

Seven Promises, One Winter

By Somewhere U.



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

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS
www.BlueRoseONE.com
info@bluerosepublishers.com
+91 8882 898 898
+4407342408967

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Dedicated To:



*For the ones who stayed and for the ones who left but still live
somewhere inside us.*

Some stories don't begin with a meeting,
They begin with a promise.

The kind you make when you're young enough to believe
time will be kind.

This is a story about promises that were kept, broken, and
remembered long after the people who made them learned
how to live without each other.

It's about the quiet winters inside us,
and the places we return to, hoping something will still be
waiting.

1.



December 23, 2018

The thing about sneaking out is that it always feels more romantic than it actually is.

Tejas was pretty sure his feet were going numb. December in Pune wasn't supposed to be this cold, but here they were, and his toes felt like ice cubes inside his worn-out Sneakers. He should've worn socks. Pratiksha had told him to wear socks but that was not *cool* for him.

She hummed the opening bars of "Ek Ladki Bheegi Bhaagi Si" from somewhere behind her scarf. It was the thing she did when she was thinking. Pick an old melody and let it spill out, like a soundtrack for moments no one else paid attention to.

"Stop fidgeting," she said, not looking up from her phone.

"I'm not fidgeting."

"You are. You always do that thing with your leg when you're cold."

He stopped bouncing his knee. Damn. She notices everything. Six months together and she already had him figured out in ways that were both annoying and kind of amazing.

"Maybe I'm not cold. Maybe I'm just excited to be here," he said, trying to sound smooth.

She finally looked up, one eyebrow raised. "Excited? To freeze to death on the river steps?"

"Excited to be with you. On our six-month anniversary. Which you remembered *and* I definitely didn't forget."

"You totally forgot."

"I absolutely did not."

"Tejas."

"Okay, fine. I forgot. But I'm here now, aren't I? That counts for something."

She shook her head, but she was smiling. That small smile she did when she was trying not to laugh at him. He lived for that smile.

They were sitting on the steps near Vrudeswar, the ones that led down toward the Mutha River. It wasn't actually a lake. Tejas had made that mistake once and she had corrected him immediately, but at night, with the lights from the coffee shop reflecting on the water, it could pass for one. The place was always packed after 10 PM. Couples looking for dark corners, friend groups pretending to study but actually just gossiping, and random people who came to smoke and stare at nothing, along with that one uncle who came every night to smoke and stare at the water like it owed him money.

Right now, the coffee shop behind them was loud. Someone's terrible playlist was bleeding through the crowd, some remix of an old Kishore Kumar song that should probably be illegal. But out here on the steps, it was quieter. Just the sound of water moving slow and the occasional bike passing on the bridge that looked like it could collapse anytime.

Pratiksha had her notebook out. The red one she carried everywhere. It was beaten up, pages dog-eared, the cover stained with tea and covered in doodles. She wrote everything in that thing. Quotes, song lyrics, random observations about life. She had let him read some of it once. Once. Then she had snatched it back and told him some things weren't meant to be shared, which obviously made him want to read it even more.

Pratiksha's tattered red notebook was already filling up tonight; she scribbled a line earlier: *Night, river, cold fingers... sometimes memories come before they're even made.* She didn't mean for Tejas to see, but the page flapped open to that line.

"Six months," she said suddenly, clicking her pen.

"Yeah. You mentioned that."

"No, I mean... it's weird, right? Six months felt like forever when we were just friends. Now it feels like it went too fast."

He knew what she meant. They have known each other for almost two years before anything happened. Just classmates, then friends, then that weird phase where everyone around them knew something was going to happen except them. Then finally, one night in June after exams, he kissed her in the college parking lot and she kissed him back and that was that.

Six months as a couple. Half a year. It should feel like more.

"Time's weird like that," he said. "When you're happy, it moves faster. Or slower... I don't know, I failed physics."

She laughed. Actual laugh, not the polite one she did for other people. "You didn't fail physics. You got a pass grade."

"Same thing in my family. Anything less than 60% and my dad—" He stopped. His dad. Right. Better not go there tonight.

She caught it though. She always did.

"How is he?" she asked carefully.

"Same. Working too much. Worried about money. You know how it is."

She nodded but didn't push. That was another thing about Pratiksha, she knew when to ask questions and when to just let him breathe.

"Anyway," she said, turning to a fresh page in her notebook. "I was thinking..."

"That's dangerous."

"Shut up. I was thinking we should do something. For six months. Something we'll remember."

"Like what? Get matching tattoos? Rob a bank?"

"God, you're impossible. No, something... meaningful. Like a promise or something."

"A promise?" He shifted closer, trying to steal some of her warmth. She had been wearing his jacket for twenty minutes and he was about two minutes away from hypothermia, but there was no way he was asking for it back. She looked too cute drowning in it, sleeves covering her hands.

"Yeah, like... not marriage stuff, nothing that serious. Just promises between us. Things that matter."

He thought about it. His parents had made promises. Look how that turned out. His dad working himself sick and his mom pretending everything was fine when it clearly wasn't. Promises felt heavy. Permanent in a way that scared him a little.

But this was Pratiksha. And she was looking at him with those eyes, the ones that made him agree to things he normally wouldn't. Like bunking class to watch terrible movies. Or trying the street food that definitely gave them food poisoning that one time. Or sitting on freezing cold steps in December.

"Okay," he said. "What kind of promises?"

Her whole face lit up. "I don't know yet. That's the thing! We make them up. Together. Things that are just... ours."

"How many promises are we talking?"

She tapped the pen against her chin. "Seven."

"Why seven?"

"Why not seven? Three is too few, ten is too many. Seven feels right. It's a good number."

"Is it though?"

"Tejas. Seven promises. Yes or no?"

When she used that voice, he knew there was only one right answer.

"Yeah, okay. Seven. But you're starting because this was your idea."

She grinned, victorious, and wrote "Seven Promises" at the top of the page in her messy handwriting. Then she underlined it twice.

"Okay. Promise number one." She looked at him seriously, like she was about to say something life-changing. "Never watch a sunset alone."

He blinked. "What?"

"Sunsets. We don't do them alone. If one of us is watching a sunset, the other has to be there. Or at least on the phone or video call or something. We don't do sunsets solo. Deal?"

It was such a Pratiksha thing to say. Dramatic and romantic and completely unnecessary. Which somehow made it perfect.

"That's... specific," he said.

"That's the point. It's our thing. Everyone has their thing. This is ours."

He thought about all the times he sat on his roof at home, camera in hand, trying to catch the perfect golden hour shot. It was his quiet time. His alone time. But the idea of sharing that with her, of never having to watch the sky fade by himself...

"Alright," he said. "Never watch a sunset alone. I can do that."

She wrote it down, the red pen scratching against paper. "Promise number one. Official."

"My turn?"

"Your turn."

He thought about it. What kind of promise actually mattered? What would they remember years from now?

"Tell me the truth," he said. "Even when it hurts like hell."

She stopped writing and looked at him. Really looked at him.

"You're serious."

"Yeah. I'm serious. No lies between us. If something's wrong, we say it. If I'm being an idiot, you tell me. If you're scared or hurt or whatever, you don't hide it. Even if the truth sucks to hear. Especially if it sucks to hear."

She bit her lip. The left side. The thing she did when she was thinking hard about something.

"That's... a hard promise to keep," she said quietly.

"Most real things are."

She held his gaze for a moment longer, then nodded. "Okay. Tell each other the truth. Even when it hurts like hell." She wrote it down. "Promise number two."

The river was quiet tonight. Usually, you could hear it moving, water against stone, especially after monsoons when it ran faster. But December had sucked most of the water away, left it low and slow. Still, it was there. Constant. Like background noise, you stopped noticing until it was gone.

"Number three," she said, already writing. "Every birthday, no excuses, just us."

She continued, "Every birthday. Yours, mine, doesn't matter. We spend it together. Even if we have to skip class or cancel plans or travel halfway across the city. Birthdays are sacred."

He knew why she cared about birthdays. Her family barely acknowledged hers. Too busy worrying about her grades or her future or all the ways she wasn't living up to whatever impossible standard they had set.

"Every birthday," he agreed. "No excuses. Just us."

She wrote it down, and he could see her hand was shaking slightly. Just a little. But enough.

"Your turn," she said, voice steadier than her hand.

"Okay." He took a breath. "Never block each other."

"What?"

"We can fight. We're going to fight. But we don't block each other. Not on WhatsApp, not on Instagram, not on calls. We don't cut contact like that. It's..." He tried to find the right words. "It's a way to make sure things don't go worse. If we're mad, we deal with it. We don't disappear."

She nodded slowly, writing it down. "Never block each other. Promise number four."

They sat in silence for a minute. Behind them, someone dropped something and a bunch of people laughed. A bike passed on the road, music blaring from speakers that sounded like they were being tortured.

"This is getting real," Tejas said.

"Yeah."

"You okay with that?"

She looked at him, and in the low light from the coffee shop, her eyes looked darker than usual. "I'm the one who started this, remember?"

"Right. Your turn, then."

"Once a year," she said, and there was that playful edge back in her voice, "we're dancing in the rain. Non-negotiable."

He groaned. "We did that exactly one time and you got sick for three days."

"And it was amazing."

"You had a fever of 102."

"Worth every degree. Besides, that was in July. This time we'll plan better. May be we do it in June when it's warmer. Or we bring towels. Point is, we do it. Once a year, minimum. Promise number five."

She wrote it down before he could argue further. Not that he really wanted to argue. That day in July, they ran out during the monsoon rain, dancing like idiots while everyone else ran for cover. Although she did spend the next three days in bed complaining about her sinuses.

"Fine," he said. "Rain dancing. Annually. You're insane."

"You love it."

"Maybe."

He pulled out his camera from his jacket pocket. The Canon. His baby. He saved up for six months, worked weekends at his uncle's shop, just to buy it secondhand from a senior. It wasn't anything fancy, basic DSLR, kit lens, slightly scratched screen, but it was his. His dad kept telling him to sell it, said it was a

waste of money when they needed to save for practical things. But Tejas couldn't. This camera was the only thing that felt like his own choice.

"What are you doing?" Pratiksha asked.

"Promise number six," he said, adjusting the settings. "Take photos. Always. Even when we're breaking."

She stopped smiling. "Breaking?"

"You know what I mean. Even when things are bad. Even when we don't want to remember. Even when we're fighting or crying or whatever. We take the photo anyway. We document it."

"That's depressing."

"That's honest. We just made a promise to tell the truth even when it hurts. This is the same thing. We don't just capture the happy stuff. We capture all of it."

She was quiet for a long moment, staring at the camera in his hands.

"Why?" she asked finally.

"Because nothing lasts forever," he said. "People, moments, feelings, they all change. But photos don't. And maybe someday when we're different people, we'll want to remember who we were. Even the broken parts. Especially the broken parts."

She looked at him like she was seeing someone new. Or maybe just seeing him clearly for the first time.

"Okay," she said softly. "Take photos. Always. Promise number six."

He lifted the camera and took a picture of her. No warning, no posed smile. Just her, looking at him with his jacket hanging off her shoulders and the notebook in her lap and the coffee shop lights behind her and something in her eyes he couldn't quite name.

"Don't delete that," she said.

"I won't. That's kind of the point."

"Good." She turned back to the notebook. "Last one. Number seven."

And suddenly the mood shifted. Her voice changed. Got quieter. More serious.

"If life ever separates us," she said slowly, "we meet here on this date. Same place. Every year."

The words hit differently than he expected. Not playful anymore. Not light.

"Pratiksha—"

"I'm serious, Tejas. December 23rd. These steps. Every single year. If something happens and we're not together anymore, for whatever reason... we come back here. Just to see. Just in case."

"Nothing's going to happen," he said, but the words felt hollow even as he said them. He didn't know the future. Nobody did.

"But if it does," she insisted, and her voice cracked just slightly. "If it does, we have this. Our own little insurance policy. We come back and we try again. Or at least we see each other one more time."

He wanted to tell her she was being dramatic. That they were nineteen and in love and nothing was going to tear them apart. But something stopped him. Maybe it was the way she was gripping the pen. Maybe it was the look in her eyes, scared and hopeful at the same time.

Or maybe it was because some part of him, the part that watched his parents slowly drift apart, knew she was right to be afraid.

"Okay," he said finally. "December 23rd. These exact steps. No matter what. I promise."

"You swear?"

"I swear. Same place. Every year. Even if we're ninety and can barely walk, I'll be here."

She exhaled like she'd been holding her breath. Then she wrote it down. Promise number seven.

Seven promises. All there in messy red ink that would probably fade. But right now, under the coffee shop lights and the December sky, they felt permanent.

"Done," she said.

"Now what?"

She looked at him, and suddenly she was smiling again. That full, bright smile that made his stomach do stupid things.

"Now we seal them."

"Seal them how?"

"Like this."

She kissed him. Soft and slow, her hands cold against his face, her lips tasting like the chocolate she'd eaten earlier. It was freezing and his back was starting to hurt from sitting on stone steps and somewhere behind them someone was arguing about cricket scores. But in that moment, nothing else existed.

When she pulled away, she was grinning. "One kiss for each promise."

"We only kissed once."

"Exactly. Which means we have six more to go. Come on, Tejas. Try to keep up."

So they did. Seven kisses for seven promises, each one different. Some quick, some longer. Some silly, some serious. And with each one, something settled into place. Something that felt bigger than both of them. Ofcourse, at nineteen, they were not going to care about who was watching them!

After, she pulled out her house key, the one with the little Ganpati keychain her grandmother gave her and scratched their initials into the stone step.

P+T Dec2018

The letters were uneven and crooked, but it was there. Permanent. Or as permanent as things could be.

"There," she said, satisfied. "Official."

Tejas looked at the promises in her notebook, then at the initials carved into stone, then at her face, lit up by the glow from his camera screen.

"We're really going to keep these, right?" he asked. "All of them?"

"All of them," she said, sure and stern.

"What if we can't?"

"Then we try anyway. That's what promises are, Tejas. You try."

"All of them," he repeated.

She closed the notebook and leaned her head on his shoulder and spoke softly, "All of them."

They sat there for a while longer, not talking, just existing together while the river moved slow and the coffee shop stayed loud and December wrapped around them like a blanket made of cold air and possibility.

2.

January - June 2019

Tejas's mother thought he had joined a photography club.

That's what he told her when he started coming home later than usual. *"Photo walks, Aai. We go around the city, take pictures."* It wasn't completely a lie; he did take pictures. Just not of buildings and streets like she imagined.

Mostly of Pratiksha.

The lying part twisted in his gut sometimes. His mother wasn't a bad person. She worked hard, kept the house running, never asked for much. But she also made it very clear what she thought about "distractions" during college. Which meant girlfriends were firmly in the distraction category, somewhere between video games and wasting money on outside food.

So he lied. Small lies that added up.

January was hard in ways he didn't expect.

Not because of them. They were fine, better than fine, but because hiding it was exhausting. They couldn't hold hands on campus without someone seeing and telling someone else. Couldn't sit too close in the canteen without getting looks. Couldn't be seen leaving together too often.

Pratiksha had it worse. Her family was the type that loved her intensely but controlled everything. What she wore, where she

went, who she talked to. They would check her phone sometimes—"Bghu jra," her mother would say, like it was normal to violate your daughter's privacy at nineteen.

So Pratiksha learned to delete messages. Clear call logs. Keep her phone face-down always. Tell elaborate lies about study groups and extra classes and going to her cousin's place.

"I hate this," she said one evening in mid-January.

They were sitting on his bike, parked in some random lane far from both their homes. It was getting dark and she needed to be home soon, but neither of them wanted to move.

"Hate what?"

"Lying. To everyone. All the time."

Her voice cracked on the last word.

"We don't have to do this," he said quietly. "We could just... tell them."

She laughed. Not the happy kind. The bitter kind that hurt to hear.

"Tell them what? That I have a boyfriend? You know what my father will do? He'll lock me in the house. Pull me out of college. Marry me off to some guy from his office who has a 'stable career.'" She made air quotes with her fingers, eyes wet. "That's his solution to everything. Control."

"He can't do that—"

"He absolutely can. This is India, Tejas. Pune isn't Mumbai or Delhi. Girls don't just date openly here. Not in families like mine."

He knew she was right. His own family wasn't much better. His mother would cry and ask where she went wrong. His father would... actually, Tejas didn't even want to imagine that conversation.

"So we lie," he said.

"So we lie." She wiped her eyes quickly. "But I hate it."

"Me too."

She hummed something under her breath. Sad-sounding. He recognized it after a moment, "*Kabhi Kabhi Mere Dil Mein*", the old Mukesh song she loved.

He kissed her forehead. Just that. Because sometimes that's all you can do when words don't fix anything.

Every morning around 7:45, Tejas would ride his bike to the small temple two streets away from Pratiksha's house. Not because he was religious, but because it was far enough from her place that neighbors wouldn't connect them, close enough that she could walk there in five minutes.

She would show up in her college kurti, dupatta wrapped tight, backpack heavy with books she probably hadn't opened. Hair always in a braid because her mother didn't approve of "loose hair" outside the house.

"Ready?" he'd ask.

"Born ready," she'd say, climbing on behind him.

Then she would wrap her arms around his waist and press her face between his shoulder blades and hum. Always humming. Different songs every day, like her brain was on shuffle.

One morning in late January, it was "*Aaj Kal Tere Mere Pyar Ke Charche*".

"You're in a Golden mood today," he said, weaving through traffic.

"When am I not?" she shouted over the wind.

Fair point.

Those fifteen minutes on his bike, before they reached college and had to pretend to be just friends again, those were his favourite minutes of the day. Her arms around him, her voice in his ear, the smell of her coconut oil shampoo mixing with petrol fumes and morning air.

It felt like stealing something. Time, maybe. Moments that didn't belong to them but they took anyway.

On campus, they were careful.

Not friends exactly, but not obviously together. They would sit in the same general area but not next to each other. Make eye contact across rooms but not hold it too long. Text under desks during boring lectures but never get caught smiling at their phones.

It was a performance. Exhausting and necessary.

"This is so stupid," Raghav said once, watching Tejas deliberately sit three seats away from Pratiksha in the library.

"What is?"

"This... You two pretending you're not obsessed with each other. Everyone knows anyway."

"Everyone suspects. Nobody knows."

"What's the difference?"

"Suspecting means people gossip. Knowing means people tell our parents."

Raghav shook his head. "Your generation is so dramatic."

"Says the guy who's single by choice."

"Exactly. By choice. I'm smart."

But even Raghav didn't get it. Not really. He didn't have parents who checked his phone or a mother who cried at the thought of him having a girlfriend. He could just... live.

Tejas envied that sometimes.

...

Promise #1: Never watch a sunset alone

Late January, after a particularly long day, Tejas was exhausted. He spent all morning in class, afternoon helping his father with some paperwork, evening at a cousin's birthday party he didn't want to attend.

By 6 PM, he was on the terrace of his building, camera in hand, just wanting twenty minutes of quiet.

The sky was doing that thing where it goes from blue to orange to pink, layers of color bleeding into each other. He raised his camera. Clicked. Perfect light. Perfect composition.

Then his phone buzzed.

Pratiksha: sunset?

Tejas: Yeah, watching now

Pratiksha: ALONE???

Pratiksha: tejas we literally have a promise

Tejas: You want me to come get you?

Pratiksha: no i'm home my mom is hovering

Pratiksha: video call. now.

He laughed and called her. Her face filled the screen, she was on her terrace too, phone propped against something, the sky behind her the same shades of orange and pink.

"There," she said, settling into frame. "Now we're both watching."

"This is ridiculous."

"This is romantic. Also our promise. Don't be a buzzkill."

So they watched together. He on his terrace, she on hers, screens glowing between them. She hummed "*Gulabi Aankhen*" and he took a picture of his phone screen showing her face with the sunset behind her.

"Did you just take a picture of me through a video call?" she asked.

"Promise number six. Always take photos."

"You're using that promise to be creepy again."

"It's not creepy if you're my girlfriend."

"Still creepy."

But she was smiling. And she didn't ask him to delete it.

When the sun finally set completely, the sky dark except for a thin line of orange on the horizon, she sighed.

"Same time tomorrow?" she asked.

"You really want to do this every day?"

"Not every day. Just... when it matters."

"When does it matter?"

"When one of us is watching alone," she said simply. "That's when it matters."

...

Promise #2: Tell each other the truth, even when it hurts

Mid-February, Pratiksha's exam went badly.

He could tell from her face when she came out of the hall. Eyes red, jaw tight, the look of someone barely holding it together.

She didn't cry. Not in front of people. But when they met later, a safe distance from college where nobody they knew would see them, she broke.

"I failed," she said, voice shaking. "I know I did. I couldn't answer half the questions. My mind just... blanked."

Tejas wanted to lie. Wanted to say "You probably did fine" or "Don't worry about it" or literally anything that would make her feel better.

But Promise #2 sat between them.

"Yeah," he said carefully. "Sounds like you had a rough one."

She looked at him. "That's all you've got?"

"You want me to lie?"

"Maybe a little."

"That's not the deal."

She was quiet for a long moment. Cars passed on the road nearby. Someone's music thumped from a shop. The world kept moving while she stood still.

"My father's going to kill me," she whispered finally.

"He won't—"

"You don't know him. He doesn't care about reasons or explanations. Just results. Pass or fail. Good or bad. That's it."

"Then tell him it was a hard exam. Tell him you'll do better next time."

"And if I don't?"

"Then you deal with it. But you don't know for sure you failed. You're assuming."

"I know."

"You don't."

She pulled her notebook out, the red one, and opened to a random page. Scribbled in the margin was a line: *Zindagi bhar nahin bhoolungi woh barsaat ki raat*. Something about rain and nights and forgetting.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Nothing. Just... something I wrote last night when I couldn't sleep."

"You think in song lyrics when you're stressed."

"It's better than thinking in panic."

He pulled her close. She was stiff at first, then relaxed into him. Her head on his shoulder, his arms around her back, breathing in sync.

"Truth?" he said quietly.

"Yeah."

"You might have failed. Or you might have passed. Either way, we'll figure it out."

"That's not very comforting."

"But it's true."

She laughed against his shoulder. Wet and sad but still a laugh. "I hate this promise sometimes."

"Yeah. Me too."

But neither of them wanted to break it.

...

Promise #3: Every birthday, no excuses, just us

Somewhere in the middle of January, she mentioned her birthday was coming up. January 11th.

She said it casually, like it didn't matter. But he could hear it in her voice, that quiet dread. Because her family didn't celebrate birthdays. They just tolerated them.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Studying, probably. My mom already warned me it's not a 'special day.'"

He hated that. The way her family made her feel small on the one day that was supposed to be hers.

"We should celebrate," he said. "Remember Promise #3? Every birthday, no excuses, just us."

She looked at him then. Eyes soft. Like she couldn't believe he remembered.

On January 10th, he ditched his evening plans. Told his mom he had to help Raghav with something so he will be late.

He waited near her house, bike parked far enough that neighbors wouldn't see. When she finally came out, saying she was going to study at her cousin's place, he was there.

Her face lit up when she saw him.

They went to Vrudeshwar. He had already planned it. He had saved up and bought her favorite flowers, these sunflowers she always stopped to look at when they passed the flower shop. He had arranged them in a newspaper carefully. Not fancy, but real. Effort.

He brought kheer his mom made. Simple. Warm. Stolen carefully from the kitchen.

They sat on their steps and he gave her the flowers first. She just stared at them.

"You did this?" she asked, voice small.

"Course I did. It's your birthday!"

She put the flowers carefully on the step beside her, like they were made of glass. Then she opened kheer and they ate it slowly in the January cold, sitting close for warmth.

He had also brought a small wrapped gift, a bookmark. She wrote so much, had so many notebooks. This bookmark had

a quote printed on it. He had gone to three bookshops to find one with that exact quote.

When she opened it, she cried a little.

"How did you know this is my favourite quote?" she asked.

"You've quoted it like fifty times."

She hugged him then. Long hug. Like she was trying to hold onto the moment forever.

At midnight, when the day technically became the next, he kissed her forehead and said, "Happy birthday, Pratiksha. You matter. Remember that. You matter."

She cried more after that. But the good kind.

Two months later, on March 10th at 11:47 PM, his phone buzzed.

Pratiksha: outside in 2 min. dont make noise.

He stared at the message. Midnight. His parents sleeping. But he knew what this meant. Promise #3.

He crept downstairs and opened the door. There she was, standing on the street with a cake box and a grin.

"What are you doing here?" he whispered.

"Promise," she said simply. "Every birthday, no excuses, just us."

She had made a chocolate cake. His favourite. She was nervous about it but proud anyway.

They sat on the steps outside his building. Just forks and cake and darkness around them.

"At 11:58, close your eyes," she said like it was official.

At exactly midnight, she sang: "Happy birthday to you..."

When he opened his eyes, her notebook was open. *March 11*
- *The day the world got luckier.* And underneath: *January 11 &*
March 11. Both of us. Always.

He kissed her. She tasted like chocolate.

"Promise kept," she said.

"Both birthdays," he said. "Every year."

"Every year. No matter what."

She leaned her head on his shoulder and hummed that song.
"Kadhi tu..."

He laughed into her hair. And for a moment, everything felt infinite.

...

Promise #4: Never block each other

The first real fight happened in late April.

Stupid fight. The kind that starts over nothing.

Tejas forgot to reply to her messages for six hours. Not on purpose, his phone died and he had been busy with family stuff and honestly he didn't think it was a big deal.

Pratiksha thought it was a very big deal.

By the time he charged his phone and saw her messages, they had gone from concerned to annoyed to hurt to angry.

where are you
tejas?

seriously this isn't funny
you know what forget it !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
i'm done trying

He called immediately. She didn't pick up.

He called again. No response.

His stomach dropped. Had she blocked him?

He checked WhatsApp. Last seen: 20 minutes ago. So not blocked. Just ignoring.

I'm sorry
Phone died
I wasn't ignoring you
Pratiksha pleaseeeeeeeeeeee

Three dots appeared. Disappeared. Appeared again.

Pratiksha: six hours tejas

Tejas: I knowwwwww

Pratiksha: i thought something happened

Pratiksha: i thought you were hurt or sick or...

Pratiksha: forget it

Tejas: Don't do this

Pratiksha: do what

Tejas: The "forget it" thing when you are clearly not over it

No response.

He tried calling again. This time she picked up.

"What." Her voice was flat.

"I'm sorry."

"You said that already."

"I mean it. I should've charged my phone. I should've found a way to tell you I would be busy."

Silence. He could hear her breathing.

"I almost blocked you," she admitted finally. Voice small.

"But you didn't."

"Promise number four."

"Yeah."

"I wanted to though. I wanted to block you and delete your number and just... not feel this."

"Feel what?"

"Scared. Every time you don't reply, I think... I think you realized I'm not worth the trouble. That hiding and lying and sneaking around is too much. That you're going to leave."

His chest hurt.

"I'm not leaving."

"You don't know that."

"I do. Promise number seven, remember? Even if we're separated, we come back."

She laughed, but it sounded like crying. "That's the breakup promise. We're not even supposed to need that one."

"Then we won't. But I'm not leaving, Pratiksha."

"You can't promise that."

"Yeah I can. I just did."

She was quiet for a long time. Then: "I hate how much I need you."

"Hmm."

"It's scary."

"I know."

"Don't do it again. The disappearing thing."

"I won't. I promise."

"You better."

They stayed on the phone for another hour. Not really talking. Just existing together through a screen. Her humming sometimes. Him listening. Both of them trying to remember why they were doing this, the lying, the hiding, the constant fear of getting caught.

Then she said, soft and sad: *"Tum itna jo muskura rahe ho, kya gham hai jisko chhupa rahe ho..."*

"That's depressing," he said.

"But true."

...

Promise #5: Dance in the rain

Early June brought the monsoons.

Pune had been suffocating for weeks. Hot and dusty and miserable. The kind of heat that made you angry just for existing. Everyone was waiting for rain.

When it finally came, it came hard.

Tejas was in class when the sky split open. Thunder so loud it shook windows. Rain so heavy you couldn't see across the courtyard.

Everyone crowded near windows and doors, watching, complaining about wet bikes and flooded roads and ruined shoes.

Then his phone buzzed.

Pratiksha: promise number 5

Tejas: Now??????

Pratiksha: NOW

Pratiksha: meet me on ground in 2 min

He looked out the window. The ground was a mess. Ankle-deep water, rain coming down sideways. Nobody was out there. Everyone had sense.

Except Pratiksha apparently.

He slipped out of class, which was falling apart anyway. Teachers had given up. Half the students were on their phones.

She was already there when he arrived. Standing in the middle of the ground, face turned up to the sky, hair plastered to her head, completely soaked.

She looked insane. She looked perfect.

"You're going to get sick," he shouted over the rain.

"Worth it!"

She grabbed his hands and pulled him out into it. The rain was cold, shockingly cold after weeks of heat. It soaked through his shirt in seconds.

She started spinning, pulling him with her, laughing like this was the best idea anyone had ever had.

Then she started singing. Loud, off-key, zero shame: "*Bheegi bheegi raaton mein, meethi meethi baaton mein...*"

"You're crazy!" he shouted.

"Dance with me!"

So he did. No rhythm, no coordination, just movement and rain and her voice rising above the thunder.

He pulled out his camera, water-resistant but not waterproof, which meant he was absolutely risking damage but still took pictures. Her face tilted back, mouth open, catching raindrops. Her eyes closed, arms spread wide. Her spinning, laughing, alive.

She pulled him close and kissed him.

The rain ran down their faces, into their mouths, making the kiss taste like water and risk and freedom.

When she pulled back, she was grinning.

"Promise kept," she said.

"You know people saw."

"Let them."

"Your parents—"

"Will find out eventually anyway. Might as well make it worth the punishment."

She spun away from him, singing again, dancing alone now, and Tejas thought - this is the girl I'm in love with. This

fearless, reckless, song-humming girl who doesn't care about getting sick or getting caught or what anyone thinks.

Later, she would get sick. Fever and cold and three days in bed while her mother scolds her about carelessness.

But right then, in that moment, with rain erasing the world around them, they were invincible.

...

Promise #6: Take photos, always

Photography became their language.

Tejas's camera was always out. In his bag, around his neck, in his hand. He photographed everything. Her reading under the tree, her lower lip caught between her teeth. Her laughing at something on her phone, hand over her mouth. Her sleeping on the bus home, head on his shoulder, completely unaware.

"You're obsessed," she said once.

"I'm documenting."

"Same thing."

But she didn't really mind. She had started taking pictures too, though not as many. Her phone's camera roll was filled with random things. A bird on a wire. Graffiti that made her laugh. His hands holding the bike handles. Their shadows on the ground, elongated in evening light.

Once, she took a picture of their hands interlinked, his camera strap visible in the corner, and set it as her phone wallpaper.

Her friend Shruti saw it.

"You're not even hiding it anymore," Shruti said.

"Hiding what?"

"Him. You two. Everyone knows."

"Knowing and proving are different things."

"Your parents are going to find out."

"Then they find out."

But Pratiksha's voice shook when she said it. Because she knew what would happen when they did.

That very moment, she changed her wallpaper.

...

There were a thousand small moments that nobody saw.
Nobody except them.

3 AM texts:

Pratiksha: you awake?

Tejas: Now I am

Pratiksha: sorry

Pratiksha: couldn't sleep

Pratiksha: kept thinking

Tejas: About?

Pratiksha: everything

Pratiksha: you

Pratiksha: us

Pratiksha: how we're going to make this work

Tejas: We'll figure it out

Pratiksha: you always say that

Tejas: Because it's always true

Once, she caught him looking at old pictures during class.

Pratiksha: creep

Tejas: Your fault for being photogenic

Pratiksha: stop

Tejas: NEVER hehehehehehe

...

By the end of June, they were happy. Genuinely, stupidly happy.

"Think we can do this forever?" Pratiksha asked one evening.

They were back at Vrudeshwar, sitting on the same steps where they had made the promises six months ago.

"Forever's a long time," Tejas said.

"That's not an answer."

"Then yes. I think we can."

"Even with all the lying and hiding?"

"Even with that."

She hummed something soft. *"Kse sartil saye, majhyavin dis tujhe..."*

"Why that song?"

"No reason. Just... fits."

He didn't argue. She had a way of finding the right song for every mood, even when the mood hadn't been named yet.

She leaned her head on his shoulder, notebook in her lap, filled with six months of quotes and doodles and moments she had tried to preserve in red ink.

"I love you," she said quietly.

"I love you too," he said.

And he meant it. With everything he had.

3.



July - December 2019

The call came on a Tuesday afternoon. Tejas was in class, half-asleep through a lecture on something that didn't matter, when his phone started buzzing. His mother. She never called during college hours.

He almost didn't answer.

But something made him step into the hallway anyway.

"Aai?"

"Tejas." Her voice was small. Different. "Your father... he's had a heart attack. We're at the hospital. Come now."

The hallway kept existing around him. Students walking past. Someone laughing near the water cooler. The world was still moving, which was impossible because everything had just stopped.

"Is he—"

"Just come."

He left his bag at college. Didn't tell anyone. Just ran to where his bike was parked, hands shaking so bad he dropped the keys twice before managing to start it.

The ride to the hospital was a blur. He doesn't remember which roads he took. Doesn't remember if he stopped at

signals. Just the feeling of the engine vibrating under him and the city moving past too slowly, too fast, both at once.

The hospital smelled like disinfectant and fear.

His mother was sitting in a plastic chair in the waiting area, still wearing her office clothes, her dupatta slipping off her shoulder. She looked hollowed out. Like someone had taken her and replaced her with an older version.

"What happened?" he asked.

"His heart. They said it was too much stress. Too much work. His pressure was high but he never took medicine. He kept saying it would pass." She wasn't crying. Just stating facts. Like if she said it plainly enough, it would become manageable. "They're doing surgery."

His father was fifty-three years old.

Tejas sat next to his mother and they waited. Hours that felt like minutes and days at the same time. A doctor came out, said something about complications, said something about stabilizing, said something about Tejas's mother needing to be strong.

Then the doctor said his father was gone.

Died at 10:38 PM on a Tuesday.

His mother made a sound when they told her. Not a scream. Something quieter. Something that broke in ways that couldn't be fixed.

Tejas didn't cry. He just sat there, thinking about the last time he had seen his father. Two days ago. In the morning before work. His father was tired, reading the newspaper in the

kitchen, drinking tea that had probably gone cold an hour ago. Tejas had been late for college and had just grabbed his bag and left.

Had said nothing. Just left.

The next week was a sequence of moments that didn't belong to him. The cremation. The rituals. His mother moving through them like a ghost. Relatives coming and going. Everyone saying "he's in a better place" which was the stupidest thing Tejas had ever heard because his father was dead.

His father had wanted to be a photographer once. Tejas remembered this suddenly, sitting on the steps of his own house while people came and went inside. His father had shown him an old camera when Tejas was young. "I wanted to be a photographer," his father had said. "But life happened. Bills happened. You happened. And then it was too late to want anything else."

Tejas had forgotten that conversation until his father died.

On the fourteenth day after the cremation, when the house had finally emptied of relatives and rituals, his mother sat him down at the kitchen table.

"We need to talk about money," she said quietly.

She had a job. An office job. Decent salary, nothing fancy. But there were hospital bills. Debts he never knew about. Suddenly, a lot of things that needed to be paid for immediately arrived.

"I'm going to need your help," she said. "Not with money yet. But soon. I need you to understand that things are different now."

He understood. Completely. And the understanding felt like drowning.

It was August when he got the job at the cyber cafe. Evening shifts. Eight hours of sitting at a desk, helping students with internet issues, watching their faces glow in the dark while they played games and watched movies and lived their lives like the world wasn't ending.

The job paid minimum wage. It was nothing. Yet... it was everything!

He didn't tell Pratiksha immediately. Didn't know how to tell her. Didn't know how to say the words out loud.

For four weeks, he just... disappeared.

When she finally cornered him at Vrudeshwar, showing up unannounced, like she used to, her face was a mix of anger and fear that made him feel worse than any guilt could.

"Four weeks, Tejas," she said, and her voice was tight. Controlled anger. The kind that hurts more than yelling. "You just disappear? You don't call. You don't text. You don't even have the decency to tell me you're alive?"

"Pratiksha—"

"No, let me finish. Do you have any idea what that does to me? Four weeks of nothing. Just silence. I'm sitting in college wondering if you hate me. If you've met someone else. If I did something wrong. And you can't even—" Her voice cracked. "You can't even send me one text saying you're okay?"

"My dad died."

The words hung in the air between them.

She went completely still.

"What?" she whispered.

"Heart attack. He died at the hospital."

She stared at him like she was trying to process something impossible. Then her face just... crumpled. The anger drained out of it completely, replaced by something softer. Something devastating.

"Oh my god," she breathed. "Tejas—"

She closed the distance between them and pulled him close. He could feel her shaking. Feel her trying to hold him together when he was completely falling apart.

"I'm so sorry," she kept saying into his shoulder. "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry. I didn't know. I thought you were... I'm so sorry."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you," he said. "I didn't know how to... I didn't know how to say it."

"It's okay. It's okay. I'm here now."

She was holding him and he was finally, finally falling apart. Crying into her shoulder while she hummed something soft, something to soothe.

"I'm so sorry," she kept saying. "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry."

They sat at Vrudeshwar for hours. She didn't ask him to talk. Just held his hand.

"What do you need?" she asked finally.

"I don't know."

"Anything. I'll do anything."

"I got a job. At a cyber café. Evenings."

She was quiet for a moment. Absorbing this. Calculating what it meant.

"Okay," she said. "That's good. That's... that's responsible. I'm proud of you."

And she meant it. He could hear it in her voice. She was proud of him for being strong while his whole life was collapsing. Which somehow made it worse, because he didn't feel strong. He felt like he was being buried alive and she was watching him go under and praising him for not screaming...

By September, he had settled into a rhythm that felt less like living and more like surviving. Morning classes, exhausted. Come home for lunch, exhausted. Go to work at 4 PM. Come home at midnight. Sleep a few hours. Repeat.

His camera sat in his closet. He looked at it sometimes. Couldn't bring himself to touch it.

One evening in late September, Pratiksha showed up at the cyber café with samosas. She was still in her college clothes, backpack heavy, like she had come straight from campus to see him.

"Hi," she said, sitting across from him at the small table they kept near the counter.

He wanted to feel happy to see her. Instead, he felt tired.

"Hey."

"You look exhausted."

"Yeah. Work is... it's a lot."

She slid the samosas across to him. "Eat. You're getting thin."

He bit into one. Still warm. She must have bought them fresh, must have come straight here from somewhere.

"Why don't you take photos anymore?" she asked suddenly.

"What?"

"Your camera. I haven't seen you with it in weeks."

"Just don't have time."

"But you love photography."

"My mom said it's a waste of time," he said, and his voice came out harder than he meant. "She said my father had dreams too and look where they got him."

Pratiksha set down her samosa. "That's not true."

"It's not?"

"No. Your dad didn't die because he had dreams. He died because he didn't take care of himself. Those are different things."

"How do you know what my dad did or didn't—"

"I don't. But I know you. And I know that photography makes you happy. And you can't just stop being happy because something terrible happened."

"Why not?" His voice came out hard. "Why can't I just stop being happy? Why can't I just exist in this?"

"Because you're allowed to still live, Tejas. You're allowed to take pictures and have dreams and be more than just someone whose father died."

He wanted to argue. Wanted to tell her she didn't understand. That everything had changed and there was no going back to being the person who cared about photography. That person had died with his father.

Instead, he said: "I don't have energy for dreams right now."

She reached across the table and took his hand. "I know. But keep your camera. Okay? Just keep it. Don't throw it away."

He didn't promise. But he didn't throw it away either.

In early October, she told him about the internship.

They were at Vrudeshwar, sitting on their steps.

"I got offered something," she said, fingers tracing the carved letters like she was trying to remember something important.

"A publishing house in Mumbai. Creative writing internship. For the summer. Unpaid but..."

"But?"

"But it could turn into something. They loved my portfolio."

He should have been happy for her. Should have told her to take it. Instead, he felt something cold settle in his stomach.

"When?" he asked carefully.

"They want me to start in November. For three months initially."

Three months. Gone through the end of the year. Through their anniversary in December. Through December 23rd.

"Are you going to take it?" he asked.

She was quiet for a long time.

"I don't know," she said finally. "What do you think?"

The truth was, he didn't want her to go. He wanted her here. He wanted her to stay and hold his hand while he fell apart. He wanted her to be his anchor while he drowned.

But that wasn't fair. So he said, "You should do what makes you happy."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only answer I have."

She opened her notebook and started writing something. He couldn't see what. Just watched her pen move across the page, writing whatever she was feeling into that notebook like it was the only place her emotions could exist.

"I'm not going," she said suddenly.

"What?"

"I'm rejecting it. I'm going to email them tomorrow and say I can't take the internship."

"Why would you do that?"

"Because you need me here."

"Pratiksha—"

"No. You've been through too much. Your dad just died. You're working and going to college, and trying to keep your family together. I can't leave you alone in this. And anyway, why would I bother to do shifting and all the work for an unpaid internship! Nope, not doing all the hard work for nothing! Not interested!"

He should have protested more. Should have insisted she take the opportunity. But he was too tired and too sad and too grateful to have her staying.

"Thank you," he said quietly.

She reached over and squeezed his hand. "We're going to get through this. Both of us."

He didn't know she was terrified. Didn't know she had received the internship offer and her heart had jumped with excitement and then plummeted with fear. Fear that if she left, he would disappear completely into his grief. Fear that distance would finish what death had started. Fear of losing him.

So she lied. Not a big lie. Just said she had rejected it because the timing wasn't right. The publishing house had asked why and she had given them some excuse about family obligations. Didn't mention that she was lying to him for the first time, breaking Promise #2, because she was too scared to admit the real reason.

In late October, they tried to watch a sunset together.

He got off work early, called her, asked if she wanted to meet at Vrudeshtar. She said yes immediately.

But by the time he got there, it was already dusk. The sun was just disappearing below the horizon, those last few minutes of color already fading.

"I'm sorry I'm late," he said.

"It's okay. We can still watch."

But there was nothing to watch. Just darkness coming in. The moment had already passed.

"Promise #1," she said quietly, not looking at him.

"I know."

"We're supposed to never watch a sunset alone."

"I know."

"But we just did."

He didn't say anything. What was there to say? That work ran late? That he couldn't leave early without his boss getting angry? That everything was different now and the promises felt like they belonged to different people?

"It doesn't matter," she said. "It's just one sunset."

But her voice cracked when she said it.

By November, they had stopped trying to keep Promise #1. They were both too tired. He was working. She was dealing with her own stress, the rejection of the internship (or so he thought), her parents, her fear of what was happening to them.

One evening, when he came home from work, his mother was sitting in the kitchen. Looking at his camera.

"This is a waste of money," she said, not looking at him. "We need to save. Not spend on hobbies."

"Aai, I bought it with my own money—"

"I don't care. Your father had hobbies too. Dreams too. And now he's dead and we're drowning in bills. So please, just... put this away. Focus on what matters."

He picked up the camera and went to his room. Put it back in the closet.

That night, Pratiksha called.

"How are you?" she asked.

"Fine. Tired. Work was long."

"Yeah. College was... a lot too."

They were both lying. Both exhausted. Both pretending everything was fine when everything was falling apart.

"Are we keeping Promise number 2?" she asked quietly.

"What do you mean?"

"Are we being truthful? With each other?"

His stomach tightened. "Yeah. Of course."

"You're sure?"

"Why are you asking this?"

"Because I feel like we're lying. All the time. About being okay. About this. About us."

"We're not lying."

But he was. And she was. And they both knew it.

By December, the cracks were visible. They were still together. Still trying. But something fundamental had shifted.

The promises that had felt so strong a year ago were starting to feel fragile. And neither of them knew how to hold on to something that was slipping through their fingers.

On December 23rd, neither of them mentioned Vrudeshtar.
Neither of them said anything about going back to the steps
where they had made their promises.

They didn't watch sunset together.

And when the day ended, she texted him: *i love you*

He texted back: *Love you too*

But the words felt different now. Heavier. Like they were
trying to hold up a building that was already crumbling.

4.

January - June 2020

January came and Tejas felt it in his bones. Not the cold. The weight...

Six months of working evenings at the cyber cafe had turned into something permanent. His boss liked him. Reliable, he said. Always on time. Never complained. Which meant more shifts. More hours. More money that barely covered what his family needed.

His mother had stopped asking how he was doing. Just asked if he could cover the electricity bill this month. If he could help with groceries. Small things that added up to everything.

He had stopped carrying his camera. It sat in his closet gathering dust, and every time he saw it in the corner of his eye, he felt something twist inside him. Like he was betraying a promise he'd made to himself a long time ago.

Now he just wanted to sleep.

On January 10th, Pratiksha messaged him.

tomorrow's my birthday

He stared at the text. Her birthday. January 11. Promise #3. Every birthday, no excuses, just us.

I know. I'll be there

He meant it when he said it.

But January 11th came and his boss called before dawn. Emergency. Someone didn't show. Double shift. He would pay extra.

Tejas almost said no. Thought about Pratiksha waiting somewhere. Thought about the way she had looked at him last year when he showed up at midnight with flowers and cake.

Then he thought about his mother's face yesterday when she mentioned rent.

"Okay," he said into the phone. "I'll come in."

He texted her at 3 PM: *I'm so sorry. Work emergency. I can't make it tonight*

Three dots appeared. Disappeared. Appeared again.

you promised

I know. I'm sorry. I'll make it up to you

when?

He stared at that one word for a long time. Didn't know how to answer it.

Soon. I promise

The dots appeared one more time. Then nothing.

She didn't reply for the rest of the day.

That night, sitting at the cyber cafe watching college kids laugh with their friends, Tejas wondered what she was doing. If she was alone. If she was crying. If she hated him.

He wondered if he hated himself.

Pratiksha spent her nineteenth birthday sitting on her bed with her red notebook, writing.

Not happy things. Not memories of last year. Just... what was left.

She wrote about how the same person who had shown up at midnight with flowers couldn't even send a proper apology this year. She wrote about promises that felt like lies. She wrote about feeling invisible.

*Barsaat mein bheegna tha saath,
Par akele khadi hoon aaj raat.*

*Tumne kaha tha hamesha saath rahenge,
Phir kyun aaj yeh dooriyan hain?*

At midnight, when January 10 became January 11, she closed her notebook and cried into her pillow so her mother wouldn't hear. Happy birthday to me, she thought.

Two months later, on March 10th, she messaged him.

your birthday tomorrow. what time should i come?

He was exhausted. His back hurt. His eyes hurt. Everything hurt.

I'm working tomorrow. Full day shift

but it's your birthday

I know

tejas we have a promise

He stared at the message for a long time. No excuses. That's what they promised.

Except he was full of excuses now. Work. Money. Responsibility.

I can't Pratiksha. I'm sorry...

you said that last time

I know

so when? when are we keeping this promise?

He didn't reply. Didn't have an answer.

She kept messaging.

tejas answer me

we made seven promises

you can't just ignore them

you can't just ignore ME!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

He sat at the cyber cafe, watching those messages come in one after another.

I'm not ignoring you. I'm trying to survive

by breaking every promise we made?

By keeping my family alive. There's a difference

so i don't matter anymore?

And that's when he lost it. All of it.

You know what? I can't do this right now. I'm at work. I'm exhausted.

And I don't have the energy for this conversation

for what conversation? for me?

YES. For you. For us. For whatever this is

She called immediately.

He watched her name flash on the screen and declined the call.

She called again.

He declined again.

Then her message came: *pick up the phone tejas*

He blocked her.

One tap. And she was gone.

...

I sat there staring at my phone, hand shaking. What did I just do?

Promise #4. Never block each other. We made that promise after a fight. She had almost blocked me but didn't. Said it was because of the promise. Said blocking was a way to disappear.

And I just disappeared on her.

I should feel guilty. But all I feel is relief. And that's worse than guilt.

Because relief means some part of me wanted this. Wanted her gone. Wanted to not have to care anymore.

I'm so tired. I'm tired of disappointing her. I'm tired of being the reason her birthday gets cancelled. I'm tired of being a person who can't keep promises.

Maybe this is better. Maybe she's better off without me.

I put my phone face-down and went back to work. Pretended the world wasn't ending.

...

Message failed to send.

I tried calling. The phone went straight to that automated voice. The number you are calling is not reachable.

He blocked me.

Tejas had actually blocked me.

I sat on my bedroom floor and tried to understand what had just happened. How we had gone from seven promises under a winter sky to him erasing me from his phone.

What did I do wrong?

That's what kept running through my head. What did I do that made him want to disappear?

I asked for a promise to be kept. Is that wrong? Is loving someone and wanting to be loved back in return that wrong?

Everyone leaves. My father works all day and avoids home. My mother controls me instead of loving me. And now Tejas has decided I'm not worth staying for.

I opened my notebook because if I don't write, I'll disappear too.

*Tumne vaada nahi,
Hme hi toda.*

And then:

*Kyun lagta hai main kaafi nahi?
Kyun har baar main hi reh jaati hoon?*

I wrote until my hand hurt. Sixteen new pages filled with heartbreak and the terrible realisation that maybe he was right to leave. Maybe I was too much. Too needy. Too desperate for someone to stay.

Maybe I've never been enough for anyone.

...

The next day, Tejas woke up and unblocked her immediately.

His fingers moved before his brain caught up.

He typed: *I'm sorry. I shouldn't have blocked you. I was just overwhelmed*

you can't just block me when things get hard

I know. I'm sorry

that's the one promise we weren't supposed to break

I know

There was a long pause.

are we okay?

He wanted to tell her no. Wanted to say they are crumbling.

Instead: *Yeah. We're okay*

But they both knew it was a lie.

can we talk? later?

I have work

after work?

I'm tired Pratiksha. Can we just... not tonight?

okay

I'm sorry

me too

And that was it. No real conversation. No addressing what had just happened. No talking about how they had broken two promises in three months. No talking about their birthdays. No talking about anything that actually mattered.

Just silence wrapped in apologies that meant nothing.

Neither of them knew how to fix it.

So they just didn't.

5.



July - November 2020

The email came on a Tuesday morning. Tejas stared at it three times before it felt real.

Congratulations, it said. Welcome to the team. Start date: July 6th.

A real job. An actual software engineering role. Entry-level, basic salary, but it was different from the cafe. This was supposed to mean something.

His mother cried when he told her. Happy tears!

College became something he went to only on exams and practicals. Office from 10 AM to 8 PM, then home to sleep. The pattern repeated until days blurred into each other and he couldn't remember what day it was or what subjects he was supposed to be studying.

His grades were still decent. He didn't fail anything. But he stopped going to the library. Stopped working on projects. Stopped being the person who cared about learning. He was just... moving through it.

Raghav asked him once if he wanted to grab coffee.

"Can't," Tejas said. "Work."

"Every single day?"

"Yeah."

"Dude, you're going to burn out."

Tejas didn't have energy to explain that burning out required having something to burn. He was already ash.

...

The first monsoon came in early July.

Tejas and Pratiksha were sitting at Vrudeswar after his shift. She had waited for him to finish work, which meant sitting in a cafe for four hours doing homework. Now they were on their steps, watching the sky darken.

Rain started coming down. Not heavy yet. Just enough to make the world smell different.

She looked at him and smiled. That old smile. The one that used to make him feel like maybe everything was going to be okay.

"Promise #5," she said quietly.

He looked at the rain. Looked at her.

"What?" she asked, reading his face.

"We're not going to dance in the rain," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean... we're not doing that anymore."

She laughed like he was joking. "Yes we are. It's raining. We are here. We promised."

"When we were nineteen," he said. "We made that promise when we were nineteen and stupid."

"We're still nineteen. I'm nineteen and you're—"

"That's not the point."

"Then what is the point?"

He looked at her sitting there in the rain, waiting for him to dance with her like they were characters in a movie. Like promises from a different lifetime still mattered.

"The point is we're not those people anymore," he said.

"Dancing in the rain is childish."

"It's not childish. It's—"

"Pratiksha, we're wet. We're tired. We can't just run around like idiots because we made a promise a year and a half ago."

She stared at him like he had said something in a language she didn't understand.

"Okay," she said finally. "Okay, let's just go home."

They didn't dance. Just sat there while the rain got heavier, and neither of them moved to leave because leaving meant accepting that they had just let another promise die.

...

The fights started small.

A disagreement about when they could meet. He said Tuesday. She said she needed Thursday.

"I only have Tuesday free," he said. "Work is crazy right now."

"So is college. But I'm trying to make it work."

"I don't know what you want me to do. I'm doing everything I can."

"Are you though? Because it feels like you're choosing work over us."

That conversation went nowhere. Just ended with both of them frustrated and him thinking she didn't understand anything about his life.

Another time, she mentioned a movie she wanted to watch together.

"I don't have time for movies," he said.

"Not even on Saturday?"

"Pratiksha, I work Saturdays."

"Every Saturday?"

"Most Saturdays, yes."

He watched her face do something. Watched her realize that she barely saw him anymore. That the person she was dating existed mostly in text messages and cancelled plans.

She didn't say anything. Just nodded like she understood.

But she didn't understand. He could tell.

In September, they had the real fight.

They had managed to get three hours together on a Sunday. Three hours where he wasn't at work, she wasn't at college, and they could actually exist in the same physical space.

But he was exhausted. She wanted to talk. Really talk. Not the surface-level stuff they had been doing.

"I don't feel like you want to be with me anymore," she said.

"That's not true."

"Then why do you act like spending time with me is a chore?"

"I don't—"

"You do. Every time we make plans, you seem annoyed. Like you had rather be doing anything else."

"Maybe I'd rather be sleeping. Maybe I'd rather not be this tired all the time."

"So it is about me."

"No, it's about everything. It's about work being insane and college being useless and my mother asking me for money and you acting like I'm supposed to have the energy to be a good boyfriend when I barely have the energy to exist."

"I never asked you to be a good boyfriend. I just asked you to show up."

"I am showing up."

"You're physically here. That's different from actually being here."

He wanted to scream. Wanted to tell her that he was doing his best. That he had taken on a job and was trying to keep his grades from completely tanking and was trying to help his mother and was trying to not completely lose his mind. And her wanting more from him felt like asking him to give blood he didn't have.

Instead he said: "If you're so unhappy, why are you still with me?"

She flinched. Actually flinched like he had hit her.

"Because I love you," she said quietly.

"That's not enough," he said. And immediately regretted it.

"I know," she said. "I'm starting to realize that."

There was silence. The kind that feels permanent.

Then she said: "I'm sorry. I'm sorry for not understanding. I'm sorry for being difficult. I know you're stressed."

"Don't be sorry," he said. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"Take a photo," she said suddenly.

"What?"

"Of me. Right now. Promise #6. Take a photo."

"Pratiksha—"

"Please. I want you to take one."

He pulled out his phone. No camera. Just the phone camera. Not the Canon. Not the camera that mattered. But he opened it anyway.

She was sitting there with tear stains on her face, hair falling into her eyes, looking at him like she was trying to memorize him.

He could take the photo. Should take it.

Instead he said: "I don't want to remember this."

"What?"

"This moment. This fight. You crying because I'm a terrible boyfriend. I don't want to remember it. I don't want to capture it. Some moments aren't worth keeping."

She looked at him for a long moment.

"Okay," she whispered.

He put his phone away.

They sat there for a while longer, not talking. Just existing in the fact that they had just broken Promise #6. Or more accurately, he had chosen not to keep it. Had chosen to forget instead of remember.

...

By October, communication had become a minefield.

He would say something innocent and she would hear criticism. She would mention something small and he would interpret it as an attack. They were speaking the same language but no longer understanding each other.

He texted: *Can't make to dinner tomorrow. Work is crazy*

She read: I don't want to see you

She replied: *okay. whenever you have time*

He read: Fine, abandon me like everyone else

The gap between what they meant and what they understood became wider every day.

She stopped humming. He stopped trying to make plans.

By November, they were more like roommates than lovers. Existing in the same relationship but inhabiting completely different worlds.

She had college. He had work. They had the space in between where they used to meet, but now that space just felt empty.

One evening, she called him.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi. Can we talk?"

"I'm tired," he said immediately.

"I know. But we need to talk."

"About what?"

"About us."

He felt something tighten in his chest. Those words. "About us." Never good.

"Okay," he said.

"I don't think I'm enough for you," she said.

"That's not—"

"No, listen. You're stressed about work and college and your family. And I'm just another thing you have to manage. Another person wanting something from you. And I don't want to be that."

"You're not that."

"I am. Because every time we're together, you seem like you would rather be anywhere else. And I can't keep being with someone who doesn't want to be with me."

"That's not true."

"Isn't it?"

He didn't have an answer for that.

"I think we need space," she said quietly. "Real space. Not just because we're busy. But because this isn't working."

"Pratiksha—"

"I still love you. But I don't think love is enough right now. And that's the saddest thing I've ever had to say."

The call ended and Tejas sat there staring at his phone, knowing she was right but unable to admit it. Unable to say that he didn't have anything left to give. That loving her had become too hard when he was barely holding himself together.

They didn't officially break up. They just... stopped trying.

By the end of November, they were texting like acquaintances. Polite. Distant. The promises nothing but ghosts.

6.



December 2020 - March 2021

Pratiksha emailed the publishing house on December 3rd.

She didn't tell him first. Didn't ask what he thought. Just sent the email saying she was ready now. Ready to take the internship she had rejected fourteen months ago. Ready to leave.

The response came in two hours:

We'd love to have you. Can you start December 17th?

Fourteen days. She had fourteen days to pack her life into a suitcase and move to Mumbai.

When she told Tejas, they were on a video call. Or trying to be. His connection kept cutting out.

"I'm taking the internship," she said.

"What internship?"

"The one from the publishing house. In Mumbai. They want me to start next week."

There was a pause. Then: "Okay."

That's it. Just "Okay."

"Just okay?" she asked.

"What do you want me to say? You've already decided."

"I wanted to know what you think."

"I think you should do what makes you happy."

She knew that line. Had heard it before. It was what he said when he didn't actually care.

"I'm doing this because I need to," she said. "Because I'm disappearing here. Because I can't keep waiting for you to have time for me."

He didn't argue. Just said: "When do you leave?"

"December 15th."

"Okay."

And that was how it ended. No fight. No attempt to stop her. No asking her to stay.

Just okay.

Raghav found Tejas sitting alone at their college canteen.

"Where's Pratiksha?" he asked, sitting down.

"Mumbai. She left yesterday."

"What?"

"Took an internship. Didn't want to wait around for me to figure out my life."

Raghav stared at him. "Dude, what happened?"

"We happened," Tejas said. "And then we stopped happening."

That night, Tejas called Raghav after work. Needed someone to talk to who wasn't his mother or his exhausted brain.

"We're broken," he said without preamble.

"I know."

"She's in Mumbai now. We're trying long distance. But I think we're just pretending at this point."

"Have you talked to her about it?"

"Every time we talk, it becomes a fight."

Raghav listened while Tejas described video calls where they couldn't find words. Where silences felt heavier than arguments. Where she would ask him questions and he would give one-word answers. Where she would try to tell him about her day and he would already be exhausted before the call even started.

"I think I'm just done," Tejas said finally. "I don't have anything left to give."

Raghav was quiet for a long moment.

"Do you love her?" he asked.

"Yeah. But loving someone isn't enough when you're both drowning separately."

After that call, Raghav understood. Understood that this wasn't a normal breakup. This was two people who had loved each other trying to survive in a world that kept pulling them in opposite directions.

He stopped trying to fix it.

...

Their first video call after she got to Mumbai was awkward.

She showed him her tiny apartment. He showed her nothing. Just his face, tired and distant.

"How was work?" she asked.

"Fine."

"Just fine?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. Well, my office is amazing. They gave me this whole project about—"

"That's great."

She waited for him to say more. He didn't.

"Tejas, can you actually engage here? I'm trying to share something with you."

"I'm listening."

"No, you're not. You're sitting there checking your phone."

"I'm not—"

"You are. I can see it. You literally just looked down."

"I'm tired, Pratiksha."

"I'm always tired too. But I'm still here. I'm still trying."

"I'm not trying to have a fight right now."

"Then what are you trying to do?"

"I don't know. Exist?"

She muted the call. He watched her face freeze for a second, then she unmuted.

"Let's just... talk tomorrow," she said.

"Okay."

But tomorrow came and neither of them called.

...

By January, their messages had become something different. Not loving. Not even particularly kind. Just functional.

did you eat?

Yeah

working late?

Yeah

okay. sleep well

You too

Gone were the voice notes where she hummed. Gone were the screenshots of their old conversations. Now there was just this. Obligation dressed up as communication.

One night, he sent her a photo of his college campus at sunset.

She replied: *pretty*

And that was it. Not "I wish I was there." Not "Remember when we used to watch sunsets?" Just: *pretty*

He stared at that one word for ten minutes. Tried to locate anger. Found nothing.

...

Mid-January, Shruti called Pratiksha.

"So how's Mumbai?" she asked, her voice already carrying that edge.

"Good. It's good. I'm learning a lot."

"And Tejas?"

"What about him?"

"Are you guys... I mean, long distance is rough."

Pratiksha knew what was coming. Could feel it building.

"It's fine," she said.

"Is it though?" Shruti's voice shifted. Became softer but somehow more cutting. "Because I told you this was going to happen. When you guys got together, when you guys made those stupid promises... I literally said this wouldn't last. That loving someone wasn't enough when the world was against you."

"Shruti—"

"I'm not trying to be mean. I just... I tried to warn you. And now you're in Mumbai working your dream job while your boyfriend is in Pune burning out. And you're both miserable."

Pratiksha wanted to argue. Wanted to say Shruti was wrong.

But she wasn't.

"I know," Pratiksha said quietly.

"So what are you going to do?"

"I don't know. Probably end it. It's cruel to keep pretending we can make this work."

"Yeah," Shruti agreed. And somehow her agreement hurt worse than her judgment.

7.

April - July 2021

Arjun was easy.

That was the thing Pratiksha noticed first. Easy to talk to. Easy to laugh with. Easy to exist around without constantly feeling like she was failing at something.

Tejas was hard now. Everything with him required effort. Required her to be smaller. Required her to accept that love wasn't enough.

With Arjun, there was no requirement, just ease.

They started getting coffee every morning. Started sitting together during lunch. Started messaging about work that could have been emails. Started calling each other after work to debrief.

She never told Tejas about Arjun.

Not because she was hiding anything. Or maybe because she was. She didn't know anymore.

When Tejas asked what she was doing, she would say: "Work stuff." Which was true. Mostly.

But she didn't mention that Arjun remembered how she liked her coffee. That he had held her hand when a publisher rejected her stories. That he made her feel like she mattered.

She didn't mention any of that.

Because mentioning it would make it real. And if it was real, she would have to acknowledge that she was letting someone else fill the space that Tejas used to fill.

...

Tejas saw the Instagram post on a Tuesday.

Arjun's account. His profile was not private and Pratiksha had liked the post so it was on his feed. A photo of Pratiksha laughing in the office. Their hands almost touching on the desk.

"My favourite colleague "

He stared at it for five minutes.

Then he called her.

"Hi, I'm actually in the middle of—" she started.

"Who's Arjun?"

"What?"

"Your colleague. Who is he?"

"He's just... a colleague. Why?"

"Because he just posted a photo of you. You're touching. You're happy. Actually happy. More happy than you've been in any of our calls in months."

"Tejas, that's just—"

"Just what? A work friend? Pratiksha, come on."

"It's not like that."

"Then what is it like?"

"He's kind to me. He listens. He makes me feel like I'm not completely failing."

The line went quiet.

"So you're emotionally cheating on me," Tejas said.

"I'm not cheating. We haven't done anything."

"You don't have to physically cheat to cheat. You're confiding in him. You're spending time with him. You're letting him matter instead of me."

"Because you stopped mattering!" she shouted. "You stopped trying. You made me feel like I was too much. Like my existence was a burden. And then Arjun showed up and he didn't make me feel like that."

"So this is my fault? I'm drowning in work and family! I just wanted you to wait a little until..."

"I was waiting! I waited while you disappeared. I waited while you gave me one-word answers. I waited while you made me feel like I wasn't worth fighting for."

"I was trying to survive."

"I know. And I was trying to not disappear. But we couldn't do both at the same time."

"So what now? You're dating him?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Or maybe I'm just going to keep existing in a space where I don't feel pain."

"Then we're done."

"What?"

"We're done. Don't wait for me. Don't see if things get better. We're finished."

"Tejas—"

"I can't keep competing with someone who actually has time for you. I can't keep being the person you're settling for. You deserve better than me. And I deserve better than this."

There was silence.

"Love shouldn't feel like an exam we keep failing," she said quietly.

And that was it. That one line. The moment everything finally broke.

"No," he said. "It shouldn't."

The call ended.

8.



August - December 2021

They didn't officially break up after that call.

Just stopped talking.

Not a dramatic silence. Just a slow fading where one day she realized he hadn't texted in a week. Then two weeks. Then a month. And she didn't text him either.

By August, they were ghosts to each other.

...

Raghav tried to talk to Tejas about it once.

"How are you doing?" he asked carefully.

"Fine," Tejas said.

"You're not fine."

"I don't want to talk about it."

Raghav stopped trying after that.

But he noticed. Noticed that Tejas would cross the campus in a way that avoided the library where Pratiksha used to study. Noticed that when their friend group tried to make plans, Tejas always had an excuse. Noticed that he had become someone who existed but didn't really live.

Shruti called Pratiksha in September.

"Hey, have you talked to Tejas?" she asked.

"No."

"Are you guys... broken up?"

"Yeah. We are."

"Oh god, I'm sorry. I know I said—"

"I know what you said. You were right."

Pratiksha deleted Tejas from her social media on a Thursday. Not blocked. Just removed. Unfollowed. Made it so their names wouldn't appear in each other's feeds.

She deleted the photos of them together. All of them. The ones from Vrudeshwar. The ones from college. The ones where they were actually happy.

She couldn't delete the memories though. So she just tried not to think about them.

Tejas deleted her number from his phone. Or tried to. Kept almost calling her. Kept almost texting. But every time he started typing, he would remember her voice saying, "Love shouldn't feel like an exam we keep failing."

So he would delete what he had typed and put the phone away.

By October, they had become strangers who used to know everything about each other.

...

Tejas threw himself into work.

Took on every project. Stayed late every night. Became the guy who got things done. His manager started talking about promotions. About leadership roles. About a future that looked successful on paper but felt hollow in reality.

His apartment became a place where he slept. Nothing more.

Pratiksha wrote.

She took all the pain and put it into stories. Wrote about love and loss. About promises broken. About two people who tried but couldn't survive the world.

She submitted them to magazines. Got rejected from most. But one small literary journal accepted a piece about a girl who loved someone she couldn't keep.

They published it in November with her name in print for the first time.

It was supposed to feel like an achievement.

It just felt like evidence of her heartbreak on paper.

...

December 23rd came.

Three years exactly since they had made seven promises on the steps of Vrudeshwar.

Tejas woke up that morning and remembered. Tried not to remember. But his brain had marked that date forever.

He didn't go to Vrudeshwar.

Pratiksha woke up that morning and remembered too. Tried to ignore it. Tried to pretend it was just another day.

But at 6 PM, she found herself on her balcony in Mumbai, staring at the city lights, thinking about a river in Pune that she used to sit by with someone who mattered.

She picked up her phone. Typed his name. Stared at the blank message.

Didn't send anything.

At 6 PM that same day, Tejas was at the office working late. Didn't go home. Didn't go to Vrudeshwar. Just sat at his desk and pretended the date didn't exist.

By midnight, they had both acknowledged what day it was. Both remembered what they had promised.

Neither went to the steps.

The final promise died in silence.

...

By December 31st, they had both accepted it was over.

Not just the relationship. The entire version of themselves that had existed together.

Tejas became the guy who worked all the time, whose camera gathered dust in his closet.

Pratiksha became the girl who wrote about sadness. She achieved some success with her stories. She was kind but distant. She built walls so high that no one could hurt her again.

They lived in different cities and avoided everything that reminded them of each other.

And slowly, they became ghosts.

9.

2022 - 2023

Two years passed like they were nothing.

Tejas got promoted. Then promoted again. Senior Developer. Team Lead. The kind of position that came with a salary that would have made his father proud.

He didn't feel anything about it.

He dated occasionally. Women who were kind and interesting and wanted something real from him. But he couldn't give them anything real. Would go on dates, feel them starting to hope, and then disappear before it got serious.

It was easier that way.

His camera sat in his closet. He had opened the box once. Held it. Felt the weight of it. Then put it back.

Some part of him knew he would never use it again.

His apartment in Pune was nice. Decent furniture.

By 2023, he had become someone who had everything and felt nothing.

...

Pratiksha's collection of short stories got published in early 2022.

People read them. Some loved them. Some didn't. She read the good reviews and felt nothing. Read the bad reviews and felt worse.

She dated Arjun briefly in 2022.

He was kind. Patient. Wanted to help her heal.

But she realised after three months that she was using him. Using his attention to fill the void that Tejas had left. And that wasn't fair.

She broke it off. He took it well. But she could see the hurt in his eyes. The realisation that he wasn't enough because someone else had already taken up all the space inside her.

She felt guilty about that for months.

By 2023, she had stopped trying to date. Stopped trying to fill the void.

Just accepted that it was there and probably always would be.

She lived in Mumbai. Had a good job at the publishing house. She achieved the thing she had once dreamed about. Had her name in print. Had success.

But success tasted like ash.

Once, in late 2022, Tejas saw her name on a book cover at an airport bookstore.

He was waiting for a flight to Delhi and just... saw it. Her name. In print. On a book of stories.

He picked it up. Read the back cover. Realised these were her stories. The pain she had turned into words.

He opened to a random page and read about a girl who loved someone she couldn't keep.

He put the book back.

Walked away.

Didn't buy it.

Didn't need to read her heartbreak in print. He lived with it every day.

Pratiksha saw him once in 2023.

Not in person. On LinkedIn.

His profile showed up in her feed. Team Lead at a major tech company. Multiple endorsements. Recommendations from colleagues praising his work ethic. His professionalism.

He looked successful in his profile photo.

He looked like a stranger.

She almost clicked to view his full profile. Wanted to see what he had done over the past two years. Wanted to know if he was happy.

Then she remembered that knowing wouldn't change anything.

So she scrolled past.

They had mutual friends who sometimes mentioned one or the other. But they never asked for details. Never pushed.

Because everyone understood that some people weren't meant to exist in each other's worlds anymore.

They had become parallel lines.

Moving forward. Both successful. Both hollow.

Never crossing. Never touching.

Just two people who used to matter to each other, now living separate lives and trying not to think about what they had lost.

The promises were seven years old now.

Nobody kept them.

Nobody even remembered them.

Except them.

And they tried very hard not to remember at all.

10.



2024 - Early 2025

Tejas was transferring files from his old laptop when he found it.

A backup from 2019. Somehow it had survived through three computers and four years of his life.

He almost deleted it without opening it.

Then curiosity won.

He clicked on the messages folder. It auto-populated with conversations from his phone. Thousands of them. All of them with her.

He didn't read them all. Just saw fragments as he scrolled.

"I miss you"

"when can we meet"

"you're obsessed with me"

"you love it"

"I do"

Random conversations from a lifetime ago. From when they were different people.

He closed the folder without reading more.

But he didn't delete it.

Just left it there on his laptop. A ghost of someone he used to be.

...

Pratiksha was cleaning her apartment when she found the red notebook, shoved in the back of her closet, next to a box of old clothes she never wore anymore.

She almost didn't open it.

Then her hand did anyway.

The pages were worn. The handwriting was familiar. Her own words staring back at her.

Seven Promises

Written at the top in her messy script.

She read them slowly.

Seven promises made by two people who believed they were invincible.

She closed the notebook and put it back in the closet.

But she didn't leave it there for long. Just moved it to her nightstand, where she could see it every morning and every night.

...

In March 2024, Tejas saw her name in his LinkedIn notifications.

Someone had reposted one of her articles about storytelling and emotions.

Her name appeared in his feed. Her face in a small profile picture.

He stared at it for a long time. Almost clicked to view her profile. Almost sent a message saying something. Anything.

Then he closed the app.

Put his phone down.

Didn't let himself do it.

...

In April 2024, Pratiksha heard "Tum Itna Jo Muskura Rahe Ho" playing in a cafe.

That old song. The one she used to hum.

And she wanted to send him the link. Wanted to say:
"Remember this? Remember when I hummed this?"

She opened her phone.

Scrolled through her contacts looking for his name.

Remembered it wasn't there anymore.

She had deleted it.

She put her phone away and finished her coffee in silence.

On January 11th, 2025, Pratiksha turned twenty-five.

She didn't celebrate.

Didn't go out. Didn't tell anyone at work. Didn't do anything except exist through the day and try not to remember.

But she remembered anyway.

Remembered sitting at Vrudeswar with flowers and drinking kheer. Remembered him showing up with a bookmark with her favourite quote. Remembered believing that he would always be there on her birthday.

By evening, she was crying in her apartment.

Not because she was turning twenty-five.

Because he wasn't there to witness it.

...

On March 11th, 2025, Tejas worked late.

Deliberately. On purpose.

Because it was his birthday and he didn't want to be alone with that knowledge.

Stayed at the office until midnight. Made sure he was surrounded by work and people and noise.

Anything to not sit in his apartment and remember.

Remember her showing up at midnight with cake. Remember her singing off-key. Remember being twenty and feeling like maybe forever was possible.

He worked through midnight.

Then went home and didn't check his messages.

...

In June, during the monsoon, Tejas found himself standing in the rain.

Not intentionally. Just got caught without an umbrella on his way back from the office.

And instead of running for cover, he just... stood there.

Watched the rain come down.

Remembered dancing in a courtyard with someone who made him feel alive. Remembered Promise #5.

The rain didn't feel magical anymore.

Just wet.

He went home and sat on his balcony, soaking wet, staring at nothing.

Pratiksha went to her balcony and watched it. The rain...

Remembered dancing in rain that felt like freedom. Remembered his hand in hers. Remembered believing that some moments were worth getting sick for.

She wanted to dance now. Wanted to spin in the rain and feel alive again.

Instead, she went inside and closed the window.

By August, the haunting had become routine.

Sunsets made Tejas think of Promise #1. He would try to watch them and just feel empty. The sky could be the most beautiful thing in the world and it would only remind him that he was alone watching it.

He stopped watching sunsets.

Started working through them. Kept his office lights on so he wouldn't notice the sky changing colours.

Rain became melancholy.

Every time it rained, Pratiksha thought of him. Every time it rained, Tejas thought of her.

They couldn't enjoy the rain anymore. Couldn't see it without remembering dancing. Without remembering the promise they had kept once and then let die.

The promises that were supposed to keep them together had become the things that kept them apart.

Because every promise was a reminder of what they had lost.

Every memory was a wound that wouldn't heal.

And they carried those wounds through their successful lives in different cities, trying not to think about the people they used to be.

Trying and failing.

Always failing.

11.

November 2025

Raghav's father died on a Tuesday.

Heart attack. Just like Tejas's father.

The funeral was on Friday. The same crematorium. The same rituals.

Tejas went because you show up for your friends. Even when you haven't really been a friend in years.

He stood there watching Raghav's mother cry and thought about his own mother. About how grief never really goes away. Just becomes something you carry.

After the cremation, Raghav called him.

"Can you come back to my place?" he asked. "I don't want to be alone."

They sat in Raghav's apartment at 2 AM, drinking whiskey that tasted like regret.

"My dad used to ask about you," Raghav said suddenly. "Asked if you were still with Pratiksha. I told him you guys broke up and he... he got sad. Like actually sad."

"Why would he get sad?"

"Because he loved your story. The way you two just... believed in each other. He would say it was the most romantic thing he had ever seen. Two kids making promises like the world wasn't going to tear them apart."

Tejas stared at his whiskey.

He said "If two people who loved each other like that couldn't make it, then what was the point?"

"Raghav—"

"And then I lost faith too. Because you two made me believe that love could survive anything. And then it didn't survive. It just... died."

"We were different people. We wanted different things."

"No, you didn't. You wanted each other. But you couldn't figure out how to be together while also surviving. And that broke something in me. Made me think love was impossible."

Tejas didn't have words for that.

"I thought about getting married, thinking maybe I could make it work," Raghav said. "Thought maybe if I tried harder than you two did, I could keep it alive. But I couldn't. Because you had already shown me it was impossible."

"I'm sorry," Tejas said. And meant it in a way he hadn't meant anything in years.

"Don't be sorry. Just... think about that. Think about how your love story became everyone else's cautionary tale."

Shruti called Pratiksha on a Wednesday.

"I'm getting divorced," she said without preamble.

"What? When?"

"Papers are being finalised next month. We've known for a while. Just finally admitting it now."

Pratiksha didn't know what to say.

"I was wrong about love," Shruti continued. "Remember how I was always saying it was impractical? That you and Tejas would never survive?"

"Yeah."

"I was wrong. Love isn't impractical. It's just... hard. And I thought if I was pragmatic about it, if I didn't believe in it too much, I could protect myself. But I couldn't. And now I'm divorced and alone and I've wasted years being cynical instead of just... trying."

"Shruti, that's not your fault."

"It's not? I judged your relationship so harshly. Made you feel like it was doomed. And maybe if I hadn't done that, if I had been supportive instead, things would have been different."

"You weren't responsible for us breaking up."

"But I was part of the culture that made you both feel like love wasn't enough. Like it was naive to believe in promises. And now I'm living in the world I created and it's miserable."

After they hung up, Pratiksha sat on her balcony and cried.

...

Tejas was going through old files at work when he found the folder.

Labeled: "Moments."

He didn't remember creating it but opened it anyway.

Photos. Hundreds of them. All of Pratiksha.

Her reading under the tree. Her laughing. Her sleeping on the bus. Her at Vrudeshwar. Her in the rain. Her with her notebook.

Photos he had taken over two years. Captured moments he had tried to forget.

He sat there staring at these images of a girl he used to love with his entire being.

And realized he couldn't remember the last time he had felt anything.

Couldn't remember the last time he had cared about capturing a moment. About documenting life.

Couldn't remember the last time he had actually been alive.

He is successful. Promoted. Wealthy. Respected at work.

But emotionally numb for five years.

He had turned himself into stone to avoid feeling the pain of losing her.

And in the process, had become someone he didn't recognize.

Someone his father wouldn't be proud of.

His father had wanted success. But he also wanted Tejas to be happy.

To have a life that meant something.

Not just a career. A life.

He looked at the photos again. At her face in all these moments.

And something cracked open inside him.

Not gently. Violently.

Five years of numbness breaking all at once.

Five years of not feeling anything. Of not wanting to feel anything.

Because feeling meant remembering. And remembering meant accepting that he'd let the best thing in his life slip through his fingers.

By the end of November, both of them were undone.

Tejas couldn't stop looking at those photos. Couldn't stop remembering what it felt like to love someone like that.

Pratiksha couldn't stop thinking about Shruti's words. About how love wasn't impractical. About how maybe she had given up too easily.

12.



December 23rd, 2025

Tejas woke up and knew he couldn't do this anymore.

Every sunset reminded him. Every birthday that passed. Every time it rained. Every song that came on the radio. Every time he saw someone's hand in his peripheral vision and thought it might be her.

He was tired of being haunted.

Tired of looking at those photos on his laptop and feeling nothing and everything at the same time. Tired of walking past the library on campus and taking a different route because she used to study there. Tired of working so hard that he forgot why he was working in the first place.

His camera was still in his closet. Hadn't touched it in seven years. Couldn't touch it because using it meant remembering what it felt like to care about capturing moments. Meant remembering her looking beautiful in every single frame.

He was tired of being this person. This hollow, successful, emotionally dead version of himself.

So he made a decision.

Just like that. Didn't overthink it. Didn't talk himself out of it.

He called in sick. Got on his bike. Drove to Vrudeswar.

Because maybe it was time to stop running from the place where it all started.

Maybe it was time to go back.

...

Pratiksha was in a meeting when she realised she couldn't do this anymore.

The date was December 23rd and she was sitting in a conference room talking about quarterly targets and she was completely numb to it all.

Because she had spent years trying to forget.

Trying to bury it in work. Trying to bury it in writing. Trying to bury it in the red notebook she kept hidden in her closet like a shameful secret.

But the haunting never stopped.

She didn't hum anymore. Couldn't hear the old songs without feeling like her chest was closing in. Couldn't watch sunsets without thinking about watching them alone. Couldn't see her January 11th birthday come around without spending it alone and pretending it was fine.

She was tired of pretending.

Tired of writing about heartbreak like it was some noble thing. Tired of going to dinners with friends and feeling like a ghost. Tired of looking at her phone and wanting to call him and then remembering that she had deleted his number so long ago she couldn't even remember the digits anymore.

She couldn't do this anymore.

She stood up in the middle of the meeting and said she had to leave.

Her boss looked confused. She didn't explain. Just grabbed her bag and walked out.

Took a train to Pune.

Sat by the window the entire way knowing exactly where she was going.

Because maybe it was time to stop running from the place where everything was promised.

Maybe it was time to go back.

...

Tejas arrived at Vrudeshwar at 3:45 PM.

He walked down the steps slowly. His heart was doing something weird in his chest. Like it was trying to remember how to feel.

He sat on their step and waited.

Didn't know what he was waiting for. Maybe just the closure of coming back to the place. Maybe just to sit here and remember what it felt like to be nineteen and believe in forever.

Pratiksha arrived at 5:50 PM.

She walked down the steps and saw him sitting there.

Time did something strange. Stopped maybe. Or went backwards. Or moved in all directions at once.

He was older. His face had lines it didn't have before. His shoulders looked heavier.

But it was him.

Unmistakably him.

He looked up.

She froze.

13.



December 23rd, 2025 - Evening

For a long moment, neither of them moved.

Just stood there looking at each other like they were seeing ghosts. Maybe they were.

"Hi," he said finally. His voice came out rougher than he meant it to.

"Hi," she said back.

The word felt too small for all these years.

She walked down the rest of the steps slowly. Sat down on the stone, not close to him but not far either. Like there was an invisible line between them that neither knew how to cross.

"You came," she said.

"So did you."

"I didn't think you would."

"I didn't think I would either."

They sat in silence for a while. The river moved. The sky started changing colours. Everything felt familiar and foreign at the same time.

"How are you?" he asked, and immediately felt stupid for asking. Like they were strangers at a networking event.

"I'm okay. Good, actually. Got promoted last year. Running the editorial department now."

"That's amazing. You always wanted that."

"Yeah." She looked at her hands. "What about you?"

"Delivery Manager. Software. It's... it's good. Pays well."

"That's great."

The conversation felt like walking on broken glass. Every word careful. Every sentence measured.

"Your mom?" she asked.

"She's good. Still in the same house."

"My parents are the same," she said. "Still controlling. Still disappointed I'm not married yet."

"You're not married?"

"No. You?"

"No."

They let that sit between them.

As the sun kept sinking, Tejas noticed things.

The way she sat with her hands folded. The way she looked at the river instead of at him. The way she was completely silent.

No humming. Not even under her breath.

He remembered her always having a song playing somewhere in her head. Remembered her filling silences with melodies. Remembered the way music used to leak out of her like she couldn't contain it.

Now there was just quiet.

"You don't hum anymore," he said.

She looked at him, startled. "What?"

"You used to hum all the time. Old songs. You would hum when you were nervous or happy or just existing. You're not doing that now."

She looked away. "I stopped."

"When?"

"After we... after everything ended. Couldn't listen to those songs anymore without thinking about you. So I just stopped."

He felt something twist in his chest.

Pratiksha looked at his empty hands. No camera strap. No bag. Just him.

"You still don't carry it," she said quietly. It wasn't a question.

"No."

"I remember," she said, her voice softer. "That fight. The day you refused to take the picture. You said you didn't want to remember that moment."

"I never took it out again."

"Why, Tejas? It was your dream. You loved it before you loved me."

"I thought so too," he said. "But then somewhere along the way... you became the only thing I wanted to capture. Every frame I saw, I looked for you in it. And when you left... the

world just looked empty. There was nothing worth freezing anymore."

"So you just stopped?"

"Yeah. Around the same time you stopped humming."

They looked at each other then. Really looked. And saw exactly what all these years had cost them.

"Do you want to walk?" he asked suddenly. "To the lake?"

She nodded.

They stood up and started walking. Not touching. Not talking. Just moving together toward the place they used to go.

The walk took five minutes. Felt like an eternity.

When they reached the edge where the river widened, where they used to sit and watch the sky turn colors, they stopped.

The sunset was happening. Orange bleeding into pink bleeding into purple.

"Promise number one," she said quietly. "Never watch a sunset alone."

"We broke that one pretty early," he said.

"Yeah. I remember the first time you missed one. You were working and I called you and you said you couldn't make it. I watched it alone and cried."

"I remember that too. I sat at the cafe and hated myself for choosing work over you. But I kept doing it. Kept choosing work."

She looked at him. "It wasn't just you. I broke them too."

"Which ones?"

"Promise number two. Tell the truth even when it hurts. I lied about the Mumbai internship. Told you I rejected it when I was just scared of being alone. Scared you would leave if I left."

"I wouldn't have left."

"You did leave. Just not the way I thought. You left emotionally. Stopped being present. And I couldn't handle that so I lied instead of telling you how scared I was."

He sat down on the edge. She sat next to him.

"Promise number three," he said. "Every birthday, no excuses, just us."

"I spent my birthdays alone in my apartment. Cried the whole day. Kept waiting for you to call even though I knew you wouldn't."

"I worked through my birthdays. Stayed at the office until midnight so I wouldn't have to think about you showing up with cake like you used to."

"We were so good at keeping that promise once."

"We were good at keeping all of them once."

The sky kept changing. They kept talking.

"Promise number four," she said. "Never block each other."

"I broke that one. Blocked you during a fight because I couldn't handle it anymore. Couldn't handle you asking me to be someone I didn't have the energy to be."

"I almost blocked you so many times before that. Every time you didn't reply. Every time you chose work. I would hover

over the block button and then remember the promise. And then you did it anyway."

"I unblocked you the next day. But the damage was done."

"Yeah."

They sat with that for a while.

"Promise number five," he said. "Dance in the rain."

"We skipped it. You said it was childish."

"I was an idiot."

"No, you were tired. You were drowning and I was asking you to dance. That wasn't fair either."

"I should have danced anyway. Should have chosen joy when I had the chance."

She smiled sadly. "We should have done a lot of things differently."

"Tell me what really happened," she said suddenly. "With you. After your father died. Tell me what I didn't understand."

He was quiet for a long moment. Like he was deciding whether to let her in one more time.

"I was drowning," he said finally. His voice cracked on the word. "Every single day. I woke up and my first thought wasn't about you or college or anything normal. It was the bills. The hospital bills. The cremation costs. My mom sitting in the kitchen doing math on a piece of paper, trying to figure out how we would pay for next month's rent."

He stopped. Swallowed hard.

"I would calculate it in my head. All the time. While I was in class, I would be doing math. How much the cyber cafe paid. How much that would cover. How much we would still be short. And then when I started the software job, I did the same thing. More money, but never enough. Never ever enough."

His hands were shaking.

"And you wanted to spend time with me. You would ask me to watch a sunset or come meet you somewhere. And I would feel this... this rage. Not at you. At the situation. At my father for dying. At myself for not being able to give you what you needed. And I snapped at you because I didn't know what else to do with all that anger."

She was listening so intently it almost hurt to look at her.

"Every time you asked for more, it felt like a weight on top of an already impossible weight," he continued. "Like you were asking me to lift something I didn't have the strength for. And I knew that was unfair to you. I knew you weren't asking for much. Just for me to be present. But I couldn't be present. I was too busy trying to survive."

He looked at her finally.

"I would come home at midnight and my mom would be sitting in the dark waiting for me to give her money. And I would give it to her and then I would come to bed to your text asking how my day was. And I had nothing left. Nothing to give you. Not even words. Just... exhaustion. And I made you feel like you were the problem when you were just trying to love someone who was broken."

His voice broke completely.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm so sorry for making you feel like you weren't enough. You were everything. You were the one bright thing in all of that darkness. And I was too scared and too tired and too broken to see it."

She was crying harder now. Not holding it back.

"Your turn," he said quietly. "Tell me. Tell me what I didn't understand about you."

She took a breath that shook.

"I was terrified," she said. "Every single day. Not of anything external. I was scared of being abandoned. Because that's what happened my whole life. My father worked all the time. My mother was there but controlling. They never really saw me. I was just this thing to manage. To guide. To control."

She wiped her eyes roughly.

"And then you came along and suddenly someone was looking at me. Actually looking at me. Taking pictures of me. Showing up at midnight on my birthday. Caring about what I felt and what I wanted and what I thought."

Her voice got smaller.

"It was like finally, finally, I mattered. After nineteen years of feeling invisible, I suddenly mattered to someone."

She looked at him.

"And then your father died. And you started disappearing. Not all at once. Slowly. Cancelling plans. Being distant. Giving one-word answers. And every time you pulled away, it confirmed what I already believed. That I wasn't worth staying

for. That if I couldn't keep you interested when you were drowning, then I was never going to be enough for anyone."

She was shaking now.

"So when I got the Mumbai internship opportunity the first time, I rejected it because I was terrified. Terrified that if I left, you would realise you were better off without me. That you would fill the space I left with someone who wasn't as needy. Someone who didn't need as much from you."

"Pratiksha—"

"No, let me finish. I lied to you because admitting that I was scared felt like admitting I was weak. And I had already spent my whole life feeling weak. So I told you I rejected it for work reasons. Professional reasons. Anything but the truth."

Tears were streaming down her face now.

"And when you started pulling away more, I held on tighter. I messaged you constantly. Ask you what time you could meet. Try to force moments with you. And I could feel you getting more frustrated. I could feel you resenting me. And that made it worse. That made me cling harder because if I lost you too, then everyone was right. Everyone who said I wasn't enough. My parents. My friends. Even my own brain was telling me I was too much."

She looked away.

"The worst part is that I knew what I was doing. I knew I was being clingy and needy and that I was probably suffocating you. But I couldn't stop. Because the alternative was admitting that you might leave anyway. That love might not be enough. That I might be unlovable."

"You're not unlovable," he said fiercely.

"I know that now. But I didn't know it then. I just knew that everyone leaves. So I tried to make myself small enough to keep. Tried to be whatever you needed. Tried to disappear myself so you wouldn't have a reason to disappear first."

She finally looked at him.

"And then Arjun came along and suddenly someone was paying attention to me again. Someone who wasn't drowning. Someone who had energy. And I felt this tiny bit of relief because maybe if you left, at least I wouldn't be completely alone. At least there would be someone."

"You were... I mean that was..."

"Emotional Cheating... You don't have to hesitate while saying it. I still remember those words... Yeah. I was. And I hated myself for it. Hated that I was hurting you when you were already hurting. But I was so scared. So absolutely terrified that I would be abandoned again."

He reached over and took her hand. She let him.

"I wasn't going to leave you," he said quietly.

"I know that now. But my trauma didn't know that then. It just knew the pattern. Attention, then abandonment. Love, then rejection. That's what my whole life had taught me."

They sat there holding hands in the dark, both crying.

"I was so broken," she said. "And you were so broken. And we were both too broken to fix each other. That's what it comes down to, isn't it?"

"Yeah," he said. "That's what it comes down to."

Silence... Nothing happened for the next 10 minutes, just pure silence.

"I thought about calling you," he said. "So many times. Would pull up your contact and just stare at it."

"I deleted your number. But I tried to remember it. Tried to piece it together from memory. Never could."

"I saw your book at the airport once. Didn't buy it."

"I stalked your LinkedIn sometimes. Saw you got promoted. Almost messaged you congratulations."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because what would I say after years? 'Hey, proud of you, sorry I broke your heart?'"

"I would have appreciated that actually."

She laughed through her tears. "Really?"

"No. Probably not. Probably would have broken me all over again."

The sun was almost gone now. Just a thin line of orange on the horizon.

"We're different people now," she said quietly.

"Yeah."

"I'm not the girl who hummed all the time. You're not the guy who took pictures of everything."

"No."

"And even if we wanted to... we couldn't go back to who we were."

He looked at her. At the lines around her eyes. At the way she held herself differently now. Guarded. Protected. But also stronger in a way she hadn't been back then.

"I don't want to go back," he said.

She looked surprised at that. Like she had been bracing for him to ask. Like part of her had been hoping and dreading it at the same time.

"I loved who we were," he continued. "But that was then. We were kids making promises we didn't understand. Promising forever when we didn't even know who we would be next year."

"Does that make the promises a lie?" she asked, her voice trembling.

"No. It makes them innocent. And we aren't innocent anymore, Pratiksha. We lost that right when life happened to us."

He shifted on the stone, looking out at the water that had witnessed their beginning and was now witnessing their end.

"We broke those promises because we were drowning," he said. "We were too young to know how to swim together. We just pulled each other down trying to stay afloat."

She was sobbing now. "But we're swimming now. We're both okay now. Why can't we try again?"

"Because we aren't just two people who fell in love," he said gently. "We are two people who fell apart. Our entire history... it isn't just the happy moments. It's the trauma. It's my father dying and me shutting down. It's you feeling abandoned and

terrified. Every time I look at you, I remember how much I hurt you. Every time you look at me, you remember how scared you were that I would leave."

He turned to face her fully.

"If we tried again, we wouldn't be starting fresh. We would be building a house on a foundation that's already cracked. Every fight would feel like the old fights. Every silence would feel like the old abandonment. We would spend our whole lives trying to apologise for who we were seven years ago instead of loving who we are now."

"So you think we're... what? Damaged goods?"

"No," he said firmly. "I think we're survivors of the same wreck. And survivors can't heal if they keep living at the crash site."

The words landed heavily between them. She looked at him, devastation warring with understanding in her eyes.

"Part of me has spent years wondering 'what if'," he admitted, his voice cracking. "What if I had been stronger? What if we met now, today, for the first time? But the truth is, if we met today... we wouldn't recognise each other. Because the versions of us that fit together perfectly? They died. They didn't survive the winter."

"You really believe that?"

"I have to. Because trying to resurrect them... that's not love. That's refusal to accept grief. That's us being so scared of the void that we would rather be in pain together than be healed apart."

"So you don't want me," she whispered.

"I want you more than I've wanted anything in years," he said, and the raw honesty of it silenced her tears for a moment. "I want to hold you. I want to tell you I'm sorry a thousand more times. But wanting isn't enough. Loving isn't enough."

He took a breath that shuddered in his chest.

"I'm saying that I will always love you. But loving someone isn't the same as being meant to keep them. We succeeded at the hardest thing possible, Pratiksha. We survived the loss of the most important person in our lives. We survived losing each other. And if we undo that now... if we try to crawl back into the safety of the past... we disrespect the people we had to fight to become."

"We earned this peace," she realised, the words barely audible. "Separately."

"Yes. We earned it separately. And we can't share it. Because my peace is built on learning to live without you. And yours is built on learning you didn't need me to survive."

She looked down at her hands. "It feels like a waste."

"It's not a waste. It's the price. The price of growing up."

He reached over and wiped a tear from her cheek with his thumb.

"I don't want to be your security blanket," he said softly. "And I don't want you to be mine. I want you to be happy. Really happy. Not just comfortable because I'm familiar. Not just safe because you know how I break. I want you to find a love that doesn't have years of scar tissue before it even begins."

She nodded slowly. The resistance was leaving her shoulders. The desperate hope was fading, replaced by a quiet, heavy acceptance.

"When did you get so wise?" she asked, a sad smile touching her lips.

He smiled back, but his eyes were full of tears. "A few years of being hollow will do that to you. You have a lot of time to think when you're trying not to feel."

"Yeah," she said. "I know that too."

They sat in silence for a long time.

"I want you to be happy," she said finally. "Even if it's not with me."

"I want that for you, too."

"Even though it hurts?"

"Especially because it hurts. That's how I know I mean it."

She leaned her head on his shoulder. And for a moment, they just sat there. Connected but separate. Loving but letting go.

"This is the right choice," she said. But she was crying as she said it.

"I know," he said. "And that makes it the hardest choice."

"Yeah."

She lifted her head and looked at him one more time.

"Thank you for not asking me to stay," she said. "Thank you for being brave enough to let me go."

"Thank you for coming back one last time," he said. "Thank you for being brave enough to face this."

They sat until the sun was completely gone.

Then Tejas did something he hadn't done in seven years.

He pulled out his phone. Opened the camera.

"Can I take a picture?" he asked.

She looked at him, surprised. "Why?"

"Because I want to remember this. Not the pain. Just... this moment. You here. Me here. The way the sky looks. The way we're different now."

"Okay," she said quietly.

He pointed the camera at her.

She didn't pose. Didn't smile. Just looked at the place where the sun had been. Her face half in shadow. Her expression unreadable.

He took the photo.

It was beautiful and devastating at the same time.

When they finally stood to leave, they both knew this was goodbye.

Not the angry goodbye from years ago. Not the bitter breakup. But the real goodbye. The one that acknowledged what they had been and what they had become.

"Thank you for coming," she said.

"Thank you for coming," he said.

"I'm glad we did this. Glad we got to... I don't know... Close the circle."

"We kept promise number seven after all," he said.

She smiled. The real smile. The one from years ago. "We did. Just not how we expected."

"Never how we expected."

She started walking back toward the steps. Stopped. Turned around.

"I don't hate you," she said. "I want you to know that. I never hated you."

"I don't hate you either. I never did."

"Good."

"Pratiksha?"

"Yeah?"

"I hope you hum again someday. The world needs that."

Her eyes filled with tears. "I hope you take pictures again. You were good at it."

"Maybe I will."

"Maybe I will too."

They looked at each other one last time.

Then she turned and walked away.

He watched her go.

When she reached the top of the steps, he heard it.

Faint. But there.

She was humming.

"Kabhi kabhi mere dil mein khayal aata hai..."

He smiled.

Pulled out his phone. Looked at the photo he had just taken.

Then he walked in the opposite direction.

Past the river. Past the coffee shop. Past all the places they used to go.

And for the first time in seven years, he started noticing things.

The way the winter light hit the water. The way shadows fell across the bridge. The way life kept moving even when you stopped paying attention.

He lifted his phone and took a picture.

Then another.

And another.

By the time he got home, he had seventeen new photos.

None of them were of her.

All of them were beautiful...

Author's note



This story was written in pieces.

In late nights. In between memories. In moments when something ordinary - a song, a date, a sunset suddenly felt heavier than it should.

It's not about love. It's about the version of us that exists when love changes us and then leaves.

I don't believe all love stories are meant to last forever. But I do believe they leave marks... quiet, permanent ones.

If you have ever held onto a promise longer than the person who made it, if you have ever wondered whether timing mattered more than love, if you've ever gone back, even just in your head...

Then this story was written with **YOU** in mind.

Thank you for being here, for feeling it, for carrying it with you.

— Somewhere U.

Acknowledgements



This book exists because of the people who listened without trying to fix things, who stayed when silence was easier.

To my friends - thank you for the patience and the space.

And to **M** and **S** - thank you for teaching me, in different ways, how to stay.

To the stories I lived before I knew how to write them, and to every reader who picked this up without knowing why -
thank you for trusting it with your time.