel. They exchanged a quick glance. Sahana was only twelve and had recently been promoted to the eighth grade.

"And what did you say?" Nishi asked, trying very hard to keep a straight face.

"Of course, I declined." Sahana shrugged, completely unfazed. "I have more important things to do. Let me first become an ace chess player."

Neel smiled proudly and patted her shoulder.

"That's my brilliant girl."

Palash looked at her thoughtfully.

"You don't want to become a doctor like Papa?"

"No." Sahana shook her head with a grin. "I want to become an ace chess player. You become the doctor."

Palash immediately nodded.

"Sure. I'll become an oncologist like Papa."

Neel's face brightened.

"That's my boy!"

He held out his hand, and Palash eagerly high-fived him. Sahana watched them, pretending to be offended.

"And what about me?"

Nishi laughed.

"Aww, come here."

She pulled Sahana into her arms.

Within seconds, Palash joined them. Neel stood beside them, smiling before finally wrapping his arms around the whole little group. The four of them huddled together, laughing and teasing one another.

For a few precious moments, there were no worries about the past, no difficult conversations waiting for tomorrow, no fears about what the future might bring.

There was only this. A warm home. Four hearts close together. And an ordinary evening that, somehow, felt like everything they had ever wanted.

Later that night, Nishi was exhausted. After the children retired to their rooms, she went to her bedroom, hoping to get some much-needed rest. Palash had fallen asleep in Sahana's room, so Neel had gently sent him back to his own bed with a promise that he would sleep on the diwan. A little while later, Neel walked in carrying two steaming cups of coffee.

Their daily ritual. He held one out to her.

"Here."

"Thank you. I needed this."

"You should have told me."

Nishi took the cup from him and smiled.

"I knew you would bring it."

Neel smiled back. He didn't need to ask how she knew. Somehow, after more than a year of knowing each other, there were things they simply understood. They settled comfortably on the bed, their cups warming their hands as they began talking. Not about work. Not about deadlines or office politics or tomorrow's responsibilities.

They talked about the little things that had made them smile that day—the children's antics, something funny Sahana had said, Palash's excitement over his Maths marks, and all the small, ordinary moments that somehow felt worth remembering.

Their conversations rarely had a destination. They simply wandered. And perhaps that was what they loved about them.

When their coffee was finished, Neel noticed Nishi rubbing her temple.

"Headache?"

She nodded.

"A little more than usual."

He knew she disliked taking painkillers unless absolutely necessary. Without another word, Neel moved towards the headboard and gently tapped his lap.

"Come here."

Nishi looked at him for a second before quietly resting her head on his lap. Neel carefully adjusted the pillow beneath her and began massaging her temples, his fingers moving slowly through her hair. Nishi closed her eyes.

The touch was gentle, familiar and reassuring. She let out a small sigh.

She loved these moments—the quiet ones in which Neel didn't try to fix everything with words. He simply stayed.

After a few minutes, she murmured,

"It's much better, Neel."

"I know how to make my woman feel better."

Nishi opened her eyes and looked up at him.

A faint smile appeared on her lips.

"Your woman?"

Neel's fingers paused for just a moment.

He looked down at her, a playful smile in his eyes.

"Did I say something wrong?"

She shook her head, still smiling.

"No."

"Good."

He resumed the gentle massage. Nishi closed her eyes again, secretly enjoying the warmth in his voice more than she wanted to admit.

For a while, neither of them spoke. There was only the soft hum of the AC, the faint scent of coffee lingering in the air, and Neel's fingers gently easing away the last of her headache. It was an ordinary night.

But somehow, lying there with her head in his lap, Nishi felt an extraordinary sense of peace.

Some kinds of love announced themselves loudly. Theirs had begun to live quietly—in coffee cups, tired smiles, gentle touches, and the comfort of knowing that someone would always notice when you needed them.

# Chapter 41
# SHE KNEW PERFECTLY WELL



A couple of weeks passed quietly, settling into a rhythm that neither of them questioned anymore. Ira was responding remarkably well to the chemotherapy. Her condition was improving, and for the first time, there was genuine hope that the treatment would bring her back to a normal life.

At the office, things had changed for Nishi too.

She had been promoted—something she had earned through months of hard work and dedication. Vineet had recommended her for the position himself. He hadn't done it out of guilt or obligation. He genuinely believed she deserved it.

One morning, while Nishi was preparing breakfast, Neel stood beside her, helping with the preparations. He was unusually cheerful, humming softly as he worked.

Nishi glanced at him and smiled.

"What happened? You are in a very good mood today."

Neel looked at her with an easy smile.

"Come on, Nishi. With you around, I am always cheerful."

She paused for a moment, looking at him. There was something effortless about the way he said it—as though it were simply a fact.

Then he added,

"Ira is responding very well to the chemotherapy. Her reports are encouraging. One more session will be done after four days, and if everything continues to go this way, she should make a complete recovery."

Nishi's face brightened. "That's wonderful, Neel."

He nodded, visibly pleased.

Nishi knew that look.

Whenever one of his patients responded well to treatment, Neel carried a quiet satisfaction with him. It wasn't pride exactly. It was something deeper—the feeling that, after all the suffering he witnessed every day, he had managed to give someone a chance at life. She watched him for a moment.

This was the man she had come to know—not only as the person who made her coffee, helped with the children and stood beside her through difficult days, but as a doctor who genuinely cared about the lives placed in his hands. And perhaps that was one of the reasons she had grown so deeply attached to him. Neel caught her looking at him.

"What?"

"Nothing," she said, smiling.

He narrowed his eyes playfully.

"That 'nothing' usually means something."

Nishi shook her head and returned to the breakfast.

"Just keep humming, Doctor. You seem to be doing a good job of making the morning pleasant."

Neel smiled and went back to humming.

And for a few minutes, the kitchen felt almost perfectly ordinary—two people preparing breakfast, sharing good news, and quietly enjoying each other's company.

Soon after, Nishi's phone began to ring.

Her hands were covered in dough, so Neel picked up the phone and turned on the speaker. It was Vineet.

Neel knew it would most likely be something related to work. At the office, everyone knew that Vineet was on sick leave after an accident. Beyond that, nobody knew much about what had happened to him.

"Hey, Nishi!"

"Hi, Vineet."

"Nishi, I have some good news. The project your team worked on has finally been approved by the client. The company is going to make a substantial profit."

He sounded genuinely pleased.

"Congratulations!"

"Thank you, Neel."

Neel looked up immediately.

"He is Vineet," he whispered.

Nishi blinked.

"Ah… I'm sorry. I mean, Vineet."

There was a brief silence on the other end before Vineet chuckled.

"That's okay. I know you have Neel helping you with breakfast right now."

Nishi looked at Neel.

"Actually, he is."

"How did you know?"

"Just assumed. He cares about you a lot." Nishi chuckled

Neel quietly opened the refrigerator, took out a carrot and began munching on it. Nishi looked at him suspiciously. She leaned towards him.

"Did you even wash that?"

Neel whispered back,

"I washed them before putting them in the fridge."

She shook her head, amused, while Vineet continued speaking.

"I was wondering… perhaps I should go back to work."

Nishi's expression immediately brightened.

"That's brilliant, Vineet. You should."

"But I'm scared."

Nishi's voice softened.

"It's been quite a while. You don't have to rush back into everything at once. Start slowly. Take one step at a time. Gradually, everything will fall into place."

There was a pause.

"Nishi, I want to ask you something."

"Go on, Neel—"

"Vineet," he corrected with a smile.

Neel smiled too.

"Oh… yes. Vineet."

Vineet continued,

"Dr. Suhani told me that I have almost recovered. I still need to take things slowly, but I think I'm ready to start rebuilding my life."

Nishi smiled.

"That's wonderful news. I'm genuinely happy for you."

"I need your help."

"Of course. Tell me."

"Nishi, now that one of your projects has been completed successfully, you can continue working from home for some time. I just want to ease your burden. I know you're already dealing with a lot."

"That's thoughtful of you, Neel. Thank you so much."

She said it without thinking. Again.

This time, neither of them corrected her. There was a tiny smile on Vineet's face. He understood more than he said.

"Nishi," Vineet continued, "now that you know I'll be joining the office shortly… it has been quite a while since I've been away from work."

He hesitated. Nishi waited patiently.

"I was wondering if you could help me get back on my feet."

Nishi looked at Neel. He didn't immediately respond. He simply listened.

"Tell me, Vineet. How can I help?"

"Could you come over to my place and help me take over some of my responsibilities? Just for a while."

Nishi fell silent. She looked at Neel again. He looked back at her, equally uncertain. Vineet seemed to sense her hesitation.

"If it's a problem, that's perfectly fine. I'll manage."

Then, after a moment, he added quickly,

"Baba and the nurse will be around too. You won't be alone."

Nishi understood what he was trying to convey.

"I never doubted that, Vineet. I just didn't want to inconvenience anyone."

"But I'm the one asking for help," he replied gently. "Will you help me?"

Nishi looked at Neel once more. This time, he nodded.

"Yes, Vineet. I'll help you."

There was relief in Vineet's voice.

"Thank you, Nishi."

Then he added,

"And tomorrow is Saturday. If it isn't a problem, can I come over to see Palash?"

Nishi turned towards Neel. He nodded again, this time while arranging breakfast on the plates.

"Of course," she said. "Palash will be happy to see you."

After exchanging a few more pleasantries, the call finally ended. Nishi placed her phone down.

Neel looked at her.

"I think we should help him."

She nodded.

"He's trying to get back on his feet. And I'm genuinely happy that Dr. Suhani has helped him come this far."

"Hmm. Me too," Nishi said softly.

Neel picked up another plate. Then, as though a thought had just occurred to him, he looked at her with a mischievous smile.

"By the way…"

Nishi looked up.

"You addressed him with my name three times during that conversation."

She stared at him. Neel raised an eyebrow.

"What does that mean?"

Nishi's cheeks warmed.

"I don't know."

"Hmm."

He stepped closer.

Before she could say anything else, Neel gently caressed her cheek, his fingers lingering for just a moment. Then, with an utterly satisfied smile, he turned away and carried the breakfast plates towards the dining table.

Nishi stood there watching him. She couldn't help smiling. Perhaps she didn't know what it meant. Or perhaps she knew perfectly well.

# Chapter 42
# NO UNCOMFORTABLE SILENCES



Ira's chemotherapy had begun.

The treatments left her exhausted. After every session, she would return home drained, her body weakened by the medicines. Neel had arranged for two nurses to take care of her around the clock, making sure she received everything she needed. Nishi, meanwhile, never let Ira sink into despair.

She stayed beside her whenever she could, encouraged her through the difficult days and reminded her that the treatment was temporary—that there was a life waiting for her beyond it.

The chemotherapy had taken her hair too. One evening, Neel returned home with a new wig for her.

Ira wore it and slowly walked into the living room. She looked at everyone and smiled hesitantly.

"How do I look?"

"Beautiful as always," Neel replied.

Sahana immediately looked at Nishi, slightly irritated by her father's answer. Nishi only smiled.

"Very beautiful, Auntie," Palash added sincerely.

Ira's eyes softened. She bent down and gently hugged him. Neel looked at her.

"You don't need hair to feel beautiful, Ira. Your heart is beautiful."

He paused before adding gently,

"You came here to help our daughter. That will always mean something to us."

Nishi understood exactly what he was doing. Neel wanted Ira to feel valued, hopeful and strong enough to continue fighting.

Ira's eyes filled with emotion. She stepped forward and embraced him. Neel glanced around the room for a moment before gently returning the hug.

"Neel, your words really mean a lot to me."

"I mean it, Nishi."

Nishi almost laughed.

"Ira," she corrected softly.

Neel smiled faintly.

"Oh... Ira. See? You have already come a long way. You will recover soon. Just remain hopeful. One more chemotherapy."

Ira nodded, though her eyes remained fixed on him.

"I too want to return to our old life, Neel."

She lowered her voice.

"I owe you my entire life."

Sahana rolled her eyes and quietly left the room. Nishi noticed and followed her. She found Sahana sitting on the bed.

"What happened?" Nishi asked gently. "Something is bothering you."

"Nothing. Just leave me alone."

Nishi didn't leave. Instead, she sat beside her and made her comfortable.

Sahana remained silent for a moment before finally speaking.

"I know you're going to lecture me too."

Nishi gently caressed her hair.

"I won't lecture you. Tell me what you're feeling."

Sahana turned toward her.

"I just... I can't see her with my dad like that."

Nishi understood. Before she could answer, Sahana continued.

"I want you and Papa together, Mom."

Nishi's hand stopped for a moment. Sahana looked at her.

"But I wonder if that will ever happen."

"Palash wants that too."

Nishi looked at her in surprise.

At that moment, Palash appeared at the doorway.

"Yes, Mom," he said innocently. "We already live like a family. I call him Dad. Sahana calls you Mom. So why can't you both be together?"

Nishi didn't know what to say. Sahana answered for her.

"Grandmother wants it too. She's just stuck with Chetna Auntie right now. She'll be back in a month, and hopefully things will become better then. She stayed away longer than usual. If she had been here, things might have been different."

Nishi gently pulled both children into her arms. She was happy. Deeply happy. But she didn't say it aloud.

The children had already accepted something that the adults were still struggling to put into words.

They had accepted Neel and Nishi as a family. They were already living like one. Nishi smiled and tried to lighten the moment.

“Hey, children. Ira Auntie needs hope right now. Papa is giving her that hope so she can fight the cancer.”

“Moreover, this is true that she wanted to give her eyes to Sahana. So, clearly her intentions were good “

“We hope one more chemotherapy will make her better,” Palash said.

“Then hopefully she'll leave?” Sahana asked.

“Sahana...” Nishi said gently. “Let her recover first. I'm sure we'll find a way after that.”

“But what if she doesn't?” Sahana asked.

“Then we will still deal with it when the time comes. Her treatment comes first. Once she recovers, we'll figure everything else out.”

Sahana nodded reluctantly. Nishi knew the truth in her heart. Neel was helping Ira in the same way she had been helping Vineet—with compassion, responsibility and the belief that someone who was struggling deserved a chance to find their way back.

And she knew something else too. Neel loved her. He didn't have to say it. She could feel it in the way he looked at her, the way he stood beside her, the way his presence made her feel safe. Some feelings did not need words. Palash suddenly broke the silence.

“Papa said he would remove the wall between our two houses. When will he do that?”

Nishi smiled.

“During your summer vacation, child. Let Ira Auntie recover first. Once everything is settled, Papa can get the wall removed.”

She lifted Palash onto her lap.

"Until then, you still have the playground. You can play badminton and football there."

"Yeah!" Palash grinned. "Then we'll live in a big house!"

"I'll turn one room into a library," Sahana announced immediately.

"And I'll turn another into a play zone!" Palash declared.

Soon, the two children were deep in another of their endless discussions—arguing over rooms, books, games and all the wonderful things they would do once the houses became one. Nishi listened with a smile.

Their plans were simple. Their dreams were innocent. And somehow, without anyone announcing it, they had already begun building the family they wanted. Gradually, Nishi's attention drifted back toward her work.

There were emails waiting, deadlines to meet and responsibilities she could not postpone. She opened her laptop while the children's voices continued in the background.

For the moment, that was enough. Life was complicated. But somewhere between illness, forgiveness, old wounds and new beginnings, a family was quietly finding its way home.

Ira's final session of chemotherapy had begun. After weeks of treatment, there was finally a sense of hope. Her latest tests showed remarkable improvement, and even though the treatment continued to leave her weak, the doctors were optimistic about her recovery. On the work front, Nishi was managing everything efficiently from home. She had also been visiting Vineet regularly for almost couple of  weeks. She guided him through the work, updated him about the developments in the office and slowly helped him regain his confidence. Vineet had changed.

There was no trace of the bitter, suspicious man he had once been. He listened now. He accepted responsibility. He no longer blamed

Nishi or himself for the things that had gone wrong in his life. He understood he was mentally ill back then. Apart from work, their conversations often turned to Palash.

Vineet would ask about his studies, his friends, his games and the little things he was doing. Nishi answered without hesitation. There was no awkwardness anymore. Apparently, everything was falling into place.

On one particular Saturday, Palash had gone to Raima's house to spend the day with her children. Sahana had planned to study with a friend.

For once, the house was unusually quiet.

Then Ira suddenly began feeling extremely weak. Neel and Nishi took her to the hospital immediately.

After a preliminary examination, Neel decided to keep her in the ICU for observation.

Nishi waited anxiously outside. After some time, Neel came out.

"She'll be fine," he assured her.

Nishi looked at him worriedly.

"Sometimes fighting cancer gets difficult. Her body has been through a lot. My colleague just wants to keep her under observation tonight.", Neel explained.

"Does one of us have to stay here?"

"Not really." Neel gently patted her shoulder. "She's in the ICU, and one of our best nurses is monitoring her. My colleague is also on the night shift. There's nothing more either of us can do tonight."

He smiled reassuringly.

"We can come early in the morning. Don't worry. She'll be fine."

Nishi nodded, though the worry remained in her eyes. Just then, her phone rang.

It was Vineet. She answered.

"Nishi, I wanted to tell you something. I think I'm ready to join work again."

Nishi's face immediately brightened.

"Really?"

"From Monday."

"That's wonderful, Vineet. I'm really happy for you."

There was a brief silence on the other end.

"Nishi... I owe this life to you."

"Please don't say that, Vineet."

He smiled.

"I was just wondering..." he began hesitantly. "Could we meet at our house once before I join? Just over a cup of tea. Maybe today?"

Nishi glanced toward Neel.

"Vineet, actually, Ira is in the hospital."

"Oh."

His voice immediately changed.

"Alright. Then take care of her. How is she now?"

"She's under observation—"

Nishi stopped. Neel was looking at her, silently asking what was happening.

"One second, Vineet. I'll call you back."

She ended the call and turned toward Neel.

"Vineet wants to join the office from Monday. He asked me to come over for a cup of tea today."

Neel's face lit up.

"That's good news."

He pulled Nishi into a warm, spontaneous hug.

"Vineet has recovered. Ira will recover too."

For a moment, he forgot where they were. A few people nearby looked at them with quiet admiration. Nishi smiled. Neel released her and looked at her thoughtfully.

"I think you should go."

"But Ira is here."

"There's nothing you can do for her tonight," he said gently. "She is being looked after by the best people. Even I'll leave after my shift and come back tomorrow morning."

He paused.

"This may be an important step in Vineet's recovery too."

Nishi remained hesitant.

"I'll drop you there and pick you up after my shift."

She finally nodded.

"Okay."

Nishi's car was at the service centre that day, so Neel drove her to Vineet's house that afternoon. As they stopped outside the familiar house, Nishi looked at the door for a moment. She was returning there for something completely different.

Closure, perhaps. Or simply a cup of tea between two people who had finally learned how to forgive. Nishi entered the house without informing Vineet beforehand.

She had deliberately avoided calling him. She didn't want him to make elaborate arrangements or feel obliged to prepare savouries and refreshments simply because she was visiting. Vineet looked pleasantly surprised when he saw her.

"Nishi! Why didn't you tell me you were coming?"

Before she could answer, he gently hugged her. There was nothing awkward about the gesture anymore.

It was simply the hug of a friend. Nishi hugged him back just as naturally.

"Baba has just left to meet a relative," Vineet said. "Had he known you were coming, he would have stayed."

He smiled.

"There's no one at home except me. Come right in."

Nishi stepped inside.

"Have you had something to eat?" Vineet asked.

"I had brunch in the hospital cafeteria."

"Brunch?" Vineet looked at the clock. "It's already four-thirty!"

Nishi laughed.

"I'm not hungry."

"I am." He grinned.

"Come on. Let's have something."

Before Nishi could protest, Vineet headed straight toward the kitchen and called out to her.

"Come right in, Nishi."

There was such warmth and informality in his voice that she couldn't refuse. She followed him. Vineet opened the cupboard and looked around.

"Will you please make the tea for us? I'll make those instant noodles for you."

He looked at her with a mischievous smile.

"The way you used to like them when I cooked them for you."

For a second, Nishi simply looked at him. The memory belonged to another life. But there was no bitterness in it anymore.

“Sure,” she said with a smile. “I'll make the tea.”

Soon, the kitchen filled with the familiar sounds of boiling water, clattering cups and casual conversation. They began talking about the office.

Nishi told him about the latest developments, the projects he had missed and how everyone was coping with his absence.

Then she couldn't resist teasing him.

“You know, your team has a name for you.”

Vineet looked suspicious.

“What name?”

Nishi tried to keep a straight face.

“Hitler.”

For a moment, Vineet stared at her. Then he burst out laughing.

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“What else?”

“Oh, there are several stories. But I think I'll save them for another day.”

“Now you've made me curious.”

Their laughter filled the kitchen.

The evening passed more easily than either of them had expected. They talked about work. They talked about Palash. They laughed over old office incidents.

There were no accusations. No explanations. No uncomfortable silences. Just two people sitting together, finally able to speak without the weight of the past pressing between them. Nishi watched Vineet quietly for a moment.

This was not the man she had once known. This was simply Vineet. A friend. A colleague. Someone who had finally found his way back to himself.

And perhaps that was the greatest sign of healing of all.

# Chapter 43
# MAY GOD ALWAYS BLESS YOU



Nishi spoke to Neel on the phone. He told her that he was on his way and would be there in another half an hour.

Vineet turned towards her.

"So, time to go home?"

"Hmm. But we'll see each other on Monday, right?"

"Right?"

He smiled faintly.

"It's a new beginning?"

"Don't worry," Nishi said gently. "You know the law of inertia. Only the beginning is difficult. Once you start coming to the office again, things will gradually become smoother."

Vineet smiled.

"Hmm. I guess so."

There was a brief silence.

"Shall we have one more cup of tea?" he asked.

"Or we can wait until Neel comes," Vineet suggested.

"Once he comes, we'll leave. It looks like it's going to rain. We can have tea at our home. He must be tired too and would probably want to go home." Nishi replied

"Alright, then. I'll make the tea for us."

"No, Vineet. I'll make it."

Nishi went into the kitchen. She began preparing the tea while Vineet stood nearby, watching her quietly.

There was something strangely familiar about the sight. The way she moved around the kitchen. The quiet concentration on her face. The little gestures he had once known so well. For a moment, he wasn't looking at the woman standing before him. He was remembering the Nishi he had married. His wife.

The woman with the same innocence in her eyes, despite everything life had put her through. He watched her almost without blinking. As Nishi reached for the cups, Vineet slowly walked towards her. Before she could pour the tea, he gently touched her shoulder. She turned. Without saying anything, Vineet pulled her into his arms.

It wasn't lust. It was longing. A longing for something he had lost through his own mistakes.

He held her tightly, almost desperately, as if he could somehow reclaim all the years that had slipped away.

Nishi stiffened.

"Vineet… what are you doing?"

He immediately understood. He gently loosened his arms and stepped back.

"Nishi… have I made you uncomfortable?"

Nishi didn't answer. Because he had. And she could already sense what was coming next.

She poured the tea quietly.

"Vineet, I want to tell you something."

"Sure," he said softly. "Let's talk over a cup of tea."

He picked up the tray and carried it to the living room. Nishi followed. She handed him one of the cups, but Vineet placed it on the table without drinking.

Instead, he reached for her hands. Nishi looked at him, surprised.

"Nishi…"

He took a breath.

"Let's get married again."

Nishi wasn't shocked. Somewhere inside, she had already known this was what he wanted to say. She was only sorry for him.

"Nishi, I promise you, this time I'll make up for all the years we lost. I'll try to be the husband and father I should have been."

"I want to keep you and Palash happy. I promise you; we can be happy again."

"I've also received a brilliant offer in Bangalore. We can go there. We still have our house."

He smiled faintly.

"The same house where we started our journey."

"Can we start again, Nishi? With a clean slate?"

Nishi struggled to find the right words.

Vineet misunderstood her hesitation.

"Alright. I understand. You have a job here, and you've just got your promotion."

"We can cancel the Bangalore plan. We'll stay here."

"And we'll still have the same workplace."

He was speaking faster now, building a future before she had even answered.

"I'll drop Palash to school every day. We can come home together."

"We'll help him get ready for school. I'll help you prepare breakfast."

Nishi sat quietly on the sofa. Vineet slowly lowered himself to the floor in front of her.

"Please, Nishi."

His voice had become almost childlike.

"Give me one chance. I promise I'll fix everything."

Nishi gently placed her hand on his shoulder.

"Vineet, please sit on the sofa. I feel embarrassed seeing you like this. We need to talk properly."

He obeyed. Nishi took a deep breath.

"Vineet… I love Neel."

She didn't delay saying it. She knew that postponing the truth would only make things harder. Vineet's expression faded. For several seconds, he said nothing. Nishi watched him anxiously.

For a fleeting moment, she wondered whether she had said it too soon. He had only just begun to recover. She desperately hoped he wouldn't do anything drastic, as he had once done before. But Vineet finally looked at her.

"And Neel?"

Nishi remained silent.

"Does he reciprocate your feelings?"

"That isn't important, Vineet."

She spoke quietly but firmly.

"I love him. That's what matters."

Vineet nodded slowly.

"Hmm. I agree."

He looked at her for a moment.

"I'm sure he loves you too."

Nishi looked at him.

"I've noticed the admiration in his eyes whenever he looks at you."

He smiled faintly, but there was pain behind it. Then he stood and walked towards the balcony. It was already pouring outside.

"The house help dried the clothes," he murmured, picking up the bundle from the balcony railing. "And now they've become wet again."

He gathered the clothes into his arms. The rain was falling harder, and within moments, his shoulders were damp. Nishi understood. He wasn't talking about the clothes. He was hiding his tears. She walked towards him and gently took the bundle from his hands. Vineet turned away.

"Nishi… could you please warm the tea?"

He still didn't look at her.

"I need to use the washroom."

Nishi understood that he needed a moment alone. She didn't stop him. She returned to the kitchen and warmed the tea. A few minutes later, Vineet came back. There was warmth in his voice now, though his eyes still carried the traces of what he had tried to hide.

"Nishi, you know something?"

She looked at him.

"You clearly deserved better."

He smiled.

"And I'm happy for you."

"He loves Palash too."

"He can give you the love I couldn't."

Nishi's eyes softened. Vineet shook his head gently.

"Don't look at me like that, Nishi. I'm truly happy for you."

"And for Palash."

He paused.

"Though… it's a different story that I may move on in life, but there won't be anyone else."

Nishi's expression changed.

"No, Nishi. Don't feel bad for me."

He smiled again.

"Actually, I don't think I'll ever find anyone who can replace you."

Nishi sighed.

"I'm sorry, Vineet. I…"

He stopped her gently.

"That's alright, Nishi. Don't say anything."

He picked up his cup.

"I was never the man who could give you the love and respect you deserved."

"You clearly deserve better."

He looked at her one last time.

"And I have no regrets."

"Let's just finish the tea."

They drank in silence. There was nothing more to say. Soon, the sound of a car horn came from outside.

Neel had arrived. Nishi stood up and went towards the door and opened it. Then she turned to collect her handbag. Vineet watched her.

"May I take your leave, Vineet?"

He nodded.

"Sure."

She turned to leave.

"Nishi."

She stopped.

"I'm sorry about today."

His voice was quiet.

"I got carried away."

Before Nishi could respond, Neel appeared at the doorway.

He had heard the last sentence.

"That's okay, Vineet," Nishi said softly.

She walked towards Neel.

"Come, Neel."

Neel didn't exchange pleasantries with Vineet. Something about the atmosphere immediately told him that something had happened.

He noticed Nishi's subdued expression. He followed her out. Vineet remained standing near the doorway, watching them leave. The rain had intensified. The car slowly moved out of the driveway and disappeared down the wet road. Vineet stood there until the taillights vanished. Only then did he allow the tears to fall.

He looked towards the empty driveway.

"Goodbye, Nishi."

His voice broke.

"You clearly deserve better."

He wiped his eyes and looked up at the rain-filled sky.

"May God always bless you and Palash with all the happiness and prosperity in the world."

# Chapter 44
# THE MOMENT OF LOVE



Neel drove in silence. For several minutes, Nishi said nothing. She could sense something was bothering him, but she couldn't quite understand what it was. Suddenly, Neel pulled the car over to the side of the road.

He switched off the engine and turned towards her.

"Nishi," he asked softly, "Vineet was alone at home?"

"Yes. His father had gone to meet a relative."

"Oh, I see." Neel paused. "Is that why he called you there?"

Nishi looked at him carefully. She could see the restrained anger in his eyes.

"What happened, Neel?"

Neel sighed.

"Nishi, you can tell me. You know you can trust me."

"Of course, I do. You know that."

"Then tell me… why did he say he got carried away?"

Nishi remained silent for a moment.

"Did he do something inappropriate?"

"No, Neel. It was nothing of that sort."

"Then?"

"He wanted to marry me again."

"What!"

Neel turned towards her. For a fleeting moment, Nishi saw discomfort cross his face.

"So… what did you say?"

"I told him that I have moved on with my life."

"Oh." Neel looked ahead. "I thought…"

He stopped himself. Nishi studied his face.

"No, Neel. He didn't cross the line."

Neel looked away, his jaw tightening slightly. Nishi understood.

Perhaps Neel still wasn't ready to name what he was feeling. Before she could say anything more, her phone rang. It was Sahana.

"Mom, can I sleep over at Natasha's house tonight?"

Nishi frowned.

"No, Sahana, we were coming to pick you up."

"Mom, don't worry. Her parents are here. You know them."

Nishi hesitated before asking, "Let me talk to her mother."

She spoke to Natasha's mother and, after being reassured that Sahana was safe and would be looked after, finally agreed.

"Okay. But call me if you need me."

"Okay, Mom!"

The call ended. Neel had been quietly watching her. Nishi turned towards him.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"You've been observing me."

A faint smile touched his lips.

"Your possessiveness for Sahana."

"Come on, Neel. Shouldn't we protect her?"

"Hmm." He nodded thoughtfully. "Now I hope you understand what I felt when I saw your subdued face earlier… and then Vineet apologised to you."

Nishi's expression softened. She hadn't expected him to say that.

"But, Neel…" she said gently, "I'm not Sahana. She's twelve. I'm thirty-six."

Neel looked at her.

"But still…"

He paused.

"You're my responsibility."

Nishi's cheeks flushed.

She lowered her eyes, trying to hide her smile. Neel turned back towards the steering wheel and tried to start the car. Nothing happened. He tried again.

The engine remained silent. He frowned and tried once more. Nothing. Outside, the rain had grown heavier, drumming steadily against the windshield.

Nishi looked at him.

"What's wrong?"

“I don't know.”

Neel tried the ignition again.

Still nothing. He leaned back with a sigh and looked out at the rain. For a moment, neither of them spoke.

They were stranded on a quiet road, with the rain closing around them.

Neel turned towards Nishi. “You stay inside. I’ll get the mechanic.”

Before Nishi could protest, he was already out of the car. She watched him disappear into the curtain of rain.

He returned sometime later, completely drenched. Water streamed from his hair and down his face, his shirt clinging to him. Nishi immediately frowned.

“Neel! You’re completely wet.”

He opened the door and got inside.

“The mechanic says the car can't be repaired before tomorrow.”

Neel glanced at the rain outside. The road was almost deserted. The shops around them had already closed, their shutters lowered against the downpour. There wasn't a raincoat or even an umbrella in the car. Their apartment was barely a kilometre away.

Neel looked at her.

“Our home is one kilometre away. Let’s just walk, Neel.”

“Are you crazy?” Neel stared at her. “Look at the rain!”

“We'll wait for it to slow down.”

They waited. For a while, the rain softened into a gentle drizzle. Neel looked outside.

“Maybe it's stopping.”

Nishi smiled.

"Let's go."

They stepped out of the car.

For the first few minutes, they walked quickly, trying to avoid the puddles and the occasional splashes from passing vehicles. Nishi carefully gathered the edge of her midi dress in one hand. Then the rain began again. Not gently this time. Within moments, the drizzle turned into a heavy downpour. Neel stopped.

"Nishi, come back. We'll wait."

But she was already laughing. Her hair was plastered against her face, and droplets of rain sparkled on her eyelashes.

"What's so funny?" Neel asked, trying not to smile.

"Nothing!"

"You're getting completely drenched."

"So are you."

"I don't care about myself."

"That is exactly the problem," she laughed. "You worry about everyone except yourself."

Another sheet of rain came pouring down.

Nishi closed her eyes for a moment and simply stood there, letting the rain wash over her. Droplets traced the contours of her face, slipped through her hair and gathered along her shoulders. There was something almost ethereal about her in that moment—soaked, still, and strangely at peace.

Neel watched her silently.

His gaze lingered on her serene face, on the quiet smile that seemed to belong only to the rain, and something inside him softened. He blinked slowly, as though trying to hold on to the fleeting beauty of the moment.

For a few seconds, neither of them spoke.

The rain said everything for them.

"Look, Neel," she said, opening her eyes. "We can't protect ourselves from this rain."

She held out her hands, letting the water collect in her palms.

"So, let's enjoy it."

Neel looked at her with quiet admiration, saying nothing. His eyes lingered on her rain-drenched face, drawn irresistibly to the soft curve of her lips. For one fleeting moment, he found himself wishing he could lean closer and kiss those wet lips—but he kept the longing to himself, letting the silence speak for him.

There was something wonderfully carefree about her at that moment.

The woman who carried responsibilities on her shoulders every day had suddenly disappeared. In her place stood someone almost childlike—laughing at the rain, unconcerned about wet clothes, muddy roads or tomorrow's worries. A reluctant smile appeared on Neel's face.

"Fine."

Nishi looked at him in surprise.

"Fine?"

"Fine. Let's enjoy it."

She laughed.

And this time, Neel laughed with her. They continued walking. The rain soaked them completely. Their shoes splashed through puddles, and Nishi deliberately stepped into one of the deeper ones. Neel shook his head.

"Really?"

"What?"

"You're thirty-six."

"And?"

"And you're behaving like a five-year-old."

Nishi grinned.

"Maybe I haven't had a chance to behave like one for a long time."

Neel had no answer to that. Instead, he slowed his pace to match hers. Every few steps, he glanced at her.

"Are you cold?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, Doctor."

"Don't joke. You'll catch a cold."

Nishi laughed again.

"You're still worrying."

"Of course, I'm worrying."

He immediately looked away, as though the words had escaped before he could stop them. Nishi noticed. But she said nothing. They walked on.

The rain continued to fall around them, turning the familiar road into something almost magical. The streetlights shimmered through the sheets of water, and their reflections trembled in the puddles beneath their feet. At one point, Nishi slipped slightly.

Neel instinctively caught her hand.

"Careful."

She steadied herself. For a second, neither of them moved. His fingers remained around hers. Then Nishi gently pulled her hand away.

"I'm fine."

Neel nodded.

"Hmm."

They continued walking. Side by side. Neither spoke about the hand he had held. Neither spoke about the way he kept checking whether she was all right. Neither spoke about the quiet happiness that had settled between them.

They simply walked home through the rain. And somehow, the one kilometre that had seemed inconvenient at first became a walk neither of them would ever quite forget.

By the time they reached their apartment building, the rain had soaked them completely. Nishi looked up at the building and sighed.

"Finally, home."

But as soon as they stepped inside, they realised they had one more obstacle to face. The entire building was without electricity. The lift stood still. A notice near the entrance said the power outage was expected to last for nearly one hour. Nishi looked at Neel.

"We're on the first floor."

"We'll take the stairs," Neel said.

She nodded and started walking. But after only a few steps, Neel noticed the way she was moving.

Her feet were tired. Her high heels, which had already been uncomfortable on the long walk through the rain, were clearly making the climb harder.

"Nishi."

"Hmm?"

"Stop."

She turned around. Before she could ask why, Neel bent down and gently lifted her into his arms.

"Neel!"

She instinctively put her arms around his shoulders.

"What are you doing?"

"Saving you from those shoes."

"I can walk."

"I know."

"Then put me down."

"No."

There was such quiet certainty in his voice that Nishi fell silent. Neel began climbing the stairs. One step at a time. The stairwell was dark except for the faint light coming through the windows. Rainwater still clung to their clothes, and the cool night air drifted in from outside. Nishi could hear his breathing. She could feel the steady rhythm of his footsteps beneath her. For once, she didn't argue. She simply rested against him.

Her cheek was close to his shoulder. His wet shirt was cold against her skin, yet somehow his arms felt warm and secure around her.

"Neel…"

"Hmm?"

"You're getting tired."

"I've carried patients much heavier than you," Neel said with a soft, teasing smile. "You're hardly any weight at all."

She smiled.

"I'm not a patient."

"I know."

"Then who am I?"

Neel looked at her for a moment. His answer came quietly.

"Someone I don't want to see hurt."

The words were simple. But they made something inside Nishi go still. She looked at him. Neel immediately turned his eyes towards the stairs again, as though he hadn't realised how much those words revealed.

Nishi said nothing. She only tightened her arms slightly around his shoulders. Neel felt it. He simply continued climbing.

There was something strangely intimate about those few steps—the darkness, the sound of rain outside, the warmth of her body against his, and the unspoken trust with which she had allowed herself to be carried.

Neither of them tried to understand it. Perhaps they didn't want to. At the landing, Neel paused.

"Almost there."

Nishi smiled softly.

"I know."

And for those few moments, neither of them wanted the stairs to end too quickly.

# Chapter 45
# YOU FOUGHT FOR THEM



Neel and Nishi entered the house. It was completely dark. Nishi looked around and let out a small sigh.

"It's good that Sahana is at her friend's house and Palash is with Raima. Otherwise, how would they have managed in this darkness?"

"I couldn't agree more," Neel replied with a faint smile.

Nishi searched through the kitchen drawer until her fingers found a candle. Neel checked with the secretary of the apartment complex and returned a few minutes later.

"Well, there's a major fault near the power house. They're already working on it. It should be rectified soon."

"Don't worry, Neel. It isn't hot. The rainfall has made the weather quite bearable."

She lit the candle. For a moment, its tiny flame was the only light in the apartment, casting a soft, golden glow across the room.

Nishi handed Neel another candle and quietly went to change.

Neel watched her for a moment. Her clothes were still damp from the rain, clinging to her frame, and the candlelight softened everything around her. He quickly looked away, conscious of the sudden tenderness stirring within him.

There was something about seeing her like this—unguarded, natural and completely unaware of the effect she had on him—that made his heart beat a little faster.

Neel, meanwhile, made two cups of coffee and carried them to the bedroom. When Neel returned, she was standing near the window, watching the electricians moving about in the distance. Their torches flickered against the darkness as they worked. Neel stood behind her.

Neither spoke. Outside, the rain had slowed to a gentle drizzle. Inside, the candlelight trembled against the walls.

"They'll fix it soon," Nishi whispered.

"Hmm."

But Neel wasn't looking at the electricians anymore.

He found himself simply looking at her—the damp strands of hair resting softly against her cheek, the quiet warmth in her eyes, the woman who had, almost without either of them realizing it, become an inseparable part of his everyday life.

Somewhere along the way, Nishi had slipped into the little spaces between his routines, his thoughts, his ordinary days. Now, he could hardly remember what his life had felt like before she had been there. Perhaps she felt his gaze, because Nishi slowly turned.

Their eyes met.

For a few suspended seconds, neither of them moved. The candlelight flickered gently between them, while the rain whispered against the windows.

Then Neel lifted his hand. With a tenderness that made the moment feel almost sacred, he reached out and gently brushed the

damp strand of hair away from her cheek. His fingers lingered for just a heartbeat.

Neither of them spoke.

They didn't need to. Nishi lowered her eyes.

"Neel…"

His hand lingered for a moment before falling away.

"I don't know what happened to me tonight," he whispered.

Nishi looked up again. There was something vulnerable in his eyes that made her heart beat faster. He stepped closer. She didn't move away. His fingers found hers, almost hesitantly, as though he was giving her every opportunity to stop him. She didn't. Instead, her fingers slowly closed around his. That small gesture was enough.

Neel drew her gently into his arms. Nishi rested her forehead against his chest. She could hear his heartbeat—fast, unsteady, almost mirroring her own. For so long, they had protected the invisible boundaries between them. Tonight, those boundaries seemed to disappear beneath the sound of the rain.

Neel lifted her face and kissed her gently. Nishi closed her eyes.

The kiss deepened, carrying all the words they had never found the courage to say. His arms tightened around her, but there was still tenderness in every movement. He held her as though she were something precious, something he had no intention of hurting. Nishi's shyness slowly gave way to trust.

She held onto him. And when Neel kissed her again, she answered him without words. The rain continued outside. The candle burned quietly beside them. And somewhere between one breath and the next, they stopped thinking about tomorrow. There was no past. No fear. No unanswered question. Only the two of them, holding on to a moment they had both tried so hard to resist.

That night, they surrendered not merely to desire, but to the affection that had been quietly growing between them for months. Their closeness became a language of its own—tender, hesitant, and deeply intimate.

And when the world outside finally disappeared into silence, Neel held Nishi close, as though letting her go was the last thing he wanted to do. Neither of them said anything. Perhaps the words were too frightening. Perhaps the moment was too fragile. But in the quiet that followed, Nishi rested against him with a peacefulness she had not felt in a long time. Neel gently kissed her forehead.

"Sleep," he whispered.

She smiled faintly and closed her eyes. His arms remained around her.

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Morning arrived quietly. The rain had stopped. A pale light filtered through the curtains, falling softly across the room.

Nishi woke first. For a few seconds, she didn't remember where she was. Then she felt Neel's arm around her.

She looked at him. He was still asleep, his face calm and unguarded. A small smile touched her lips.

Neel stirred. His eyes opened slowly, and when he saw her, something softened in his expression.

Neither spoke. They simply looked at each other. There was an awkward sweetness between them now, mixed with something neither quite knew how to name. Neel lifted his hand and gently touched her face..

"Nishi…"

She waited.

He seemed about to say something. Something important. But before he could, his phone rang. The sound shattered the quiet

morning. Neel reached for it. His expression changed almost immediately.

"Ira?"

He listened. His face became tense.

"What happened?"

A pause.

"I'm coming."

He ended the call and sat up. Nishi immediately understood.

"Ira?"

Neel nodded.

"Her condition has worsened. I have to go to the hospital." He quickly dressed.

Nishi remained quiet, watching him. At the doorway, Neel stopped.

For a moment, he simply looked at her. Then he walked back, bent down and gently caressed her cheek.

There was tenderness in his eyes. Perhaps he wanted to say what he had almost said moments earlier.

Perhaps he wanted to explain the night. But once again, the words remained unspoken.

"Take care of yourself," he whispered.

Then he left. Nishi watched the door close behind him.

She touched her cheek where his hand had rested.

And for the first time, she wondered whether the beautiful night they had shared meant the same thing to him that it meant to her.

By afternoon, Nishi found herself looking at her phone again and again.

She finally called Neel. He answered after a few rings.

"Hello?"

"How is Ira?"

There was a brief silence before Neel replied.

"Her blood pressure dropped quite badly. Thank God she was brought in on time. We managed to stabilize her."

Nishi exhaled with relief.

"Thank God."

She paused before asking softly, "And you? Have you had something?"

Neel smiled faintly at the concern in her voice.

"I was just about to ask you the same thing. Have you eaten?"

Nishi smiled.

"I've prepared lunch. When will you come? The children have already returned. I brought them back."

There was something so ordinary about the way she said it—I brought them back, I prepared lunch, when will you come?—that Neel felt a warmth spread through him.

It sounded like home. But before he could answer, someone called his name from the corridor.

"Nishi, there's an emergency case. An important surgery. I have to go in."

"Oh…"

"I'll have lunch before performing the surgery. Don't wait for me."

Nishi was silent for a moment.

"Okay. Take care of yourself."

"You too."

The call ended. By evening, Neel finally returned home—with Ira.

She was still extremely weak. The moment Nishi saw her, she stepped forward instinctively.

"I'll help her."

But before Nishi could reach her, Neel gently slipped an arm beneath Ira and carried her into the bedroom.

"Careful," Nishi whispered, following them.

Neel lowered Ira onto the bed and adjusted the pillows behind her. He made sure she was comfortable before turning toward Nishi.

"Nishi, please take care of her until she recovers. Today, we almost lost her."

His voice was tired.

"She needs to eat properly. Please make sure she doesn't skip her meals."

"Of course," Nishi replied.

She didn't ask any questions. Soon, she brought the food and served it beside Ira's bed. Neel sat beside her and patiently fed her himself, making sure she ate every few spoonfuls.

He then turned to the nurse.

"Please stay with her tonight. If you notice anything unusual—anything at all—wake me immediately."

"Yes, doctor."

Only after he was satisfied that Ira was settled did Neel finally step away. He barely ate anything himself. Nishi noticed but said nothing. She fed Palash and Sahana, made sure they finished their dinner, and watched as they eventually retired to their rooms. The house grew quiet.

Nishi stood at the kitchen counter, putting away the last of the dishes, when she felt someone take her hand.

She turned. Neel was standing behind her.

"You're okay?" he asked softly.

Nishi looked at him with surprise.

"Yes. Why would you ask?"

He didn't answer.

Instead, he leaned forward and gently kissed her forehead. The gesture was tender, but something in his eyes unsettled her.

"What happened, Neel?"

He remained silent. Nishi didn't press him. She simply led him to his bedroom and made him sit comfortably.

"I'll get you some coffee."

A few minutes later, she returned with a warm cup and placed it in his hands. Neel stared at it for a long moment. Then he finally spoke.

"Nishi…"

She sat beside him.

"I couldn't save one of my patients today."

His voice broke slightly.

"I had promised his family."

Nishi listened quietly.

"He had recovered two years ago. We all thought we'd won. But the cancer came back."

He swallowed hard.

"I told them we'd fight it together. I told them we'd do everything we could."

He lowered his eyes.

"But he lost the battle."

A pause.

"I lost the battle."

Nishi's heart tightened.

"Neel…"

"I know I'm a doctor. I know we don't always win. I know what medicine can and cannot do."

He looked at her, his eyes exhausted.

"But at the end of the day, I'm still human."

His voice became quieter.

"My heart goes out to every person who loses their battle with cancer. And sometimes…"

He stopped.

"I feel like I've failed them."

"No."

Nishi's answer was immediate.

"You didn't fail them."

"I tried."

"You did more than try," she said gently. "You fought for them."

Neel shook his head.

"Maybe I should have tried harder."

Nishi knew then that words would not be enough. There was no argument she could make that would erase the face of the patient from his mind. So, she didn't argue. She simply moved closer and embraced him.

For a moment, Neel remained still. Then his arms slowly went around her. He held her tightly, as though he had been carrying the weight of the entire day alone and had finally found somewhere safe to put it down.

"Nishi…"

"Hmm?"

"There is another surgery next week."

She gently stroked his back.

"She is a single mother. Two children."

His voice trembled.

"I have to save her."

"You will."

"It's an important surgery."

"I know."

He looked at her. Nishi held his gaze.

"Neel, get some rest tonight. You have done everything you could today. Tomorrow, you'll wake up stronger."

He said nothing. After a moment, he slowly lay down, resting his head in her lap. Nishi was not surprised. She didn't move.

She gently ran her fingers through his hair. For the first time that day, Neel allowed himself to stop being the oncologist who had to be strong for everyone. He was simply a tired man. A man who had lost a patient.

A man who was afraid of losing another. A man who needed someone to tell him that he was allowed to rest.

# Chapter 46
# A QUITE INTIMACY



Neel pulled Nishi into his arms and held her tightly, as though he had been carrying a weight for far too long and had finally found somewhere safe to set it down. Nishi instinctively tightened her arms around him. For a while, neither of them spoke.

Then Neel gently guided her down onto the bed, never breaking their embrace. They lay there wrapped in each other's arms, close enough to hear one another breathe. He held her as though he was afraid that if he loosened his grip, the quiet comfort of the moment might disappear.

He pressed a soft kiss against her neck. Nishi smiled and kissed his forehead. His arms tightened around her.

"Stay here, Nishi," he whispered.

"I'm here, Neel," she replied softly.

He closed his eyes.

"You really are my calm in the storm, Nishi."

Her heart ached at the simplicity of his words. She gently held him closer, letting him find whatever peace he needed in her arms. Within minutes, his breathing became slow and even. His head eventually came to rest against her bosom, his body slowly surrendering to the warmth of her embrace.

Nishi instinctively wrapped her arms around him, one hand resting gently against his back while the other moved softly through his hair. She could feel the tension leaving him, little by little, as though being held by her had finally given him permission to stop fighting the storm inside him.

Neel drew a slow, peaceful breath and moved slightly closer, seeking her warmth even in his sleep.

For a moment, there was nothing beyond the quiet rhythm of his breathing, the warmth between them, and the steady beat of her own heart. She held him a little tighter. Not because she wanted anything from him. Not because she needed him to say anything. She simply wanted him to know, even in his sleep, that he wasn't alone.

Neel's fingers remained loosely curled against her, as though some part of him was still afraid she might disappear.

"I'm here," she whispered, barely louder than a breath.

He didn't answer. He didn't need to. He was already asleep in her arms, trusting her with the part of himself he showed no one else. And Nishi stayed awake, holding him close, quietly cherishing the fragile tenderness of the moment. He had fallen asleep.

Nishi remained still, afraid that even the smallest movement might wake him. She looked at him and gently brushed her fingers through his hair.

For tonight, at least, she wanted him to sleep peacefully. It wasn't a night of desire. It was something quieter. Something deeper.

A tired soul had simply sought comfort, and somehow, she had become the place where he could finally rest.

That night, when Neel had brought Ira into the house, neither of them had remembered to lock the main door.

It was Monday morning.The children had no school that day because of a festival, so they were still sleeping peacefully in their bedroom.

Nishi, too, had taken the day off that week. She had worked harder the previous week and had taken one day less than her allotted leave. Since the children were also on holiday and Neel's shift wouldn't begin until after 7 p.m., she decided to take the morning slowly and spend the day at home with them.

Vineet was joining work that morning, which meant it was an unusually easy Monday for her. It was already nine o'clock in the morning. The house was quiet. The children slept undisturbed in their room, while Ira was asleep in Neel's mother's room. Ira had slept until late that morning under the influence of the medication, leaving the house unusually quiet. Just then, Vineet arrived at the house. He pressed the doorbell. Nothing happened. He pressed it again. Still nothing.

The doorbell wasn't working.

Vineet hesitated before knocking. He didn't want to disturb anyone, especially this early in the morning. He was about to call Nishi again when he noticed something unusual.

The main door was slightly open. He frowned.

Why was the door open?

He pushed it gently.

"Nishi?" he called softly.

There was no response. He stepped inside, still reluctant to intrude. Then he remembered why he had come.

The previous night, his father had found a gold chain in their kitchen. Vineet immediately recognised it as Nishi's. She must have dropped it there when she had visited him.

He had called her that morning to tell her, but her phone was switched off.

Since he was on his way to the office anyway, he had decided to stop by and return it personally. He instinctively touched his pocket, reassuring himself that the chain was still there.

He looked around the quiet house.

"I'll just leave it with Nishi," he murmured.

Vineet stepped into the living room.

It was calm and unusually quiet. There was no one around.

He still felt slightly uncomfortable about entering without being invited, but he wanted to return the gold chain to Nishi personally. It wasn't just any piece of jewellery. Her father had gifted it to her on her tenth birthday, and Nishi had worn it almost every day since. He knew how much it meant to her.

She must be in the children's room, he thought.

Vineet had visited Neel's house several times before, so he knew that Nishi often slept in Sahana's room. He walked quietly towards the bedroom and gently pushed the door open. Palash was sleeping peacefully on one side of the bed, while Sahana lay on the other.

A soft smile appeared on Vineet's face.

He stepped closer and looked at Palash affectionately. Then he bent down and pressed a gentle kiss against his forehead.

"Sleep, son," he whispered.

His eyes glistened.

"I looked just like this when I was your age."

He carefully pulled the blanket over Palash and then over Sahana, making sure neither child stirred. Slowly, he stepped back and closed the door.

Perhaps Nishi was with Ira, he thought.

He didn't want to intrude there. Ira was unwell, and Vineet was a decent man; he knew better than to enter another woman's private space without a reason.

So, he decided to check Neel's room instead. He thought he would give it to Neel and leave. He walked down the hallway and gently turned the handle. The door opened. Vineet stopped.

For a few seconds, he simply stood there. Neel was asleep, resting against Nishi, his face nestled near her neck. Nishi lay peacefully in his arms. They were fully clothed. Neel was still wearing his formal clothes from the previous night, while Nishi was dressed in her nightgown.

There was nothing improper about what Vineet saw. And yet, there was something deeply intimate about it.

Neel's arms were wrapped securely around Nishi, even in sleep, as though his body instinctively refused to let her go. Nishi's arms were around him too, holding him with the same quiet tenderness. Vineet immediately looked away.

He felt as though he had stepped into something that wasn't meant for his eyes. But after a moment, almost against his own will, he looked back.

His gaze fell on Nishi's face.

She looked serene. Almost childlike in her sleep. There was no trace of the worries she usually carried in her eyes. And Neel was holding her as though she were something precious and fragile.

Vineet stood there silently. Something shifted inside him, though he couldn't quite put it into words. He looked away again. Without disturbing either of them, he quietly stepped out of the room. He walked to the dining table and placed the gold chain there carefully. For a moment, he stood looking at it.

He had come to return something that belonged to Nishi. Instead, he had witnessed something he had never expected to see.

He turned towards the door and walked out quietly, careful not to make a sound. He didn't realise when his eyes filled with tears.

By the time he reached his car, a tear had already slipped down his cheek. He quickly wiped it away with the sleeve of his shirt before getting into the driver's seat.

For a few moments, he simply sat there, staring ahead. Then he looked back at Neel's apartment one last time.

The image of Nishi sleeping peacefully in Neel's arms came back to him. He blinked away the remaining tears, started the car, and drove towards his office.

Neel was the first to open his eyes. For a few seconds, he remained still, completely aware of where he was. He knew he was lying in Nishi's arms.

Her face was close to his, peaceful and completely relaxed. A faint smile touched his lips.

He gently kissed her cheek. He didn't want to wake her. Carefully, he slipped out of the bed and glanced at the clock.

It was already ten in the morning. They had overslept.

A little while later, Neel returned to the bedroom carrying two cups of tea. He had found the gold chain on the dining table and had brought it with him. He leaned over and gently kissed Nishi's cheek again.

"Wake up, sleeping princess."

Nishi stirred sleepily. Then her eyes opened wide when she realised how late it was.

"Oh God! It's ten already?"

She turned towards him and found Neel sitting beside the bed, smiling, one cup of tea held out towards her.

She took it from him. There was something different about him that morning. He looked completely relaxed.

There was no trace of the worry that had clouded his eyes last night. Neel picked up the gold chain.

"Look what I found."

He gently fastened it around her neck. Nishi touched the chain and smiled.

"Oh, it must have fallen off yesterday. I think the clasp has become loose."

"Don't worry. I'll get it fixed today." Neel assured her

She smiled at him and then held out her cup.

"You have yours."

Neel took the cup from her and sat beside her. His fingers gently brushed her cheek.

"Nishi…"

"Hmm?"

"Let's go out today. All of us. The children have a day off, and it's such a beautiful morning." He paused. "The nurse will take care of Ira."

Nishi looked at him, slightly surprised.

"Where will we go?"

"There's a new restaurant nearby. We could have lunch there."

A spark of delight appeared in her eyes.

"Hmm… why not?"

Neel smiled. For a while, they simply sat together, enjoying their tea and the quietness of the morning. Then Neel looked at her again, his expression turning playful.

"You know what you looked like while you were asleep?"

Nishi raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

"The sleeping princess from those childhood fantasy novels."

She laughed softly.

"Really?"

"Really." His smile widened. "When I was a child, I always wished that the sleeping princess would be mine."

Nishi looked at him in amused disbelief.

"And now?"

He looked at her for a moment, his voice softer.

"Today, I have my princess right here."

Nishi's cheeks warmed.

"Wow," she said, trying to hide her smile. "I am flattered."

Neel laughed softly. For that morning, there was no anxiety in his eyes, no uncertainty in his voice.

There was only an unexpected lightness between them—as though, for a few precious hours, life had forgotten to remind them of everything that was waiting outside that room.

Soon after the house help entered the house and Nishi stepped out of the bed to help her.

The rest of the day passed beautifully. Neel, Nishi, and the children spent the day outdoors, laughing, talking, and enjoying one another's company. For those few hours, there were no worries, no difficult conversations, and no questions that needed answers. It was simply a day filled with laughter and togetherness.

But the weeks that followed were far more demanding for Neel.

One of his colleagues had to take leave because his daughter was appearing for her entrance examinations. Soon after, another colleague's father suffered a cardiac episode, forcing him to return to his hometown.

Suddenly, Neel found himself almost alone in the department, shouldering responsibilities that would normally have been shared among the three doctors. His days became longer and his nights more exhausting. At home, however, Nishi quietly took over.

She knew how overworked Neel was. She didn't need him to explain it. She could see it in the tiredness in his eyes and the way he returned home after exhausting shifts.

Neel had once done the same for her. Whenever her workload had become overwhelming, he had stepped in without being asked—taking care of the children, managing things around the house, and making sure she had one less thing to worry about. Now it was her turn. There was no discussion about it. No written agreement.

No expectation that one of them owed the other anything. It was simply an understanding between them.

Nishi worked from home, and she managed the household around her work without making Neel feel guilty about how little time he had for anything else. Slowly, a comfortable rhythm settled into their lives.

Vineet had joined the team and maintained a cordial, respectful relationship with Nishi. Their interactions remained easy and professional, just as they had always been.

Life seemed to have found a strange but steady rhythm. Neel carried the hospital responsibilities on his shoulders.

Nishi quietly carried the home.

The intimate night they had shared was never discussed between them. Neither Neel nor Nishi felt the need to put that moment into words. Yet Nishi knew, perhaps more clearly than ever, what she meant to him.

Neel was exhausted by the demands of the hospital. His days were long, his responsibilities relentless, and often, by the time he returned home, he had little energy left.

But even then, they found small moments for each other. Sometimes it was nothing more than sitting together over a cup of tea.

A few quiet minutes. A tired smile. A gentle touch.

A simple "How was your day?"

And somehow, those brief moments were enough. The weight of the entire day seemed to grow lighter when they sat beside each other. Neither needed to entertain the other or find the right words. Their quiet companionship itself had become a kind of refuge.

For Neel, after hours of carrying everyone else's worries, Nishi had become the place where he could finally set his own down.

And for Nishi, those few peaceful minutes with him were enough to remind her that beneath the exhaustion and uncertainty, something between them had quietly deepened.

They never spoke about it. They simply lived it—in shared cups of tea, tired smiles, lingering glances, and the comfort of knowing that at the end of a difficult day, they had each other.

# Chapter 47
# Something didn't feel right



A couple of weeks passed. One evening, Vineet told Nishi that he had accepted a job offer in Bangalore and would be moving there soon with Baba.

After office hours, he asked her if she would join him for their usual coffee—but this time, instead of the office cafeteria, he suggested a small restaurant nearby. Nishi agreed.

They sat across from each other at a quiet table. For a while, neither spoke.

"So, Vineet… when will you join the Bangalore office?" Nishi asked.

"In a week's time. I've already served more than a month of my notice period," he replied.

Nishi took a slow sip of her coffee. When she looked up, she found Vineet watching her.

"Nishi…"

"Hmm?" she responded with a gentle smile.

He hesitated for a moment.

"I just want you to know something. I still love you."

Nishi's smile faded slightly. She looked down at her coffee, suddenly uncomfortable.

Vineet noticed.

"Please don't feel bad for me," he said softly. "You are under no obligation because of what I feel."

He paused.

"I just want you to know that no one will ever replace you in my life."

Nishi looked at him quietly.

"In this life," he continued, his voice trembling slightly, "I found some kind of solace with you. I don't think I will ever find that same feeling anywhere else."

Nishi reached across the table and gently placed her hand over his. It was not a promise. It was simply an acknowledgment that she understood. Vineet covered her hand with his other hand and held it for a moment. Nishi smiled faintly.

"Vineet, I wish you all the very best for your new journey."

He smiled back, though his eyes had filled with tears.

"Nishi… just keep me informed about Palash. I would be happy to know about him."

He lowered his gaze.

"Though I don't know if I deserve that."

Nishi gently shook her head.

"No, Vineet. Don't say that. You've already been through a lot. You don't deserve any more suffering."

She paused before adding softly,

“Palash is your son. Of course, I will keep you posted about him.”

A grateful smile appeared on Vineet’s face.

“Thank you, Nishi.”

He took a breath.

“I was a broken man. You had every reason to hate me.”

His voice grew quieter.

“But instead, you accepted me for who I was. You came to the hospital when I needed you. You helped me get back on my feet.”

Nishi looked at him with compassion.

“Vineet, I just want you to be happy.”

“I will be happy if I know that my woman is happy.”

Vineet Squeezed her hand. Nishi looked up.

“This is my last day in the office”

Nishi was taken aback by the words, but Vineet quickly continued.

“Please let me know when you get married. I promise I won't come. I can’t come.”

“I won’t have the courage”

He gave a faint, almost embarrassed smile.

“I don't think I could bear seeing you with someone else. But I'll still be happy for you. Truly. It will be your new beginning.”

Nishi didn't know what to say. She hadn't realized that Vineet had already made plans to leave so soon.

Before she could respond, the waiter arrived with a slice of chocolate cake. Vineet looked at it and smiled.

“Nishi, this is my last day in the office. So, let's celebrate the beginning of a new life before we separate”

“Vineet… you never told me.”

He casually brushed aside her concern.

“Come on. Forget that for now. Let's have your favourite chocolate cake.”

He picked up a spoonful and held it out to her. Nishi instinctively pulled back.

“Vineet, I’ve been feeling a little nauseous for the past few days. I don’t think I can eat the cake right now. “

“Come on. Just one bite.”

She hesitated, then reluctantly took the spoonful. But within minutes, she suddenly covered her mouth and hurried away from the table. Vineet immediately followed. She bent down and threw up.

“Nishi!”

People at the nearby tables began to glance in their direction. The waiter hurried over. Vineet quickly asked him to clean the area and helped Nishi move to another table, away from the crowd. He handed her a glass of water.

“Here. Take small sips.”

Nishi drank some water and wiped her mouth. Vineet looked worried.

“I didn't realize it was this bad.”

“Are you okay?”

“I'm fine,” Nishi assured him.

Vineet frowned.

“Nishi, you've been feeling like this for a week. Why didn't you tell Neel? He could have given you something for it.”

“Let's go to a doctor.”

"No, Vineet. I live with a doctor," she said with a tired smile. "It's probably just acidity. Maybe it's the work pressure. I'll manage."

"Really?"

He studied her face.

"You manage pressure better than anyone I know. That's why I don't think you should ignore this."

Nishi remained silent.

"Tell Neel that you're not feeling well," Vineet insisted gently. "And get some rest."

She nodded.

"I will."

For a moment, they simply sat there. Two people who had once shared a life were now preparing to walk in completely different directions. Soon after, they parted ways.

Vineet walked away carrying the quiet ache of a love he had finally learned to let go of.

And Nishi returned home, unaware that the nausea she had dismissed as acidity was about to change everything.

When Nishi reached home, she found the children busy packing their backpacks. Neel was helping them, checking their things one by one to make sure they hadn't forgotten anything. Ira had almost recovered and was taking rest in the other room. The children were leaving for a week-long school trip to Jim Corbett National Park, and their excitement was impossible to miss.

"Do we need another pair of shoes?" Palash asked.

"Definitely," Neel replied, pretending to be very serious. "Unless you plan to walk barefoot through the jungle."

The children burst into laughter. Neel began humming as he helped them pack, and the house was filled with cheerful chatter.

A little later, he walked over to Nishi and handed her a steaming cup of coffee.

"Thank you, Doctor," she said with a smile.

Neel sat beside her.

"You seem happy today."

"I am," he replied. "Ira's reports came back positive."

Nishi smiled.

"That's wonderful."

"And one of my patients has recovered completely. It was such a beautiful sight to see them walk out of the hospital knowing they were finally free of cancer."

His face lit up as he spoke. "Do you remember the single mother I told you about?"

Nishi nodded.

"Hmm."

"I do. And I know how much satisfaction you get when your patients recover."

"That satisfaction is on another level."

Neel smiled. From across the room, Sahana suddenly looked up.

"So, Ira Mom will leave now that she has recovered?"

Neel glanced at her.

"Let's give her some time to get back on her feet. She has recovered well, but she still needs to regain her strength."

Sahana rolled her eyes and went back to packing. Nishi smiled at the exchange. Neel then looked at her more closely.

"By the way, you're not cooking tonight."

"I can manage, Neel."

"No, you don't have to."

"I've been feeling fine."

"You've been tired for the past couple of days, and you've been feeling nauseous too."

Nishi looked at him for a moment.

"I'll cook something light for you," he continued. "You just rest."

"But—"

"No arguments," he said with a smile.

Nishi finally gave in.

"All right, Doctor."

While Nishi helped the children finish packing, Neel went into the kitchen and began preparing dinner for the family. He made the usual meal for everyone and prepared something milder and less spicy for Nishi.

The evening passed in laughter and easy conversation. The children talked excitedly about their trip, comparing what they had packed and arguing over who would get the window seat on the bus. Neel patiently settled their little disagreements while Nishi watched them with a smile.

The following morning, the children left for their school trip to Jim Corbett National Park, just before the summer vacations began. Their backpacks were ready, their excitement was at its peak, and neither of them seemed remotely worried about being away from home for a whole week.

"Take care!" Nishi called out.

"Bye, Mom!"

"Bye, Papa!"

They waved enthusiastically from the bus before disappearing behind the windows.

Neel and Nishi stood together, watching until the bus was out of sight. For a moment, the house suddenly felt unusually quiet. Neither of them knew that this quiet week would bring a revelation that would change their lives forever.

On the way back after seeing the children off, Nishi suddenly felt nauseous again. She tried to ignore it, but the uneasy feeling lingered all the way home. As soon as they reached the apartment, Neel noticed that she looked tired.

"Come, sit down."

He gently settled her on the sofa and went to the kitchen. A few minutes later, he returned with a warm cup of tea. "Here. Have some. You'll feel better."

Nishi took the cup from him, but the moment the aroma reached her, her stomach churned. She managed barely a sip before suddenly covering her mouth and hurrying towards the washroom. Neel followed immediately, concern flashing across his face.

He stayed beside her, gently rubbing her back as she struggled with the nausea. When it finally passed, he reached for the towel from the rack and, with quiet tenderness, helped her freshen up.

He said nothing, but the worry in his eyes said more than words ever could.

"Come on," he said softly. "Let's get you to bed."

He helped her back to the bedroom and made her comfortable.

"Nishi, this has been going on for more than a week."

"I know."

"Let me examine you."

"No, Neel. It's just acidity."

He looked at her sceptically.

“Remember, we had Chinese food last week? I think it just didn't agree with me.”

Neel sighed.

“All right. At least let me give you something for the acidity.”

“No, Neel. I don't like taking medicines unless they're absolutely necessary.” She paused and closed her eyes for a moment. “Besides, I feel so sleepy and exhausted today.”

“You didn't sleep well last night?”

“I did,” she replied. “I don't know what's wrong with me. I just feel completely drained.”

Neel studied her face for a moment.

“Then don't worry about work. Get some rest.”

“I have a meeting at eleven. I just want to sleep for an hour.”

“All right. Sleep.”

“We'll talk later.”

Neel gently pulled the sheet over her and adjusted the pillow beneath her head. He switched on the AC, making sure the room was comfortable, and quietly stepped out. Within minutes, Nishi drifted into a deep sleep.

Outside the bedroom, Neel paused for a moment, still concerned. Something about her tiredness and persistent nausea didn't feel like ordinary acidity to him. But for now, he decided to let her rest.

# Chapter 48
# I WANT OUR LIFE TOGETHER



It was 10:30 in the morning. Neel gently tried to wake Nishi. She had an important meeting at eleven, and she needed to be up soon.

"Nishi…"

She opened her eyes faintly, looked at him for a moment, and then closed them again.

Neel watched her quietly. She must be really tired, he thought. Whatever was troubling her had clearly taken a toll on her. She needed rest more than she needed another meeting. He decided not to disturb her again.

Then another thought crossed his mind. Someone from her office should know about her condition. Vineet was the only person Neel knew there, so he picked up Nishi's phone and called him.

"Hello, Nishi?"

"No, Vineet. It's Neel."

"Yes, Neel. I can see you're calling from her number."

"Yes. I just wanted to let you know that Nishi isn't well. She won't be able to manage the upcoming meeting."

There was a brief silence.

"That's strange. She still hasn't recovered," Vineet said. "We met yesterday, and she was already unwell. She said it was acidity."

"Hmm. I'm concerned too. I'll examine her properly once she wakes up. But for now, I want her to get some uninterrupted sleep."

"I understand, Neel. And although I've resigned, the formalities haven't been completed yet. Tell Nishi to get some rest. I'll handle the meeting and take care of her part of the work until she's back."

"But won't you have to join your new office in Bangalore?" Neel asked.

"I can delay it by a few days. A little delay won't harm anyone."

His voice softened.

"When I was ill, you and Nishi adjusted your lives to help me. Nishi even took over my share of the work. So, this is the least I can do for her."

Neel remained silent for a moment.

"Tell her not to worry about the office," Vineet continued. "She should concentrate on getting better."

Then his tone became more serious.

"And Neel… please find out why she's been feeling this way."

"I will, Vineet. I'll examine her as soon as she wakes up."

"Good. Take care of her."

"I will."

Neel ended the call and placed the phone back beside Nishi. He looked at her sleeping face once more before quietly stepping out of the room. He then went to check on Ira in the other room.

Nishi woke up almost two hours later. The moment she opened her eyes, anxiety washed over her.

The meeting. She quickly reached for her phone, her mind already racing. It was well past eleven. She had missed it. Then her eyes fell on the bedside table. A glass of chilled lemonade stood there, covered neatly with a coaster. Beside it lay a small handwritten note. She recognized the handwriting immediately. Neel.

She picked up the note and read it.

«Nishi,

I had a word with Vineet. He will handle today's meeting. He also said that you need not come to the office until you recover.

So please take care of yourself.

I have an evening shift today. We'll have lunch after you wake up. The food is ready.

So, for now, just focus on getting well.

—Neel»

Nishi read it twice.

The anxiety that had gripped her a moment ago slowly began to fade. She had been so used to taking care of everything herself—her work, her responsibilities, everyone around her—that sometimes she forgot what it felt like to have someone quietly take care of her. There was nothing extraordinary in the note. No grand words.

Just a few simple sentences written in Neel's familiar handwriting.

And somehow, they touched her deeply. She picked up the glass and took a small sip of the chilled lemonade.

For the first time that morning, she allowed herself to simply sit there and breathe.

After finishing the lemonade, Nishi realized that she was feeling considerably better. The nausea had eased, and the heaviness in her body had lessened. She glanced at the clock.

It was already one in the afternoon. Wondering where Neel was, she got out of bed and stepped into the living room. He wasn't there. She checked his room. Empty.

The kitchen was empty too. He must be checking on Ira, she thought.

Nishi walked toward Ira's room. The door was open, and she was about to knock when she heard voices coming from the balcony. She looked outside. Ira and Neel were standing there, talking quietly.

Nishi stepped forward, ready to call them for lunch, but before she could say anything, Ira said something that made Neel laugh. A smile appeared on Nishi's face. They seemed comfortable with each other.

Perhaps this was simply a doctor-patient moment, she thought. Ira had been through so much, and Neel was only trying to keep her spirits up. Nishi decided not to disturb them. As she turned to leave, something on the small table beside the balcony caught her attention.

Another glass of chilled lemonade, neatly covered with a coaster near Ira's bedside table. Beside it was a small birthday card along with a note on a small piece of paper.

Nishi recognized the handwriting immediately. Neel's handwriting. A faint smile crossed her face.

It must be a little get well soon message for Ira and probably it's her birthday too, she thought. She had no reason to read someone else's message. So, she turned away. Just then, a sudden breeze swept across the balcony.

The card slipped open, and the loose sheet inside fluttered out, landing almost at Nishi's feet.

She stopped. For a moment, she simply looked at it. Then, with a slight hesitation, she bent down and picked it up. She was about to put it back inside the card without reading it. But as she turned the sheet over, her eyes fell upon the familiar handwriting. Neel's handwriting.

Something about the first few words caught her attention. She froze. Her eyes moved slowly across the page. And then her expression changed.

**********

Ira,

I know you are still angry with me.

Perhaps you don't even want to look at me today. But it is your birthday, and I cannot let this day pass without saying what I should have said before our argument. I'm sorry.

I never wanted to hurt you. Sometimes I say things without realizing how deeply they can affect the person I love the most. And yes, perhaps I am not always good at saying what is in my heart.

So let me say it now. I miss you.

I miss your voice, your laughter, even the little things that used to annoy me. I miss having you beside me at the end of the day. I miss the feeling that no matter how difficult the world becomes, I have a place to come home to.

You are my home, Ira.

And I don't want to lose that.

Whatever has happened between us, I still believe there is a beautiful life waiting for us—a life we can build together, if we are willing to leave our anger behind.

I keep thinking about our little girl Sahana.

I want to see her smile, hear her tell us about her day, and watch you look at her with that expression that makes me fall in love with you all over again. I want the three of us to have those ordinary days that somehow become the most precious memories of our lives.

So, Ira, if there is still a little place for me in your heart, please come back.

Let us forget this fight. Let us begin again. Not because the past didn't happen, but because what we have is worth more than one angry moment. I don't know what tomorrow will bring.

But I know what I want.

I want you.

I want our little girl.

I want our home.

I want our life together.

And if you let me, I will spend the rest of my life making sure you never have to wonder about that again.

Happy birthday, my love.

Come back to me.

Always yours,

Neel

**********

Nishi froze. She carefully placed the letter back inside the card and slipped it onto the bedside table.

From the balcony, she could still hear Neel and Ira talking. Their voices were soft, almost familiar. Then Neel laughed again.

Nishi stood there, unable to move. Just then, Neel's phone rang. He answered immediately.

"Oh, really? Don't worry. I'll be there in ten minutes."

His expression changed.

"Take the patient to the ICU."

He ended the call and turned toward Ira.

"There is an emergency. I have to go"

"But before I leave I want you to know"

"Ira, you know I'll be there for you. Always. Just remember that."

Ira gently touched his face.

"I know, Neel. I always knew."

Nishi's heart seemed to stop. The letter. Those words. And now this. She couldn't believe what she was hearing.

For all these days, she had believed that Neel loved her. She had allowed herself to believe that his kindness, his concern, the little things he did for her—all of it meant something more.

But perhaps she had simply wanted to believe it. Everything was happening right in front of her, and she had been too blinded by her own feelings to see it. Neel still loves Ira. He wants to start his life over with her.

He is waiting for Sahana to return home.

And she? She had been foolishly waiting for him.

A wave of nausea suddenly rose within her. Nishi instinctively reached for the bedside table to steady herself.

Her hand struck the glass of lemonade. It fell to the floor. Crash. The sound shattered the quiet balcony conversation. Neel turned instantly.

"Nishi!"

He rushed toward her. Ira followed. Nishi barely had time to step back before Neel gently caught her in his arms.

"You're not well."

He looked at the broken glass and then at her pale face.

"I'll clean it up," Ira whispered. "You just take care of her."

Before she could say anything more, Neel lifted her into his arms.

"Oh God, Nishi. You really are ill."

He carried her back to the bedroom and carefully lowered her onto the bed. He adjusted the pillows behind her and looked at her worriedly.

"Look at yourself. You've become so weak."

He turned toward the doorway.

"Ira!"

She came in almost immediately.

"Please get lunch for her. Quickly."

Ira nodded and left. Neel picked up the blood-pressure monitor and wrapped it around Nishi's arm.

Nishi remained silent. She watched him move around her with the same tenderness he had always shown. And suddenly, it felt different. So, this is what it was. All these days, he was only being a caring friend. And I mistook his kindness for love. Neel checked the reading.

"Nishi, your blood pressure is slightly low. You need to eat something and get some rest."

He gently touched her face.

"There is a patient in the ICU. I have to go. I'll come back and examine you properly."

He hurried toward the door, then stopped briefly.

"Ira, please take care of her until I come back."

"I will," Ira replied.

And then he was gone. Nishi stared at the closed door. A few minutes later, Ira returned with the food.

"You need to eat," she said gently.

Nishi shook her head.

"I don't feel like eating."

"I know. But you have to."

There was no harshness in Ira's voice, only concern. Yet somehow that made it hurt even more. Nishi mechanically ate a few bites. She didn't taste the food. She didn't know what she was eating. Her mind was still trapped inside that letter.

**I want you. I want our little girl. I want our home. I want our life together.**

When she had eaten enough to satisfy Ira, she quietly said, "I think I need to rest."

Ira nodded.

"Of course."

She took the plate away and left the room. The door closed softly behind her. Nishi turned toward the window.

For the first time, the room that had felt so safe began to feel unbearably lonely. She closed her eyes.

And silently, painfully, she began to let go of the love she had only just allowed herself to believe in.

# Chapter 49
# WHY IS IT SO HARD TO LET GO



After Ira left the room, Nishi remained where she was, unable to move. Her mind was in turmoil. She had been such a stupid lady. She had mistaken Neel's kindness, his gentle concern, his easy friendship for something more. She had allowed herself to believe that he had fallen in love with her.

But now she understood. Neel had never truly moved on. His heart had always belonged to Ira.

One memory after another began flashing through Nishi's mind.

Their first meeting.

That chance encounter that had slowly turned into friendship. Long conversations, shared laughter, quiet moments that had made her feel understood. And somewhere along the way, without even realizing when it happened, she had fallen in love with him.

Then came the first accident.

Sahana.

The fear, the chaos—and Neel's helpless desperation. She remembered how fiercely she had reacted, how deeply he cared for her.

She remembered the countless little things after that.

The meals he cooked for her. The way he noticed when she was tired. The way he would quietly make sure she ate, rested, and took care of herself.

And Palash...

The day Palash had started calling him Dad.

How naturally Neel had accepted him. How the four of them had slowly begun to feel like a family.

Then came Mayank.

The memory of what had happened still made her shudder. Neel had lost control when he learned what Mayank had tried to do. He had fought for her dignity, furious that anyone had dared to hurt her.

At the time, she had wondered what that protectiveness meant. Now she knew. It was simply Neel being Neel.

Kind. Protective. Compassionate. A good friend. Nothing more.

And then Kasauli.

The trolley-car ride.

The height. The vertigo. Her anxiety.

She could still remember the way Neel had held her tightly, reassuring her until the fear slowly subsided.

"Then she remembered how Neel risked his life to save Palash in Kasauli"

"She was so scared"

There had been so many moments after that. Moments with the children. Moments in the kitchen. Evenings spent talking.

Laughter. Small arguments. Shared silences. So many ordinary moments that had quietly become precious to her.

She had gathered them all into her heart and given them a meaning they had never carried for him.

The realization was unbearable. Nishi hurried into the attached bathroom and closed the door softly behind her.

She didn't want Ira to hear.

The moment she was alone, the tears came. She pressed a hand over her mouth, trying to silence herself, but the sobs broke through anyway. She cried for the love she had never been promised.

For the future she had imagined. For every moment she had misunderstood.

And then another memory surfaced. That rain-soaked night. The night when everything between them had changed. Nishi closed her eyes.

Perhaps even that had been a mistake. A moment of weakness. A moment when emotions had overwhelmed reason. She had wanted to believe it meant something. She had wanted to believe that Neel loved her.

But perhaps he had only been seeking comfort in a moment of vulnerability, while she had turned that moment into a declaration of love that had never been spoken.

Her tears fell harder. Neel had always been kind to her. He had always cared for her. He had always protected her. And somewhere along the way, she had mistaken that kindness for love. She leaned against the bathroom door and slowly sank to the floor.

"I'm such a fool," she whispered through her tears.

Now she understood the truth she had been refusing to see.

Neel had never stopped loving Ira. And she had mistaken his friendship for love because, somewhere deep inside, she had desperately wanted it to be true.

By the time Nishi stepped out of the bathroom, she had made up her mind. She couldn't stay in this house anymore. Not after what she had witnessed. Not after what she had finally understood.

Every familiar corner of the house held a memory of Neel, and staying here would only make the pain harder to bear. She quietly took out her phone and called Raima.

"Raima…"

"Nishi? What happened?"

After exchanging a few pleasantries, Nishi learned that Raima's husband was out of the country and that the children were staying at her mother's house for the vacation. Then she asked gently,

"May I come and stay with you for a few days?" There was not even a moment's hesitation.

"Of course! Why are you even asking? Come whenever you want. I'll be waiting for you."

Nishi managed a faint smile.

"Thank you."

She ended the call and began packing. Just a few clothes. Nothing more.

She folded them mechanically into a small bag, trying not to look around the room. Every object seemed to remind her of something she was trying desperately to forget. Ira noticed the bag.

"Nishi, what are you doing?"

"I'm going to Raima's place for a few days."

Ira looked concerned.

“But you’re not well. You still look so weak. Neel will be upset if he finds out you left like this.”

Nishi looked at her and gave her a gentle smile.

“Don’t worry. I’ll talk to him myself.”

“But—”

“I’ll explain everything to him.”

There was something strangely calm about Nishi's voice. She didn't want Ira to see how badly she was breaking inside. A few minutes later, she picked up her bag.

Before leaving, she sent Neel a message.

Raima isn't well, and no one is there with her. I'm going to stay with her for a few days and take care of her. Don't worry. I'll talk to you later.

She stared at the message for a few seconds before pressing Send. Then she left.

---

The roads were unusually quiet. Nishi drove with both hands firmly on the steering wheel, her eyes fixed ahead.

She didn't look back. After some time, her phone lit up on the dashboard. Some notification. Neel had read her message. The blue ticks appeared. But there was no reply. Nishi stared at the screen for a moment at the next red light.

Perhaps she had expected him to call. Perhaps she had hoped he would ask her to come back.

Perhaps, somewhere deep inside, she was still waiting for him to say something that would prove everything she had just convinced herself of was wrong.

But the phone remained silent. The light turned green. Nishi looked ahead again. A small, painful sigh escaped her lips. Then

she pressed the accelerator and kept driving. This time, she didn't wait for him..

Raima was pleasantly surprised to see Nishi at her doorstep. They spent the next two hours talking about all sorts of things, catching up on life, work, the children, and everything in between. But Nishi never mentioned what was truly weighing on her heart.

She listened—or at least pretended to. Her mind was already somewhere else, quietly trying to work out what she should do next. She had to sell her house. She had to take Palash and move to another city. Perhaps a new place, a new job, and a life far away from Neel would give her the distance she needed to heal. Perhaps, with time, she would learn to forget him. She had to move on. Not just for herself, but for Palash.

While Raima continued talking, Nishi kept smiling and nodding at the appropriate moments. But she wasn't really listening. Her thoughts were consumed by the life she would have to build all over again. When Raima went to make some tea, Nishi quietly picked up her phone and checked her bank balance.

She studied the amount for a few moments. It was enough to manage for at least a year. That was all the certainty she needed. She would move to another city, find a job, and start over. Perhaps distance was the only way she could finally find peace.

Just then, the doorbell rang. Nishi quickly wiped her face and went to open the door. She froze.

Neel stood outside.

He looked worried—and unmistakably angry.

"Nishi?"

She stepped aside.

"Come in."

Neel walked in and immediately held up his phone.

"What is this, Nishi?"

He showed her the message she had sent him.

“Neel, Raima isn't well. She’s my friend, and she’s alone, so I came to stay with her.”

Before Neel could respond, Raima walked in carrying a tray of tea. She immediately understood that something was wrong. Her eyes moved from Neel to Nishi.

Why was Nishi lying? But she didn't interrupt. She quietly placed the tray on the table and stood there, listening. They didn’t see her.

“But you aren't well yourself,” Neel said. “And you're going to take care of her?”

“Nishi, I know you're a selfless person. If Raima is unwell and alone, then let's take her back to our place.”

He looked at Nishi with concern.

“You need to recover first. It's been a week. This afternoon, you almost fainted.”

“But I'm fine, Neel.”

“I can see that,” he replied sarcastically.

His eyes travelled from her face to her tired posture.

Then he gently took her hand. “Come with me. You need to be examined.”

Nishi immediately pulled her hand away.

“Neel!”

He looked slightly taken aback by her reaction, but he didn't step back.

“Nishi, you said Raima is unwell. You're also unwell. Tell me, then—who is going to take care of whom?”

He paused and then suggested quietly,

“If you're really concerned about her, I can stay here.”

Something inside Nishi softened. It was becoming harder and harder to convince herself that she had misunderstood him. Why did he care so much? Why did he make it so difficult for her to walk away? Neel gently cupped her face in his hands.

“Nishi, I can see the dark circles under your eyes. You're clearly not well.”

She didn't have the courage to pull away.

“I’m fine, Neel. Trust me.”

“I want to spend some time with my best friend here,” she said softly. “Now that her husband is away, we have so much to gossip about.”

Neel looked at her for a moment.

“Alright. But first, the examination.”

“We'll decide after that.”

“No, Neel. I promise you, I'm fine.”

He held her hands tightly

“I won't take no for an answer.”

He took her hands again. Raima watched them silently. She finally understood. Nishi wasn't simply staying with her. She was trying to escape from Neel. Raima knew she had to intervene. She entered the living room

“Hello, Raima. How are you now?” Neel asked.

Raima looked at Nishi briefly before answering.

“Much better now. I called Nishi here because I didn't want to be alone.”

Nishi's eyes widened. Then she understood. Raima had heard everything. She had heard the lie.

Somehow, between the two of them, they managed to convince Neel that Nishi was fine. Raima assured him that Nishi hadn't felt

nauseous for nearly two hours and that they had actually been having a wonderful time together. With considerable reluctance, Neel finally gave in.

"If she feels unwell, you'll call me immediately?"

"Of course," Raima assured him. "I promise."

Neel turned back to Nishi. His expression softened. He gently caressed her cheek.

"Alright, then. Stay here for a couple of days. I'll come and see you in the evening everyday"

"There's no need, Neel."

He looked surprised. Nishi quickly softened her words.

"I mean... tomorrow evening, Raima and I are planning to go shopping. Just a few girls' moments before her husband returns."

Neel's expression tightened.

"No. You're not going shopping. What if you faint there?"

Nishi looked at him.

Neel's expression softened as he gently added, "What if you suddenly feel dizzy or faint? Raima won't be able to carry you all the way back. I just… I don't want you taking any chances, Nishi."

His voice was filled with genuine concern for her well-being. He turned to Raima, his expression serious.

"Nishi's blood pressure is really low, and she's extremely weak. She needs to be monitored. Please don't take her anywhere."

Raima gently smiled, trying to reassure him.

"Neel, don't worry. I'll take care of her. I won't let her overexert herself, and if she feels even slightly unwell, I'll bring her straight back home."

Neel still looked unconvinced.

"Okay, I will not take her anywhere. I promise."

"I'll be responsible for her," Raima added softly. "You don't have to worry. She'll be safe with me."

Nishi watched him quietly, mesmerised by the trust and concern in Neel's voice. After a moment, Neel finally sighed and nodded, though the concern in his eyes remained.

"Alright, Raima. This week is going to be a little difficult for me at the hospital. So, I want you to promise me that I can count on you."

"You can, Neel. I promise."

Neel paused for a moment, as though considering what to say. Then he turned to Nishi.

"Perhaps it's actually better that you're staying here. You'd be alone at home while I'd be busy at the hospital. At least here, Raima will be with you. But, please don't go anywhere else. No shopping, no outdoors "

Raima smiled reassuringly.

Neel leaned closer, gently cupping one of Nishi's cheeks in his palm. He pressed a soft kiss to her other cheek, letting his lips linger for a few quiet seconds before slowly pulling away. It was a tender, unhurried gesture, yet the warmth of his touch seemed to linger on her skin long after he had moved away.

"Bye, Nishi. Please get plenty of rest, okay? Don't worry about anything—just take care of yourself. I'll see you soon."

She felt strangely comforted that he had come looking for her. And that comfort frightened her. Because she knew something he didn't. She had finally convinced herself that his kindness meant nothing more than friendship—and yet his every gesture made that conclusion harder to believe. How was she supposed to tell him that she had discovered the truth?

How was she supposed to tell him that his behaviour was giving her hope when she was desperately trying to let go?

Neel finally left. The moment the door closed behind him, Raima turned toward Nishi.

"Nishi."

Nishi avoided her eyes.

"What?"

"Don't."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Raima folded her arms.

"You're going to tell me the truth."

"There is nothing to tell."

"Fine."

Raima raised an eyebrow.

"Then I'll call Neel and tell him that you lied about me being unwell."

Nishi stared at her.

"Raima!"

"Either you tell me, or I tell him."

Nishi remained silent for a long moment. Her resistance finally broke. She sat down on the sofa, covered her face with both hands, and began to cry. Raima sat beside her.

"What happened?"

Nishi tried to speak, but the words wouldn't come. Finally, between broken sobs, she told Raima everything. Everything she had heard. Everything she had misunderstood. Everything she had felt.

And the truth she now believed she had no choice but to accept. She cried until there was nothing left to hold inside.

# Chapter 50
# I HAVE NOT COMPLETELY LOST NEEL



After some time, the children called. Nishi answered the call and spoke to them in her usual calm, composed voice. She smiled, laughed at the right moments, and asked about their day. Neither Sahana nor Palash suspected anything. Everything seemed perfectly fine at their end. But Nishi knew that soon she would have to tell them that their paths would separate.

The thought broke her heart. It wasn't going to be easy. But perhaps it was necessary.

When the call ended, Nishi noticed that her phone battery was almost dead. She got up to put it on charge, but before she could take more than a step, a wave of nausea suddenly hit her. She stumbled back and sank onto the sofa.

Raima immediately rushed to her.

"Nishi…"

"I should call Neel…", Raima said.

"Wait." Nishi said instinctively.

Raima looked at her anxiously.

"What happened, Nishi?"

Nishi suddenly went still. A thought had struck her. She shook her head slowly, almost in disbelief. Then she looked at Raima.

"Raima… could you please get me a pregnancy test kit?"

Raima stared at her.

"What?"

"A pregnancy test kit?"

"Yes."

"Nishi, you want a…?"

"Please, Raima."

Her voice was soft, almost trembling.

Still stunned, Raima went to her wardrobe and took out a pregnancy test kit. She handed it to Nishi, but she was still struggling to process what she had just heard. Nishi walked into the washroom.

A few minutes later, she came out. Raima immediately reached for the test.

"We'll wait three minutes."

She placed it carefully on the table between them. Neither woman spoke. They simply stared at it.

One minute passed. Then another. Finally, three minutes were over.

Two red lines stared back at them.

Nishi froze. Raima slowly shook her head, unable to believe what she was seeing.

"Nishi…"

There was disbelief in her voice.

"What is this?"

Nishi couldn't answer. Raima looked at her, then back at the test.

"You told me Neel treated you like a good friend. You told me he had always been kind to you and that you had misunderstood his kindness for love."

She pointed helplessly toward the two red lines.

"Then what is this?"

Nishi stared at the test. Her mind refused to catch up with what her eyes had already understood. The life growing inside her had suddenly changed everything. She sat completely still, trying to comprehend the truth that had just been revealed.

Nishi gently placed her hand over her abdomen. For a few moments, neither woman spoke.

Raima finally broke the awkward silence.

"Nishi, I have to tell Neel. He needs to know."

"No!"

The word escaped Nishi almost as a shriek.

"But, Nishi—"

"Please, Raima. I said no."

Her voice softened into an almost desperate plea. Raima put the phone back on the table.

Raima looked at her with concern.

"Why, dear?"

Nishi lowered her eyes.

"Because I don't want him to accept me out of pity. He still loves Ira."

"Nishi, you are carrying his child."

"This child deserves a father."

Nishi sighed, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Raima, for him, it was a mistake. For me…" She paused. "For me, it was love."

There were no tears in her eyes now. She was simply trying to come to terms with the truth.

Raima gently pulled her into her arms.

"Nishi… how long has it been?"

"Six weeks."

Raima drew back, thinking for a moment.

"Then let's go to the doctor, Nishi. We can get the pregnancy terminated before it becomes any more difficult for you."

"No!"

Nishi recoiled at the suggestion. Raima stared at her.

"What? Don't tell me you want to have this baby."

"I want to have this baby," Nishi replied softly.

"What? Nishi, you can't be serious. Think about what you're doing."

"The world will judge you," Raima continued. "People will call you an unwed mother. Please don't make life harder for yourself."

Nishi slowly shook her head.

"I've already lost Neel."

Her voice remained steady.

"I can't afford to lose this baby too."

She placed her palm protectively over her abdomen.

"I will protect my child."

"Nishi, you've completely lost it," Raima said, overwhelmed. "You're planning to move to another city with Palash and this child. Do you have any idea how difficult that will be?"

"It won't be easy."

"But I can't take my baby's life just to spare myself the difficulty."

Nishi gently wiped away her tears. Then, surprisingly, she smiled.

"You know, Raima, I thought I had lost Neel forever. I kept wondering how I would ever come to terms with it. I was miserable at the thought that I might never see him again."

She paused, her hand still resting protectively over her abdomen.

"But life has not been that cruel to me after all. It has still been kind."

Raima looked at her, confused.

Nishi gently placed her other hand over her abdomen.

"This baby… this innocent little life growing inside me…"

Her smile trembled, but there was happiness in her eyes.

"I'm really happy right now. I have no regrets about anything."

She looked at Raima with quiet conviction.

"I don't want pity, Raima. I know what I'm doing."

Raima stared at her for a long moment. She finally understood that there was no point trying to change Nishi's mind. Not now.

The next day, Nishi took the day off from work.

Neel called her first thing in the morning, his heart heavy with worry. When she assured him that she was feeling much better and the nausea had subsided, he let out a deep breath of relief. He hadn't realised how anxious he had been until he heard her reassuring voice. She had lied. The nausea had not completely subsided.

After lunch, she finally gave in to the exhaustion and went to sleep.

While she was asleep, Vineet called. Raima answered before the ringing could wake Nishi. She stepped outside and quietly closed the bedroom door behind her.

"Nishi! How are you doing now?" Vineet asked.

"I'm Raima, Vineet. She's here with me, and she isn't feeling well."

"Yes, I saw the message saying she wasn't well. But why is she with you and not with Neel?"

"She just came to meet me."

Something about Raima's voice made Vineet suspicious.

"Raima, send me your address. I'll come over and see her."

"Sure. I'll send it." Vineet arrived barely ten minutes later.

Raima welcomed him inside.

"Please, make yourself comfortable, Vineet. I'll get you some tea."

"No formalities, please, Raima."

He took a seat, and Raima settled down opposite him.

"What happened to Nishi?" he asked. "If she's unwell, why is she here?"

"It's nothing serious. Just… some women's health issue. You wouldn't understand."

Vineet wasn't convinced.

"Alright, then let me talk to Neel. He's a doctor. He'll understand."

He reached for his phone.

"No, Vineet. Please, for God's sake, don't."

He stopped.

"She would be furious. She doesn't want anyone to know. She doesn't want anyone's pity."

Vineet looked at her intently.

"So, I was right."

Raima fell silent.

"She's going through something serious, and she doesn't want anyone to know about it. Not even Neel."

Raima looked away.

"Come on, Raima."

His voice softened.

"I know I was a terrible man in the past. I know the things I did hurt her. But I'm not that man anymore."

He paused.

"I truly care about Nishi."

His voice broke slightly.

"And my heart is sinking just sitting here, knowing that she's suffering and you won't tell me why."

He picked up his phone again.

"If you don't tell me, I'll call Neel and ask him to come here. Then we'll find out what is wrong with her."

Raima knew there was no way around it.

"Okay. I'll tell you. But please, don't tell Neel."

"I can't promise that until I know what you're asking me to keep from him."

Raima sighed.

"Vineet… Neel has decided to move on with his ex-wife, Ira."

Vineet stared at her in disbelief.

“No. Raima, there must be some misunderstanding.”

“There isn't.”

Raima shook her head.

“Nishi has evidence.”

“What evidence?”

“She saw a letter Neel had written to Ira. He wants to build a life with her again.”

Vineet slowly leaned back, struggling to absorb what he had just heard.

“Disgusting.” Vineet frowned.

“And that’s why Nishi is heartbroken. She came here because she couldn't stay there anymore.”

“When did she find out?” Vineet asked

“Yesterday everything was fine. Neel had even called me.”

“She found out yesterday?” Raima said

“Then what about her illness? She has been unwell for almost a week.”

Raima looked away. Vineet noticed.

“Raima…”

She remained silent.

“You know what has happened to her, don't you?”

Raima hesitated.

She knew Vineet was desperate for an answer. And she also knew that the man sitting before her was no longer the person Nishi had once feared. She decided to trust him.

"Vineet…"

She took a breath.

"She's pregnant."

Vineet went completely still.

"What?"

# Chapter 51
# I STILL LOVE YOU



Just then, the doorbell rang. Raima went to answer it and found her neighbour standing outside, visibly distressed.

"Raima, please come quickly. Mummy has fallen down the staircase. I don't know what to do. I need you to help me"

Raima immediately turned towards Vineet.

"I'll be right back. Please stay here."

Before he could respond, she hurried out. Neither of them realised that Nishi had heard everything from the adjoining room. She had heard enough. Vineet knew. He knew about her pregnancy.

For a moment, Nishi stood completely still, her heart pounding. She had never wanted him to find out this way—not before she was ready, and certainly not before she had the chance to tell Neel herself.

Slowly, she stepped out of the bedroom. The moment her eyes fell on Vineet, she stopped.

His face was unreadable, but there was something in his eyes that frightened her. Rage. Their eyes met.

For a fleeting moment, the hardness in Vineet's expression disappeared. His eyes moved over her instinctively, checking whether she was all right.

Then his jaw tightened. His hands curled into fists. Nishi instinctively stepped back. She knew that anger.

She had seen it before. She remembered the man Vineet had once been—the man whose temper could turn frighteningly cold when he felt betrayed or helpless. And suddenly, another memory came rushing back.

For a moment, Nishi was taken back to the day she had been pregnant with Palash. She remembered how, consumed by anger, Vineet had tried to punch her hard in the stomach. Somehow, she had managed to step back just in time. The memory came rushing back now, making her fear him all over again.

Her heart began to pound. Was he going to hurt her?

Or worse—was he going to hurt her baby?

She saw his hand slowly curl into a fist. Without thinking, Nishi placed both hands protectively over her abdomen.

The small gesture did not escape Vineet. He took a cautious step towards her.

"No!"

Nishi turned and hurried towards the bedroom. Vineet followed, but he kept his distance.

"Nishi, please. Just listen to me."

She reached the door and tried to push it shut behind her. Vineet caught the edge of it from the other side, careful not to let it strike her.

"Nishi, please. I'm not going to hurt you."

But she was too frightened to believe him. All she could think about was the child growing inside her.

"No! Please don't hurt my baby!"

Her trembling hands pushed desperately against the door.

Vineet could have forced it open, but he deliberately held back. One sudden movement might frighten her further or make her lose her balance.

"Nishi, please let go. You'll hurt yourself."

"No! Go away!"

"I won't let you hurt yourself."

"I know what you want to do!" Her voice broke. "You want to kill my baby!"

The words struck him. Vineet realised, with a painful clarity, what she believed he was capable of.

She thought he might hurt her—or even strike her stomach. The door remained half-closed between them.

"Nishi, please. You're frightened. Just let me help you."

She refused to let go. Finally, Vineet reached carefully through the opening and caught her trembling hand. He eased her away from the door rather than pulling her roughly, then pushed it open.

Nishi stood before him, trembling violently, both hands immediately returning to protect her abdomen.

"Vineet, please…" she whispered. "Leave me. Please don't harm my baby."

Vineet stopped several feet away. He did not move closer.

"Nishi, I would never hurt you," he said quietly. "And I would never hurt your baby."

But she was still too frightened to hear him. When she tried to pull away again, Vineet instinctively reached for her, trying only to steady her.

“Please, Nishi. Stop struggling. You'll hurt yourself.”

His attempt to calm her only frightened her further. Afraid that she might fall, he carefully lifted her into his arms. He was strongly built, while Nishi was thin and fragile. Against his strength, she could barely free herself.

She struggled desperately.

“Let go of me!”

“Why are you holding me like this?”

“Nishi, please calm down. You're safe.”

As he lifted her, he failed to notice that his hand had brushed against her bare thigh or that the hem of her midi dress had slipped above her knees. His only concern was keeping her steady. But Nishi noticed. She felt exposed and deeply vulnerable.

Vineet carried her towards the bed and carefully lowered her onto the mattress. As he leaned forward to steady her, his lips accidentally brushed against her upper chest.

Nishi recoiled instantly.

“No!”, Nishi shrieked

“What are you doing?”

“Don't come near me!”

Vineet immediately tried to calm her.

“I won't hurt you.”

For a fleeting moment, Nishi had genuinely believed that Vineet might assault her. Fear had overwhelmed reason, and in her panic, she had mistaken his attempt to steady her for an attempt to overpower her. Panic had completely taken control of Nishi. She struggled to pull away, barely aware of what she was doing.

Vineet tried to calm her, but when she struggled again, he gently caught her hands, only to keep her from hurting herself.

"Nishi, I would never…" he began softly, his voice filled with concern.

"Vineet… please."

Her voice broke.

"Don't come any closer."

Tears filled her eyes.

"I'm pregnant."

She looked at him desperately.

"Please… just let me go."

Vineet didn't release her hands. Holding both of them securely in one of his, he kept her from struggling further.

Without hesitation, he gently pulled the hem of her dress back into place and reached for the bedsheet beside her. Carefully, he covered her legs before looking at her again. There was no desire in his eyes. Only hurt. She had completely misunderstood him.

His voice rose slightly, not with anger, but with disbelief.

"Are you out of your mind, Nishi? Do you really think that, in this state—frightened, vulnerable, and carrying a child—I would ever rape you?"

His expression tightened with pain.

"I may have been a terrible man in many ways, but I would never sink that low. Never."

He had been trying to protect her, yet she had been terrified that he meant to hurt her. For a moment, neither spoke. Tears rolled down Nishi's cheeks. Then Vineet released her hands and gently placed his hand on her abdomen. His voice trembled.

"Nishi…Please calm down. You are carrying a child"

His voice broke.

"I was a beast."

She looked at him through her tears.

"It was your love that made me human again."

His eyes glistened.

"I could never harm this baby."

He glanced down at her abdomen before meeting her eyes again.

"It's your baby."

He paused, his expression softening.

"I loved you, Nishi. And I still love you dearly. Whatever happened between us, whatever mistakes I made, I could never stand by and watch you suffer. I will protect you"

He stepped away. Nishi remained still. For several seconds, neither of them spoke. Then she noticed the tears in Vineet's eyes.

Something inside her began to change. Her fear slowly gave way to understanding. He had never been trying to hurt her. He had been afraid she would hurt herself. And suddenly, she understood the anger she had seen in his face. It had not been hatred. It had been fear. Fear for her.

After a long silence, Vineet moved towards her again and gently pulled her into his arms.

Nishi remained still for a moment before allowing herself to rest against him.

"I'm sorry, Vineet," she whispered. "I misunderstood you."

A tear slipped down his cheek.

"I'm sorry, Nishi… that you have to go through this."

Vineet gently cupped her face.

"Don't worry, Nishi. I'm not going to judge you."

His voice was quiet and sincere.

"I'm not the same Vineet I used to be. I've changed—and a lot of that change happened because of you."

Nishi lowered her eyes.

"I know you loved Neel with all your heart," Vineet continued. "And honestly, I still don't believe that letter tells the whole story. Maybe there is another version of what happened."

"No, Vineet," Nishi replied softly. "There isn't another version."

Nishi sighed

"It was just one of those moments when we both got carried away."

Nishi paused, her voice unsteady but certain.

"But for me, that moment with Neel was sacred. I haven't done anything immoral."

She finally looked at Vineet, her eyes filled with quiet conviction.

"I don't regret it."

Nishi closed her eyes. Her voice was barely above a whisper. Vineet waited without pressing her further.

He studied her face for a moment before speaking again.

"Nishi, all I know is that you are carrying Neel's child."

His voice softened.

"There must have been something deeper between you that night. I don't believe it was simply lust or desire."

Nishi remained silent.

"Neel doesn't seem like the kind of man who would share something so intimate with you and then simply walk away, leaving you to face everything alone."

He hesitated.

“Are you sure there isn't something more—”

“Please, Vineet.”

Nishi gently interrupted him.

“I’m not comfortable discussing it.”

Vineet immediately fell silent. For a few moments, neither of them spoke.

Nishi lowered her eyes, gathering the courage to say what she could.

She took a slow breath and closed her eyes.

Vineet said nothing. But the anger slowly returned to his eyes—not towards her, but towards the man she had trusted. Then Nishi opened her eyes.

“I still love him.” “I always will.”

Vineet looked at her. There was no hesitation in her voice now.

“It doesn't matter whether he feels the same way. I don't love Neel because I expect anything from him. I love him because… I simply do.”

Vineet remained silent. There was pain in his eyes, but no jealousy. Perhaps he was finally beginning to understand that love did not always mean possession.

Vineet gently drew her into his embrace. For a moment, he simply held her, struggling to comprehend how everything had changed so quickly. Only a few days ago, he had thought he could finally be happy for Nishi. She had found someone she loved, someone he believed was right for her, and Vineet had convinced himself that perhaps this was what she deserved. She is with someone far better than him.

And now, she was alone—pregnant, frightened, and carrying the weight of everything that had happened.

And the bitterest realization of all was that Vineet had once believed in Neel too. He had trusted him to care for Nishi. Perhaps that was what hurt the most.

Before he could respond, a sudden wave of nausea overwhelmed Nishi. She covered her mouth and hurried towards the bathroom. Vineet followed immediately.

By the time he reached her, she was pale and exhausted. He stayed beside her until the nausea subsided.

Vineet immediately realised how exhausted she was. Nishi could barely remain standing and finally leaned against the sink, her face drained of energy. Without saying another word, he gently slipped his arms around her and lifted her.

She was too tired to protest. Her face clearly reflected the strain of everything that had just happened, and Vineet held her firmly, careful not to hurt her.

"Let me call the doctor, Nishi," he said, his voice filled with concern. "Your condition is really bad."

He carried her to the bed and carefully lowered her onto it.

"No, Vineet," Nishi murmured. "I just got tired from all that screaming… and from being frightened unnecessarily. I'm just exhausted. I need some rest."

Vineet looked at her for a moment, unconvinced.

"Lie down."

He gently settled her against the pillows, pulled the sheet over her, and made sure she was comfortable.

"That's exactly why I was trying to stop you," he said quietly. "You've been through enough already."

She was too tired to argue.

"Get some rest, Nishi. I'm here."

She closed her eyes. After a moment, he murmured,

"Let me call the doctor."

"No."

"Please…" she whispered, "Just let me be."

She closed her eyes for a moment, completely drained.

"I just want to lie down for a while. I'm so tired. I don't even have the stamina to get ready and go to the hospital."

Vineet hesitated. "Then let me call a doctor here."

"No, Vineet," she said softly. "Please… just let me get some rest."

There was no strength left in her voice. She was already exhausted, and all she wanted was to close her eyes and escape the overwhelming events of the past few minutes.

Vineet gently kissed the top of her head as she lay back on the bed.

"Alright, after you wake up if you still feel unwell, we will see a doctor"

"Hmm"

She simply nodded, then Vineet carefully pulled the sheet a little higher around her.

He stayed beside her for a moment, watching as the strain slowly left her face. Within minutes, exhaustion overtook her. Her breathing gradually settled into a soft, steady rhythm, and she drifted into a deep sleep. Vineet remained beside her, watching over her.

# Chapter 52
# HOW COULD YOU



As he looked at her sleeping face, he thought about the past.

He understood where her fear had come from. He knew he had not always treated her with the kindness she deserved. His anger and hurt had caused her pain, and perhaps some part of that fear had remained with her all these years.

For the first time, he tried to see things from her side. Not to defend himself. Just to understand her. It was his turn to understand her pain.

He quietly adjusted the air conditioner before turning back to her. A loose strand of hair had fallen across her face. Gently, he brushed it away, his fingers lingering against her cheek for a moment.

Nishi remained asleep. There was no anger in Vineet's eyes now. Only concern. A few minutes later, the phone lying beside Nishi began to ring.

Neel.

Vineet glanced at the sleeping woman before answering.

"Hello, Nishi?"

"Vineet here."

There was a brief silence on the other end.

"Vineet? Where is she? Is she better?"

"I assume you called to check on her."

There was a faint edge to Vineet's voice, despite his attempt to remain polite. A part of him wanted to unleash everything he had been holding inside—to confront Neel, to ask him how he could have allowed Nishi to suffer like this.

But then his eyes fell on her. She had already been through enough. This was not the time for his anger.

Whatever he felt about Neel, Nishi's well-being came first.

"Of course Vineet, How is she?" Neel asked.

Vineet looked at Nishi again.

"It's not easy to forget your first love, is it?"

Neel frowned. He wasn't sure what Vineet meant.

"Don't worry," Vineet continued calmly. "She's fine. She's fast asleep."

"At this hour?"

Neel glanced at the clock.

"It's half past six."

"I'm coming there."

"I don't think that's necessary. She's finally getting some rest. If her condition worsens, I'll call you."

"But something in me tells me she needs me right now," Neel said. "I've always trusted my instincts, and I don't want to ignore this one."

Vineet looked at Nishi for a long moment before speaking.

"Neel, ask your instincts to relax for a while. I'm here for her."

"You've already done enough."

Vineet almost said, You've already done enough harm. But he stopped himself. His expression softened.

"Neel, she is someone I once loved deeply," he said quietly. "And right now, I'm here for one reason—to make sure she's safe."

His eyes remained fixed on Nishi.

"You can count on me."

He gently ran his fingers through her hair before withdrawing his hand.

"Let her rest," he said. "Right now, she deserves peace."

Neel remained silent. He didn't hear the sarcasm hidden beneath Vineet's words. He didn't notice the possessiveness behind the gesture either. To Neel, Vineet was simply a man who still cared deeply for the woman he had once loved.

Perhaps, Neel thought, some feelings never completely disappear.

"Alright. I trust you, my friend," he finally said. "Just keep me informed about her condition. If anything changes, or if there's any cause for concern, please let me know."

"There was an emergency," Neel added. "And I have a surgery waiting. I'll stay back for now."

"You carry on," Vineet replied. "I'll look after Nishi. I'll let you know if anything changes."

There was a brief pause.

Then Vineet asked, "By the way, how is Ira?"

"Doing great. She has recovered completely."

"And, I am truly happy about it"

Vineet's jaw tightened slightly. Neel continued;

"I'm truly grateful to Nishi. That day, she convinced me that Ira needed help. I had almost given up on her."

"Yes, Neel," Vineet replied quietly. "I really wish she had learned to be selfish sometimes. Her life would have been much easier then."

Another layer of sarcasm. And once again, Neel completely missed it.

"I agree with you, Vineet," he said. "She was unwell herself, yet she still went to care for Raima."

Vineet said nothing.

"Don't worry," Neel continued. "Once she's back, I'll be there for her. All the time."

"Neel, right now, just focus on your patients. Don't worry about her."

This time, the coldness in Vineet's voice was unmistakable.

"Alright, Vineet. I'll catch you later."

The call ended. Vineet slowly placed the phone back beside Nishi. For several seconds, he stared at it.Then his expression hardened.

He turned towards the sleeping woman beside him. She looked peaceful, unaware of the conversation that had just taken place. Vineet watched her silently. Neel trusted him.

He had no idea how close he was to losing her.

"I may have been a beast once," he murmured bitterly. "But you, Neel… you hid behind the face of a saint."

His eyes darkened. You ruined the life of an innocent woman. The thought burned inside Vineet as he looked at the screen.

How could you do this to her? How could you let one night of desire destroy everything she had built for herself?

His jaw tightened. And how could you be so unbothered by the consequences? You're a highly qualified doctor, Neel. You understand responsibility. You know better than anyone that every action has consequences. How could you do this to Nishi and then move on as though nothing had happened?

Vineet gently caressed her hair, his fingers lingering for a moment against her temple.

"I still love you, Nishi," he whispered.

"It wasn't your fault. None of this was."

He watched her sleeping face, his heart heavy with everything she had been forced to endure.

"Maybe someday, my love will be enough to ease some of your pain. I don't want to replace Neel, and I know I never could. But I won't let you face this alone."

His voice trembled slightly.

"I still love you, Nishi. And I always will."

Nishi was still asleep in the bedroom. In the living room, Raima and Vineet sat quietly over cups of tea. For a while, neither of them spoke.

Finally, Raima broke the silence.

"She has decided to leave the city," she said softly. "She wants to move somewhere else with Palash… and the baby."

Vineet didn't respond. Somewhere inside, he had known she would eventually make a decision like this. Nishi had always been fiercely protective of the people she loved. If leaving was the only way she believed she could protect her child, she would leave without looking back. Yet his thoughts remained elsewhere.

He still couldn't come to terms with what he had heard.

Neel. The man Nishi trusted. The man who called himself her friend.

Vineet found it almost impossible to believe that Neel could have crossed such a boundary under the guise of friendship. His fingers tightened slightly around the teacup.

Raima noticed his silence.

"Vineet…"

He looked up.

She hesitated before speaking, as though even saying the words aloud made her uncomfortable.

"Can you convince her…"

She stopped. Vineet waited.

"Can you convince her to terminate the pregnancy?"

For a moment, Vineet simply stared at her. Then his expression changed.

"Raima, are you serious?"

There was disbelief in his voice.

"You know she won't do it."

Raima lowered her eyes.

"I know."

"She's determined to protect her baby," Vineet said quietly.

"She would rather walk away from everything than give up her child."

Raima remained silent. Vineet leaned back, his thoughts returning to Nishi. He knew her well enough to understand that this wasn't a decision she had made impulsively. Whatever happened next, she had already chosen her child.

And perhaps, after everything she had endured, that child was the one thing she still believed she could protect.

Raima spoke again, her voice hesitant. She clearly didn't want to say what was on her mind, but somehow, she mustered the courage.

"Then… perhaps we can do one thing. I mean, I'm not sure if we should…"

"What is it, Raima?" Vineet asked.

Raima sighed.

"Vineet, we know Neel has moved on. And now Nishi is going to have a difficult life with this child. She has built a career, and she already has Palash to raise. We both know she won't willingly accept anyone's support."

She paused.

"I'm worried about my best friend."

Vineet looked at her steadily.

"Come on, Raima. Don't beat around the bush. Just say what you're thinking."

Raima lowered her voice.

"I was wondering if we could give her something…"

Vineet frowned.

"Something?"

"I mean… mix something into her juice and tell her it's good for her."

Vineet stared at her.

"What do you mean?"

Raima swallowed.

"Pills… for the abortion."

For a moment, Vineet simply looked at her in disbelief.

Raima sighed.

"She wouldn't know. She might think she had a miscarriage. It would hurt for a few days, but eventually—"

"Oh, shut up, Raima!"

Vineet's voice cut through the room. Raima fell silent.

"Do you even hear yourself?"

His expression was filled with disbelief.

"How could you suggest something like this when you know Nishi so well?"

"Vineet, I'm only thinking about her future—"

"And what about her choice?"

Raima didn't answer.

"You're talking about secretly giving her medication and making her believe she lost her baby."

"She is only six weeks pregnant," Raima argued weakly.

"That doesn't make it your decision to make."

"It's barely developed—"

"Stop it, Raima!"

Vineet slammed his palm against the table.

"How can you be so callous?"

Raima looked shaken.

"You want to end an innocent baby's life without Nishi even knowing what happened?"

"I'm trying to save her from a difficult life!"

"No."

Vineet's voice became quieter, but somehow more forceful.

"You're trying to decide her life for her."

Raima looked away. Vineet continued.

"And don't tell me it won't put her life at risk. You have no right to secretly give her medication and assume you know what will happen."

"I only wanted to help her."

"Help her?"

He gave a bitter, disbelieving laugh.

"Then stand beside her. Support her. Help her raise Palash. Help her build her career. Help her through whatever comes next."

He leaned forward.

"But don't drug her because you think you know what's best for her."

Raima stared at him in disbelief. Then, unable to contain her anger, she let out a short, bitter laugh and clapped sarcastically.

"You are just amazing, Mr. Vineet Malhotra. Such a polished, sensible man."

Vineet frowned.

"What happened, Raima?"

"What happened?" she repeated, her voice rising. "Really?"

She took a breath, trying to steady herself, but the memories were already flooding back.

"Let me remind you of something, Mr. Malhotra. Nine years ago, you threw Nishi out of your house in torrential rain when she was carrying Palash."

Vineet looked away.

"Where was your humanity then?" Raima demanded. "Your beautiful wife was standing outside in the rain, pleading with you."

"She could have been attacked. She could have been assaulted. Anything could have happened to her."

"Stop it, Raima," Vineet said quietly.

"No, Vineet. Not this time. It is time someone told you what you did."

Her voice trembled with anger.

"Even if you believed the child she was carrying wasn't yours, you had no right to treat her like that. She was the woman you had once loved more than anything. And yet you shut the door on her while she stood outside, begging you to listen."

Vineet remained silent. Raima continued, her voice softer now but no less painful.

"You know who found her? My husband and I did. She was lying unconscious outside your porch. We brought her into our home. We took care of her. We stood beside her when she had nowhere else to go."

"I know, Raima," Vineet said, his voice heavy with remorse. "And I am sorry. I truly am. I have no justification for what I did."

"I don't want your apology for that," Raima replied. "And I don't want credit for what we did for Nishi. We helped her because we knew she was innocent"

"We were your neighbours. We knew what kind of man you were Vineet"

She wiped the corner of her eye.

"She could have aborted Palash. She could have walked away from everything and started a new life. She is beautiful, educated and capable. She could have chosen an easier path."

"But she didn't."

"She chose to raise her child alone."

Raima looked directly at him.

"And now, suddenly, you have realised that Palash is your son. Suddenly, you are worried about Nishi. Suddenly, you want to decide what is best for her."

"That isn't what I'm trying to do," Vineet said gently. "I am only trying to tell you that Nishi is strong. She has raised Palash alone all these years. She can raise her children."

"Vineet, do you have any idea what she has been through?"

Raima's voice broke.

"Do you know how many times society questioned her character? She was carrying her husband's child, yet people still judged her. Men like Mayank questioned her integrity. And why did they feel entitled to do that?"

She shook her head.

"Because you accused her of cheating."

Vineet closed his eyes for a moment.

"I know."

"What I did to her was wrong," Vineet continued. "But two wrongs don't make a right."

"What you are suggesting now is not right either."

Vineet looked at her carefully.

"Raima…"

"You are a mother of two," he said softly. "How could you even think of something like that?"

Raima's expression hardened for a moment, but then her eyes filled with tears.

"Yes, Vineet. I am a mother. And perhaps that's exactly why I'm so frightened for Nishi."

She took a shaky breath.

"My husband stood beside me when I was carrying my children. He took responsibility for them. He never left me to face everything alone."

Her voice became quieter.

"Unlike you and Neel."

Vineet had no answer. He knew she was stating a painful truth, and he accepted it without defending himself. Raima looked away.

"Nishi was always a free-spirited girl. She was educated, hardworking and independent. She survived everything that happened to her. In some ways, she was always better off alone."

She sighed.

"She raised Palash alone. She built a life for herself. She was doing well."

Then her voice cracked. "Then Dr Neel Mehra entered her life."

She closed her eyes briefly.

"You men think you can walk into a woman's life, change everything, hurt her, and somehow walk away without leaving scars."

Silence filled the room. Raima suddenly realised how far her anger had carried her. She brought a hand to her mouth and closed her eyes. Vineet waited until she had composed herself.

"Raima," he said quietly, "I agree with everything you have said about me."

She looked at him.

"You can curse me. You can hate me. You have every right to."

His voice remained calm.

"I was an awful man back then. I hurt Nishi when she needed me the most. I will regret that for the rest of my life."

He paused.

“But I will not let you hurt her now.”

Raima stared at him.

“She came to you because she trusted you,” Vineet continued. “Please don't betray that trust.”

His voice was still gentle, but there was an unmistakable firmness in it now.

“I won't allow anyone to harm her baby. And if you are seriously considering doing anything that could put that child at risk, I will take Nishi away from here myself.”

Raima looked down.

“I will tell her what happened. I won't hide it from her.”

He took a breath.

“Not because I want to threaten you. But because Nishi deserves to know it”

Raima's anger slowly gave way to shame.

“I am sorry, Vineet,” she whispered. “I promise I won't do anything like that.”

She shook her head, tears gathering in her eyes.

“I don't even know why I said those things.”

She covered her face with her hands.

“How could I say something like that for an unborn baby?”

After a moment, she looked up.

“I was only frightened for Nishi. She has already been through so much. I can't bear the thought of seeing her suffer again.”

Vineet's expression softened.

“Me too, Raima.”

He stepped closer.

"But abortion is not a solution to the pain she has already suffered."

Raima remained silent.

"She loves Neel," Vineet continued. "And if she loses this baby, she may carry that pain for the rest of her life."

He gently placed a hand on Raima's shoulder.

"Raima, I am not dead yet."

She looked at him through her tears.

"This time, I won't let anyone accuse Nishi of something she hasn't done."

His voice trembled slightly.

"She hasn't done anything wrong. She loved Neel with all her heart."

He paused, his eyes filled with regret and tenderness.

"And despite everything that happened between us…"

He swallowed.

"I still love her. I love her with all my heart"

Raima looked at him for a long moment. For the first time, she could see that his determination was not about reclaiming Nishi or rewriting the past. It was about making sure that the woman he had once failed so terribly would not be failed again.

# Chapter 53
# YOU DON'T HAVE TO DEAL WITH IT ALONE



Nishi woke in the evening with a heavy head. The room seemed to spin for a few seconds before her vision finally settled. She turned her head and froze. Vineet was sitting beside her bed.

"Vineet… what are you still doing here?"

Before Nishi could say anything, Raima entered with a cup of tea and a plate of savouries. She placed them on the bedside table and quietly walked out, leaving them alone. Vineet picked up the cup and held it out to her.

"Have this. You'll feel better."

Nishi took the cup, still watching him carefully. He was calm and composed. He poured himself another cup and settled into the chair beside her bed.

Nishi took a few sips. She hadn't realised how much she needed it.

"I'll deal with it, Vineet. Please leave me alone."

Vineet remained silent for a moment.

"Nishi, I just want to know one thing."

She looked up.

"Do you want this child?"

There was no hesitation in her answer.

"Yes."

Vineet nodded.

He reached for a bowl that had been covered with a small plate and removed the cover.

"Then eat this."

Nishi looked at the bowl.

"What is it?"

"Porridge. I made it myself in Raima's kitchen."

He smiled faintly.

"Exactly the way you like it."

Nishi looked at him, uncomfortable with the tenderness in his voice.

"Raima told me you hardly ate anything at breakfast or lunch. If you want to have this baby, you need to eat properly."

"Vineet, why are you doing this for me?"

Her voice hardened.

"Please leave me alone. I don't want your sympathy. I can take care of my life."

Vineet gave her a small, understanding smile.

"Alright. Finish the porridge, and I'll leave."

Nishi looked away.

"Nishi…"

"Vineet, please don't lecture me. I know how to take care of my baby."

He didn't argue.

He understood that he had stepped into her private space at a time when she was vulnerable. He also understood that her anger wasn't really directed at him. She was hurting, and she didn't want anyone's pity.

Still, he held the bowl out to her. After a moment, Nishi took it. She ate quietly until the bowl was empty. Then she looked at him.

"Happy now?"

A faint smile appeared on her face.

"And it was delicious too."

Vineet smiled back. But the moment passed quickly.

"Nishi… are you sure about that letter?"

Her expression changed.

"Vineet, I don't want to discuss it. I've left it behind."

She looked down at her hands.

"I'm not going back. Let Neel move on. I love him, and I will always love him."

Her voice trembled slightly.

"But I'm not going back to intrude in his life."

"What will you do then?"

Nishi gave him an irritated look.

"Hasn't Raima told you? I thought I was already the talk of the town."

Vineet sighed softly.

"Raima told me. She was reluctant to say anything, but I kept asking because I was worried about you. He paused before continuing.

"And I'm not going to leave you alone with your stupid plan of moving to another city with Palash and this unborn baby."

Nishi looked at him sharply.

"Isn't that exactly what you're doing, Vineet? You're moving to Bangalore too."

"Yes."

"That's true, Nishi."

He looked at her for a long moment.

"I'm moving to Bangalore for the very same reason."

Nishi stared at him.

"I can't see you with anyone else."

She didn't respond. Vineet's voice softened.

"I thought I would never stay in touch with you again. I thought walking away was the right thing to do."

He gave a small, rueful smile.

"But thank God I didn't."

He leaned back in his chair.

"Because I just found out that the woman, I love is alone."

Nishi's eyes filled with confusion.

"Vineet…"

He gently touched her face.

"In this condition, I'm not leaving you alone."

She pulled back slightly.

“I don't need anyone to rescue me.”

“I know.”

His answer came without hesitation.

“And I'm not trying to rescue you.”

He lowered his hand.

“I know you can take care of yourself. You've always been stronger than I gave you credit for.”

Nishi remained silent. Vineet looked at her, his expression completely free of resentment now.

“I am Palash’s biological father.”

Nishi's eyes widened. He glanced briefly towards her abdomen.

“And this baby…”

He paused, choosing his words carefully.

“This baby is yours.”

His eyes met hers again.

“And if you will allow me, I would be happy to call this baby mine.”

Nishi couldn't speak. Vineet continued softly,

“Ours.”

The word hung between them.

“I’m not asking you to forget Neel. I'm not asking you to love me. And I'm not asking you to make any decision today.”

He stood up.

“I just want you to know that if you choose to have this baby, you won't have to face everything alone.”

Nishi looked at him, stunned. For the first time, Vineet wasn't asking her to come back to him.

He was simply offering her a future in which she wouldn't have to walk alone.

Nishi's expression softened, but she shook her head gently.

"Vineet, I told you—I'm not going to marry you. Please let me handle this my way. I've handled everything before."

Vineet looked at her quietly.

"Nishi, you don't have to marry me. I knew you wouldn't."

She looked at him, surprised.

"But I still won't leave you alone in this condition," he continued softly. "Not because I expect anything from you, but because you are still the woman I once loved deeply."

Nishi took a slow breath.

"Look, Vineet, I've handled Palash all these years by myself."

"I know."

"I didn't need anyone around me. You know that."

"I know that too."

She looked down for a moment before continuing.

"Yes, I loved Neel deeply. And yes… I made a mistake. But that doesn't change what I feel for my baby."

Her hand instinctively moved towards her abdomen.

"It's my baby. My responsibility. And I will take care of it."

Vineet listened without interrupting.

"I don't want anyone to help me," she said firmly. "My life. My choices."

There was a long silence. Then Vineet nodded.

"I understand."

Nishi looked at him.

"I'm not trying to take those choices away from you."

"Then what are you trying to do?"

"Stand beside you."

She remained silent. Vineet's voice was gentle.

"You don't have to marry me. You don't have to live with me. You don't even have to accept my help."

He paused.

"But if you ever need someone, I want you to know that I will be there."

Nishi looked away, fighting the emotion rising in her eyes.

"I am accountable for my choices, Vineet."

"I know."

"And I will take care of my child."

Vineet gave her a faint smile.

"I know you will. I never doubted that, Nishi."

He paused before continuing.

"All I'm saying is… come with me to Bangalore."

Nishi looked up at him.

"I'll help you find a job there. You don't have to marry me. You don't have to live in my house."

He smiled gently.

"We can simply live in the same locality. I've found a job there, and I can recommend you to the company if you want. You can start afresh."

Nishi shook her head slightly. Vineet continued before she could object.

"You may not even need my recommendation. You're talented and hardworking. You can rebuild your career anywhere."

He took a breath.

"And if you're already planning to move to another city, why not Bangalore?"

Nishi remained silent.

"Listen, Nishi," he said softly. "I'm not doing you a favour. I don't want you to feel indebted to me."

His voice became gentler.

"You will rebuild your life yourself. You will earn your own money, make your own decisions, raise your children your way."

He smiled faintly.

"I just want to stay beside you. That's all."

Nishi shook her head, still unable to accept what he was offering.

Vineet understood.

He stood up and picked up the empty bowl. He turned towards the door, but stopped. Without looking back, he said quietly,

"I just don't want your strength to become a reason for you to believe that you have to do everything alone."

# Chapter 54
# THE MYSTERY CONTINUES



It had been four days since then. Neel called her every day. Something urgent had come up at the hospital, and he had been unable to visit, but he never failed to call and check on her health.

Nishi spoke to him normally, as though nothing had changed. She asked about Ira, listened patiently while Neel told her about her condition, and even discussed the children with him. Whenever he asked how she was feeling, Nishi assured him that she was perfectly fine.

"You probably just needed a break," Neel said cheerfully one evening. "I think you were overexerting yourself. You've been doing too much lately. A few days of rest will do you good."

Nishi smiled faintly.

"Maybe you're right."

Neel also told her that his mother would be coming back soon.

"That's good," Nishi replied. "Sahana must be missing her."

"She is. And Ma is already excited about coming back and seeing everyone."

Whenever the children called, Nishi spoke to them just as she always did. She laughed at Palash's stories, answered Sahana's questions, and asked about their day. To them, she sounded completely normal. No one could have guessed how much she was struggling to keep herself that way.

One morning, Neel called her.

"Nishi, it's been five days," he said gently. "I was thinking I'd come and bring you home after my shift. I really miss you."

Nishi fell silent. He misses me? How could he miss me when Ira was already in his life?

Before she could respond, Neel asked, "Nishi, have you recovered completely?"

"I'm perfectly alright, Neel."

There was a brief pause.

"I know you," he said softly. "My instinct tells me you're not telling me everything. You always say you're fine when you don't want me to worry. I want to see you myself and make sure you're really alright."

His concern left her speechless.

"Come home Nishi. I want to spend some time with you before our children return. There are so many things I want to tell you, and I'd rather talk to you in person."

The pleading warmth in his voice reminded her so much of Palash. There was something almost childlike in the way he asked—so innocent, so affectionate, as though all he wanted at that moment was to have her beside him and share the thoughts he had been carrying in his heart. Then his voice became lighter.

"And honestly, I don't even feel like eating properly. I've been surviving on the hospital cafeteria and whatever I can find."

Nishi felt a pang of pain at his words. She could almost picture him eating alone, too exhausted to care about what was on his plate.

"You don't feel like eating?" she asked softly, concern creeping into her voice.

"Not without you," he admitted. "I miss our meals. I miss cooking with you."

Nishi smiled despite herself but her eyes moistened.

"Really?"

"Really."

She hesitated before asking, "And what about Ira?"

There was no jealousy in her question, only concern for him. Neel gave a small sigh.

"Well, Ira makes sandwiches every morning. Apparently, that's her specialty."

Nishi chuckled.

"Come back Nishi," he said softly. "Tonight, we'll cook together."

"I'm definitely coming to get you this evening," Neel replied.

There was silence in the other end. Nishi wondered how she would face Neel that evening. How could she protect her heart from his effortless warmth and affectionate, almost intimate familiarity?

He loved Ira, yet the way he spoke to Nishi, the way he worried about her and longed for her presence, felt so deeply personal—as though they were already a couple, sharing a life together. His closeness was innocent in his eyes, perhaps even natural, but for Nishi, every tender word was becoming harder to endure.

He suddenly added, almost sheepishly, "Though I should warn you—I've been surviving on chocolate cake since you left."

"Chocolate cake? From Ira's birthday?"

Nishi immediately remembered the birthday card and the letter she had found.

"Ira's birthday?" Neel repeated, genuinely surprised. "It's not her birthday, Nishi. I think hers is sometime in October… or November. I don't even remember exactly."

Nishi went silent.

"One of my patients bought the cake for me," Neel explained. "She owns a bakery. And I know how much you love chocolate cake, so come home before I finish it."

He said it teasingly, as though the cake were merely an excuse to coax her back home. Nishi smiled faintly. For a moment, the heaviness in her heart seemed to ease. Just then, she heard a nurse calling Neel from somewhere nearby. Before she could say anything more, Neel spoke again.

"One of my patients has a stomach ache. I need to go. Nishi, I'll see you in the evening."

And before Nishi could respond, the call ended. Nishi slowly lowered the phone. For a moment, she simply stared at the screen. She didn't know how she would face Neel that evening. There was so much she wanted to tell him. Most of all, she wanted to tell him about the baby growing inside her. But fear held her back. She knew Neel well enough to believe that he would never ask her to abort the baby. Yet another possibility frightened her even more.

What if he accepted me out of pity?

She could bear his rejection. What she couldn't bear was the thought of him staying with her merely because he felt responsible. She didn't want obligation. She wanted to be loved. Tears slipped silently down her cheeks.

Then something suddenly caught her attention. The chocolate cake.

Nishi wiped her tears and stared ahead. It wasn't Ira's birthday. Neel didn't even remember when her birthday was. October… or November. He wasn't sure.

Then what about the birthday card? And the letter? Her heart began to beat faster.

It is May. Ira's birthday was nowhere near. So why had Neel wished her?

Another thought surfaced. The handwriting. She remembered it clearly. It was Neel's handwriting. There was no mistaking it.

The letter had mentioned that he was waiting for Sahana to return, which made sense because she was away on a school trip. But there had also been a birthday wish.

Nishi frowned. Something wasn't adding up. Before she could piece it together, Raima's voice broke through her thoughts.

"Nishi?"

She looked up.

Raima stood at the doorway, holding her phone.

"I've taken an appointment with the doctor," she said. "We need to leave soon."

The truth was that Nishi was still struggling with the uneasiness. The nausea came and went, leaving her tired and uncomfortable. She tried not to think too much about it. Whenever Raima insisted that she see a doctor, Nishi brushed it aside.

"It's normal during the first trimester," she said "There's nothing to worry about."

But Raima refused to be convinced.

"You've been saying that for days," she finally said firmly. "I know morning sickness is common, but you should still get yourself checked. At least we'll know everything is fine."

"Raima, honestly, I'm okay."

"I'm not asking you anymore, Nishi. I'm taking you to the doctor."

Nishi looked at her for a moment. She knew there was no point arguing with her.

"Fine," she sighed. "Let's go."

Raima immediately picked up her bag.

"Good. That's all I wanted to hear."

Nishi gave her a reluctant smile and followed her out, still convinced that the doctor would simply tell her what she had been saying all along—that it was just the usual discomfort of early pregnancy.

On the way, Raima finally broke the silence. "There's a very good gynaecologist near Vineet's apartment. Vineet has taken an appointment with her. He's meeting us there."

Nishi immediately looked at her.

"Why did you involve Vineet?"

"I'm not taking any sort of help from anyone."

Raima kept her eyes on the road.

"Nishi, Vineet has made up his mind. He isn't going to leave you alone."

Nishi sighed.

"Raima, I'm not going to Bangalore. I know he still loves me, and I don't want to give him any unreasonable expectations. My life is for my children now."

"Hmm." Raima paused. "Have you thought about Sahana?"

Nishi fell silent.

"She'll be with her biological mother, Ira," she finally said. "Gradually, she'll forget me."

She sighed. Even saying those words hurt.

"And how do you think all this is going to unfold?" Raima asked gently. "What will you tell Palash?"

"Look, Raima, Neel has moved on. I can't stay there and wait for him."

"He wants to start his life with Ira."

"And I have to leave his house. It's about my self-respect."

"Palash will understand when he grows up."

Raima hesitated before asking the question she had been avoiding.

"And what about this baby? What will you tell your child about his father?"

Nishi looked away, staring out of the window.

Raima continued quietly.

"And how are you finally going to tell Neel that you're leaving the city?"

"After the children arrive, and after Neel's mother comes back, I'll handle it."

"And your pregnancy?" Raima asked. "You still won't tell Neel?"

Nishi remained silent.

"Nishi, silence isn't the answer." Raima's voice softened. "It takes two people to bring a child into the world. Neel is equally responsible for this baby."

Nishi turned towards her.

"He may have moved on with Ira, but that doesn't mean you have to carry everything alone."

"Raima…"

"All I'm saying is, he has a right to know. Whatever happened between the two of you, this child is a part of both your lives."

"He's a highly qualified doctor, Nishi. It's difficult to understand how he could have been so careless about precautions and you are paying the price alone "

Nishi's expression hardened.

"Don't make it sound so cheap."

"I'm not."

"I still love Neel," Nishi said quietly. "And I respect him. I'm not going to use this baby to hold him back or force him to choose me."

Raima glanced at her.

"Then don't. Just tell him the truth."

Nishi shook her head.

"What if he thinks I'm doing this to get him back?"

"He knows you better than that."

"Maybe he did."

Her voice broke slightly. Raima reached over and briefly placed a hand over hers.

"Nishi, I'm not asking you to go back to him. I'm only asking you not to make this decision for him."

Nishi slowly withdrew her hand and looked out of the window again.

"I've already decided, Raima."

Raima said nothing. But from the determination in Nishi's voice, she knew that changing her mind would not be easy.

# Chapter 55
# Let's find out



Nishi looked out of the window, but her thoughts had already drifted far away. Her mind returned to the birthday card—and then to the letter. Something about it had never quite made sense.

Neel had told her that he didn't even remember Ira's birthday. Yet the letter had contained a warm birthday wish, written as though it had come directly from him. What if it wasn't written by Neel? The thought suddenly unsettled her. Could someone else have written it?

Her mind went back to the possibility she had once considered—the possibility that Ira's former boyfriend had written the letter. But then another question surfaced. Sahana's name was mentioned in it. And Neel had signed it. That made things far more complicated. Nishi frowned, trying to piece everything together.

What if there is another story behind that letter? For the first time, she allowed herself to consider a possibility she had been too afraid to entertain.

What if the letter was forged? Her heart began to beat faster.

She remembered Neel's mother warning her about Ira. What if she was trying to warn me about something I didn't understand? Nishi's doubts were no longer easy to dismiss. She couldn't continue making assumptions from a distance. This time, she decided, she would see Neel in the evening. He was coming to pick her. She needed to look into his eyes and ask him about the letter herself. If there was another side to the story, she wanted to hear it from him.

And if the letter really had been forged, she was determined to find out who had written it—and why.

Just then, Raima's phone rang. It was Vineet.

"Raima, I spoke to the doctor. She's consulting at Lifeline Hospital today, but she won't be available for the next four days. If Nishi needs to be examined, it's better that we see her today."

"I see."

"I'm already on my way there," Vineet assured her. "You bring Nishi. I'll meet you at the hospital."

"Don't worry," Raima replied. "I'll bring her there."

After ending the call, Raima glanced at Nishi.

"Vineet is already on his way. The doctor is available only today, so we're going straight to Lifeline Hospital."

Nishi's face fell when she heard the name of the hospital.

"No, Raima. Not this hospital. Neel will be there."

Though she had decided to meet Neel that evening, Nishi knew he would come to pick her up himself. Yet she didn't want him to find her in the maternity ward—not until she had uncovered the truth about the mysterious letter. Something about it still troubled her. The more she thought about the letter, the more questions surfaced. Until she knew who had written it and why, she wasn't ready to let Neel see her there.

She needed answers first. Raima immediately took a U-turn.

"Nishi, we are going there."

"Raima…"

"It's about your baby," Raima said firmly, without taking her eyes off the road. "You need to get yourself checked, and we're going straight to the maternity ward. What would Neel be doing there? He must be in the oncology department."

Nishi remained silent.

"Besides," Raima continued, "Vineet said he would speak to the doctor himself and make sure you get the proper medical attention."

"I don't want Vineet involved."

"I know."

"Then why—"

"Because right now, I care more about you and the baby than about what you want to avoid."

Nishi looked at her, irritated. Raima didn't look back. She simply kept driving.

She knew Nishi too well. When she became stubborn, reasoning with her only made her more determined. Sometimes, the only way to deal with Nishi was to stop arguing and simply take charge. And that was exactly what Raima intended to do.

Raima parked her car outside the hospital and immediately spotted Vineet standing beside his car.

As soon as he saw Nishi, he walked towards them and gently offered her his hand.

"That's okay, Vineet. I'm not a patient."

Nishi got out of the car herself and turned towards him.

"Why have you come, Vineet? It's just a regular check-up."

Vineet smiled.

"In Bangalore, I've found an apartment for you and Palash. It's in our apartment complex."

"I'm not coming to Bangalore."

Vineet smiled again, as though he had expected that answer.

"I also forwarded your CV. You'll get a good package at the company where I'll be working."

"Vineet, I said I'm not coming to Bangalore. Can't you hear me?"

"Come. Let's get you examined first."

He gently took her hand.

"There's a big hospital near my apartment in Bangalore, with excellent doctors."

"I know. Palash was born there."

"Exactly. We'll get you examined there once we reach Bangalore."

"Vineet, can't you hear me?"

"Sshh."

He raised a finger gently, asking her to stop arguing.

"Don't get so stressed. It isn't good for you or the baby."

Nishi stared at him, exasperated. Vineet's expression softened.

"And Nishi, I'm not leaving you alone. If you don't come to Bangalore, I'll follow you wherever you go."

"You have no escape from me."

Nishi looked at him in disbelief.

"You're still the love of my life," Vineet continued quietly. "If you still believe you have the right to love Neel unconditionally, then I believe I have the right to love you the same way."

Nishi looked away.

"I don't want anything from you," she said softly. "I just want to protect you."

"I know."

Vineet's voice became quieter.

"I wasn't there when you brought Palash into this world. I'll be there for this baby, no matter what."

He paused before adding,

"So, either you come with me to Bangalore, or I'll follow you wherever you go."

Nishi had no answer. She still wasn't convinced, but she understood one thing clearly—Vineet was determined, and he wasn't going to give up easily.

"All right, Vineet," she finally said. "I'll come to Bangalore. But I'll stay separately."

Vineet nodded with a small smile.

"Hmm. That's more like it."

Just then, someone called out from behind them.

"Sir, could you please park your car properly? It's taking up quite a lot of space."

Vineet turned towards the man and then looked at Raima.

"Raima, please take her inside. I'll come straight to the maternity ward."

He gently patted Nishi's shoulder.

"Don't worry. Everything will be fine."

Raima took Nishi's hand and led her towards the maternity ward. Nishi followed silently, her mind still crowded with questions, while Vineet walked back towards his car.

Raima went straight to the reception desk and enquired about the gynaecologist

"I have an appointment with Dr Garima Nagar," she told the receptionist.

The receptionist smiled. "The doctor has arrived. She's right behind you."

Nishi turned around. A lady doctor was speaking to another doctor a few steps away. It took Nishi only a moment to recognise him.

Neel.

Before she could look away, Neel noticed her. Their eyes met. His expression changed instantly.

"Nishi?" he said, surprise flashing across his face. "What are you doing here in the maternity ward?"

Nishi froze. She glanced helplessly towards Raima, who was still busy completing the formalities at the reception desk.

Neel stepped towards her. Without saying another word, he gently took her hand and led her towards a quieter corner of the corridor before she could protest.

"What happened, Nishi?"

His voice softened as he looked at her. The concern in his eyes was unmistakable.

"Are you still feeling nauseous? You told me you had recovered."

"No, actually… I… Neel…"

The words caught in her throat. How could she possibly explain why she was standing in a maternity ward?

Neel watched her quietly. For a moment, something flickered across his face—an almost imperceptible realisation. But it disappeared just as quickly, replaced by his usual calm composure.

"I suspected something, Nishi," he said at last.

She looked at him, puzzled.

"But after you told me you had recovered, I put that thought to rest."

"What did you suspect?"

Neel's eyes remained fixed on her face.

"Are you still feeling uneasy?"

Nishi nodded.

"Yes."

"Did you miss your periods?"

Her eyes dropped to the floor.

"Hmm."

That tiny response was enough. Neel's expression grew serious.

For some reason, that seriousness frightened Nishi more than anything else. She searched his face, trying to understand what was going on inside his mind. There was no obvious joy. No disappointment. No guilt. Only a quiet, thoughtful seriousness that left her even more uncertain. Neel stepped closer.

"Nishi, don't worry."

His voice was gentle.

"I'm here."

Slowly, he lifted his hands and cupped her face, his touch warm and reassuring.

"Nishi…"

He paused, as though choosing his words carefully.

"It's possible that you're pregnant."

Nishi's breath caught. For a moment, the sounds of the hospital seemed to fade around her.

Neel held her gaze. His expression remained composed, but there was something deeper in his eyes now—something she couldn't quite understand.

"Let's find out," he said softly.

There was no hesitation in his voice. No regret. Only concern.

By then, Vineet had reached them. He stopped a short distance away and said nothing. His eyes rested on Neel standing beside Nishi, his hands gently holding her face, and something inside him eased. Whatever questions still remained unanswered, at least Nishi wasn't facing this alone.

A little farther away, Raima had finished the formalities. She looked towards them and understood immediately that this was a moment that belonged only to Nishi and Neel.

Without interrupting, she quietly stepped back. Giving them the privacy, they needed.

Neel looked around and spotted Vineet and Raima nearby. Still holding Nishi's hand gently, he turned to Raima.

"Raima, you should have called me. You told me you would. But you did the right thing by taking the appointment first."

His eyes moved to Nishi's face. He studied her for a moment.

"I can see that she's nervous. You should have told me. I could have brought her here myself."

Raima glanced at Nishi and, after a brief hesitation, lied.

"No, actually, I thought I would find you here. I was just about to call you."

"Yeah, that's true. It's good that you brought her here."

"Thank you Raima"

There was so much genuine concern in Neel's voice that even Raima, who had been lecturing Nishi only moments ago about being practical, couldn't bring herself to tell him the truth. She

simply didn't have the heart to hurt him. Neel then turned towards Vineet.

"I know you came here because you were concerned about her."

"Thank you for coming here for her," Neel said, smiling as he gently patted Vineet's shoulder.

"Yes, Neel. I was actually looking for you. I asked Raima to take her to the maternity department while I searched for you."

"I was also about to call you,"

Nishi understood what had happened.

Raima and Vineet had lied for her. They had probably realised that if Neel discovered that she already knew about the pregnancy and had still kept it from him, he would be hurt. For some strange reason, she felt grateful to both of them. She looked at them and smiled through her tears and they smiled back giving her reassurance. Then Neel turned back to Raima.

"When is her turn, Raima?"

"Well… she's the seventh patient."

"Alright. Raima, we'll be right back."

He turned towards Nishi.

"Come with me."

Without another word, he took her hand in both of his—firmly, yet gently—and began walking towards the elevator. Nishi didn't protest. She never questioned Neel when he took charge. She trusted him completely.

Raima watched them disappear towards the elevator, wondering where exactly Neel was taking her.

Vineet turned to her.

"I told you. There may be another version of what we assumed."

Raima looked at him. Vineet gave her a faint, thoughtful smile.

"Raima, I agree that I assumed Neel had ruined her life. I was mad at him. But right now, I want to know the truth before we assume anything."

Vineet paused, his eyes drifting towards Nishi.

"My misunderstanding ruined our lives once. Years ago, if I hadn't misunderstood the situation, perhaps Nishi and I would be living a beautiful life together today—with our son."

His voice softened with regret.

"I admit that after I found out about the letter and Nishi's pregnancy, I immediately assumed Neel was an evil man. But my inner voice is telling me something different now."

He took a slow breath.

"I genuinely hope I was wrong about him."

"I don't want another misunderstanding ruin Nishi's life again"

Vineet looked at Raima firmly.

"Let's not jump to conclusions. Let's find out what really happened."

"Let's find out the truth."

# Chapter 56
# DON'T WORRY. I AM WITH YOU.



Neel held Nishi's hand and led her towards the elevator. She was utterly confused.

For the past few days, she had been planning her departure from his life. She had thought about how she would leave Delhi, how she would take Palash with her, and how she would keep the child growing inside her a secret from Neel. And now she was standing beside him, her hand in his, while he calmly walked her towards the very answer she had been trying so desperately to hide.

And then there was the letter. The letter he had written for Ira. Her heart tightened. She glanced at Neel again.

He seemed tense. She could see it in the slight tightness around his eyes and in the way his fingers remained wrapped around hers a little more firmly than usual. But there was something else in his expression that she couldn't understand. The elevator doors opened, and Neel led her towards his cabin.

As they reached his floor, he asked the ward boy passing by,

"Please send a cup of tea to my cabin."

He opened the door and gently ushered Nishi inside.

“Sit here.”

He helped her settle comfortably on the sofa before taking the chair opposite her. For a moment, he simply looked at her and gently caressed her.

“You look so tired, Nishi. You’ve been so hard on yourself.”

Then he reached into a drawer and took something out. A pregnancy test kit. Nishi's heart stopped. Neel sat down beside her and held it out.

“Nishi, do you remember the day you were so sick that you couldn't attend the office meeting?”

She nodded silently.

“That day, I suspected you might be pregnant. I bought this test kit, but I had to leave because of an emergency. Then you told me that you had recovered, so I put the thought out of my mind.”

The ward boy arrived with the tea. He placed it on the table and quietly left. Neel picked up the cup and held it towards her.

“Have some.”

“No, Neel. I don't feel like having tea.”

He didn't insist. He simply placed the cup back on the table.

“So, you never really recovered,” he said quietly. “And you lied to me.”

Nishi lowered her eyes.

“Raima could have called her family. She has so many relatives who could have looked after her. But you...” Neel paused and looked at Nishi. “I am the one who will always be there to look after you.”

He let out a quiet sigh.

"Yet you left the house to take care of her. I insisted that you come back, but you were stubborn, arguing with me over the most ridiculous things."

A faint trace of frustration crossed his face.

"Sometimes, Nishi, your stubbornness really irritates me."

His expression softened again.

"And then you delayed your own treatment." His eyes moved over her face.

"She seems perfectly fine to me. You don't."

Nishi remained silent.

"And that entire week, I was so caught up with everything that I couldn't check on you properly. And you… you kept ignoring your own condition."

"I called you the other day, but you were fast asleep at half past six in the evening. Vineet told me he would be there for you, but even he didn't tell me how bad things had actually become."

"He asked me to trust him and leave you in his care."

He paused; his voice heavy with regret.

"I should have listened to my instinct. I should have come to you that day."

Neel looked away

"Now, I won't trust anyone else with you. You are my responsibility"

Nishi's expression softened.

"Neel, what makes you think I'm unwell?"

Neel studied her face for a moment, his concern impossible to hide.

"Nishi, you look exhausted. You've lost weight, and those dark circles under your eyes…" His voice softened as he looked at her more closely.

Then his expression changed, as though another possibility had quietly crossed his mind.

"Or perhaps…" he said gently, almost cautiously, "you're experiencing some of the early symptoms of pregnancy."

Nishi froze for a moment. His words had caught her completely off guard.

His voice carried no anger—only concern.

"I am still grateful to Raima for bringing you here."

Nishi finally looked up. She didn't know what to say. Once again, Neel was showing her the same quiet concern that had always made her feel safe with him. And somehow, that made everything even harder.

Neel quietly locked the door of his cabin and turned towards Nishi. He reached for her hand.

"Come. Let me examine you."

Nishi rose slowly from the sofa and followed him to the examination couch. Neel helped her lie down comfortably, making sure she was properly settled before stepping closer.

His manner was calm and professional, but the concern in his eyes was unmistakable.

"Just relax," he said softly. "I know you're nervous."

Nishi nodded, though her fingers remained tightly clasped together.

Neel looked at her for a moment before asking gently, "When was your last period?"

Nishi's heart sank.

She knew she wasn't answering these questions merely as a patient. She was answering the man who is the father of her child.

"About two weeks before…" She hesitated. "Before that night."

Neel's expression changed subtly.

"And since when have you been feeling tired?"

"It's been three weeks."

"Seriously? Three weeks?"

"You've been more than tired, Nishi." His voice remained gentle. "You've looked exhausted for days. Why didn't you tell me?"

Nishi gave him a faint, nervous smile.

"I thought it was just stress."

Neel sighed softly. He wasn't angry. If anything, his concern seemed to deepen.

"Next time, you won't dismiss something like this. Especially when your body is clearly telling you that something has changed."

"Next time?"

Neel smiled gently.

"Yes. Next time—and every time—you'll tell me if something feels different."

During the examination, Neel examined her gently, his touch careful and reassuring. When he noticed a slight tenderness, he paused, his eyes softening with concern.

"Is this area a little tender?" he asked quietly. "Have your breasts been feeling unusually sensitive lately?"

Nishi quickly looked away.

"Yes."

Neel gave her a gentle, knowing smile.

"Nishi, that can also be a sign of pregnancy. "You're always so occupied with taking care of everyone else's well-being that you probably didn't notice the changes in your own body. Otherwise, you would have told me."

He then moved on to a gentle abdominal examination, palpating carefully and watching her face for any discomfort. He put on his gloves and looked at Nishi reassuringly.

Neel noticed the hesitation in her eyes and gave her a soft, reassuring smile.

"I'm not a gynaecologist, Nishi, but I've done these examinations before with my cancer patients. You don't have to worry. Just take a slow breath and relax. I'll be gentle, alright? I'm right here."

Nishi took a slow breath and nodded, her eyes meeting his.

"I know, Neel. I trust you," she said softly, without hesitation.

Neel proceeded with the pelvic examination carefully and professionally, explaining each step before continuing. He noticed the slight tenderness and paused for a moment, making sure she was comfortable.

"Does this hurt?"

Nishi shook her head.

"Just a little uncomfortable," she whispered.

"Alright. Tell me if you feel any pain."

He completed the examination and gently removed his gloves. There was a thoughtful look on his face now, as though he was putting together several small clues.

Nishi remained still, her heart quietly racing. She knew Neel had already begun to suspect the truth. He was a doctor. Sooner or later, he would find out.

And perhaps that was what frightened her most—and what she secretly wanted. The truth was, she wanted to tell him herself.

She wanted to see his reaction when he learned that she was carrying his child.

Neel helped her down from the examination couch, but the moment her feet touched the floor, she almost stumbled. He immediately caught her, holding her firmly.

"Easy, Nishi. Don't be nervous."

"Hold me."

Neel pulled her closer. He gently kissed her forehead, the way one might reassure a frightened child.

Then, still keeping an arm around her, he guided her towards the sofa. Once she was seated, Neel sat beside her and took her hand in his.

There was something different in his expression now—a quiet tenderness, touched by uncertainty.

Nishi noticed the faint smile on his face and swallowed nervously.

"Neel…"

"I know." His fingers tightened gently around hers. "You're scared."

She looked at him, her eyes revealing everything she was desperately trying to hide. Neel gave her hand a reassuring squeeze.

"Nishi…" he said softly, I have a feeling you're about seven weeks pregnant."

He looked at her with quiet tenderness and understanding. Nishi stared at him, her heart suddenly pounding.

Has he actually figured it out? Her eyes filled with tears again. Neel gently wiped them away and kissed her cheek.

"Hey… don't be afraid, Nishi." Neel gently held her hand, his thumb brushing softly over her knuckles. "We haven't done anything wrong, Nishi. There's nothing for either of us to feel

guilty about. Whatever happens, we'll face it together. You don't have to carry this fear alone—not when I'm right here with you."

Those words touched something deep inside her. The father of her child was reassuring her that everything would be all right. For the first time, the fear in her heart softened, replaced by a quiet sense of warmth and hope.

His voice was soft and reassuring as he took her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. He picked up the pregnancy test kit from the table and held it out to her.

"Come on," he said gently. "Let's find out."

Nishi stared at the test kit but didn't take it immediately.

"What if the test is positive?" she asked deliberately, already knowing how close Neel was to the truth.

Neel smiled, trying to lighten the moment, and then said mischievously,

"Nishi, I was just wondering… you're so thin. How are you going to carry our baby?"

"Excuse me, Dr. Mehra," Nishi retorted, a little indignantly. "I'm not thin. I'm slim."

"Well, what's the difference?"

Nishi chuckled. Neel laughed softly and leaned against her shoulder, letting the tension between them melt away for a moment.

"There's an attached washroom in my cabin," he added quietly. "You can take the test there. I'll wait here."

She finally reached for it, her trembling fingers brushing against his. Neel noticed.

"Take your time," he whispered. "There's no need to be frightened."

Nishi stared at the pregnancy test kit in his hand. She already knew what the result would be. Positive. She had known for days. But she couldn't bring herself to tell him. If she told him now, he would ask the question she had been dreading. Why hadn't she told him?

Neel noticed her hesitation. He gently patted her hand.

"Don't worry. I am with you."

Those six words struck her differently.

His words carried a kind of reassurance she hadn't expected. For a moment, Nishi felt the strength drain from her resolve to leave him. She looked into his eyes. How could she tell this man that she had already decided to walk away?

And yet, here he was, caring for her with the tenderness of a loving husband, as though he already knew that his wife was carrying their first child. Every little gesture, every word of concern, made her resolve feel a little weaker.

"Come on, Nishi," Neel said softly. "Let's find out."

Without saying a word, she stood up and walked towards the attached washroom. A few minutes later, she came out and handed the test strip to Neel. Neel glanced at it.

"Let's wait"

He made her comfortable on the sofa and sat beside her, wrapping an arm gently around her shoulders.

Neither of them spoke. Three minutes passed. Neel picked up the strip. Two red lines had appeared. He stared at them carefully.

For a moment, he didn't say anything. Then he slowly looked away and stood up. Nishi's heart sank. Why had he turned away? Was he already regretting it? Had he never wanted this child?

She stood up, watching him anxiously.

"Neel..."

He turned around.

His eyes were filled with tears. But they weren't tears of regret. They were tears of happiness.

Before Nishi could understand what was happening, Neel crossed the distance between them and pulled her into his arms. Nishi froze.

She had expected questions. Confusion. Perhaps even disappointment.

Instead, his embrace tightened around her. He held her as though he had just received the most precious news of his life. Nishi still couldn't understand.

"Neel..."

He didn't answer. He simply held her closer, overwhelmed by the emotion he could no longer contain. He gently kissed her near her neckline and rested his head against her shoulder, keeping his arms wrapped firmly around her.

Nishi stood completely still. For the first time, she realized that the tears in his eyes had nothing to do with regret. Neel was happy. Truly, deeply happy. And somehow, that frightened her even more. She didn't want to lose him. She wanted to live the moment.

Nishi burst into tears. Neel immediately pulled back from the embrace and gently settled her on the sofa. He sat beside her and wiped away her tears with the tenderness she had come to know so well.

"Nishi, I know what is behind your worries. And I know why you are crying."

She looked at him through tear-filled eyes.

"We are not married yet," he said softly.

Nishi lowered her gaze. Neel continued, his voice calm and reassuring.

"Nishi, I wanted to propose to you after we came back from Kasauli. But the children had their exams, and Ma wasn't around. Ira was unwell. Everything kept getting in the way."

He paused for a moment, looking at her.

"And honestly, I never felt the need to put everything into words between us."

Nishi looked up. Neel gave her a faint, tender smile.

"Wasn't it already understood that we love each other deeply?"

Nishi's lips trembled. She had no answer. Because she knew. She had known it for a long time.

In the quiet mornings they shared, in the way he looked after her without being asked, in the way he worried when she wasn't well, and in all the little things they had begun to do as though they were already a family.

Perhaps neither of them had said the words. But their hearts had understood them long ago.

Neel moved to the chair in front of her. For a moment, he simply looked at her. Then he gently cupped her face in his hands and leaned forward until his forehead rested against hers.

"Nishi, that night when we gave ourselves completely to each other was never a mistake. It was a moment when our love finally found its way into our hearts and our lives."

His voice was soft but certain. "It was our moment of love."

Nishi closed her eyes.

"The mistake was mine," he continued. "I should have reassured you. I should have made you feel that I was there for you, no matter what."

He paused.

"Ira fell sick. One of my patients passed away. My colleagues were on leave, so I had to spend extra time at the hospital. Everything became so hectic that I failed to see how much you were hurting."

His thumbs gently brushed away the tears gathering beneath her eyes.

"But none of that changes the truth, Nishi. And, the truth is simple."

He looked directly into her eyes.

"I love you. And I love this little life growing inside you."

Nishi's eyes filled with tears.

"We always wanted this future together," he whispered. "You, me, our children... and now this little one."

"Neel..."

"Sshh."

He gently placed a finger against her lips.

"Nishi, look into my eyes."

She slowly raised her gaze.

"Don't you trust your Neel?" he asked with a tender smile. "I am your Neel."

His voice softened further.

"And you are my Nishi."

She looked into his eyes and saw the love she had always known was there. All the doubts, the fears, the unanswered questions—they were still somewhere inside her.

But for this moment, she didn't want to question anything. She wanted to believe him. She wanted to believe in them. Nishi leaned forward and wrapped her arms around him. Neel held her close.

After a moment, he gently pulled back and smiled.

"Tomorrow, our children will come back. And in the evening, Ma will return too."

Nishi looked at him, still overwhelmed.

"Then, we will get married."

She stared at him.

Neel's smile widened—a genuine, unguarded smile.

"Not much longer now, Nishi," he murmured, his voice warm with quiet happiness. "Soon, there'll be wedding bells… and it'll be you and me, Mrs. Mehra. Just you and me, finally."

He gently placed his hand over her belly. A small, tearful smile appeared on Nishi's face.

"And after that," he continued softly, "we'll wait for our little Baby Mehra."

Nishi blushed.

"I promise I won't let you ignore your health anymore."

His eyes softened.

"From now on, you are not going to take care of everyone else and forget yourself."

He smiled.

"You and our little one is my responsibility too."

Nishi placed her hand over his. For the first time in days, she allowed herself to imagine the future she had been so afraid to hope for.

# Chapter 57
# IT FELT LIKE HOME



Soon after, Neel received a call from Raima. Nishi's turn had come. They entered the cabin. Vineet remained outside with Raima, waiting for them.

The lady doctor looked up—and was pleasantly surprised to see Neel.

"Dr. Mehra!"

Neel smiled and shook her hand warmly. He then pulled out a chair for Nishi. She sat down beside him, still feeling a little nervous. The doctor glanced at Nishi and then back at Neel, her expression curious.

Neel smiled gently.

"She is my wife."

Nishi looked at him. For a moment, her heart seemed to stop.

His words brought a quiet happiness she had not expected. He had said it so naturally, so confidently—as though there had

never been any doubt about where she belonged in his life. The doctor smiled.

"Oh, Nice to meet you Mrs Mehra"

Nishi lowered her eyes, unable to hide the faint smile that appeared on her face. Neel turned towards the doctor.

"We took a pregnancy test."

The doctor began asking a few questions—about the test, Nishi's symptoms, her last period and how she had been feeling over the past few weeks. Nishi answered what she could, while Neel listened carefully to the doctor.

The doctor prescribed folic acid and calcium supplements and gave them a few basic instructions about diet, rest and the next appointment. Neel thanked her warmly.

"It was good seeing you again, Doctor."

"Congratulations once again, Dr. Mehra."

Neel smiled.

"Thank you."

He helped Nishi out of the cabin. Outside, Vineet and Raima were waiting.

Before leaving, Neel stopped at the hospital pharmacy and bought the prescribed medicines. He handed the report to Raima and briefly explained what the doctor had advised.

"I'm taking Nishi home," he said gently. "She needs to rest."

Raima nodded. But Nishi remained quiet. Her mind was still struggling to make sense of everything.

She needed answers—especially about the letter, about Ira, birthday date confusion and about what she had seen and believed.

Yet another part of her desperately wanted to push those questions away. Perhaps it had all been a misunderstanding.

Perhaps she had allowed her fear to create a story that was never true. She wanted to believe that. She wanted to believe Neel.

But Vineet and Raima needed answers too. There were too many unanswered questions now, and the mystery surrounding the letter had not disappeared.

Neel looked at both of them.

"Come home with us. Join us over a cup of tea."

Vineet readily agreed.

"Of course."

Raima nodded as well.

"We'll come soon."

Neel gave them a small nod before turning towards Nishi. He gently placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

"Let's go home."

Just then, a ward boy appeared at the door carrying a small parcel.

"Dr. Neel, this was delivered for you."

Neel took the parcel from him. The moment he saw it, his eyes widened. Without saying a word, he quickly opened it. Inside were several beautifully designed wedding cards.

Nishi was confused. Whose wedding cards could it be. And, so many. Raima and Vineet exchanged a puzzled glance.

Neel picked up the cards and looked around the room. Then, almost casually, he reached into the front pocket of Vineet's shirt and pulled out his pen. Vineet stared at him in surprise.

"What are you doing?"

Neel didn't answer.

He just smiled. He bent over one of the cards and quickly wrote something inside. Then he picked up another card and did the

same. Nishi watched him, completely confused. What was going on?

Neel finally walked towards her. He handed her a card. Then he gave one to Vineet and another to Raima. Nishi stared at the card in her hands.

Before Nishi could open it, Neel looked at her with a faint smile.

"You're invited too."

Nishi looked up at him. Neel's smile widened. For a moment, nobody spoke. Nishi slowly opened the card.

Raima and Vineet opened theirs at the same time. The words printed inside made Nishi's breath catch.

**********

WEDDING INVITATION

Neel Mehra

weds

Nishi Sanyal

The wedding ceremony will take place four days from today.

RSVP: Sahana & Palash

**********

Nishi stared at the names.

Neel Mehra. Nishi Sanyal. She looked at Neel who was still smiling and looking at her.

"We're getting married, Nishi."

He smiled; his eyes filled with warmth.

"This is what I wanted to tell you this evening. I was planning to surprise you… but clearly, you ended up surprising me instead."

Her fingers trembled around the card. She looked up at him, unable to speak. Was this real? Was she dreaming? Neel had

already planned their wedding. He had done all this before he even knew about the pregnancy.

He had apparently been planning a future with her all along. And the wedding was only four days away. Nishi's eyes slowly filled with tears.

"You… you already planned this?"

Neel simply looked at Nishi with a mischievous smile. Vineet looked away, but there was genuine happiness in his eyes. He knew Neel wasn't marrying Nishi out of guilt or because of the baby. Neel had already decided to spend the rest of his life with her.

Raima couldn't resist teasing him.

"Neel, you haven't even proposed to her, and you've already printed the wedding cards?"

Neel smiled. He slipped an arm gently around Nishi and looked into her eyes as he answered Raima.

"Raima, we are soulmates from another life, reunited in this life. I always knew we were meant to be together."

His eyes remained fixed on Nishi. Her eyes glistened.

"There was never any need for words or some grand proposal."

Nishi's cheeks flushed.

"And now," Neel continued, his voice softening, "we've just found another beautiful reason to celebrate our happiness."

He gently placed his hand over Nishi's abdomen. Nishi immediately blushed again.

"Our little one has made this moment even more special."

Raima smiled warmly. Neel then turned towards her and Vineet.

"And this isn't going to be a grand ceremony. Only close friends. I want both of you to come. I won't take no for an answer."

Raima nodded immediately.

"I'll definitely come. Anil will be here by then too."

"Thank you, Raima. I knew you would."

Then Neel turned towards Vineet.

"My friend…"

Vineet looked at him.

"The day Nishi was unwell and I was busy at the hospital, you stayed with her. You took care of her when she needed someone around."

Vineet remained silent.

"I know what she still means to you," Neel continued gently. "And Palash is your son. I respect the feelings you have for Nishi."

He paused for a moment.

"Please join us for the wedding."

Neel stepped forward and warmly embraced him. Vineet hesitated for only a second before returning the hug.

"No, Neel," he said quietly. "I've already delayed my joining. But I'm genuinely happy for you and Nishi. Truly."

Nishi's eyes glistened. She knew exactly why Vineet had refused. Neel understood too. He nodded.

"I understand, Vineet. It's about your career."

Then his expression softened.

"But don't forget—you can always come and see Palash. He is your son."

"You've been through enough, Vineet. Whatever your past held, and whatever the future brings, you will always be Palash's father. He deserves your love, and you deserve his."

Vineet's eyes filled with emotion. He hugged Neel again, holding him tightly for a moment. There was no resentment between them. Only an understanding that some relationships could change without disappearing completely.

Soon after, Neel turned towards Nishi and smiled.

"Let's go home, Nishi."

He gently slipped his arm around her. Then he looked back at Raima and Vineet.

"We'll wait for you at home."

With that, Neel and Nishi walked away together. Nishi held the wedding invitation close to her heart.

Four days. In just four days, she would become his wife.

And for the first time, the future didn't frighten her. It felt like home.

# Chapter 58
# THE MYSTERY OF THE LETTER



Neel helped Nishi settle comfortably in the passenger seat and gently fastened her seat belt. He started the car and drove with extra care, avoiding sudden turns and braking.

"Nishi, just tell me if it hurts. I'll drive slowly."

Nishi kept looking at Neel, quietly noticing every little gesture—the way he drove carefully, the concern in his expression, and the tenderness with which he looked at her.

A little while later, Neel called his mother and put the phone on speaker. She sounded delighted to hear from him and told him that she had already boarded the train.

Neel smiled.

"Ma, I have something to tell you."

"What is it, son?"

"I've finally decided to tie the knot. We were waiting for your blessings." There was a brief silence on the other end. His mother seemed to freeze for a moment.

"Son… you're getting married? To whom?"

"Nishi."

Neel glanced at Nishi and smiled.

"She's sitting right next to me, Ma. Talk to her."

Nishi looked at him, surprised and touched, before taking the phone.

She spoke to Neel's mother for a while. His mother's voice was warm and affectionate, and her surprise soon gave way to unmistakable happiness. Neel continued driving, listening to them with a quiet smile.

Clearly, his mother was more than pleasantly surprised. She was genuinely happy for them. The call ended.

Finally, Nishi gathered the courage to ask Neel. She wanted to understand the mystery—not because she doubted him, but because she still couldn't understand what had happened with Ira.

She hesitated before speaking.

"Neel, I found a birthday card and a letter in Ira's room…I thought it was Ira's birthday and you wished her."

Neel gently brushed the concern aside.

"Nishi, I already told you—it wasn't Ira's birthday. Let's not think about that now. I only want to talk about us and our wedding plans right now."

Then his face brightened.

"And there's still some chocolate cake in the fridge. I'll order more. My pregnant wife deserves to be pampered."

"And today, you're going to get plenty of rest. Tomorrow, once the children and Ma arrive, we'll go shopping. We need to pick out our wedding outfits and your jewellery."

Neel continued, excitedly sharing all the little plans he had been imagining, his enthusiasm spilling into every word. Nishi simply listened, smiling, without interrupting him even once.

His happiness was so genuine that Nishi couldn't help smiling. For the first time, Nishi felt certain that there had to be some misunderstanding surrounding the card and the letter.

Maybe there had been another Neel in Ira's life. She had admitted that she'd had several relationships in the past, and perhaps she had simply mistaken the handwriting.

Nothing about Neel's reaction suggested that he was connected to that episode—not even remotely.

Slowly, the doubts that had troubled her began to fade. Right now, she didn't want to think about any of it. She gently rested her hand on her abdomen. Neel noticed the gesture and, with a tender smile, placed his hand gently over her abdomen.

"In a couple of weeks, it'll start showing," he said softly.

Nishi looked at him, her eyes moist with emotion. For a moment, neither of them spoke. They simply sat there, sharing the quiet happiness of knowing that a new life was growing between them.

She realised how much time and emotional energy she had wasted dwelling on that episode. Now, with Neel beside her and his hand resting gently on her abdomen, it suddenly seemed so distant and insignificant. Nishi wondered where she had been going with all those doubts. Why had she allowed that one confusing episode to occupy so much of her mind when the truth in front of her was so much more beautiful?

Neel and Nishi reached their apartment. As soon as he got out of the car, Neel came around to her side and helped her down.

"Slowly, Nishi. Watch your steps."

She smiled at him. "Neel, I'm pregnant, not a patient."

"You keep stumbling. I have to keep an eye on you."

Nishi smiled and let him hold her hand as they walked towards the apartment.

"Oh, I almost forgot to tell you," Neel said casually. "Ira is going home today."

Nishi looked at him. "What? Where?"

"To her hometown. She has recovered now, so there's no reason for her to stay here anymore."

Nishi couldn't help feeling a little sad for Ira as she thought of her leaving. Neel understood her expressions.

"Come on, Nishi," Neel said gently. "She stayed with us because she needed some moral support. It was your idea to help her that way. And now she has recovered. I'm genuinely happy for her."

He smiled.

"You know how much satisfaction I get when one of my patients recovers completely and can finally return home. We did it, Nishi. Together, we did it." Neel smiled.

"She had almost lost hope. I may have played my part as a doctor, but your positivity gave her the strength to get back on her feet."

He gave her hand a gentle squeeze, and they continued walking. Nishi looked at him quietly.

She realized that Neel had always seen Ira as his patient—nothing more. Nishi looked up at the sky and silently thanked the Almighty. She had come so close to losing Neel, all because of a misunderstanding.

When they reached home, another surprise was waiting for Nishi. As she stepped inside, she stopped in disbelief. The wall separating their two houses had been removed, opening up the space between them.

Neel looked at her with a gentle smile.

"Our children will need more space to play and read," he said.

Nishi looked around, still taking it all in.

"While you were away, I got the masons to start the work. I even paid them extra to finish it quickly. The children are going to be so happy when they see this."

He paused, his eyes resting affectionately on her.

"And very soon, our little one will need even more space when he starts learning to walk."

Nishi's eyes welled up.

She looked at Neel, overwhelmed by the simple way he had begun making room—not just in their homes, but in his life, for all of them. Neel noticed the tears in her eyes. Without saying a word, he gently pulled her into his arms. Nishi rested her head against his chest, letting the tears fall as she smiled.

Just then, Ira entered the room. Neel gently released Nishi from his embrace. Ira was carrying a large suitcase. Neel immediately turned towards her. Nishi wiped her tears.

"Ira, leave that. I'll carry it for you. You've only just recovered."

Ira smiled faintly.

"Don't worry, Neel. It has wheels. Besides, I've recovered completely."

Her smile was genuine, but Nishi noticed the sadness lingering in her eyes. Ira looked at Neel for a moment.

"You genuinely look happy today."

"Yes, Ira. I really am." Neel replied

Neel walked back to Nishi and slipped his arm around her.

"We're getting married."

Nishi noticed the subtle change in Ira's expression. There was a moment of silence before Ira smiled.

"Congratulations, Neel. I'm truly happy for both of you."

She came closer and gently touched Neel's face. Then she turned towards Nishi.

"Thank you, Nishi. For everything."

Nishi looked at her quietly.

"It was because of you that I got to live under this roof—with my estranged husband and my daughter."

Ira let out a soft sigh before asking,

"By the way, how is your health now? You were so unwell when you left."

Nishi instinctively glanced at Neel. He smiled reassuringly.

"She'll be fine soon. I'll take care of her."

Then, with quiet happiness, he added,

"Ira… Nishi is pregnant. We're going to have a baby."

His arm tightened gently around Nishi.

Nishi smiled, but when she looked at Ira, the happiness on Ira's face still felt like a sudden jolt to her heart.

"What? Nishi is expecting your baby?" Ira's voice softened, though the words seemed to catch somewhere in her throat. She managed a small smile. "Then… it really is a double celebration."

She looked at them both, her smile steady despite the emotion in her eyes.

"I'll always pray for both of you."

Nishi watched Ira turn away, trying desperately to hide the tears in her eyes. Neel picked up her suitcase.

"Ira, let me carry the suitcase for you. I will put in in the cab"

Ira gave him a faint smile.

"Thank you, Neel"

She turned to Nishi. "I'm going to my parents' house in Srinagar today. I have a flight to catch."

But Nishi still had questions. Too many of them. Looking at Ira, she could sense that beneath her composed expression, she was crying inside.

Ira glanced at her phone. "Neel, the driver is waiting at the apartment gate."

"Don't worry. I'll take your luggage down to the taxi. You take your time."

Ira sighed.

"Yes. I need a little time with Nishi. We've only just met. Let me at least say goodbye to her properly."

"Of course. Take your time."

Neel left. At the doorway, he met Vineet and Raima.

"Come in," he said warmly. "Make yourselves comfortable."

They entered the house, but Nishi barely noticed them. Her eyes remained fixed on Ira. Ira took out two beautifully wrapped gifts from her handbag.

"I bought these for Palash and Sahana."

"Thank you so much," Nishi said softly.

As Ira handed her the gifts, a small card slipped from the wrapping and fell to the floor.

Nishi's eyes immediately fell on it. She set the gifts aside and bent down to pick up the card. Before she could open it, Ira gently took it from her. Then she pulled out the letter tucked inside and held it out to Nishi.

"Neel wrote this letter to me."

Nishi froze. She recognised the handwriting immediately.

It was Neel's. Her mind rebelled against what she was seeing. Could Ira be lying? Could the letter have been forged? And why had she waited until Neel had left to tell her?

Vineet and Raima exchanged a troubled glance. Ira held the letter out again. Nishi took it. She had already read those words once. Now she read them again.

For a fleeting moment, she wanted desperately to believe that Ira was lying—that this was nothing more than a desperate attempt to win Neel back.

Nishi snapped at her.

"Ira, when is your birthday?"

"October 29th."

"Today is May 15th. Are you seriously trying to tell me that Neel wished you five months in advance? Why would he do that?"

Nishi held up the letter.

"And I don't believe this letter either, even though it resembles Neel's handwriting."

"Nishi, I swear on Sahana that Neel wrote this to me."

Nishi stared at her in disbelief.

"Wow, Ira. How could you sink so low?"

Nishi's expression hardened.

"Do you have the courage to say that in front of Neel?"

Before Ira could respond, Raima intervened.

"I'm sure she doesn't, Nishi. That's why she brought this out only after Neel left the room."

Vineet intervened, sensing the tension in the room.

"Nishi, please calm down. Let Neel come. Don't stress yourself—it's not good for you or the baby. We'll discuss everything, but only in front of Neel."

Then he turned to Ira, his voice gentle but firm.

"Ira, I learned this the hard way in my own life. True love isn't about holding someone back. Sometimes, it means having the courage to let them go wherever their heart belongs. You won't gain anything by doing this."

He paused, looking at her with quiet understanding.

"Please, Ira. Don't humiliate yourself by trying to hold on to someone who has already moved on."

Ira looked at Vineet, her voice softer now.

"Vineet, now I realise that we are sailing in the same boat. Who would understand better than you how difficult it is to let go?"

She paused, her eyes briefly lowering.

"We both made the same mistake in our lives."

Then she looked at Nishi.

"You were fortunate to have Nishi as the woman you loved, just as I was fortunate to have Neel in my life. But our mistakes drove them away from us."

Her voice trembled slightly.

"So, Vineet, I finally understand what you're trying to tell me. Sometimes, no matter how much we love someone, we have to accept that we cannot force them to stay."

"The bitter truth is, unlike you, I didn't even love Neel then."

She paused, her voice breaking slightly.

"But I love him now. He is the love of my life and the man of my heart"

Nishi stared at her in disbelief, unable to believe what she had just heard. Nishi knew that Ira was only making things more difficult for herself, desperately trying to convince them that Neel had written the letter.

"No, Ira. Neel didn't write this letter. I believe him, so please don't put yourself through this. There's no need to try so hard to convince us otherwise" Nishi said calmly, without losing her composure.

"Neel…"

Ira spoke quietly.

"Thirteen years ago, when I was carrying Sahana…"

"Neel wrote this letter to me"

"Thirteen years ago?" Nishi interrupted, startled.

She looked down at the letter again.

Then suddenly, everything fell into place.

The card. The letter.

This wasn't a recent letter. The paper had a faint yellow tinge, its edges slightly worn with time. It had been written thirteen years ago—before Sahana was even born.

"Yes, Nishi."

Ira's voice trembled.

"Thirteen years ago, just before my birthday, Neel surprised me with flowers and cooked for me. He planned a vacation for us and went out of his way to make me happy."

She wiped away a tear.

"Exactly the way he does for you now."

Nishi's expression softened, but she remained silent.

"But I was foolish back then," Ira continued. "I was upset because Neel hadn't brought me diamonds."

She gave a bitter little smile.

"Can you imagine? He was trying to show me how much he loved me, and all I could think about was what he hadn't bought me."

Her voice broke.

"Neel tried to convince me that he loved me dearly. But I was a snob. An arrogant, foolish woman. We had a terrible fight, and I left the house because I thought I could make him chase after me."

She looked at the letter.

"Then Neel sent me this card along with the letter"

Her eyes filled again.

"Somehow, my heart melted. I came back."

She swallowed hard.

"No one has ever loved me the way Neel did."

Her composure finally broke. Ira began to cry.

Nishi immediately guided her towards the sofa and helped her sit down. Raima came forward and offered her a glass of water.

After taking a few sips, Ira continued.

"When I came back to this house with cancer after six years, I thought Neel would give me another chance. I thought he still loved me and that we could rebuild our life together."

She looked at Nishi.

"I tried."

Nishi listened silently.

"But Neel noticed my advances. And one day, he made everything very clear because he didn't want me to hold on to any false hope."

Ira took a shaky breath.

"He told me he had no grudges against me. That he had forgiven me completely."

She paused.

"And he told me something else."

Nishi's heart tightened.

"He told me that you are the love of his life."

Nishi looked down.

"He said he was helping me as my doctor, as a friend, and because I am the mother of his child."

Ira's voice became softer.

"He promised that if I ever needed him as a friend, he would always be there."

She wiped her tears.

"That was Neel's kindness. Even after everything I had done, he was capable of forgiving me."

A painful smile touched her lips.

"He treated me. He showed me compassion. He stood by me even when I didn't deserve it."

Ira looked towards the doorway through which Neel had disappeared.

Her voice grew quieter.

"You know something, Nishi?"

She gave a faint, bitter smile….

# Chapter 59
# He was never mine to reclaim



"I deliberately left the card and the letter on the bedside table because I wanted Neel to notice them and reminisce about the old days. But he didn't pay any attention to them. "

"Nishi, Neel was so worried about your illness that he barely noticed anything else," Ira said softly.

I knew you had seen them and I knew exactly why you had left the house," Ira said.

Nishi looked at Ira, astonished by her revelation.

"I was glad when you left the house. I thought… perhaps this was my chance. I could finally reclaim my man."

Nishi's expression hardened.

"I was jealous of you," Ira continued. "Even when you were kind to me, even when you helped me, a part of me resented you for having what I had lost."

She lowered her eyes.

"That night, when you went to your friend's house, I…"

She swallowed.

"I tried to seduce Neel."

Nishi stared at her in disbelief. Raima and Vineet exchanged a stunned glance.

"I went into his bedroom while he was asleep and rested my head against his chest. I knew he had told me that you were the love of his life, but I deliberately took advantage of your absence."

Her voice trembled.

"Instead of remembering everything you had done for me, I wanted him to forget you."

Nishi looked away, visibly uncomfortable.

"I convinced myself that if I could get close enough to him, if I could make him believe for even a moment that I was the woman he had once loved, perhaps he would give in. I thought that if we crossed that boundary, he might fall for me again."

A heavy silence settled over the room.

"Neel gently caressed my hair and drew me into his embrace."

"For those few moments, I allowed myself to believe that I had finally taken your place in his heart."

"I thought I knew what men desire"

Nishi's eyes widened in disbelief. It was clear that Ira was deliberately playing nasty.

Vineet intervened, his voice soft and composed.

"Ira, I'm sorry to intervene, but… you seem to have a rather narrow view of men. Not every man is driven by desire. Some men seek a woman's heart, her companionship, and the comfort of a genuine emotional connection."

Vineet glanced at Nishi. Ira paused. Then, she continued;

"Please Vineet, Let me finish"

"He began to wake up."

Her voice dropped almost to a whisper.

"I had deliberately made myself vulnerable, believing that once he realised who I was, he might give in to me."

"He was still half-asleep," Ira continued. "He thought I was you. He gently caressed my head and pulled me into his arms because he believed he was holding you."

"I kissed his lips, then his chest. I unbuttoned his shirt…"

Nishi's jaw tightened. A sudden wave of nausea swept over her.

"Shut up Ira!", Nishi shrieked

"Spare me the details of your fabricated story"

Nishi's voice was strained.

"Neel is a man of unwavering character. He would never betray the woman he loves by being intimate with another woman."

She looked directly at Ira, her eyes filled with hurt and conviction.

"I trusted you with all my heart. I thought you were a woman and a mother like me. You were hurting, and I thought you deserved compassion and care. And now you are trying to defame Neel."

Her gaze did not waver.

Raima turned to her, her eyes filled with disbelief.

"Shame on you, Ira. You tried to take advantage of a man who sheltered you even after everything that had happened between you. And now you stand here and say it so shamelessly—with another man right beside you."

She looked at Vineet before she continued;

"You are a disgrace to womanhood. You are clearly a…"

The words caught in Raima's throat. She was too furious to finish the sentence.

Nishi clenched her jaw, her eyes flashing with anger. She turned to Ira.

"Neel has done nothing immoral, Ira. He would never stoop so low. You clearly don't know the man you're talking about. He is a compassionate doctor, a good human being, and a wonderful father. I know him, and I trust him. People respect him because of the person he is, and I'm not going to let you make me doubt that."

Her voice trembled slightly, but she held her ground.

"He is the man who fought cancer and saved your life, and you…" Nishi's voice faltered. She gasped for breath, overcome by anger and emotion.

"So, if you think you can fill my mind with doubts about him, you're mistaken, Ira. I won't stand here and listen to you malign his character. I will make sure—"

Before she could finish, Vineet stepped forward and gently rested a hand on her shoulder.

"Nishi," he said softly, his voice calm and reassuring.

The quiet warmth in his voice made her pause.

"You've made your point. Don't put yourself through this. Please… try not to get so worked up. The stress isn't good for you or the baby."

He waited until she had taken a breath before turning toward Ira. His expression grew serious, though his voice remained gentle.

"Ira, for God's sake. She's expecting a baby. Whatever you have to say, say it without upsetting her."

Ira listened quietly. Then she shook her head and turned to Nishi.

"Sure Vineet, let me finish Nishi"

Nishi turned away.

"And then," Ira continued softly, "he said something before he even opened his eyes."

Nishi glanced back. Ira's voice broke.

"He said, 'Nishi, how do you feel now? Why did you go to Raima's house?' "

Nishi froze. For a moment, she could not breathe. Even in his sleep, even when she wasn't there, Neel had been thinking about her.

Ira continued.

"Those words changed everything."

"The moment he opened his eyes and realised it was me, he pulled away. There was no desire in his eyes. He didn't even touch me. He didn't hesitate."

She wiped a tear from her cheek.

"He simply got up and walked out of the room."

Nishi lowered her eyes.

"Ira…"

"I understood something that night," Ira said. "Something I had spent years refusing to see."

She took a shaky breath.

"I had deliberately put myself in a vulnerable position because I wanted him to cross that boundary with me. But he didn't even come close to doing so."

Her voice trembled.

"Neel's mother had understood me perfectly. I had been selfish. I had been terrible to both of you."

She looked towards the doorway again.

"But Neel…"

A sad smile touched her lips.

"He is a good man. Far better than I had ever allowed myself to believe."

Nishi remained silent.

"I felt small that night," Ira whispered. "Not because he rejected me, but because I finally understood how deeply he respected you."

She wiped another tear away.

"He could have taken advantage of the situation. He could have hidden it from you. But he didn't. He chose you even when you weren't there to know what he had done."

The room fell silent.

"The next morning, he made one thing very clear," Ira continued. "You were the only woman he loved."

Tears slipped down Nishi's cheeks.

"He also knew that once he decided to marry you, it would become difficult for me to remain in this house. So, he spoke to my parents. He convinced them to take me back."

She looked down at her hands.

"He never gave me false hope. He never encouraged me. He didn't humiliate me either. He simply wanted me to return home and begin my life again."

Ira took a long breath.

"So… I'm going back to Srinagar."

Her voice was barely audible.

"And this time, I think I finally understood something."

She looked at Nishi.

"Neel was never mine to reclaim."

Silence settled over the room.

Vineet lowered his head, remorse weighing heavily on him. He remembered how quickly he had judged Neel, how fiercely he had accused him in his own mind without knowing the truth. Now, all those assumptions had collapsed. He had been wrong about him.

Neel had protected Nishi's trust even when she wasn't there to witness it.

Vineet's expression softened. He really is a saint, he thought.

And with that realisation came an unexpected sense of relief. The man he had once believed had ruined Nishi's life had, in fact, been the very man who had respected their boundaries when she wasn't even there to defend them.

A tear slipped down Ira's cheek. Nishi looked at her for a long moment.

The hurt was still there. So was the anger. But beneath them was something else now—a quiet understanding of Ira's remorse. She reached out and gently wiped the tear from Ira's cheek. Ira looked at her in surprise. Nishi said nothing.

The small gesture was all she could offer: not forgiveness, not forgetfulness, but compassion for a woman who had finally acknowledged the damage she had caused.

"I'm fine, Nishi," Ira whispered.

She took Nishi's hands in hers.

"And I'm grateful to you. You helped me stand on my feet again. You trusted me when perhaps I didn't deserve that trust."

She squeezed her hands gently.

"But now I have to make my own choice."

Her voice was steadier now.

"I'll do what I believe is right."

She looked at Nishi with quiet determination.

"I am never coming back into Neel's life again."

Nishi's eyes filled with tears. Ira stepped forward and embraced her.

"Please take care of yourself," she whispered. "And please take plenty of rest."

When they finally pulled apart, Raima and Vineet exchanged a look. The mystery surrounding the letter had finally been resolved.

It had never been a declaration of Neel's present feelings.

It belonged to another time—a letter written thirteen years earlier, when Ira was still his wife, long before Sahana had even been born.

Ira gently took the letter from Nishi's hands and folded it carefully.

She placed it inside her handbag. For the first time, there was no bitterness in her expression. Only acceptance. Just then, Neel returned.

"Ira, the taxi driver is being rather adamant. He doesn't want to go to the airport."

Ira looked worried.

"But I don't want to miss my flight."

"I'll book another taxi for you."

Nishi turned towards Neel.

"Neel, why don't you drop her at the airport?"

Neel looked at her immediately.

"No, Nishi. You're not well. I need to stay by your side."

He said it without the slightest hesitation.

"I'll call another taxi. I don't know why everything is taking so long today."

Before he could reach for his phone, Vineet intervened.

"I can drop her."

Neel looked at him.

"My house is near the airport."

"Come on, Vineet. You've just arrived. Let me see if I can—"

"That's alright, Neel."

Vineet gave him a reassuring smile.

"May I take your leave? I have to start packing soon. I'll drop Ira at the airport before I go home."

"Are you sure?"

"One Hundred percent."

Vineet turned towards Ira.

"Come. I'll drop you."

"Thank you so much, Vineet."

Ira picked up her handbag.

"Don't mention it, Ira. We should get going. Looks like we're in the same boat, after all," Vineet said gently.

Vineet was about to leave when he stopped and turned towards Nishi. She noticed the sadness in his eyes.

He walked over to her and gently rested his hand on her head, his touch warm and reassuring, as though silently telling her that everything would be alright.

"Goodbye, Nishi. Always stay blessed."

His eyes fell on a photograph of Palash—a cheerful picture that stood in a frame nearby. He picked it up gently.

"I'm taking this with me."

Nishi looked at him and nodded.

Vineet turned towards Neel, holding the photograph carefully.

"I wish you both a wonderful life ahead."

Neel smiled and looked at him quietly. There was no bitterness in Vineet's face anymore. Only acceptance.

Raima exchanged a final round of pleasantries with them, and then she and Vineet left with Ira.

The door closed gently behind them, and for a moment, the house fell into a deep, comforting silence.

Neel turned towards Nishi. His eyes rested on her with a tenderness that needed no words. He lifted his hands and gently cupped her face, his thumbs brushing softly against her cheeks before he leaned forward and pressed a lingering kiss to her forehead.

"Nishi…" he whispered; his voice filled with affection. "You are my Nishi."

She looked into his eyes, her heart swelling at the simple words. Neel leaned closer and kissed her gently on the lips. Nishi closed her eyes and kissed him back, letting herself surrender to the warmth and reassurance of the moment.

Then she slipped her arms around him and held him tightly, as though she never wanted to let go.

Neel wrapped his arms around her in return, drawing her closer against him. For a while, neither of them spoke. They simply held each other, finding in that embrace a quiet assurance that, whatever lay ahead, they would face it together.

And within that embrace lived a silent promise—a promise that they would never let life pull them apart again, that no matter what came their way, they would always find their way back to each other.

# Chapter 60
# WHEN HEARTS FIND HOME



## Seven months later

Morning rays streamed gently through the curtains, falling upon the colossal photograph that adorned the wall of Neel and Nishi's bedroom. The photograph captured them on their wedding day.

Nishi, draped in a magnificent bridal saree, looked every bit like a queen—graceful, radiant, and regal. Beside her stood Neel in a deep blue sherwani, looking every bit the handsome king who had found his princess.

The soft morning light seemed to breathe life into the photograph, illuminating the smiles they had shared on that unforgettable day.

For a moment, the room felt as though it held a beautiful memory frozen in time—a queen and her king, standing together beneath the promise of a lifetime.

Neel slowly opened his eyes. Beside him, Nishi was sleeping peacefully, her face serene in the soft morning light. Now in her

ninth month of pregnancy, she carried their little one so close to them that every moment felt precious.

Neel smiled and gently planted a kiss on her cheek. Then, with infinite tenderness, he rested his hand on her rounded belly. For a moment, he felt nothing. Then came a tiny movement beneath his palm.

His eyes lit up with a quiet smile.

"Good morning, little one," he whispered, barely audible, as though afraid even his voice might disturb Nishi.

He kept his hand there for another moment, cherishing the little movements beneath his palm. Then, careful not to wake her, he slowly slipped out of bed and left her to sleep peacefully.

By the time Neel reached the kitchen, he found that his mother had already prepared breakfast. He quickly packed the tiffins for the children while Sahana joined her grandmother in arranging the plates and preparing the table.

Palash, meanwhile, proudly announced that he had packed his schoolbag the previous night.

The children were doing their best to cooperate. They knew their mother needed plenty of rest, especially now that she was in her ninth month of pregnancy. Very soon, a new little member would join their family.

They also knew that Granny and Papa were trying to take as much of the household work off Nishi's shoulders as possible.

Everyone moved quietly that morning. Doors were closed gently, utensils were handled carefully, and even the children kept their voices low. No one wanted to disturb Nishi.

Neel's mother looked at him and asked softly, "Could she sleep well last night?"

Neel shook his head.

"No, Ma. She had quite a bit of backache and couldn't sleep. I gave her a hot compress, and she finally managed to fall asleep after two."

His mother nodded with concern.

"Then let her sleep. She needs it."

She turned towards the children and lowered her voice even further.

"And you two—no making noise, understood?"

"Understood, Granny," Sahana replied with a small smile.

Everyone settled around the dining table. After a few moments, Palash suddenly looked up at his grandmother.

"Granny, when can we expect our little brother?"

His grandmother smiled.

"We still have about ten days. But how do you know it will be a baby brother?"

"I don't know," Palash admitted. "But I really want one."

Neel looked at his son, amused.

"As long as the baby is healthy, son, does it really matter whether it's a brother or a sister?"

Palash thought about it for a moment before shaking his head.

"But I still want a brother. He can play with me."

Neel smiled and gently caressed Palash's hair. Sahana, who had been listening quietly, finally joined the conversation.

"I'm okay with either," she said.

She paused for a moment before adding with complete seriousness, I don't particularly want a sister."

Everyone looked at her curiously.

"Why?" Neel asked, amused.

Sahana shrugged.

"Because Mom is already my best friend. I don't need anyone else as a companion."

The table fell into a soft round of laughter, everyone careful to keep their voices low.

Neel smiled at his daughter. For a moment, he looked towards the bedroom where Nishi was sleeping peacefully.

Their family was about to change again—and somehow, even in the quietest of mornings, the anticipation of that little arrival seemed to fill the entire house with warmth.

Soon, the children picked up their schoolbags. Before leaving, Neel's mother looked at him and said gently,

"Stay with Nishi. She might need you. I'll take the children to the bus stop."

Neel nodded.

"Of course, Ma."

A few minutes later, the front door closed behind them, and the house became quiet once again. Neel was just about to check on Nishi when he heard a sudden cry from the bedroom.

"Nishi!"

He rushed towards her.

She was sitting on the edge of the bed, one hand gripping the bedsheet and the other resting protectively over her belly. Her face had tightened with pain, and her breathing had become uneven.

"Neel…" she managed to whisper.

He immediately went to her side.

"What happened dear?"

"I think… the pain has started."

Another contraction came. Nishi closed her eyes and gripped his hand tightly, breathing through the pain.

Neel tried to remain calm, though his heart was racing.

"I'm here," he said softly. "Just breathe, Nishi. Slowly. Look at me."

She leaned against him, her fingers tightening around his.

The pain eased after a while, but before either of them could relax, another contraction followed. Neel gently rubbed her back and kept reassuring her.

"It's okay. You're not alone. I'm right here."

Nishi nodded, fighting through the pain.

Neel quickly gathered the hospital bag they had already kept ready. He helped her stand carefully and supported her as they made their way towards the door.

"We're going to the hospital now," he said gently. "Our little one is ready to meet us."

Nishi looked at him through the pain and managed a faint smile. Neel held her firmly and guided her towards the car, never letting go of her hand.

The moment they had been waiting for had finally arrived.

The labour room was filled with quiet urgency. The medical team moved calmly around Nishi as she lay on the bed, her face tired but determined. Neel stood beside her in hospital clothes, holding her hand firmly.

Another contraction came, and Nishi squeezed his hand, her eyes closing as she breathed through the pain.

"Neel… I don't think I can do this anymore," she whispered.

He leaned closer, gently brushing the damp strands of hair away from her forehead.

"You can, Nishi. You've got this. I'm right here with you. Just breathe. One moment at a time."

She nodded, drawing in a deep breath as another wave of pain passed through her.

Every time she felt overwhelmed, Neel reminded her that she wasn't alone. He held her hand, wiped her forehead, and quietly encouraged her through each contraction.

"You're doing beautifully," he whispered. "Just a little more. Our baby is almost here."

Nishi gathered all her strength and followed the doctor's instructions. Neel remained beside her, his hand firmly clasped around hers.

And then, after what felt like an eternity, the room suddenly filled with the most beautiful sound they had ever heard.

A newborn's cry. Nishi's exhausted eyes opened.

For a moment, she simply stared, overwhelmed by emotion. Neel's eyes filled with tears as he looked towards their baby.

"A boy," the doctor announced with a smile.

Nishi let out a trembling breath, tears of relief and happiness slipping down her cheeks.

"Our son…" she whispered.

Neel bent down and kissed her forehead.

"You did it," he whispered. "You brought our little boy into the world."

Their new born son was gently placed in Nishi's arms. She looked down at his tiny face, unable to take her eyes away from him. Neel stood beside her, his hand resting gently on their son's little head.

"He is beautiful," Neel whispered, his eyes fixed lovingly on their newborn son. "Look, Nishi… he has your eyes."

Nishi looked down at their baby, her heart overflowing with emotion. Neel leaned closer and gently kissed his tiny forehead, his touch filled with tenderness.

"Our little boy," he whispered, smiling through tears. "You are so loved."

For a few moments, neither of them spoke. There was nothing left to say.

They had waited, hoped, worried, and dreamed—and now, their little boy was finally in their arms.

Neel looked at Nishi, his eyes shining with tears.

Look at him, Nishi. A little piece of you, a little piece of me, and a whole lifetime of love waiting for him." he whispered.

Nishi smiled through her tears and held their son a little closer.

And in that quiet room, surrounded by the warmth of a love that had carried them through everything, they welcomed their little boy into the world.

Soon, Nishi was shifted to a private ward, where Neel's mother, Palash, and Sahana were eagerly waiting to meet her and the new member of their family.

The moment they entered the room and saw the baby, their faces lit up with joy.

Palash rushed closer; his eyes fixed on his little brother.

"I have a brother now!" he announced proudly, unable to hide his excitement.

Sahana stood beside him, gazing at the tiny baby with a tender smile. Then she leaned closer and introduced herself solemnly.

"Hello, little brother. I'm Sahana, your elder sister."

Everyone burst into laughter. Even Nishi smiled, her tired face glowing with happiness.

Neel's mother came closer to the bed and gently touched Nishi's head.

"How are you feeling, dear?"

Nishi looked at her family gathered around her and then at the tiny baby sleeping peacefully beside her.

"On top of the world, Ma," she replied with a radiant smile.

Her mother-in-law smiled warmly.

And for a moment, the entire room seemed to hold nothing but happiness—the happiness of a family that had just welcomed a new little life into their world.

Neel and Nishi drew Palash and Sahana into their embrace, while Nishi cradled their new-born son tenderly in her arms. Surrounded by the warmth of their children, they looked at one another, their hearts overflowing with gratitude. They knew their hearts had found home.