

When It's MEANT TO BE

A Story of Hope, Destiny, and Renewed Faith

Shiva Sharma



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To my late mother, *whose unwavering strength and boundless love met every trial with grace—her spirit still nudges me, whispers to me, and guides me at every step. Thank you for being such a wonderful mother.*

To my father, *a man of quiet strength and unstoppable resilience—proof that real superheroes don't announce themselves or wear capes.*

To my siblings, *whose “support” has carried me through life—gentle nudges, sarcastic remarks, pranks, endless teasing—love in disguise, proof that the strongest pillars sometimes come with a punchline (and occasionally a well-aimed water balloon).*

And to my friends, *who leave no corner of my life unteased, no prank unpulled, and no day untouched by laughter—reminding me that life is brighter, lighter, and richer because they are in it.*

About the Author

The author holds a degree in Science and brings over a decade of experience working with multinational companies. A keen observer of life and an avid reader, he has long been drawn to the quest of understanding the purpose of human existence and the deeper meaning hidden within each unfolding moment.

Through years of reflection, he realized a simple truth—every life is uniquely designed and driven by purpose. This insight led him to take up writing as a part-time passion. With a style that blends subtle humor and deep spiritual reasoning, he begins his literary journey with “*When It’s Meant To Be.*”

Born in Delhi and raised in a small town in Uttar Pradesh, he currently lives in Chandigarh.

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Above the clouds, the heavens stirred,
Parvati's voice through silence slurred.
“For Nalini, Swami, how long must she cry?
Her prayers climb, yet answers pass by.”

Shiva smiled, calm as the flowing stream,
“Patience, Devi, is the soul's true theme.
Her tears shape paths she cannot yet see,
Each choice a step to who she will be.”

Each dream you hold, each whispered plea,
Each soul who walks your path to see—
A sign from Parvati, tender, near,
A gentle murmur: **“I am here.”**

I, Shiva, watch, I let you grow,
Through storms unseen, through ebb and flow.
**This book found you—by choice, by fate,
To show how your life and this tale relate.**

**By journey's end, every doubt will fade,
Chains of despair will break, unafraid.**

**Your spirit will rise, your wings take flight,
And soar beyond the dark into light.**

Three Months Ago! | When a prayer brought a storm in Mount Kailash!!

Residential Society of Supreme Gods – Above & Beyond the Clouds!

The day at Mount Kailash began as calmly as ever. The divine corridors shimmered in quiet peace; until Parvati Ji came storming through. Her usually serene face was clouded with worry, her steps quick and charged with emotion as she had someone on her mind; a devotee.

But not just any devotee. Its Nalini.!

Nalini's prayers had reached every corner of the heavens; her devotion echoed in every aarti, every whispered plea. Yet, her pain lingered, and that...that stirred the mother in Goddess.

Few moments back, the sky was soft. The winds were still as if calm sea. The kind of stillness that holds breath, until something breaks it.

And break it did!

She pushed open the divine chamber doors, her voice trembling as it cut through the calm.

Parvati Ji (with moist eyes and a sharp tone), "Swami what is this? How much more do you want from Nalini? She breathes your name, she cries your name... and still, you? The one who runs this universe, can't help her with one small wish? Really?"

Lord Shiva, sitting in his meditative state, opened his eyes slowly. He smiled gently because he knew this angry voice already. It was familiar. He had heard everything - the weight in

her steps, the pause in her breath, the pain wrapped in each words Goddess Parvati spelled.

Parvati Ji stood in front of him, eyes glossy, voice shaking ... but strong.

She continued, "Her (Nalini) tears fall with chants on her lips. Not once has she asked you "why" life keeps hurting her. Not once has she turned away. And yet... you? You stay still? Why? For how long?"

Lord began softly, "I know Nalini. Every time she cries, I am there. Every time her heart breaks, I hold the pieces, even when she doesn't realize it. But there's something you see only from the heart. Let me show you what I see from the soul."

Parvati Ji crossed her arms, pain still pulsing through her.

"Show me, then. Because from here, it looks like suffering with no reason."

Lord Shiva nodded, not in disagreement, but in understanding.

"You know how the river flows? It doesn't choose its path. It follows the land. The stones that cut it only deepen its song. And Nalini ... she is like that river. Carving through sorrow, shaping something deeper than even she knows."

Parvati (half turning away, arms crossed), "Then why's it taking forever? Don't tell me it's part of your grand master plan again!"

Shiva (with smile), "Well... yes, sort of. See, this whole world runs on timing. Even a baby takes nine months, right? Everything takes its time. A person's entry or exit, joy or sorrow, they all have a sequence. I can't just override it because someone's suffering. That suffering sometimes... has purpose. Plus, there is purpose of everyone in each other's lives. You can

say, each person has a certain role to play while they live with each other.”

Parvati Ji, “But Swami, why do you need people to be part of each other’s journey? Can’t you just... I don’t know... fix it from up here?”

Shiva (gently), “Because they live with each other. This world is made for experience such as pain, delight, growth, love and more. If I handed out wisdom at birth, there’d be no need for mothers, fathers, friends, heartbreaks, or hugs. The journey is what shapes the soul.”

Parvati Ji sighed, her eyes softening but still emotional.

“But still... some lives are so hard. From childhood to old age, always struggling. It’s like... the more someone prays, the more you test them.”

Shiva (nodding softly), “Not a test, Devi... a transformation. Some of them... are my special ones. I parent them directly. And I don’t raise them with ease - I raise them with strength.

I isolate them... to teach the value of presence.

I let them break... to teach them how to build themselves.

I give them delay so they can discover endurance.

I give them storms so they can find their anchor.

And sometimes, I end relationships... not to punish, but to protect. Because I know who belongs where.”

Parvati looked away, her voice a whisper now. “But she’s tired, Swami. She’s so tired.”

Shiva stood then, and stepped toward her - “I know. I see it. She hides it from the world, but not from me. Every time she smiles when she wants to weep, I am there. Every time she lets go when she wants to hold on, I hold her hand in the unseen.”

“But why not just... help her now?” Parvati ji asked. “She’s done everything right. She’s waited, she’s prayed, she’s grown. Doesn’t she deserve peace?”

“She does,” Shiva said. “And she will have it. But not the kind she’s praying for. Something deeper. Right now, she’s asking from her wounds. One day, she will ask from her wisdom. And when she does, and when she no longer begs the past to return, or demands answers too early - I will give her not what she “wants”, but what her soul has “earned”.

Parvati Ji, “Ughh... your logic is so hard to follow, Swami! I’m done. I’m not arguing anymore!” She turned and stomped out, the sound of her steps echoing dramatically down the divine corridor.

Shiva just smiled quietly, watching her leave. He knew she’d be back again - the next time Nalini or any other Bhakt cried out in pain. Because mother Goddess heart is pure. Always fighting, always loving, always asking why - just like any of us do, when life feels unfair.

But Shiva...He listens. And always... always has a plan.

Somewhere below on earth, Nalini lit a diya again.

She didn’t know it, but her name had just been spoken in the heavens. By the mother who felt her pain...And the God who was shaping her soul.

Present Day | A Wedding

Without Chaos? No way!

Chintu fell on the buffet table.

A wedding without hyperactive kids ruining and messing around? Impossible.

Chintu, the six-year-old cousin with the energy of ten monkeys and the confidence of a stuntman, had been attempting increasingly dangerous jumps for the past hour. This time, he decided to leap from a three-feet-away table onto a bean bag, screaming,

“Incommiiiiiiiiingggg...!”

And... he missed.

He landed chest-first into a giant plate of biryani. Rice flew like blessings thrown by accident.

At the far end of the room, Bua ji let out a legendary scream, “Chintuuuuuu...!!”. A sound so sharp that even Chacha ji swung and sat down abruptly, claiming the ground moved under him. He swore twice that the floor moved beneath him.

The poor chef, already on edge, slammed his ladle down for the seventh time.

“Enough... That’s it! Whose kangaroo kid is this? He’s been jumping on food for two hours! Tie him up or pay my dues - I’m leaving!”

Upstairs, the war for beds had escalated to the point where one uncle was guarding a mattress like it was national treasure.

Downstairs, two guests were in a full-blown debate over whether the rasgullas were smaller than they had been at Divya's engagement. One aunt even held a rasgulla against her index finger lines like an official measurement scale.

At the mandap, chaos had its own rhythm. The priest's teenage assistant dropped the sacred coconut into the Havan fire because he was too distracted staring at Gupta Aunty, who was definitely fifty, definitely & loving it.

And in the middle of all the storm, there stood - Nalini Desai!! Pen in one hand, diary in the other, trying desperately to keep track of everything that was going wrong so she could fix it.

Nalini, Ms. Perfectionist, was determined that nothing feel incomplete at the wedding of the most important person in her life; her younger sister Divya (aka Dia).

Dia: sister, best friend, fashion advisor, decision-maker, keeper of secrets.

Dia, glowed in a red bridal lehenga, like she'd stepped out of a dream: diamonds shimmered every time she moved. A rare beautiful moment of wedding.

Just a few steps away, their mother sat on a plastic chair, red-eyed and smiling weakly while dabbing her tears with the corner of her pallu. The waiter had already made three sympathy trips with water and tissue because even he couldn't handle so much dramatic crying.

"Maaa..." Nalini knelt beside her. "Can we save the emotional sobbing for the bidaai, please? Right now your moaning seems louder than the DJ's dhol."

"I'm just emotional, beta... Dia is looking like a doll. I can't control myself," her mother sniffled.

As if that emotional distress had been sensed by the universe.

(Wait...what...? Emotional distress, without Bua ji? No way...)

Here she comes: Bua ji...having heard emotional distress, appeared from behind the pillar as if she had been there all the time (like a villain summoned from thin air).

“Hai hai, Nalini beta,” Bua ji said, fanning herself with a wedding card. “Still no decision about that boy from Ghaziabad? Bakery owner, two flats on the roadside, said yes seeing your photos only!”

Nalini closed her eyes for a second and whispered to herself *Not again*.

“Don’t be so choosy, bete,” Bua ji continued dramatically. “Your train might leave the station before you even reach the platform.”

“Then maybe I’m meant to fly, not take the train,” Nalini replied, smiling with practiced grace.

(It was a perfect line...but even as she said it, something inside her tightened. The smile didn’t reach her eyes.)

Across the mandap, Dia caught her gaze and mouthed, “Don’t kill her. Please.”

But Bua ji... wasn’t done yet.

“Your sister is five years younger and getting married before you,” she added loudly, providing nearby aunties premium gossip - they pretended not to hear.

“Career is fine, beta, but what’s the use of success if you eat alone every night?”

Nalini’s jaw stiffened. Even her mother looked away, not entirely disagreeing - and that !

That hurt far more than Bua ji’s words.

Nalini stood up quietly as she had vowed no arguments today. Not at the wedding...Dia's wedding.

Trying best not to respond or react, she turned and walked away. The murmurs faded behind her as she stepped outside into the cool night air and headed toward the decorated garden.

She inhaled deeply.

Held it.

Let it settle in her chest.

She wouldn't break. She wouldn't cry. Not today.

A loud crash echoed from the hall - probably Chintu again, hopefully not on the utensils this time.

"Let them say what they want..." she whispered to herself. "Breathe... breathe. You are strong...A strong Nalini...breath..."

But as Dia's laughter floated out from inside the tent and the wedding drums restarted, something in Nalini shifted, the soft painful loosening of a thread pulled too tight for too long i.e., Dia would be gone soon. The house would feel emptier.

Her own questions - about life, about love, about everything she tried not to think about, would no longer stay quiet.

She forced another deep breath closing her eyes, letting the chilly night air hit her face, trying to restore peace in her...but not long enough. As the time has come. Time - for her story of life to begin. Time - that will probably answer all her unasked question which kept her awaken at nights. Time which would not only shake but test...

Wedding in Progress: DND Activated

(But universe – calls!)

Just as Nalini took another slow, steady breath in the garden and could whisper one last time, “Finally... some peace,” the universe having sensed she was almost stable decided to intervene.

As her phone buzzed so violently in her hand that she nearly dropped it into the flowerbed.

Nalini opened one eye. The screen glowed like a curse:

“Prakash D / Mngr Calling...”

She stared at it in disbelief. “Aah...common... not now. Atleast *not today.*”

But the universe...had clearly taken the day off. Her boss, however, had not.

She pasted on the most painfully polite “I-love-my-job” smile and answered.

“Hellooo Sir...”

Prakash without bothering to greet, “NALINI! Urgent situation.”

(Of course there was.)

“Our international partners’ flight landed early. You need to be at the hotel ASAP. Welcome them, walk them through the presentation, full briefing. Schedule is tight...and takeover”

Nalini blinked. Slowly. Then looked around.

Behind her, the wedding drums boomed. The mandap lights flickered. She could smell marigolds and burnt coconut.

“Ooh...I am sorry....wait....what...Sir... my sister is sitting in the mandap *right now*. Like for real. Holding the flowers & rice in palm and the priest is warming up his shlokas. Even the videographer is on his toes.”

“That’s sweet,” Prakash replied, completely unaffected. “Watch the video later and do send me the highlights. But we really need you. Client prefers dealing with you, as you bring challenging insights.”

Nalini massaged her forehead. “Sirrr Please !! I’m wearing a silk saree so heavy it has its own gravitational pull. My earrings are one sneeze away from tearing my ears. And my heels - one is literally shorter than the other. I’m limping glamorously.”

“It’s India, Nalini. People attend meetings in wedding outfits all the time. Add sneakers with saree. Its a trend now. I am sure client will love it. Don’t be late.”

She inhaled sharply. “Sir... please. Not today. Can I join early morning? Post-bidaai? I’ll come before any of you even wake up.”

(A moment of brief pause took place...as if both couldn’t think of words to say)

Then Prakash’s voice softened in that manipulative HR-approved tone.

“Nalini... it’s important. For the team. For the company. Consider it a personal favor. Can you do this? Please?”

(Ah-ha. *The word* – “please”. Her kryptonite.)

Nalini felt the guilt hit her exactly where it always did: the tiny part of her brain that refused to let anyone down, even if it meant disappointing herself.

"Sir..." She sighed. Deeply. "Alright. I'll... try. No promises."

"Good girl. Proud of you." And he hung up!

Nalini stared at phone's screen as if it had just ended her entire bloodline. The display dimmed slowly, like even the phone was ashamed.

She took a breath, squared her shoulders, and walked back inside.

Her mother was still dabbing tears. Dia was practicing the shy-bride-half-smile. The dhol was still drowning out half the guests' gossip. Everything was loud, chaotic, emotional and perfect.

Nalini felt like the only glitch in the program.

She approached her mother, heart thudding.

"Maa... I have to go."

Her mother blinked. "Go? Beta where? Restroom? I told you not to eat that chutney, your stomach is weak"

"Maa! Not restroom. To work."

The wail that escaped her mother could've put mythological queens to shame.

(Distress. Here she comes..!)

As if summoned by distress radar, Bua ji swooped in from behind a pillar once again.

"Hey Ram! Work? On your sister's wedding? This girl only knows office-office-office. At least think what Dia will say!"

Dia close enough to hear, looked up sharply.

For a moment, Nalini braced for judgement. Disappointment. Maybe tears.

Instead, Dia met her eyes. No words. Just a small, steady nod, as if saying..

Go. It's okay. I understand. Win...and... Come back fast.

And that was all Nalini needed to not collapse right there.

With renewed purpose, she fixed her pallu like a warrior adjusting armor. Her bangles clinked, her eyebrow twitched, and a spark lit behind her eyes.

She leaned toward Dia, whispering, "Forgive me. I'll be quick. Thank you. You're the best human in existence."

Dia smirked. "Just don't trip in that saree."

Nalini exhaled a laugh - small, shaky, but real. Then she turned toward the exit of hall.

What she didn't know was that each step she took wasn't just leading her toward a hotel lobby.

It was pulling her away from the life she had known & toward something unexpected, irreversible, and entirely her own.

Saree Struggles & Presentation Strikes Back

Hotel ZMX Lobby, 1:00 AM

The glass door slid open with a tired whoosh as Nalini walked into the lobby, partly wedding guest, partly corporate hostage.

The receptionist blinked once.

Then twice.

Then a full, stunned third time.

Because standing before her was: a woman in a heavy silk saree, matching bridal-style jewelry, a laptop bag, an office ID card, and spotless white sneakers.

Nalini looked like someone who had been dragged out of a wedding and pushed into a board meeting by fate itself.

Before the receptionist could find words, a young junior executive came sprinting toward her, breathing like he had just escaped from a treadmill set on “mountain-climb mode.”

“Ma’am....thank you...thank you for coming!!,” he panted. “They just arrived and requested a quick meeting. We have fifteen minutes. Would you like to... uh... *freshen up*? Or... change... anything?”

Nalini simply looked at him.

Not angrily.

Not rudely.

Just... the tired, silent stare of a woman who had fought a family, a boss, a wedding crowd, and traffic red light...all in saree...just to be here.

The boy swallowed hard. "Cool. Okay, ma'am. I'll... make other arrangements. See you. Somewhere. I don't know where. Bye."

He practically ran away sideways.

30 Minutes Later

The receptionist approached her carefully, as if Nalini might burst into flames at any moment.

"Ma'am... the Business Conference Room is ready. You may go in."

Nalini nodded, adjusted her pallu, and walked in.

1:30 AM – Conference Room

The room was cold, polished, and painfully corporate.

Nalini set up everything: laptop open, files arranged, projector connected, water bottles aligned like soldiers.

Despite the late hour, she looked well composed, as someone could look wearing diamonds, sneakers, and four kilograms of silk.

The door suddenly swung open. The international business partner walked in...tall, sharp, impeccably dressed in a charcoal suit.

A soft accent, strong jawline, clear focus.

He paused.

His eyes trailed from Nalini's saree, to her jewelry, to her sneakers. "Oh," he said lightly, "Nalini, right? Are we at the wrong kind of reception?"

Nalini smiled with the confidence of someone who had reached peak exhaustion. "Welcome to India, Mr. Clare. We do business with fire rituals and floral jewelry."

He laughed. "Okay, that's... impressive. Unexpected, but impressive."

Prakash entered next - half-running, half-choking on his own stress. His tie hung from one hand like a dead snake.

"Nalini! You made it! And in... saree?"

"Yes, sir. Straight from mandap to corporate. Multi-tasking in layers."

The room laughed.

Prakash looked proud for a second, like he had invented her.

Few minutes passed. Lights dimmed. The projector flickered on.

Nalini took her seat at the head of the table, flash drive in one hand, hot coffee in the other. Her bangles jingled softly with every move, unintentionally adding background music to her presentation.

Robert (or "Rob" as he preferred to be called) watched her with a curious expression.

"You seemed as if walked in like a hurricane," he said, leaning forward. "In silk. That's mythical."

Nalini grinned. "Mythology has nothing on Indian weddings. Tonight someone fainted at the buffet, someone's shoe got stolen, and the priest's assistant nearly ran away with my aunt."

Rob laughed. "Sounds like reality TV. I should invest."

"Oh, absolutely," Nalini nodded. "Top TRP. Zero productivity."

The room chuckled.

Then the slide changed.

“Proposed Expansion Strategy – India Operations.”

The atmosphere shifted instantly. Lightness dissolved. The air turned business-cold.

Nalini straightened. Rob crossed his arms, expression turning analytical.

The Debate (or the war begins)

After a few slides, Rob spoke, voice low and firm. “This assumes a 38% response in three months. That’s... very ambitious.”

Nalini pointed at the chart. “Calculated. Tier-2 regions, adaptive pricing. Historical trend spikes support it.”

Rob frowned. “Your data’s solid. But you’re assuming distribution partners will cooperate. They never cooperate that easily. I’ve worked across five countries. Nothing flows this smoothly.”

Nalini’s tone sharpened just slightly.

“I’ve worked in these towns. I know the language, politics, and people. Respectfully, international experience doesn’t equal local intuition.”

(A few executives exchanged looks.)

Rob’s jaw tightened.

“Respectfully, intuition doesn’t replace risk mitigation. If this goes wrong, we lose six months and double the recovery.”

Nalini leaned forward.

“And if we delay, we lose first-mover advantage. You said you wanted quick expansion. This is quick.”

Rob's voice dropped lower.

“Speed isn't strategy. It's stress wearing a nice suit.”

Nalini's tone hardened.

“Playing safe is losing before starting.”

Rob, “Or it's avoiding unnecessary collapse.”

Nalini, “Or it's giving the competition a head start.”

The temperature of the room dropped.

Everyone sat still, like watching a silent thunderstorm.

(Nalini stood slowly, walked toward the screen.)

“This isn't risk appetite. This is foresight. India doesn't react. India evolves. If you want safe, Switzerland is great. If you want scale, you take calculated risks. And this is one.”

(Rob tapped the table once.)

“And if it backfires? Whose name is on the mess?”

Nalini didn't blink.

“Mine.”

A long pause.

The power dynamic shifted.

Rob finally nodded.

“Bold move,” he said.

“It has to be,” Nalini replied. “I left my sister's wedding mandap for this meeting. Safe isn't an option.”

(Something softened in his eyes.)

"Alright," he said quietly. "Let's go bold. Weekly reviews. Strict reporting. Anything goes wrong - we slow down. Deal?"

"Deal.!"

"You present like a diplomat, argue like a lawyer, and think like a founder," he said. "Interesting combination."

"Thank you."

Rob turned to his associates, whispering intensely. A few frowned, a few nodded reluctantly.

After a few minutes, he cleared his throat.

"One last thing, Ms. Nalini. This proposal is bold. Impressive, but bold. We want to support it...fully. So we'll be adding someone to your team."

Nalini's eyes narrowed, but she stayed silent.

Rob continued, calm and firm.

"Senior Risk Advisor. Co-leading execution with you."

She blinked once.

Twice.

"And what will he be doing while I... execute the plan I designed?"

"Ensuring we don't crash mid-flight. He's worked with me globally. Sharp guy."

Nalini exhaled through her nose.

"So... a babysitter."

"A partner," Rob corrected. "Someone who aligns with how I work. Someone who'll keep the project clean."

"I'm not a risk," she said quietly. "I'm the reason this proposal exists."

“And that’s exactly why I’m protecting the investment,” he replied.

She sat back down slowly, shoulders tight.

“Fine. When do I meet him?”

Rob smiled.

“Tomorrow morning. Office. His name is Sidhartha R. M. Iyer.”

Nalini nodded. “Perfect.”

Rob stood, gathering his files, and said “And Nalini”

She looked up.

“Give your sister our best wishes.”

He left the room the same way he entered...confident, composed, leaving a trail of tension behind. Tension that would give an anxiety to any tough soul.

The new guy meets | Fury Vs Frost

Next morning. Office. 9:12 a.m.

(Exact time noted because everyone remembered it later.)

The office was buzzing. Not productive-buzzing. Nervous-buzzing. The kind where keyboards sound louder, coffee tastes bitter, and people suddenly remember important emails they *must* send from very far away.

And then Nalini walked in. The air changed when she stepped in. Not dramatically. Not loudly.

It *tightened*...like the room had inhaled and forgotten how to breathe.

White shirt. Perfectly pressed. Black trousers sharp enough to emotionally wound someone. Hair pulled back. Face calm...too calm...dangerously calm. The kind of calm that meant *someone* was going to suffer.

Everyone instantly became alert of her presence, and they moved out of her way like she was Moses and the floor was about to split. Whispers followed her like background music.

“She didn’t sleep.”

“She’s running on pure rage.”

“God save the new guy.”

And....Nalini heard everything.

She always did.

She said nothing. (Which was worse.)

Her assistant...poor thing...walked in next, wearing a fake smile that screamed *I want to be invisible*.

“M-Ma’am... someone named Sidharth is here.”

Nalini’s jaw tightened. Just a twitch. Blink and you’d miss it.

She nodded once.

(Universal corporate signal for: send the victim in.)

The door swung opened...and in walked him.

A tall, annoyingly composed man entered, moving with an almost unbothered grace. His sleeves were rolled up precisely to the forearms, his hair impeccably styled – like a shampoo ad, as if he carried his own personal, perfectly calibrated wind system.

“Good morning, Ms. Nalini Desai,” he said, his voice a warm, inviting baritone that seemed out of place in the frigid atmosphere. A kind of warm voice...friendly...but entirely wrong for the temperature of the room.

Nalini offered no acknowledgment, her gaze fixed on a distant point beyond him.

She didn’t look at him.

He paused, a beat of expectation hanging in the air for an invitation to sit ...which never came. After a few seconds, he gave a faint, almost subtle tug at his collar. “Thanks for asking...” he murmured, his eyes twinkling with a hint of mischief. And...without waiting for permission, he settled into the chair opposite her, his posture relaxed, yet alert. It wasn’t an act of disrespect, but an audacious display of self-assured confidence...which for sure... irritated her more than any outright challenge could have.

She still didn’t look at him.

Didn't need to.

Because she could *feel* his presence, his each movement.

"Beautiful office," he said casually to break the silence.

"Whoever designed it deserves a raise."

"I designed it," Nalini replied, her voice flat, devoid of inflection.

"Fantastic," he smiled, a slow, genuine curve of his lips. "I'll personally recommend the raise."

Her nostrils flared, a tiny, almost undetected tremor of fury.

"So," Nalini began, her voice now a honed blade, "you're the... specialist Robert is forcing onto my project."

He paused, letting the word 'forcing' hang in the air, then a slow smile spread across his face. "'Joining' sounds nicer than 'forcing,' but I'll accept both." She stared at him, her gaze as cold and unforgiving as a software update she desperately wished she could decline.

"I went through your proposal," he said, sliding open a sleek folder with a soft rustle.

"Obviously," she retorted, a sneer playing on her lips.

"It's brilliant," he said, his tone genuinely admiring.

Nalini blinked. A flicker of mild pleasure sparked within her, quickly extinguished and expertly hidden behind her impassive mask.

Then he added, his voice dropping slightly, "Brilliant like a rocket. Powerful. Impressive. And if mishandled... explosive."

Her fingers tightened on the polished table, the knuckles whitening under the strain.

"Are you calling my strategy dangerous?" she demanded, the words clipped and sharp.

"No," he said gently, his eyes holding hers. "I'm calling it bold. And bold things need airbags."

"I don't need airbags," she said, her voice a frigid whisper. "I need people who follow my lead."

Sidharth nodded, a calm, unwavering gesture. "Absolutely. I follow smart leaders."

"That wasn't a compliment," she snapped, her patience wearing thin.

"That wasn't sarcasm," he replied, his expression one of almost innocent sincerity.

She narrowed her eyes, a silent challenge in their depths.

He continued flipping through the pages of the proposal with an infuriating casualness. "I marked my concerns in blue pen," he said, his gaze still on the document. "Red would look too aggressive for a first meeting."

"Show me."

He turned the pages, revealing precisely two small, neat blue marks.

"That's it?" she asked, a flicker of disbelief in her tone.

"Yep."

She frowned, her brow furrowing in confusion. "So what now? You'll fix my strategy?"

"No," he said softly, finally meeting her gaze. "I'll question it until you fix it yourself. Much easier."

Nalini almost choked on her own breath, a gasp catching in her throat.

“Let’s be very clear,” she leaned forward, her voice a low, dangerous growl. “You are here to assist me, not direct me.”

He matched her lean, his posture as calm and unruffled as a saint in a tempest. “Perfect. And you are here to lead the project, not self-destruct with it.”

Nalini’s eyes blazed. “This 38% growth is achievable.”

Sidharth’s smile was disarmingly gentle. “So is climbing Everest. If you ignore the weather.”

“I know these markets better than anyone,” she countered, her voice laced with venom.

“Which is precisely why Robert sent me — to keep up with you.” He offered a small, almost imperceptible shrug.

She blinked, momentarily disarmed by his unwavering calm.

He smiled again, a hint of genuine warmth in his eyes. “You think you can handle my speed?” she challenged, her voice dripping with disdain.

“Handle it?” he echoed, a soft chuckle escaping him. “I’m wearing metaphorical seatbelts.”

“Seatbelts won’t save you,” she muttered, the words barely audible.

“They might save *us*,” he corrected politely, his gaze steady.

She stood abruptly, the sharp scrape of her chair against the floor echoing in the sudden silence. “Let me tell you something, Sidharth. I don’t need a babysitter.”

He replied instantly, without missing a beat, “Great. Because I don’t babysit.”

He paused, then added, his infuriating half-smile returning, “I just stop talented people from setting the house on fire.”

The room froze, the air thick with unspoken tension. Nalini's eye twitched, a tiny, involuntary spasm.

"Why exactly did Robert choose you?" she demanded, her voice tight with suppressed fury.

"Oh," he said casually, as if discussing the weather, "because I don't get intimidated easily."

She crossed her arms, her posture rigid. "You should."

He tilted his head, a thoughtful expression on his face. "Should I be scared of you because you're brilliant or because you're sleep-deprived?"

Nalini actually sputtered, a sound of pure indignation escaping her. "I...I...what...that's not...."

He raised a hand politely, cutting her off. "Don't answer. I enjoy the mystery."

He closed the file with a soft snap, his tone suddenly serious, the lightness vanishing. "Nalini," he said softly, his gaze piercing, "your idea is good. Bold. Intelligent. But the execution will be hell. I'm not here to block you. I'm here to make sure you don't collapse halfway."

She inhaled... slowly, deliberately, trying to regain her composure. "I don't collapse," she stated, her voice regaining its steel.

He smiled. "Noted. I'll still carry water."

That infuriatingly gentle statement irritated her more.

"Whether you like me or not doesn't affect the work," he said, his voice a low, steady current. "But trusting my competence will make your life easier."

"And why should I trust you?" she challenged, her eyes narrowed to slits.

Sidharth smiled – a calm, confident, annoyingly charming smile that promised both competence and trouble. “Because I’m very, very good at what I do.”

She froze, caught in the web of his unwavering self-assurance.

He stood, gathering his folder. “Nice meeting you!” he said, his voice bright, then walked out effortlessly, leaving Nalini standing there, a tempest of fury, a tremor of reluctant admiration, and an absolute refusal to admit either.

After he leaves.

(Why does the room feel louder now?)

Nalini doesn’t sit. She can’t. Sitting would mean stopping and stopping would mean *thinking* and she is already thinking too much. She just stands there, staring at the door like it did something wrong. Like it *allowed* him to leave.

Gone.

Of course he’s gone.

Her jaw hurts. Actually hurts. When did she start clenching it like this? She exhales hard, controlled, the way she does before difficult meetings. Except the meeting is over. Except it doesn’t feel over.

Idiot.

Not sure who that’s for.

Him?

Her?

Her mind betrays her instantly. Rewinds. Plays it again. Slower this time. Crueler. The way he sat without asking. The way he smiled—easy, like it cost him nothing. The way he didn’t blink when she pushed.

That part sticks.

He didn't blink.

People always blink. They shrink a little. Explain themselves. Apologize. He didn't. He just stayed there. Solid. Like he belonged.

Who does that?

She moves to the window. Crosses her arms. Uncrosses them. Crosses them again. The glass is cold. Good. Something to feel.

This is irritation, she tells herself.

This is anger.

Anger is safe. Anger makes sense. Anger doesn't ask questions.

Anything else does.

And yet—

“I'll still carry water.”

Why does that sound louder now? Why does it sit in her chest like something unfinished? It wasn't sarcastic. It wasn't clever. It wasn't even dramatic.

It was steady.

She hates steady.

Steady means staying. Steady means not leaving when it gets hard.

Her mind wanders (no, stop). She paces once. Twice. The room feels smaller. She built herself alone. Brick by brick. No shortcuts. No hands pulling her up. She didn't need help then. She doesn't need it now.

She doesn't need airbags.

She doesn't need anyone.

She *definitely* doesn't need a man who challenges her without raising his voice.

And yet—

He saw her.

Not the designation.

Not the reputation.

Not the armor.

Her.

That thought lands quietly. Too quietly. Like something slipping into place without permission.

She straightens the file he touched. Moves it back an inch. Then another. Why does that matter? It shouldn't. It really shouldn't.

Focus.

Work. Deadlines. Numbers. Things that behave.

But something is wrong. Not broken. Just... shifted. Like furniture moved in the dark. Like muscle memory failing for a second.

Nalini Desai doesn't spiral. She doesn't stand in empty rooms feeling things she can't label. She doesn't think about men who leave and take silence with them.

And yet here she is.

Standing. Alone. Heart beating too fast for no reason. Thinking about him. Five minutes later. Still.

She hates that most of all.

Because she knows...

(this is the dangerous part)

This wasn't just a meeting.

And she already doesn't like how much that thought refuses to leave...and that...that hurts.

Risk, Rage, and Reason - Boardroom War

War Room(aka conference room). 3:15 PM

(Sidharth's first meet)

The team huddled around the gleaming, beige conference table, a tableau of fear. Laptops glowed like anxious eyes, files lay scattered like discarded battle plans, and every face was a silent scream of, "Please God, let this meeting end without casualties." The air itself felt thick with unspoken tension - a calm before the storm.

Nalini entered first, a figure sculpted from ice and ambition. Tall, her posture a steel rod, her gaze sharp enough to cut, she moved with the chilling efficiency of a CEO who fires people for breathing too loudly. The room seemed to drop several degrees in her wake.

Two minutes later, Sidharth strolled in. His presence was a ripple of calm in the choppy waters. He moved with an almost unbothered grace, a steaming mug of coffee cradled in his hands, a faint, unbothered smile playing on his lips. He looked like a man arriving for a serene yoga retreat, not stepping onto a corporate battlefield.

A collective, silent breath rippled through the team. Eyes darted between the two, then back to their screens, fingers hovering over laptop keyboards. They instinctively tightened their metaphorical seatbelts, bracing for impact.

Nalini's voice, crisp and devoid of warmth, cut through the silence. "We'll start with Phase-1 rollout. I want all distribution partners onboard by the 15th."

Sidharth took a leisurely sip of his coffee, the rich aroma briefly perfuming the tense air. Then, he set the mug down with a soft click and said, his tone utterly cheerful, "Impossible."

The room collectively inhaled so sharply, it sounded like a gasp of surprise from a single, multi-lunged organism. Even the hum of the AC seemed to falter in protest.

Nalini's head whipped towards him, her eyes narrowing to dangerous slits. "I wasn't asking for opinions yet."

"Oh, I know," Sidharth replied, his smile widening innocently. "That was a fact, not an opinion."

Nalini blinked slowly, the deliberate movement charged with a simmering menace. "Explain."

He slid a single sheet of paper across the polished table. "Three partners have existing commitments, ironclad. Two are currently renegotiating margins, digging in their heels like stubborn mules. One is on an extended vacation in Bali, convinced Mercury's retrograde cycle is a valid business excuse. And the last one said, and I quote, 'Call after cricket season.'"

A ripple of stifled snorts and accidental giggles broke through the team's rigid composure. The sound died instantly, choked off by Nalini's lethal glare that swept across them like a scythe.

Nalini's voice dropped, a low, dangerous growl. "We **MUST** onboard them by the 15th. It's strategic."

Sidharth met her gaze, unflinching. "It's suicidal."

"We don't use that tone in front of the team," she snapped, her knuckles white where they gripped the table.

"Should I whisper it?" Sidharth asked, leaning forward slightly. "Because it's still suicidal."

Nalini slammed her file shut, the sharp crack echoing through the stunned silence.

The team flinched in unison, a human wave of startled motion, nearly dislocating shoulders in their collective recoil.

"Listen," she said, her voice taut as a drawn bowstring, "if we delay Phase-1, we lose momentum."

"And if we rush," Sidharth countered, his tone a smooth, unruffled counterpoint, "we lose partners. Permanently."

Nalini: "You're thinking too safe."

Sidharth: "You're thinking too fast."

Nalini: "You were hired as risk advisor. Advise. Don't block."

Sidharth: "I'm not blocking. I'm protecting your plan from becoming a tragic documentary, complete with a dramatic soundtrack and a voiceover lamenting poor execution."

A junior assistant, seated near the door, choked on a cough, desperately trying to mask a burst of suppressed laughter.

Nalini's frustration simmered, visible in the slight tremor of her jaw. "We **make** momentum. That's how we stay ahead. Why can't you understand this?"

Sidharth leaned back in his chair, folding his arms across his chest, a picture of calm defiance. "Because momentum without stability is just falling forward, Nalini. And eventually, you hit the ground."

The room died. The air grew thick, heavy with the weight of that statement.

One junior analyst, eyes wide, whispered to another, "Is this what flirting sounds like for smart people?"

Nalini's glare, sharp enough to cut glass, silenced not just the whisper but the entire floor, every nerve ending tingling with the force of her displeasure.

Sidharth, sensing a shift, softened his voice, a deliberate counterpoint to the tension. "Look, Nalini. You're brilliant. Your plan is strong. But you can't bend time because it's inconvenient for your launch schedule."

Nalini bristled. "I'm not bending time."

Sidharth's lips curved into a faint, knowing smile. "You're beating it with a stick."

She stood abruptly, her chair scraping harshly against the floor, the sound a jolt of static electricity through the room. "You think you know the Indian market better than me?"

"No," he said gently, his gaze unwavering. "I think you know it emotionally, with all its passionate highs and frustrating lows. I know it mathematically, with its data points and predictable patterns. Together, we might actually survive it."

Silence stretched, thick and suffocating. Nalini's team looked at her, then at Sidharth, then back at her, their expressions a mix of awe and terror. She was a bomb, ticking steadily, and Sidharth had just dared to poke it.

Nalini's voice was barely a whisper, laced with a dangerous edge. "Why are you even here? To second-guess me?"

"No," Sidharth replied, his voice still gentle, disarmingly so. "To prevent you from burning out while pretending you're not human, Nalini. To be the anchor when your ambition threatens to pull you adrift."

She opened her mouth, a sharp retort already forming on her tongue, but nothing came out. The words withered, unspoken.

Because he wasn't wrong, and that truth, stark and undeniable, irritated her more than anything else he'd said.

Sidharth's expression softened further, a genuine warmth entering his eyes. "With the right timelines," he said, "your strategy will not just fly, it will soar. But if we rush it, it'll crash and burn. And you know it, deep down."

Nalini clenched her jaw, her gaze fixed on a distant point beyond the wall. "And if we wait, we lose advantage."

He nodded, acknowledging her valid concern. "Then we find a compromise."

"What compromise?" Her voice was still tight, but a flicker of curiosity, however grudging, was now visible in her eyes.

He smiled, a quiet, confident curve of his lips. "You get your momentum. I get my stability. And the team," he gestured to the wide-eyed, silent observers, "doesn't have a collective heart attack."

The team nodded vigorously, a synchronized bobblehead display of agreement, their relief almost palpable.

She straightened, her shoulders still rigid, but a subtle shift had occurred. "Fine. I'll consider your timelines, Sidharth. But I'm not slowing down."

Sidharth's smile broadened. "Perfect. And I'm not letting you speed into stupidity."

Nalini's eye twitched, a tiny, almost imperceptible tremor. "You..."

He raised a hand politely, cutting her off. "Relax. That was affectionate stupidity."

The team struggled, their faces contorting in a valiant effort to prevent an explosion of laughter.

Nalini's gaze lingered on him for a beat too long, a silent challenge passing between them. "We'll reconvene on this. Bring better suggestions."

Sidharth picked up his coffee mug, a picture of serene victory. "I'll bring coffee too."

"I don't drink coffee," she stated flatly.

Sidharth's smile was pure mischief. "No, the coffee is for me. You, Nalini, need sleep."

Her glare could've melted steel, an inferno of frustrated fury. He remained peacefully unbothered, sipping his coffee, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

The spill on keyboard | Clumsy finger like my father say

Next Day, 10:05 A.M.

(Sid to be introduced on Production Floor.)

Nalini entered her workspace the way she entered most things in life - like a storm disguised as a well-organized file, with purpose and precision. With a mental checklist that had already ticked off three tasks before her heels even touched the central aisle. She carried herself the way a conductor steps onto a stage: ready to arrange every movement, every breath, every detail.

The production floor glowed under the cool tone of LED panels, the kind she personally approved because warm lighting made people too comfortable, too relaxed – which somewhere was not liked by her since she believed people falling into comfort zone become less unproductive. The desks sat in faultless straight rows, evenly spaced, their surfaces tidy enough to satisfy her exacting standards. Color-coded trays lined each workstation: blue for pending, green for review, red strictly for escalations. Her system. Her order. Her fortress.

Just a usual day...everyone had their eyes on screens, fingers dancing across keyboards with the careful urgency of people who knew that in this division, performance wasn't just rewarded - it was survival. Silence hung in the air, broken only by clicking and the occasional rustle of paper.

The atmosphere.....usually was tight, controlled, almost sterile.

Just how she liked it.

Nalini(standing at the corner of a bay) inhaled as if office smell gave her peace...and then she heard the footsteps.

Slow. Unhurried.Unbothered.Just relaxed.

The kind of footsteps belonging to someone who had never feared consequences a day in his life.

She didn't need to look to know who it was.

Sidharth Iyer strolled in like this was a brunch buffet and not the one floor in the company known for eating stress for breakfast. His navy-blue suit, tailored to an irritating degree - looked effortlessly expensive. His hair - annoyingly perfect. And the smile he wore... that smile was the kind of reckless, easy charm that made people drop their guard.

He carried two cups of coffee like they were peace flags in a battlefield.

He stopped in front of her and extended one cup toward her. "Peace offering. Or bribe," he said smoothly. "Whichever keeps me alive"

Nalini...she didn't even blink. She stared at the cup as though it was an insect she refused to acknowledge. "I don't take caffeine before 11 a.m. And you're late."

He blinked once....twice.... seemingly delighted by her refusal. "Good to know," he said, taking a sip from both cups with exaggerated satisfaction. "I'll plan my crimes better next time.."

(Yet, he had the audacity to wink. Like he actually winked.)

Her jaw clenched so subtly that only someone studying her could notice. She turned away and addressed the team.

"Everyone," she announced crisply, "this is Siddharth Iyer. He'll be assisting our division....Temporarily." Temporarily –

as if extra stress on it. The last word carried the weight of a threat.

Sid lifted a hand in a small wave. “Hi everyone. I specialize in absorbing chaos, rearranging chaos, and—when absolutely necessary—pretending chaos is under control. Also, I bring snacks on Fridays. The edible kind.”

A short burst of laughter rippled across the floor. An unusual sight !!

Nalini's eyebrows twitched. She hadn't heard casual laughter on this floor in months. That wasn't good. Laughter let people relax. And relaxed people made mistakes.

She watched him with a tightening chest as he made his rounds. In under ten minutes, he'd memorized everyone's names. He complimented Rajni's data model with the confidence of someone who actually understood it. He chatted with Aditya about last night's cricket match, throwing in stats with surprising accuracy. He teased Pooja gently—too gently—about owning three identical neon highlighters.

And somehow, miraculously, the atmosphere around him softened. People smiled while coding, while analyzing reports, while sipping their coffee. Productivity didn't dip. If anything, the air felt lighter, more energetic.

And that....Nalini hated it.

A Few Hours Later

She caught him alone after lunch break, leaning against the edge of the conference table as if he owned the place.

She walked up to him with a purposeful stride.

"I don't know what you're trying to do," she said, arms crossed, voice sharpened. "But this is a focused environment. My team doesn't need a stand-up comedian distracting them."

Sid raised an eyebrow, placing a dramatic hand on his chest. "Stand-up comedian? I'm wounded. I was going for charming consultant with uplifting personality."

Her expression remained unmoved. "Stay within your limits, Iyer. This team operates on discipline."

"And fear," he corrected lightly. "Mostly fear. Very premium, high-quality fear. You've built quite the atmosphere."

Her nostrils flared. "Don't trivialize my management."

"I wouldn't dream of it." His voice softened. "But maybe they could breathe a little without the ceiling collapsing."

She glared. It was the kind of glare that made grown executives rewrite entire presentations.

He only smiled.

Infuriating.

She turned sharply and walked away, but even as she left, she heard it—the lightness in her team's voices, the faint traces of warmth Sid left like footprints across the room.

And something inside her tightened. A pinch. A small ache.

(Jealousy? No. Impossible. She didn't get jealous. She simply disliked losing control. That was it.)

And Then It Happened...

Near the last bay, a sharp clatter shattered the soft hum of productivity. Keys stopped clicking. Heads turned.

Roshni—quiet, hardworking, almost invisible Roshni—stood frozen as her teacup rolled off her desk and hit the floor, spreading a golden-brown stain across scattered papers. The spill bled into her keyboard, dripping down the edges like melting amber.

Her hands shook. She scrambled to gather tissues, her breath uneven, shoulders tight.

“It’s fine,” she whispered, voice cracking. “I’m fine. Always messing up. Stupid. Just stupid...”

Nalini winced internally—her rules were strict, not heartless. But she didn’t move. Couldn’t. Her feet stayed rooted, instinctively waiting, watching.

Sid, however, reacted instantly.

He crossed the distance between them in five long strides and crouched beside her, gently pulling the coffee-stained papers away.

“Hey,” he said softly. “Are you okay?”

Roshni’s lips curved upward in a brittle smile. “Yeah... yeah, it’s fine. Just clumsy fingers. And a useless brain...like my father always said...”

She laughed weakly, but her voice shook. Her eyes glistened.

Sid paused mid-motion.

The air as if changed—quieter, more fragile.

He sat on the corner of her desk, close enough to help but far enough not to overwhelm. His movements were unhurried, patient.

“You know,” he began quietly, “when I was thirteen, I broke my mom’s favorite lamp. It wasn’t valuable or anything—just important to her. She cried for two days. And I... I carried that

guilt for years. I kept thinking if I behaved better, studied harder, made fewer mistakes, maybe I could erase that one moment.”

Roshni blinked, confused. Then listening.

“Eventually,” he continued, wiping her desk gently, “I realized I wasn’t trying to fix the lamp. I was trying to fix how I saw myself. I wanted to stop being the kid who ruined something precious. But guilt doesn’t go away by perfection. It only grows.”

Her chin trembled. He noticed. He didn’t mention it.

“We all carry voices that weren’t ours to begin with,” he said softly. “Voices we grew up with. Voices that sounded like truth but were really just someone else’s frustration.” He paused, meeting her eyes. “You’re not clumsy. You’re tired. And you’re definitely not useless. You’re just repeating a voice you should’ve muted a long time ago.”

Roshni swallowed hard. “How... how do you stop believing it?”

“You start,” he replied gently, “by forgiving yourself for believing someone who never recognized your worth.”

Her eyes filled. She wasn’t crying—but she was close.

He didn’t push further. He simply sat there with her, letting the silence breathe.

Nalini watched from afar

Arms crossed.

Back straight.

Expression carefully neutral.

But inside—something shifted.

She hated emotional displays at work. Hated untidiness, unpredictability, vulnerability. They always led to messes. And messes took time to clean.

Yet... this moment didn't feel messy.

It felt human.

Necessary.

Sid didn't weaken the team's focus—he strengthened something she had forgotten to tend to: their morale. Their sense of belonging. Their humanity.

She hated how deeply it unsettled her.

Or maybe it unsettled her because she knew—deep down—she wasn't capable of doing what he just did. She could manage work. She could handle crises. But people? People and their fragile hearts? No. She'd sealed away that skill long ago.

Watching him now, something inside her—something old, something rusted—creaked.

It wasn't admiration. Not yet.

But it also wasn't dislike anymore.

As she turned to leave, she felt it clearly—a tiny, hairline crack in the walls she'd built around herself. A crack so small she could've ignored it.

She didn't acknowledge it.

But she felt it.

And it terrified her just enough to keep her thinking about Sid Iyer long after the floor returned to silence.

The Email Bomb | Secretly impressed

A Thursday that arrived peacefully and then decided to ruin lives.

If someone had asked her how her Thursday morning was going at 9:41 A.M., Nalini would have said something entirely unremarkable...

“Fine. Normal. Predictable.”

The kind of morning where the fluorescent office lights hummed lazily, keyboards clicked like bored insects, and the coffee machine made disturbing noises but miraculously survived.

But 9:42 A.M. changed everything.

With one sharp, intrusive notification sound...*that loud “TING!” specifically built by the universe to deliver bad news...*her inbox lit up.

She clicked it open casually.

And then froze.

Her eyes widened.

Her soul sighed.

Subject: URGENT: Client Visit at 2 PM Today – Review Meeting

Attached: A 12-page brief

Highlighted: “Both Risk & Strategy leads...Nalini Desai and Siddharth Iyer—are expected to present cohesively.”

Cohesively.

Whoever wrote that word genuinely believed God existed and blessed humans with miracles.

Nalini leaned back in her chair, rubbing her temples. She wasn't afraid of big clients or intimidating meetings. She was afraid of *working with Sid*—that unpredictable human spark plug who believed slides were mere suggestions and structure was something people without imagination needed.

Before she could spiral further, she grabbed her laptop, coffee, and the last sliver of patience she had in her bloodstream, and marched toward the small meeting room.

The Pre-Battle Room ... 9:50 A.M.

She pushed the door open.

There he was.

Of course he was.

Siddharth Iyer.

Sitting like he owned the oxygen in the room—back comfortably reclined, ankles crossed, hair perfect in a way that should be illegal in a corporate setting. He had a croissant in one hand, coffee in the other, and a posture that screamed *morning person* and *trouble* simultaneously.

He glanced up at her with that annoyingly calm expression.

“Morning,” he said, mid-chew, like he was greeting a neighbor rather than the woman whose stress levels routinely doubled because of him.

“You read the email?” Nalini asked, trying to keep her voice from cracking in irritation.

Sid swallowed, took a sip of coffee, and nodded.

“Yep. Big client. Bigger egos. We'll fit right in.”

"We?" she repeated, because she didn't recall signing up for a joint suicide mission.

"Yes, *we*," he said brightly. "Teamwork, bonding, synergy—HR would love this for their posters."

She glared.

"Sid, this meeting is critical. They could shift half their portfolio based on today. Stick to the slides. No surprises. No fancy speeches. No... Sid-isms."

"Right," he said with exaggerated seriousness, "because the world might end if I say something not featured on your... what was it... 68-slide deck?"

"It is 68 slides because it needs to be thorough," she said through clenched teeth.

He gave her a thoughtful look.

"Nalini, you do realize Google could index the entire universe faster than you can get through your deck, right?"

She ignored him. She needed to, or she'd throw her laptop at his face.

The Argument That Became Something Else

She opened her laptop aggressively, which was childish and petty but incredibly satisfying.

"You're not leading this meeting. I am. So stay in line."

Sid raised an eyebrow.

"And if your line leads to a dead end?"

Her jaw clicked shut. She hated...*hated*...that he sometimes said things that hit too close to the truth.

“You think charm replaces structure,” she shot back. “You’re reckless.”

He didn’t fight back this time. He didn’t smirk or taunt.

He looked at her with a quiet steadiness she wasn’t prepared for.

“And you think control replaces connection,” he said softly. “That’s fear talking, not leadership.”

That landed like a slap.

Not loud...not cruel...just painfully honest.

For a second, she forgot the croissant in Sid’s hand, the meeting, the stupid email—everything.

She’d never admit it, but Sid’s words could slice through armor faster than any feedback form.

He leaned forward, voice gentler.

“Look... I’m not here to challenge you. I’m here to win. Preferably with you. If that’s allowed.”

There it was again—that tone that made her want to scream and, very inconveniently, want to listen.

She didn’t answer.

Instead, she reopened the laptop, slower, calmer.

And Sid understood that as: *Fine. Let’s do this.*

2:05 P.M. ... The Meeting Begins

The conference room was the exact opposite of comfort.

Glass walls.

Harsh lighting.

Air conditioning that could freeze personality traits.

Five client representatives filed in, each looking like they ironed their suits, emotions, and possibly their moral compass before entering the office.

At the center was **Mr. Mehta**, the man whose permanent scowl could serve as a corporate logo for stress.

His voice was exactly what she expected from a man who had never smiled since 1996.

“Let’s begin. Your projection that we received via top seemed... optimistic. Convince us it isn’t naive.”

Nalini inhaled deeply and shot a sideways glance at Sid.

He was perfectly calm.

Of course he was.

The man could be standing in the middle of an earthquake and still look like he was deciding between cappuccino or latte.

The Perfect, Infuriating Rhythm

Nalini began.

Clear. Clinical. Structured.

Her words sliced through the room like lasers—precise, clean, and impossible to ignore.

Sid followed.

Smooth. Strategic. Captivating.

He spoke like someone who understood humans better than they understood spreadsheets.

Together, they were a contradiction that worked shockingly well.

Nalini handled the numbers:

“We’ve adjusted the portfolio using a tiered counter-risk model aligned to evolving volatility patterns.”

Sid leaned in effortlessly:

“And unlike earlier analysis, we’ve factored in panic behavior. Markets don’t collapse because of numbers. People do.”

Ms. Chandra, a senior woman with a gaze sharp enough to cut marble, examined Sid like she was testing him for weaknesses.

“So are you implying our previous consultants missed this?”

Sid smiled politely, dangerously.

“Not at all. I’m saying they took time reaching this conclusion. We just... arrived faster.”

Even Mr. Mehta paused his breathing for two seconds. That was the closest thing to praise the man had ever expressed.

Nalini cut in—smooth, professional, and absolutely saving the momentum:

“The strength of our model is that it accounts for emotion. Every financial decision is a human decision first.”

They were in sync without trying to be.

Their voices blended like reluctant partners forced on stage but who suddenly realized they danced well together.

Sid glanced at her once.

Not for approval.

For alignment.

And she gave the slightest nod.

They didn’t need to like each other to work together.

But damn, they worked well.

The Seal

After **56 minutes** of grilling so intense it could traumatize a drill sergeant, someone finally said what needed to be said.

Mr. Mehta leaned back, fingers steepled.

“Your synergy is remarkable.”

Sid practically glowed.

Nalini managed a half-smile that could, with generous imagination, be mistaken for genuine happiness.

The deal was sealed.

Just like that.

Outside the Conference Room

Sid stepped out first, running a hand through his hair.

He exhaled dramatically.

“You were fierce in there,” he said. “Intimidating, honestly. Almost enjoyable.”

Nalini straightened her coat.

“We had to deliver. Not charm our way through.”

“Ah,” Sid said, nodding solemnly. “So this is your indirect way of saying, ‘Thank you for rescuing the third scenario with my dramatic storytelling.’ Noted.”

“This is my direct way,” she corrected, “of saying—don’t overestimate your value just because you didn’t tank today.”

He saluted her.

“Got it. Stay in the shadows. Smile less. Speak only when spoken to.”

“Stay in your boundaries, Iyer. Even if today went well, this isn't a free pass to be reckless.”

He gave a grin that was half-sarcastic, half-sincere.

“Aye aye, Captain. Silent. Less talk. Mind my own business.”

He turned, relieved perhaps that the tension had broken.

Nalini turned too—mostly because she needed the excuse.

Because she felt it.

A smile forming without her permission.

Soft. Small.

Not for him.

Not because of him.

Just... for the moment, for the victory, and for the strange, delicate balance they somehow managed to find today.

Before he could notice, she walked away—steps steady, heartbeat not so much.

And somewhere behind her, Sid watched her leave with that maddening, knowing look he got sometimes.

A look that said:

This isn't over. Not by a long shot.

Fridge rules: if it's not labelled, steal.

Post Mr. Mehta's Success Meeting: The Pantry Truce (Almost)

The rush of adrenaline faded. Nalini walks into the office pantry with a cup of coffee in each hand (Another cup? Of course for Sid). Sid standing in front of vending machine confused over flavour of chocolates, tapping on its glass door, as if he is interrogating the chocolates.

She pretended at first that the second cup wasn't for Sid. And Sid pretended he didn't notice her pretending.

Nalini stood beside him and silently offered the second cup.

Her expression: businesslike.

The gesture: *dangerously close to kind.*

Nalini (neutral, with the hint of a reluctant smile), "Here. You might need it."

Sid refusing, "I don't accept coffee as debt."

She blinked. Once. Twice.

Nalini: "It's not a debt, it's caffeine. Take it."

Sid, smirking, "Exactly. Caffeine is powerful. The moment I accept this, I'll owe you. Today it's coffee, tomorrow I'm helping you move furniture or writing reports you hate."

Nalini, "You think very highly of your own favours."

Sid, "I've been burned by coffee diplomacy before."

Nalini exhaled, sat on the couch, and placed both cups beside her. "Fine. I'll drink both."

She took a slow sip.

(Sid watched, amused because she absolutely would drink both.)

Before he could reply, the pantry door slammed open like a SWAT team raid.

A female figure appeared - Oversized sunglasses still on, one AirPods in, hoodie half-zipped over a wildly inappropriate-for-work sparkly top. She was balancing an open laptop on one arm, a croissant in her mouth, and a smoothie in her hand, like a millennial circus act.

Just as she enters, she freezes. Surveys the scene.

Sid got frozen with a shock of door slam that literally sent a vibration to the glass of vending machine.

Sid, with shock, "What the... heck!!!"

Nalini, still sipping from cup, "Don't fear. She's my associate, Karishma."

Sid, "Of course she is."

Karishma (croissant still in mouth), "Why so quiet? Did someone die or are you two discussing top-secrets?"

Sid, "Hey !! How did you even open the door with your hands full?"

Karishma removing the croissant with unnecessary drama, "Pure rage and thigh strength."

She set the smoothie down and waved her laptop.

"I bring chaos and Google Calendar invites. I'm basically a walking startup."

Sid (to Nalini), "She's going to be the end of us."

Karishma: "Or the beginning of a very interesting HR file. Depends on my mood."

Sid, reaching towards refrigerator, "Fine, no chocolates today. Time for some protein "

But then - from the fridge he pulls open a container.

Empty.

He Freezes. Looks in again – Empty!

Sid (suddenly loud), "No. No. No no no no — this is war."

Nalini (raises an eyebrow), "What happened?"

Sid (holding up empty sandwich wrapper like it's evidence in a crime show), "Someone stole my lunch. My perfectly constructed, hand-assembled, sourdough sandwich with basil sauce and caramelized onions. It had my name on it. In bold."

Nalini (calmly chewing), "You mean this sandwich?"

He turns. She's mid-bite.

Sid stares. His mouth opens, then closes, then opens again.

Sid (horrified), "That's... you're eating my...that's criminal behaviour!"

Nalini, "It was in the fridge. Unlabeled."

Sid, "It had a neon yellow tape labelled that said 'Sid's. Do not touch unless on fire.'"

Nalini, "Which fell off. Fridge rules: if it's not labelled, it's fair game. Also, it was just lying there. Alone. Tempting. I rescued it."

Sid, "You rescued my lunch from... what? Shelf loneliness?!"

Nalini, "From underuse. Honestly, that much basil sauce is a cry for help."

Sid (mock gasp), "First you reject my peace principles, then you insult my sandwich. What's next? You'll start correcting my grammar in emails?"

Nalini (finishing last bite), "Only if you keep using 'irregardless.'"

(Sid looks betrayed but impressed.)

Sid (mutters), "This is how great partnerships fall apart. Over food."

Nalini smirks and finally slides her untouched second cup of coffee toward him. "Fine. Truce. One stolen sandwich = one peace coffee. No debts. No diplomacy."

Sid studied the cup... then accepted it with exaggerated caution.

Sid: "Alright. But next time you touch my lunch, I'm going straight to HR."

Nalini: "HR is terrified of me."

Sid: "Oh really? Can't wait to test that theory."

They sipped in silence. Karishma quietly watching them with one AirPods in and full gossip-mode activated.

Smiles Added to Cart | Riya – Chaos with purpose

By late Evening, Nalini's cabin had settled into its usual rhythm: quiet, focused, the kind of silence that grows dense with unspoken tension. The only sound was the steady tapping of keyboards, like a roomful of disciplined metronomes.

That was when HR Entered - as if raiding the place but with smiles and greetings instead of "Hands up!!

"Hello....Hello...Team. Meet Riya ! Your new support staff."

Nalini, "Wait...what...I didn't even know if we had open position..."

HR Exec, "Well its from top...they must have foreseen..."

Riya steps in — early twenties, big eyes, simple white shirt, holding a sparkly pen like it's a wand.

"Hi!" she said, beaming. "I'm so excited to be here. I love office smells and keyboards."

Sid almost lit up like someone had handed him a personal comedy show.

"Same here," he said. "Especially the smell of stress and sarcasm in the morning."

"Oh, you're funny," Riya said immediately. "I'll sit near you so I don't fall asleep."

Sid leaned back, smug, "You'll fit in perfectly. We only work with spreadsheets and trauma."

From her desk, Nalini didn't even bother to look up. "Some of us work with intelligence too," she said, still typing on keyboard carefully.

Riya blinked. "Oh! Is that a software?"

Sid choked on air and coffee at the same time. Karishma smothered a laugh behind a fake cough.

"She thought intelligence was a software," Sid managed between laughs. "I'm definitely keeping her."

Nalini finally lifted her eyes, pinning Riya with a clinical sort of curiosity, "Have you worked in risk or compliance before?"

Riya looked perfectly delighted.

"No, but I once balanced my uncle's wedding budget. Until it rained and the caterer slipped away."

Sid nodded sympathetically.

"That sounds exactly like what happens here."

Karishma added, "You're either going to boost this team's morale... or accidentally get us all fired."

Riya gave a little giggle and turned to Sid again who had somehow become her designated mentor within two minutes.

"If I don't understand something, can I ask you?"

Sid with smile, "Anytime."

Nalini made a noise under her breath. "He's very helpful," she said. "Especially when it's not part of his job description."

Sid raised an eyebrow.

"Don't be jealous, Nalini. Some of us don't need to be workaholics."

Nalini didn't miss a beat.

"I only admire people who know where the Enter key is without asking."

Riya looked genuinely troubled.

"Wait... Enter is always on the right?"

Sid shook his head in delighted disbelief.

"This is better than therapy."

Karishma tapped her pen dramatically.

"I'm cancelling my 7 PM session."

(Moments later...)

While Sid patiently taught Riya how to use shared folders, she laughed too loudly at something he said. Nalini, for reasons she did not care to analyse, flipped the page in her notebook with a bit more force than necessary.

Karishma leaned closer and whispered, amused, "Shall I get you a punching pillow? Or maybe a Riya-repellent?"

"I'm fine," Nalini said - a bit too quickly.

"Of course," Karishma murmured, "that's why you've realigned your stapler four times in ten minutes."

Riya sits next to Sid on couch – seeing Sid tapping the keys lightly.

Sid (to Riya), "Okay, golden rule: Never use Comic Sans in a financial document unless you're actively trying to get sued."

Riya, nodding sincerely, "Got it. Comic Sans equals danger."

Sid, "Exactly."

Riya, "You're like... really wise."

Sid (grinning toward Nalini's desk), "Someone write that down. Finally, someone who gets me."

Nalini didn't lift her head from her notes.

"I'm writing your eulogy."

Sid laughed.

Riya giggled without understanding why.

Karishma shook her head, already opening her secret diary.

And Nalini, very calmly, aligned her stapler for the fifth time - just to keep appearances.

Jealousy Served Cold

Conference Room. Friday, 2:00 PM

Month-End Review Meeting

The conference room felt like the last stop on a long journey. The kind where everyone arrives tired, caffeinated, and mildly questioning their life choices. The oval table was crowded with charts, printouts, and the universal corporate accessory: half-finished black coffee.

The projector hummed softly, casting a live dashboard of risk metrics across the glass wall. No Prakash today. It was Nalini's meeting which meant precision, order, and zero patience for nonsense.

She stood at the front, marker in hand.

"Based on our latest assessment," Nalini began, voice clipped but steady, "the supplier chain in Sector C still shows serious exposure because of the foreign litigation. If we don't flag this as high risk by Friday, we're inviting trouble in the next audit."

A quiet ripple of nods traveled around the table. Everyone could feel the weight of her words.

(Then from the corner a timid hand lifted.)

Riya, "Um... sorry," she said, almost whispering, "But... why is foreign litigation *our* problem if it's... you know... not happening here?"

The room paused. Sid looked up, eyebrow raised. "Geographically, you mean?"

Riya nodded earnestly. "Yeah. If the bad thing is happening far away... does it still count as risk *here*?"

All eyes slid to Nalini like she was the human encyclopedia of corporate wrath.

Nalini turned slowly, expression painfully calm.

"No, Riya," she said, voice smooth as glass but sharp enough to cut. "When it rains in another country, we stay dry and unaffected. That's why global economics doesn't exist."

Karishma bit the back of her pen to keep from laughing. A small choking sound escaped her anyway.

Riya shrank slightly. "Oh. Sorry. I just thought..."

Sid jumped in, leaning forward, tone gentle. "It's a valid question. She's thinking in terms of cause and effect. How external volatility becomes internal exposure. It's not dumb.. it's learning."

Nalini's eyes moved from Sid... to Riya... and back to the dashboard.

She didn't say a word.

Sid smiled reassuringly at Riya. "Ask anything you need. That's how we get better."

Riya's shoulders relaxed. "Thanks. I just... don't want to sound stupid."

Sid shrugged. "Sounding smart all the time is overrated."

Karishma muttered under her breath, "That explains half this room."

A few people snorted into their coffees. Nalini did not.

She stared at the projection like it had personally offended her existence. Her grip tightened around the marker; her jaw flexed

once, almost imperceptibly. Then she turned back to the board and wrote a heading with calculated calm.

“Moving on.”

Her tone was so flat it could've been ironed.

“Sid, finish the litigation trend model tonight. I'll cross-verify.”

“Sure,” Sid replied, studying her face with a hint of concern she didn't notice, or pretended not to.

“Karishma,” Nalini continued, “track audit timelines. Riya - no data entry without review.”

Riya nodded quickly. “Yes, ma'am.”

The meeting rolled on, but something in the air had shifted. A subtle tension threading through the room like a wire drawn too tight.

Nalini wasn't angry. This was something far quieter.

Something warm and uncomfortable and unwelcome.

He'd simply defended someone else — in a way she couldn't challenge without looking unreasonable.

And for someone who lived in control... losing ground, even a little, felt like a crack spreading under the surface.

Oh so now you loved Bhindi?|

Or beginning of something

The Lunch Betrayal

Later that day (post Month-End Review disaster), late evening, the office looked like a battlefield dressed in spreadsheets. Half-drunk coffees sat abandoned beside laptops, and everyone's face had that tired, month-end glaze. The month end audit committee meeting was creeping closer with every tick of the clock, and Nalini had been running purely on black coffee, discipline, and the kind of focus that makes even printers behave out of fear.

The quiet hum of work was broken when Riya wandered in with her usual soft, almost floating steps. She carried a small steel tiffin plastered with a rabbit sticker so cheerful it felt illegal in a corporate building. Before she even opened it, the smell drifted out - spicy, warm, nostalgic in a way that reminded everyone of home.

"I brought extra lunch!" she announced happily, placing the tiffin on the table. "My mom made too much bhindi sabzi again. Does anyone want some?"

Sid's head snapped up as if someone had just offered him early retirement and a million-dollar bonus.

"Bhindi?" he said, already halfway out of his seat. "Yes. Yes, please. I haven't had proper bhindi in ages."

Karishma watched him with a mischievous grin. "Last week you called bhindi 'slimy green despair.' Now look at you, sprinting."

"That was cafeteria bhindi," Sid said with full dignity, spoon already in hand. "This smells like someone's mother actually loves her family."

He took a bite - and closed his eyes like the universe had finally shown him mercy.

"Oh my..., this is good," he murmured. "Like... soul-healing good. Your mom is a genius, Riya."

Riya beamed. "She says the secret is hing and ghee. And emotional stability."

"I can do without the last one," Sid replied, scooping up another bite.

From her desk, Nalini finally spoke without glancing up.

"You once said bhindi is the most pointless vegetable in India."

"I evolved," Sid said, not even pausing mid-chew.

"Overnight?" she asked, her tone as dry as the desert wind.

Karishma giggled. "Or maybe he eats bhindi willingly only when it's served with compliments and dimples."

Sid waved a spoon. "Not my fault food tastes better than sarcasm in the air."

Nalini set her pen down - sharply, almost like she hadn't meant to. The clink echoed a little too loudly.

"Well," she said, her voice clipped, "since everyone is now spiritually connected to bhindi, may I remind you that we have risk flags to review in twenty minutes?"

Silence swept the table.

"Yes, Captain Serious," Karishma said.

Sid nodded lazily. "Relax. We'll get to it."

“That’s what you said yesterday,” Nalini reminded him. “Your portion of the litigation trail tracking was due today. We present Monday.”

Riya jumped in immediately. “I can help him!”

Sid flashed her another warm smile. “She gets it. Look how motivated she is.”

Nalini turned sharply. “Riya can’t work on secure audit files. She doesn’t have clearance.”

Karishma whispered to her notebook, “Oof. And the storm begins.”

Only then did Sid truly look at Nalini - and the irritation simmering beneath her usually calm face. His shoulders softened a little.

“Okay, okay,” he said. “I’ll finish it today. Don’t get all... intimidating about it.”

“I’m not intimidating,” she replied, cool and precise. “I’m focused. Someone has to be.”

With that, she put on her headphones and turned to her screen — or at least pretended to.

But her eyes weren’t really on the numbers.

They were on the way Sid laughed at Riya’s jokes. The way he had practically run across the room for bhindi. “Bhindi” the same vegetable he once declared as “a betrayal of all vegetables.”

A memory flickered of past when he had said, “Why would anyone willingly eat this green disaster?”

And today....today he had closed his eyes in bliss over the same dish.

It was not about bhindi or food anymore. Not really.

It was something else entirely - simmering quietly, unexpected and unwelcome, settling under her skin like the aftertaste of something she didn't want to admit she *cared* about.

Tears Behind the Glass.

Two Weeks Later.

Time passed in strange, quiet ways. Not loudly...not with announcements. Just... in small moments no one documented.

Sid began doing things that never made it into meeting notes...standing between Riya and sharp words from Nalini that weren't meant to wound but always did, redirecting blame with a calm smile, staying late to fix things that weren't technically his responsibility.

And Nalini noticed. She did, each time.

She noticed the way reports corrected themselves before reaching her desk. The way fires were already half-extinguished when she arrived. The way her team breathed a little easier, even when she didn't ask them to.

She never thanked him.

Never acknowledged it.

But deep down, in that place she kept locked and unvisited—she knew.

He helped her even when she didn't want it.

Riya, like most of us, wore faces.

One for work—bright, polite, always apologizing for existing.

One for home—quieter, tired, held together with rituals and small comforts.

But there are days when the balance slips. Days when gravity suddenly remembers you.

And begins pulling you down through all the carefully built versions of yourself.

Riya had always been cheerful. Innocent in a way that made people protective without knowing why. She laughed easily. She trusted too much.

And then... one day... she didn't.

No one could say exactly when she stopped being the girl she used to be. There was no announcement.

No visible breaking point.

She just... faded.

The conference room was almost completely dark, except for one stubborn strip of afternoon sunlight sneaking through the blinds and landing directly across the table. The rest of the room sat in that heavy, muted silence that only empty corporate spaces have...cold AC hum, faint echoes from the hallway, not a single person around.

Riya sat on one of the chairs near the window, curled up sideways like she was trying to fold herself into the smallest shape possible. Her tiny tiffin box with the rabbit sticker - her emotional support tiffin, basically...was resting near her feet. She kept twisting its handle over and over like her fingers needed something to cling to.

Her face was streaked with tears. Her cardigan sleeves were already soaked from wiping them. Every few seconds, another quiet sob escaped her, the kind that made her shoulder jump slightly. She tried to stay quiet, biting her lip hard, breathing like she was scared someone might hear.

And honestly? She looked like a child hiding under a table during a storm.

She didn't hear the door slide open.

But Sid did hear her.

He froze in the doorway for a second, eyes adjusting to the dim room, trying to understand why someone was crying in what was usually the "presentation panic" room.

"Riya?"

His voice wasn't loud. It wasn't even his usual fake-dramatic tone. It was soft...like he was afraid the air might shatter.

She jolted slightly, wiping her eyes too fast to pretend anything.

"H-Hi," she whispered, staring at her shoes. "Sorry... I was just... checking something."

Sid raised an eyebrow. "Checking what? The structural stability of the carpet?"

She sniffed. "I wanted some quiet."

"You found *too much* quiet," he replied gently and stepped inside, closing the door. "Why are you sitting alone in the dark, Yaar?"

Riya shook her head quickly, stubbornly. "It's nothing. I'm fine."

Her voice cracked again. That "fine" felt like it was stitched with flimsy thread.

Sid didn't buy it for a second.

He didn't go directly to her. He just pulled the chair next to hers and sat down slowly...like approaching a scared kitten.

"Want to talk?" he asked.

"No."

"Okay," Sid nodded. "Want to cry quietly while I pretend not to watch?"

Despite herself, Riya made a tiny, hiccup sound that was somewhere between a sob and a laugh.

He smiled faintly. "Hmmm...I see"

A moment passed...Two. Three.

And then Riya finally whispered, almost too softly,

"My parents... They're getting divorced."

Sid's teasing expression vanished instantly.

"Oh damn," he whispered. "Riya..."

He leaned in slightly but didn't touch her yet. "I'm really sorry...that must be....painful "

"They were together for twenty-seven years, Sid." Her voice trembled, and then the tears just started again, without permission.

"And suddenly they just... don't want to be husband and wife anymore. Just like that. Like switching off a light."

Her breath kept catching. She talked through it anyway.

"They didn't fight. Didn't shout. Nothing dramatic. They just said it. Like news. Like a weather update."

She wiped her face again. "I thought they were happy. I thought... love stayed."

She sounded broken in a way that wasn't dramatic...just real and raw.

Sid slowly reached out, giving her enough time to move away if she wanted.

She didn't.

He put a hand on her shoulder first. Warm. Anchoring. Gentle.

And when she leaned the slightest bit? He slowly pulled her into a comfortable hug(as if hugging a child... Just a side hug.)

And she broke.

The kind of crying that shakes your whole body.

The kind you can't swallow anymore.

Sid didn't say anything for a while. He just let her cry, like he had all the time in the world.

After a minute, he whispered,

"You know, when I was in college, I tried to run away from home because my dad yelled at me for breaking things."

Riya sniffed loudly against his shirt. "What?"

"Yeah," Sid continued, dead serious. "I told myself I would survive in the wilderness. I packed two parathas and my geometry box."

She choked on a laugh-tear. "What kind of...what wilderness cares about geometry boxes?"

"Exactly!" Sid said dramatically. "Its nothing...Just wanted to distract you..."

Riya let out another small laugh...even through tears.

Sid smiled, softening, relieved that he managed to pull her back for a second.

"You're hurting now," he said quietly. "And that's okay. It's supposed to hurt. But it won't always feel like this. You'll breathe again. Your life won't fall apart just because theirs did."

He lifted her chin slightly so she'd meet his eyes. "I promise. You'll be okay."

Riya wiped her cheeks with her sleeve again, but her breathing was calmer now. "Thank you... I didn't want anyone to see me like this."

Sid shook his head. "Everyone has days like this. Even me."

She blinked at him. "You cry?"

"I'm very emotional," he said with fake seriousness. "I cried this morning because the coffee machine stole my ten rupees."

She snorted. Actually snorted.

"That's better," Sid said softly, smiling. "Your face looks nicer when it's not drowning in tears."

She hit his arm weakly. "Shut up."

He laughed. "There she is."

The Door That Should've Stayed Closed

Nalini walked down the hallway with her usual sharp steps, a file pressed against her chest, already annoyed about something unrelated. She reached the conference room door...she had been looking for Sid to remind him about the pending audit matrix.

But when she saw the door slightly open and heard a soft sound...something like a muffled laugh and broken snuffle...she froze.

She pushed the door open a little.

And her breath caught.

Sid was sitting close to Riya, his hand still resting near hers, both of them wiping the last of her tears.

Riya's eyes were red but a small smile had returned.

Sid was watching her with this quiet, gentle expression Nalini had never...not once...seen on him.

Soft. Patient. Warm.

Like he was someone entirely different when no one else was watching.

Like he had a whole other human face that the world didn't get to see.

A side she didn't know existed.

A side she hadn't been allowed to know.

Something in her chest twisted sharply.

Not anger.

Not irritation.

Something far more dangerous.

Jealousy...hot, uncomfortable, immediate.

She stood silently, unseen, just long enough for the scene to carve itself painfully into her mind.

Then she stepped back before they noticed her, turning away quickly, pretending her heartbeat wasn't suddenly too loud.

She walked back to her desk with her jaw tight, telling herself it was none of her business.

But what she assumed was simple and suffocating...

Sid had layers...Sid had softness for Riya...Sid had a tenderness didn't see for herself. And the way he looked at Riya...the way he made her laugh through tears...

the way he held her...seemed like repeated scenes Nalini kept imagining.

She collapsed | What scares you more — being wrong or being liked?

*Thursday, 11 AM — The Day the Universe Tilted Slightly
Sideways*

*Quarterly Risk & Strategy Meet - [All departments & branch
head meeting.]*

A strange tension crawled around the oval table as if it had arrived before everyone else and reserved all the chairs.

Numbers glowed on the projector screen. Charts climbed and fell like tiny mountains. And through the pale blue light stood Nalin - spine straight, expression calm, a storm disguised as a woman who had learned long ago never to blink first. But today, the arrows were to come fast.

One of the branch heads leaned back in his chair and said, almost lazily,

“We’ve already missed two minor SLAs last month. And now you want us to stretch risk models across *three international portfolios*?”

Another voice joined in, sharp and cutting.

“Honestly, Nalini... this looks great on paper, but it feels more like a *career strategy* than a company one.”

Someone else added, “And we weren’t even consulted in the initial planning. Who exactly is making decisions here?”

(The room murmured like a restless crowd.)

Nalini didn’t flinch. Her voice stayed steady, almost deceptively calm, “When people ask for a fireproof system, they forget it

takes *heat* to test it. Yes, the model stretches us. But if we want real growth, comfort will not take us there.”

A senior from Compliance scoffed.

“Ah, the famous Nalini bold speech. Shame it doesn’t extend to team morale.”

Karishma, seated far from the center, stiffened. She couldn’t hold back.

“That’s unfair. I worked with her on the model. The structure...”. But a man cut her off with a patronizing smile. “You’re still new, Karishma. Don’t talk like you carry the risk on your name.”

And like that, the room dissolved into muttering ... opinions tossed like stones.

Through all of it, Sid said nothing. He just flipped through the printed document as if he were skimming a magazine at a café rather than sitting inside a brewing storm.

Then, he finally spoke.

Not loudly. Not dramatically but just... clearly. “You know,” he began, eyes still lowered, “I’ve worked with teams that operated like families... and some that operated like high school cafeterias.”

(The room quieted around him.)

“And right now, we’re leaning very cafeteria.”

He looked up at last, a small, dangerous smile curling at his lips.

“Everyone wants safe waters. But somehow expects to reach distant shores. Irony, right?”

(Silence. Eyes dropped. Chairs shifted uncomfortably.)

"If we spent half our energy solving problems instead of trying to pin blame on whoever suggested the solution, we'd actually hit our targets ... maybe even early."

His gaze moved calmly, deliberately.

"And about Nalini, you may not like her tone. That's fine. But at least thank her clarity. Someone in this room has to lead when most are busy... commenting."

(It was not loud...It was not angry, but it hit everyone square between the eyes. No one had a response. Not a single one.)

The meeting disbanded quietly, shame trailing behind the people who had come in with such confident accusations.

Nalini left quickly, her steps too sharp to be casual. Sid followed at a slower pace, cup of coffee in hand as if he were strolling through a park rather than after a war.

"You're welcome, by the way," he said, not quite smug, but close.

Nalini didn't look at him. Her face had suddenly gone pale.

"I didn't ask you to save me."

"I never said you did," he replied. "I just spoke up because everyone was too loud to hear your voice."

She stopped for a second. "Did you... enjoy being my savior today?"

"No," he said simply. "I enjoyed shutting stupidity down. You just happened to be on the right side of it."

"You talk too much."

"And you listen too little..." Sid replied instantly.

Her jaw tightened.

"You're not my father. I don't need you saving me."

Sid's voice rose, sharp-edged(bit abrupt).

"Of course I'm not. I don't even want to be in that place. Ever."

She turned away, her steps suddenly heavier, almost clumsy.. uncharacteristic for her.

He followed, softer this time.

"You know... sometimes I wonder what scares you more...being wrong or being liked...???"

The words hit her so quickly she stopped walking altogether.

"Liked"...That single word had the power to crumble the walls she'd spent years building.

(She turned slowly, eyes glossy(red)....the first crack in her armor Sid had ever seen.)

"Neither," she whispered. **"What scares me... is needing someone who *can walk away*."**

Before he could respond, a drop of tear slipped down her cheek. She blinked hard, turned, and walked off with the sort of speed that suggested she was running from herself more than from him.

Sid stood there stunned, deeply rooted...truly silent for once ...watching her disappear around the corner.

And somewhere deep inside her, the old memory surfaced: the one about her father, the man who disappeared and left a scar she never forgave.

Meanwhile, far above from Kailasa...

From the divine balcony, Parvati Ji leaned forward, watching Nalini & Sid below with a soft sigh.

"Why does Nalini have to be so strong?" she asked. "Can't you give her just a little softness? A little rest?"

Lord Shiva sat beside her, serene, eyes half-closed, "Because some flowers," he murmured, "bloom only during lightning. She is one of them."

Parvati Ji frowned. "And Sid? He annoys her... distracts her... challenges her... and still...."

"He's not there to save her," Shiva said, smiling gently. "He's there to remind her that she doesn't have to hold the sword alone."

Parvati ji continues to watch Nalini with utmost care and desperation to help...

Strange Turn | Unforgettable memory of Father

Same day, late at night...

Nalini closed the door of her bedroom with a soft click. The sound barely registered in the quiet apartment, but inside her chest everything was roaring—too loud, too crowded, too awake. The walls stood still, the lights dim, yet her thoughts refused to settle.

Sid's words followed her in. Not the sharp ones. Not the defiant ones. The quiet ones. The ones that slipped past her defenses without permission—especially the one about her father. It looped in her mind like an echo she couldn't outrun. She tried to breathe the way she always did—slow, measured, controlled. She reached for the routine she had perfected over the years, the one that kept her composed, untouched, safe.

But something had already slipped through.

It wasn't a fresh wound. It was older than that. Buried deep. A place she rarely allowed herself to visit. His words hadn't hurt her from the outside—they had found something fragile within, something that lived beneath years of strength and discipline, like a bruise you forget is there until someone presses too close.

Nalini didn't move toward her bed.

She almost never did.

The bed reminded her of warmth. Too warm. Deceptively so. Warmth had a way of lying to her—of convincing her, for a moment, that she wasn't alone. That someone might be sitting beside her, just as her father once had, in the quiet hours of the

night. Gentle. Patient. A presence that didn't demand anything, only stayed.

She couldn't bear that illusion.

She lowered herself to the cold floor instead, on a mat. Today, like so many nights before, she lay there with her eyes closed, arms folded close, breathing shallow—not asleep, not resting, just existing in the space between.

And that was when the memories came.

Uninvited. Unannounced.

And just like that...right in front of her, old memories bloomed.

In her memories - She was nine again.

The air smelled of agarbatti(incense) and kerosene. The yellow light of the oil lantern flickered beside the bed, casting soft shadows on the old green wall.

And sitting next to her, on the edge of the bed, was her father.

White kurta, white beard. That beard always glowed in the lamplight like thin threads of gold—like something the angels in his stories would wear.

His voice was always deep, not dramatic. Not like the booming voice of cartoon fathers. No, his voice was like a hill itself...quiet, large, and warm.

He never rushed. Never forgot details.

And in his lap, he held an old brown diary - diary of magical stories.

“Nalini,” he would say on almost each night, tapping her forehead with right hand like a blessing, “tonight's story is about a unicorn that didn't want to be white.”

She grew up hearing stories about -

A unicorn who refused to run because she believed her steps could break the earth.

An angel who wept at the cruelty of humans but chose to stay, just to watch one little girl smile.

A prince who gave up his kingdom for silence, and found peace inside a bird's song.

And a mountain—always a mountain—who never spoke, but listened to every cry in the valley.

Every night, one story.

And every time, Nalini would drift to sleep with her heart full and her head floating somewhere between wonder and wisdom.

Those nights shaped her. Taught her more about courage, difference, kindness, and quiet strength than any school ever could.

But then...a day came...when her father was gone.

Too soon.

Too silently.

And a week after the funeral, she went to the wooden drawer her father had kept locked, opened it with the key always tucked inside her mother's saree corner... and pulled out that diary.

BUT what she saw - shook the ground beneath her.

Hands trembling, she sat on the floor, holding her breath.

She opened the first page.

Then the second.

Then the third... fourth...and all the pages one by one.

Blank.

Every page. Every single one. Blank.

Her eyes scanned every inch of the paper, hoping maybe the ink had faded, or he'd used invisible ink.

No.

Nothing.

The diary that had held kingdoms and creatures... was just paper. She cried for hours....for days...for year to seek answer why !

And then one day, Nalini realized something that would stay with her for life:

"The stories were never in the diary. They were in him. And he left them in me."

She cried that night...and tonight again. Not because the diary was empty, but because she didn't realize that deep love while he was alive. Her caring father, no less then an angel!!

Years later, in boardrooms, in dark nights, in silence, in strength, Nalini still carried those stories...she always did. She never told anyone. Not even her mother. But sometimes, when the light hit a wall just right, or when someone spoke gently without trying to impress her, she'd remember the unicorn who didn't want to be white...and the man who made blank pages feel like magic.

Tonight she felt heavy...because something triggered in her. May be Sid's unintentional words.

She wept. Not loudly. Not childishly. Just quietly...like someone mourning a god they weren't supposed to meet. She picked that old empty diary once again and clutched to her chest, whispering, "Why would you tell me all those stories and write none of them down?"

But the room said nothing. Just silence.

Her questions didn't get any response in that room and with time she fell asleep, quietly...Hugging the old brown diary of her father...the very same empty diary. The last piece...by her father who didn't leave words on paper...but left entire worlds in her heart.

She fell asleep alongside time itself, each fallen tear slowly drying in its course. One by one, the muscles of her body eased into quiet repose, until at last her grasp upon the diary grew faint and slack, surrendering to rest....

Parvati Ji Decides to meet Nalini:

Storm in Kailash, Mountains cracked

Just as Nalini Fell in sleep, a storm came in Kailasa....this time...a fierce one.!! Very fierce...with loudest thunders ever heard.

The storm did have a name.

“A Mother in Pain...!!”

Parvati Ji paced across the marble floor with a fury that made the very clouds tremble. Her anklets chimed in sharp agitation...not like music, but like questions striking metal.

“Why, Lord?” she burst once again, her voice cracking just a little. “Why are you testing her patience. Why did you let all this happen to her?”

Shiva sat with the stillness of a mountain...unmoving, unshaken - the kind of calm that made the cosmos breathe slower. His eyes remained soft, almost serene.

“Because,” he said gently, “she is destined for something higher.”

Parvati Ji whirled around, her face flushed with a mother’s anger ... the kind that comes only when a child suffers.

“Higher?” she cried, tears falling abruptly. “She watched her father die of heartbreak. In past, she saw a man betray her right before she was meant to marry him. She sleeps on the cold floor because her bed has become a shrine of pain. Tell me, what ‘higher’ do you see in this loneliness of hers? She has everything... and yet nothing.”

Lord Shiva didn’t flinch.

His voice was steady, but not cold ... like someone who knows the ending of a story others are still weeping through.

"Some souls," he said, "are carved out of fire. To make them unbreakable, I must first let them shatter."

(But Parvati Ji wasn't ready to stay calm this time. Not tonight.)

"She begs you every night!" she shouted, her eyes burning. "You hear her chants — her broken voice. She still clings to her faith even though you've given her nothing back. Nothing!"

Shiva closed his eyes. And when he spoke, his voice dropped lower almost a whisper.

"That... is why I love her more than she will ever know."

It only made Parvati Ji tremble harder.

"Then show it!" she demanded in loud voice. "She doesn't need more strength, Lord. She needs arms around her when she collapses. She needs someone who doesn't walk away!"

Something shifted in Lord Shiva then...something old, something cosmic.

He opened his full eyes, and even the air bowed.

"Her time will come," he said in heavy voice. "Her story has only just begun."

Parvati Ji swallowed...her anger melting into something softer, sadder.

"But she's forgotten how to hope..." she whispered.

"Then I will remind her," Lord Shiva replied in Extreme Loud Voice that sent shivers to universe. Mountains felt cracks with Lord's voice. A sound of Damru began to echo in mountains.

"Not by miracle. But by sending her a soul who listens instead of saves. Who waits... instead of demands. And when she

believes again...when her heart remembers softness - that will be my true answer to her prayers.”

(A long, deep silence settled between them. The kind only divine beings can hold without breaking.)

Then Parvati Ji straightened, wiping the moisture gathering at the edge of her eye lashes. Her voice became firm...like a mother who has made up her mind.

“Fine,” she said. “Till you act, I am going to her...I am going to meet her... I can’t watch my child cry alone anymore.”

For the first time Lord Shiva looked mildly surprised. And then...slowly, a smile curved across his lips. Not playful, not flippant, but ancient. Pride, surrender, and infinite patience all wrapped into one perfect expression.

He raised his right hand in blessing, a silent message flowing through the gesture:

Go. I am with you.

And wherever you walk, protection walks with you.

Parvati Ji bowed her head, palms joined, and in a blink of divine shimmer, she disappeared.

And almost immediately, as if the universe had whispered the gossip of her departure, a familiar voice echoed into the hall:

“Narayan Narayan!”

Narad Ji appeared, breathless, adjusting the folds of his clothing as though he had run across galaxies to arrive.

“Swami,” he said cautiously, “forgive me for asking, but... this goes against the Governance Manuals of Divine-Human Interference. If Devi herself descends for one mortal girl — the cosmos will question it. The clauses—”

Lord Shiva's eyes softened again, but his voice held the weight of stars.

"I understand, Narad. But Devi Shakti cannot be stopped when her heart is determined. Clauses bend before her will. Laws rewrite themselves in her path. She is the origin of miracle and law ...both. If she walks toward her child... then the universe must walk with her."

Narad's eyes widened slightly - not in fear, but in awe.

He bowed low, palms pressed together.

"As you say, Mahadev," he murmured, "becomes the law."

And just like that, he vanished too — leaving behind only the echo of his chant:

"Narayan Narayan..."

*Parvati descends—love cannot wait,
The cosmos bends, rewriting fate.*

*The storms are coming, the answers near,
Watch closely, mortal—their truth is here.*

Divine Dream: The Day Parvati Ji decided to meet devotee

Not just a dream - Goddess appearing in Nalini's Dream

Quietly darkness reigns only to be lifted by light as Nalini was still in deep sleep.

It's not going to be just a dream - but a visual with closed eyes. And more than that, what was about to unfold will change entire life ...with just an experience.

The Dream -

A Desert at Dusk. The world was quiet. Not dead... just paused.

Nalini finds herself walking barefoot in a vast golden desert, the sky above painted in twilight blues and molten amber. There was no wind. No sound. Just a strange stillness, like time itself held its breath.

From afar, a lone figure(women) approached her. Slowly...Gracefully. Dressed in deep maroon and earthy orange, the woman's face was covered with a veil of soft net, eyes hidden, her presence ancient... yet calm like dusk before prayer.

Nalini stopped walking. But the woman did not...!

She came close, just close enough that Nalini could sense her...not as a stranger, but like someone she'd somehow always known.

Veiled Woman, "You don't sleep like you used to."

Nalini (confused, cautious), "Do I know you?"

Veiled Woman (with soft laugh), "Not by name. But I have watched every time you folded your hands before that stone idol... asking nothing, but still showing up."

Nalini's throat tightened.

Veiled Woman, "You carry too much pain. Yet you never scream. Why?"

Nalini, "Because screaming won't bring anything back."

Veiled Woman, "NO, but it lets pain know it's not the only one in the room."

Nalini stayed silent. The woman sat on a stone that hadn't been there moments ago - such was the nature of dreams wrapped in divine threads.

Veiled Woman, "Tell me. You wear strength like armor. But inside, you still ask... Why me? Why again?"

Nalini (tired), "Because I gave everything. And still, they left."

Veiled Woman (tilts head), "That's not the whole truth. You gave... expecting nothing. But deep down, you wished to be chosen. And when they didn't choose you... you decided to choose no one again."

(Nalini's eyes filled. She didn't argue. Truth, when it arrives gently, never needs to raise its voice.)

The woman placed something in Nalini's hand. A small mirror - carved in silver, old and worn.

Veiled Woman (asking gently), "Look."

Nalini hesitated first...and...then looked.

But instead of her own reflection, she saw her **younger self** - innocent, alive, hopeful... then slowly watched the pain change her. Guard her. Shape her.

She dropped the mirror, startled. It didn't break.

Veiled Woman, "You still carry that girl within you. You think she's weak. But she... is your beginning. Let her breathe again."

Nalini looked up. Something in her wanted to cry. Something in her wanted to believe.

Nalini (softly), "Who are you... really?"

The woman began to walk away, the desert wind finally picking up, lifting sand and stars.

Just before fading, she whispered (as wind carries her voice), "A mother. A witness. A watcher of hearts. You prayed with silence, child. And I heard it louder than thunder."

Just as the veiled woman said the word "thunder", a thunderstorm voice cracked through walls waking up Nalini. She looked at watch hanging on wall - It was 4:00 AM. Her pillow was damp with tears. She clutches her heart. Her fingers still felt the shape of the mirror.

Up in heaven, behind the clouds.

Lord Shiva, seeing everything with closed eyes, smiling as he is the only one who knows what's about to unfold which is beyond imagination.

New Life: She always carried fire, just stopped burning herself

Next Day — Monday Morning

Something felt different the moment Nalini stepped into the building.

Not wrong. Not heavy. Just... shifted, the way the sky changes when a storm has passed but the world hasn't realized it yet.

She wasn't in her usual office armor i.e., the sharp blazer, the immaculate heels, the hair tied tight as discipline. Instead, she wore a soft pastel kurta, the kind of fabric that breathed with her. Her flats made no sound on the tiles. Her hair was tied loosely, a thin line of kajal lighting her eyes. And there, unmistakably, a small round mark of kumkum sat on her forehead, just above center, like a quiet signature of something sacred.

Today, she nodded at the receptionist, offered a small smile to the housekeeping staff, and walked inside with a gentleness that felt like sunlight through curtains.

Sid, sitting at his desk, halfway through a sip of coffee, nearly died.

He coughed so loudly that made the stapler on his table rattled.

"Wait...!" he finally sputtered, staring at her as if she'd walked in riding a unicorn. "Who are you, and what have you done to Corporal Nalini?"

Without even glancing at him, she replied, "She took a leave. I'm her distant, more peaceful cousin. Try not to faint."

Karishma, mid-chew on her sandwich, blinked twice and pointed. "Umm... someone's been reincarnated overnight. Praise the Himalayas."

Sid recovered, but the grin on his face didn't fade.

"No, seriously. I'm worried. You're smiling. Are you okay? Blink twice if you're being blackmailed."

Nalini slid a stack of papers onto her desk calmly. "If I blink twice, will you finally shut up?"

"No promises," Sid said, leaning back with a smirk.

Everyone laughed ...a soft, unexpected bubble of sound.

But Sid... Sid watched her a little differently.

Her smile wasn't forced today. Her shoulders weren't tense.

The walls around her felt thinner, softer, like they weren't made of iron for once.

There was still something hidden in her eyes...there always was...but something warm had returned too, something he hadn't seen since the day she joined the team.

Later. In the Pantry

By late afternoon, Sid cornered her near the tea counter, pretending to casually lean but failing spectacularly.

"Okay," he said, crossing his arms. "Tell me. Who rebooted you overnight?"

Nalini stirred her tea with a small clink of the spoon.

"The universe did," she said quietly. "And maybe... maybe I just decided not to carry unnecessary weight anymore."

Sid looked at her...really looked.

“You know... you look like someone who's winning a battle no one ever knew you were fighting.”

Nalini raised one eyebrow. “And you look like someone who reads too many self-help quotes on Instagram.”

He laughed.....She laughed. And just for a brief second, the space between them shifted , like the first breeze of monsoon, soft but unmistakable.

Above the Clouds

Far above, where the sky turned into sacred blue, Parvati Ji watched through a veil of mist, her eyes gentle.

“Look,” she whispered to Shiva, her heart softening. “She’s changing.”

Shiva smiled...that serene, ancient smile of someone who knows a thousand steps ahead.

“She always carried fire Devi,” he said. “She simply stopped using it to burn herself.”

And the clouds moved softly around them, almost like a blessing drifting downward.

Korea: Not Just a business meet

Later That Day. 4:09 PM

Sid had circled the office twice already. He checked the cabins, peered into the conference room, even wandered past the finance bay pretending to look for a stapler. But Nalini wasn't anywhere.

Finally, with the sort of exasperation that only she could pull out of him, he called her.

Meanwhile, Nalini sat alone on one of the garden benches - the old wooden ones that creaked like tired elders. The late afternoon sunlight spilled lazily across the lawn. There was a softness to the world that didn't belong to an ordinary day.

She wasn't working. Not thinking of reports. Not rushing.

Just sitting. Still.

Her mind replaying last night's strange dream...the desert, the veiled woman, the mirror that showed her younger self.

Her chest felt lighter than usual, as if some invisible rope had loosened.

And... the phone buzzed against her palm. She hesitated... then answered.

"Where are you?" Sid's voice came through, half annoyed, half genuinely anxious. "I've called you thrice."

"Sid...I... just needed a little space," she said quietly & very softly.

His tone softened instantly, though he masked it with urgency.

“Something happened. Robert called an emergency progress review. You’re needed. And it’s... not optional.”

She exhaled, a slow grounding breath and said “Okay....I’m coming” after a pause.

Conference Room. Video Call on Screen.4:30 PM

The room felt like it always did before a storm...too bright, too cold, too quiet.

Robert’s face stared from the giant screen, unblinking. Prakash sat at the head of the table with a folder he probably hadn’t read properly. Karishma was beside him, straight-backed. Sid was already there. Nalini walked in with a stillness that said she had stitched herself back together.

Robert didn’t bother with greetings. “The board is asking questions,” he announced. “The Korea supplier deal isn’t delivering what we projected. Explanation?”

Sid leaned forward, voice steady. “Because the revised supplier data and forecast numbers were shared after our evaluation. We planned with incomplete inputs.”

Robert raised an eyebrow. “You should’ve flagged the gap. That’s on both of you.”

Nalini’s tone sharpened, not with anger but precision. “We did flag it. Email dated two weeks ago. No response.”

Sid added, “And we weren’t granted access to the latest P&L from local partners. We can’t evaluate what we can’t see.”

“So you’re saying this is due to internal delay?” Robert asked, icy.

Nalini didn’t blink. “We’re saying we made the right recommendations based on what was available.”

Sid slid in calmly, "And we've already adjusted the recovery plan. If we're given authority, we can fix this before next quarter."

For a moment, no one spoke.

Robert leaned back, expression unreadable.

"Good. Then go to Korea. Meet the supplier. Speak to the local team. Bring back clarity."

Karishma's eyes widened. "You're sending... both of them?"

"Unless someone else knows the project better," Robert said flatly. "Good luck." And the call ended.

Hallway - Outside the Conference Room

The air felt slightly warmer outside - less judgmental. Sid and Nalini walked side by side, neither rushing, nor speaking. Then Sid glanced at her, amused.

"Well," he said. "Korea."

Nalini allowed half a smirk. "Better than sitting here being blamed for everyone else's incompetence."

Before Sid could add something witty, Riya zipped into the corridor like a squirrel on sugar.

"I heard Korea!" she squealed. "OMG! Take me! I can be your cultural buffer-slash-snack assistant."

Both of them, perfectly synchronized, replied, "No."

Riya pouted dramatically.

"Fine. Bring me kimchi then," she declared, marching away.

Aditi from HR arrived next, smiling like she had single-handedly organized the Olympics.

“Congratulations to both of you. I’ve been told to start arrangements for your urgent trip.”

Both murmured a polite, tired, “Thanks.”

Aditi handed over two thick forms.

“I’ll need you to fill these quickly. And Riya will handle your hotel bookings — apparently she has ‘experience’ with Korea.”

Sid whispered under his breath, “God help us all...”

Nalini nudged him with her folder...just lightly...but he felt it.

The two of them stood at the tall counter, filling out travel details, side by side, writing their names on a future neither of them had planned.

A trip that would change everything. Neither of them knew.

But somewhere above the clouds, someone certainly did.

The Evening that seemed slow

The road home had never felt this quiet.

It wasn't that the traffic reduced or the neighborhood magically transformed...it was her.

Something inside Nalini had changed. A shift so gentle yet so unmistakable that even the air brushing against her cheek felt... different. Her steps weren't rushed. Her breath wasn't shallow. She no longer carried that invisible boulder between her shoulders.

Her dream...if it even was a dream...still lingered like warm dust on her skin.

The veiled woman's voice echoed in her ears with the hush of a mother soothing a child:

"You still carry that girl within you. Let her breathe again."

And somehow, Nalini did.

She breathed deeper. Fuller.

Like she hadn't in years.

By the time she reached the building gate, her phone buzzed again...another email, something urgent perhaps. Normally she would've checked it mid-stride, but tonight she slid the phone into her bag and said softly to herself,

"Not now."

She walked up the stairs instead of taking the lift, letting her pulse steady, letting her heart catch up with this strange but welcome version of herself.

When she reached the front door, the muffled sound of the TV was playing inside...some daily soap where someone was always fainting, waking up after 20 years, or declaring revenge dramatically. That familiar noise, absurd and comforting, wrapped around her even before she knocked.

The door opened before she could raise her hand.

Her mother stood there...warm eyes, worn cotton saree, the smell of haldi and coconut oil following her like a gentle halo.

“Tu aa gayi?” she asked softly.

Nalini nodded, stepped inside, and switched into her house slippers. Something about her movements must have been unusual because her mother kept staring at her with a puzzled, almost searching expression, as if reading a book that suddenly had a new chapter inserted into it.

Before either of them could speak, a dramatic gasp erupted from the sofa.

“HAWWW...!!”

Bua ji sat up like a snake disturbed from meditation.

“Kya pehen rakha hai yeh? Pastel color? So subtle? Are you sick? Fever hai kya?”

Nalini blinked. “Bua ji, it’s just a kurta.”

“Haan, haan, lekin tu toh hamesha woh... office wale pehenti hai! That blazer-shazer. Yeh kya hai aaj?”

“Change,” Nalini said plainly.

“Change?”

Bua ji looked at her mother. “Didi, sun rahi ho? Ladki change bolti hai aise...jaise mausam ho!”

Nalini, instead of getting irritated (as she normally would), walked to the sofa quietly, placed her bag down, and sat beside them. Her posture was soft, not defensive.

Her mother noticed.

“Sab theek hai?” she asked gently.

“Yes, Ma,” Nalini said. “I just... feel different.”

Before her mother could ask more, Nalini cleared her throat, took a deep breath, and said the words she needed to say:

“I have work news.”

This, of course, guaranteed immediate drama.

Bua ji's eyes narrowed.

“What news? Promotion? Transfer? Or has your boss realized you work too much and decided to punish you?”

Nalini shifting to dining table now, gently folding her scarf.

“It's an international trip. Work-related. Korea.”

Dead. Silence.

The kind of silence movies add before an explosion.

Then—

“Tu KOREA JA RAHI Hai?!”

Bua ji's voice cracked through all seven chakras.

Ma dropped the ladle in the kitchen with a metallic CLANG.

Nalini nodded calmly.

“Yes, bua ji. Office trip. Few days.”

“Few days? Few days?!”

Bua ji rushed to the sofa dramatically, clutching her chest like she was auditioning for a TV serial.

“A single, unmarried girl going alone to Korea! KOREA! Do you know how dangerous that country is?!”

Nalini blinked.

“Dangerous? Korea? It's one of the safest places—”

“HAH!! That's what they want you to think!”

Bua ji pointed a trembling finger at her.

“I have seen documentaries! They eat strange food! They jump from hills for stamina! They dance in groups! A single girl will get kidnapped in one minute!”

Nalini stared.

“Bua ji... that's K-drama.”

“Same thing!”

Ma rubbed her forehead, whispering a prayer for patience.

“And what will you eat?!” Bua ji continued her meltdown.

“Who will protect you?! Who will carry your bags?! Who will stop the airport people from misplacing your luggage?!”

Her mother reached for her hand. “Bata, beta. Kab jaana hai?”

“Tomorrow night.”

“HAWWW!!”

This time Buaji looked personally betrayed.

“Kal raat?! Kya matlab? Kal raat? Yeh koi golgappa trip hai kya?!”

“Bua ji,” Nalini said gently, “it's urgent. Client review. Supplier meeting. They need me.”

That last sentence...*They need me*...wasn't spoken with arrogance.

It was spoken with a calm certainty she hadn't felt in years.

Her mother felt it too. She nodded slowly.

"Toh jaana chahiye."

Nalini looked up sharply. "Ma?"

"Haan. Work is work." Her mother squeezed her fingers. "Aur tu jaayegi toh khud par bharosa aur badhega. Jaa !."

That quiet, steady sentence was enough to silence Nalini for a moment.

But not Buaji.

"Hum sab trust karte hain! Par duniya? WORLD? Bahar kya kya hota hai pata hai? Kidnapping, robbery,sab kuch!"

Her mother sighed and stood up with determination. "Koi na....kuchh ni hota...Jao."

Buaji tried one last emotional card.

"You aren't scared? Single ladki... akeli... Korea..."

Her voice dropped to a dramatic whisper.

"K-Dramas mein sab cute hota hai. Reality mein sab risk!"

Nalini finally laughed...a soft, warm, unexpected sound.

"Bua ji... please. It's just a work trip. Four days. I'll be back."

"FOUR DAYS?!"

Bua ji threw her hands in the air.

"Bas! Yeh sab hi dekhna tha...ladki akele videsh jaye gi..!"

Nalini rolled her eyes gently.

Her mother simply went to the kitchen.

And that's when reality hit Nalini.

Ma was... quietly packing.

The Packing War Begins-

It started innocently enough...one small tiffin.

Then another.

Then a small cloth bag of parathas.

Then the dabba of theplas.

Then chutney.

Then pickle.

Then dry snacks.

Then masala packets.

Then a small bottle of jeera water concentrate "in case tummy gets upset."

Then two steel bowls "in case hotel mein acha khaana na mile."

"MA!" Nalini protested, entering the kitchen. "Stop! I eat very little! The trip is just four days!"

Her mother continued packing like a soldier preparing her daughter for war.

"You say four days," she said calmly while folding rotis, "but I am your mother. I know you. When you get stressed, you eat nothing. When you get tired, you drink only coffee. And when you get busy, you forget food."

"That's not true."

Her mother turned and gave her that sharp, all-seeing look.

"...Okay, fine. It *is* true," Nalini muttered.

“Exactly.”

Her mother packed another set of theplas with the determination of someone loading a rocket ship. “Eat properly.”

Nalini groaned. “Ma, they will think I’m migrating.”

“They should think you are responsible and well-fed.”

“It’s embarrassing!”

Her mother didn’t stop.

“Good. Let them know you have a mother.”

Nalini leaned against the wall, defeated but smiling.

Her mother then added...

A small red pouch.

The kind that contained haldi, a safety pin, a coin from some temple visit years ago, a tiny Om folded inside tissue, and three cloves.

“Ma...” Nalini whispered, eyes softening. “You don’t need to...”

“I do,” her mother said, pressing the pouch into her hand. “Keep it in your bag. Don’t argue. For my peace.”

Nalini held the pouch against her palm...

And for the first time since waking from that dream, something warm flickered inside her chest.

Something soft.

Something ancient.

She slipped it into her backpack quietly.

Behind them, Buaji re-entered the kitchen dramatically.

“Accha, accha, packing ho rahi hai? Very good. Add nimbu. Add ajwain. Add haldi doodh mix. International stomach can betray anytime!”

“BUA JI!” Nalini groaned, half laughing, half wanting to hide under the sink.

But her mother just smiled and kept packing.

And in that tiny, overstuffed kitchen filled with haldi smells and soft arguments, something magical was happening.

Something Nalini had never paused long enough to notice:

Her mother wasn't packing food.

She was packing love.

The kind that travels across oceans without passport.

The kind that fills empty hotel rooms with warmth.

The kind that doesn't let loneliness sit on your bed quietly at night.

The Quiet Moment

Later, when Buaji went to watch TV and the kitchen was cleaned, her mother found Nalini again...standing by the window, hands wrapped around a cup of warm water.

“Beta...”

Nalini turned, expecting instructions or another list of safety precautions.

Instead she found her mother looking at her with... something tender. Something searching.

“You seem lighter today,” her mother said. “Something changed?”

Nalini hesitated... then nodded slowly.

“Yes.”

Her mother waited patiently, as if she had waited all Nalini's life for this moment.

“I had a dream,” Nalini whispered.

“Oh?”

“I met... someone. Not... someone real. I don't know how to explain it. But it felt like... someone understood me. Truly understood me. And told me something I needed to hear.”

Her mother's lips curved into the softest smile.

“Sometimes,” she said quietly, “God sends people into our dreams when our heart stops listening while awake.”

Nalini's breath caught.

“And what did she tell you?” her mother asked gently.

Nalini swallowed.

Looked at her hands.

Then at the window.

“She told me... I've been carrying too much pain. And I don't have to.”

Her mother's eyes glistened.

“Oh, my child,” she whispered, placing her hands on Nalini's cheeks, “I've waited so long for you to see that.”

Nalini didn't cry.

She didn't break down.

She simply leaned her forehead against her mother's...

And breathed.

For the first time in years.

Later That Night

The house settled into that soft, sleepy silence only Indian households have after dinner:

Steel plates drying by the sink.

TV murmuring in the living room.

Bua ji muttering to herself about “Korea ki hawa.”

The faint scent of agarbatti drifting from the puja room.

Nalini sat cross-legged on her bed, suitcase open in front of her. For once, it wasn't filled with worry. Or doubt. Or heaviness.

Just clothes.

Files.

A small pouch from her mother.

And... hope.

A tiny, flickering kind.

She folded her kurta and placed it inside gently, her mind calm.

Her chest light.

Her eyes soft.

As she zipped the bag, she whispered into the quiet room,

“I'll be okay.”

And for the first time...

She believed it.

The Flight

Next Day, time to go..

The airport glowed like it always did...too bright, too cold, too full of shiny tiles and people dragging their lives around in suitcases with squeaky wheels...but tonight, somehow, everything shimmered with a secret meaning only two people were carrying.

Sid had reached first.

Of course he had.

He stood right in front of the departure gate, backpack on one shoulder, hair slightly messy, eyes scanning the crowd with a mixture of excitement, nervousness and the vague fear that Nalini might text him last-minute saying:

“I have decided not to come. Korea can fix itself.”

But she didn't.

She walked toward him through the sliding doors exactly at 9:03 PM...calm, steady, composed, rolling a suitcase that looked way heavier than someone who “eats very little” should ever need.

Sid didn't blink.

He stuck his neck out like a meerkat spotting a miracle.

“Hey,” Nalini said softly.

“Hi,” Sid replied, trying to sound casual but failing spectacularly because his voice cracked like a teenager's.

Nalini raised an eyebrow.

“Voice warm-up kiya tha?”

He cleared his throat loudly.

“Just aviation allergies. Happens before flights.”

“Aviation allergies,” she repeated, unimpressed.

He nodded confidently.

“Very serious condition.”

She shook her head, trying not to smile... and he caught it.

That tiny smile.

Something inside his chest did a little somersault.

Airport Security ... The Comedy Chapter They Didn't Sign Up For

Because universe is a comedian, *the very first security queue* turned into chaos.

Nalini went first.

Straightforward. Calm.

Removed laptop. Liquids. Power bank.

System beeped clean.

Sid followed...

And instantly became the main character of a South Indian comedy movie.

Beep.

He looked confused.

The security guard raised an eyebrow and pointed at his pockets.

He emptied them.

Beep.

He frowned. "Sir, I have nothing."

"Belt," the guard said.

"Arre haan..."

He removed it.

Beep.

Sid stared at the machine like it had personally betrayed him.

"Sir...watch," the guard tried again.

"Watch!"

He removed it dramatically.

Beep.

Now even Nalini was staring at him like he was trying to smuggle an entire iron factory inside his jeans.

The security guard sighed and gestured him aside.

"Sir, shoes."

Sid froze.

"Shoes?! Why? My shoes are innocent!"

The guard didn't even blink.

Sid looked at Nalini helplessly.

He removed his shoes like he was handing over his firstborn child.

Beep.

"Sir," the guard said, exhausted, "You are wearing metal-frame underwear, kya?"

“WHAT?!” Sid shrieked. “EXCUSE ME?!”

The guard stared.

Then pointed at Sid's jacket.

“Oh.” Sid said.

“Oh.”

He had forgotten the metal zipper.

Nalini covered her face with both hands.

When he finally passed security, barefoot, offended and dramatically sulking, she whispered,

“If this is how you are in India, Korea will deport you on arrival.”

“Don't talk to me,” he mumbled.

“I was emotionally profiled.”

Boarding Time

They found their seats...side by side.

The moment Sid saw their names together on the boarding pass, his inner self played violins, temple bells, and AR Rahman background music simultaneously.

He sat down, fastened his seat belt and muttered under his breath:

“This is fate.”

Nalini, placing her bag in the overhead compartment, said casually,

“No, this is corporate booking logic.”

In Sid's mind:

Corporate booking logic = soulmate placement algorithm.

He smiled anyway.

Takeoff ... The Moment Silence Speaks

When the plane began rolling, Nalini's fingers curled around the armrest.

Very lightly.

But he noticed.

"Are you scared of flights?" he asked softly.

"No," she lied.

The engines roared louder.

Her jaw tightened.

"Are you sure?" Sid asked again.

She didn't respond.

He watched her for a moment...the calm woman, the tough woman, the woman who could stare down a boardroom of irritated executives...looking almost... fragile.

He placed his hand near hers.

Not touching.

Just *near* enough for her to take it if she wanted.

She didn't look at him. Barely there.

As the plane lifted into the sky, her grip grew firmer...stronger than she intended, maybe...but neither of them pulled away.

Through the window, city lights shimmered like scattered gold.

Inside the cabin, everything felt quiet.

Suspended.

Sid whispered, almost inaudible,

“You’re okay.”

She didn’t respond.

But her shoulders relaxed.

Her breath steadied.

And for the first time in a very long time, Nalini allowed someone to share the sky with her.

The Meal Drama

Two hours later, dinner arrived.

The air hostess smiled.

“Veg or non-veg?”

Sid said, “Veg, please.”

Nalini said the same.

The trays arrived...and the moment Sid lifted the foil, he froze.

“Kya hua?” Nalini asked.

He pointed at the dish.

“It’s... mashed vegetables. Mashed. Like baby food.”

Nalini blinked.

“So? Eat it.”

“No. My soul refuses.”

She rolled her eyes. “It’s just food.”

“NO,” Sid declared. “This is a betrayal. This is a crime. This is...”

Nalini took a spoonful from her tray.

“It’s not that bad.”

Sid gasped dramatically.

“Don’t tell me you like it!”

“It’s fine,” she said, shrugging.

“That’s it,” Sid whispered, horrified. “You are dangerous.”

Nalini hid a smile and continued eating.

But then the real twist came.

She opened the side compartment of her bag...

And pulled out thepla.

And aloo sabzi.

And homemade achar.

Sid’s jaw dropped.

“You WHAT?!” he whispered.

“My mom packed it.”

“And you didn’t tell me?!”

“I didn’t think it mattered.”

“Of COURSE it matters!” He looked betrayed. “People announce promotions, engagements... you’re sitting here with THEPLA like it’s not world-shaking news!”

She shrugged again.

“Want some?”

Sid blinked.

And then nodded passionately.

She tore a piece and handed it to him.

He tasted it.

And moaned.

“Your mother....thats too delicious...”

Nalini looked at him, something soft flickering in her eyes.

Late Night, Mid-Air ... When Walls Fell

Hours passed.

Cabin lights dimmed.

Passengers slept.

Even the engine seemed quieter.

Sid sat with his head leaned slightly toward her side, scrolling photos of Seoul places on his phone.

Nalini sat quietly... looking at the clouds outside the window.

“You okay?” Sid whispered.

“Yes.”

But he kept looking at her, and she felt it.

Finally she whispered,

“I don’t know why... but something feels different these days.”

Sid didn’t interrupt.

“I feel... lighter,” she continued. “Like something inside is waking up.”

He nodded.

Softly.

“Maybe you finally allowed yourself to.”

She looked at him.

Really looked.

“You think so?”

“I know so.”

Their eyes held a moment too long.

Nalini looked away first... but not because she was uncomfortable.

Because she wasn't.

And that scared her in a new, unfamiliar way.

Just Before Sleep

The plane cruised at 37,000 feet.

A quiet hum of blue lights filled the cabin.

Sid pulled a thin blanket over himself, then hesitated...

And placed the other half gently over Nalini's arm.

She looked down.

Then at him.

He shrugged, whispering,

“You'll catch cold.”

Nalini didn't argue.

She didn't push his hand away.

She simply let the blanket be.

A few minutes later, her head gently drifted sideways...

And rested on his shoulder.

She didn't realize it...as by now she was in deep sleep.

But he did.

He froze.

Completely still.

Barely breathing.

Not wanting to wake her.

Not wanting to move.

Not wanting to break the moment.

By the time she shifted and her breathing deepened, Sid whispered into the dark, with a smile that touched his eyes:

“Korea, I'm ready. Take my life.”

And Above the Clouds...

Far above them, beyond the altitude the plane could ever reach, Goddess Parvati Ji watched the two heads resting nearly together, her eyes filled with quiet joy.

Lord Shiva, beside her, chuckled.

“You made this happen, didn't you?” she teased.

Shiva shook his head.

“No,” he smiled. “They were always meant to sit side by side. I just... made sure no one else took seat #28B.”

Parvati ji laughed softly.

And somewhere between the stars and the airplane, a blessing drifted quietly downward.

Divine Question : Why treat Bhakta & Non-Bhakta equally ?

Night had settled gently across the world, not like a blanket tossed carelessly, but like the soft shawl a mother places over a sleeping child...careful, warm, protective.

High in the sky, a silver airplane hummed through clouds, carrying Nalini and Sid toward a country they had only ever seen in movies and PowerPoint maps. Inside that small aircraft, two humans unknowingly leaned closer to the exact paths destiny had carved for them long before either of them had learned how to speak.

But above them...far above the airplane lights, above the turbulent clouds, above the sky that humans believed was the highest point...there existed another quiet world.

A world where silence did not mean emptiness.

Where stillness was not loneliness.

Where two divine beings sat together, watching over the stories of mortals the way one watches fireflies on a summer night.

Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati.

Husband. Wife. Eternal partners. Witnesses to every heartbeat in creation.

And Parvati Ji...soft-eyed, thoughtful, carrying the tenderness of a million mothers...watched Nalini for long, long moments.

The girl asleep against Sid's shoulder did not even know she was being seen. Not as an employee. Not as a daughter. Not as the stoic, guarded woman she had trained herself to become.

She was seen as she truly was:

A soul carrying old wounds, old faith, old strength.

A soul that had been praying with silence.

Parvati's voice rose softly, like wind moving through temple bells.

"Swami... there is something I have always wanted to ask you."

Shiva's lips curved in a smile that felt ancient and young at the same time.

"Ask, Devi."

Her eyes did not leave Nalini.

The girl's breathing was peaceful, yet fragile.

A kind of calm that looked borrowed, temporary.

Parvati Ji whispered:

"I often wonder this... What truly separates a bhakta from a non-bhakta (believer & non-believer)?"

Her words were not an argument. Not a challenge. Just a mother's heart, trying to understand her children.

She continued, her voice growing more thoughtful, more curious:

"Both were created by you. Both walk the paths you placed beneath their feet. One folds hands, chants your name, seeks you with trembling devotion. The other laughs, denies, questions, sometimes even mocks the idea of a creator.

Yet both cry.

Both struggle.

Both hope.

Both break.”

Her gaze softened further.

“And still you protect them equally, Swami. You bless both with sunrise, breath, love, chance.

How? How do you hold both the believer and the unbeliever in the same gentle palm?”

Shiva closed his eyes momentarily, as though savoring the sweetness of her question.

When he opened them, galaxies seemed to swirl inside.

“Devi,” he said quietly, “there is no difference in the soul of a bhakta and a non-bhakta.”

Parvati Ji tilted her head slightly, listening like a student, not a goddess.

“They are not two different species,” Shiva continued.

“They are simply two different ways of carrying the same longing.”

Parvati blinked once, letting the idea settle.

Shiva’s voice grew softer...almost intimate.

“The bhakta says, ‘I know I belong to something greater.’ The non-bhakta says, ‘I belong only to myself.’ But both belong to me.”

Parvati smiled gently. “Then why does one call you, and the other refuses to?”

Shiva laughed under his breath. A soft, knowing laugh.

“The bhakta calls me by my name. The non-bhakta calls me by his loneliness.”

Parvati’s breath caught at that.

Shiva continued:

“One folds hands.

One folds pain.

One prays.

One pretends he doesn't need prayer.

One whispers for help.

One shouts that he can do everything alone.”

He paused...a pause full of compassion.

“But both speak to me. Both. Just not in the same language.”

Something in Parvati's heart trembled in recognition. She was, after all, the mother of the universe. She knew what it meant for children to behave differently, yet need the same love.

Why the Blessing Never Chooses

“Swami,” she murmured, “but a bhakta pours their heart into your feet. A non-bhakta pours their heart into their own hands. Still... why bless them equally?”

Shiva looked down at Earth with a tenderness that felt infinite.

“Devi,” he said softly, “does a mother feed only the child who praises her cooking?”

Parvati laughed...warm, sweet, overflowing.

Shiva smiled, continuing: “Does she protect only the child who touches her feet every morning?”

Parvati shook her head instantly.

“Never. A mother protects all. Always.”

Shiva's tone deepened.

“My blessings do not choose. My children choose how much of that blessing they want to feel.”

Parvati inhaled., “And the bhakta feels more because...?”.

“ Because he looks for me,” Shiva said.

She nodded slowly, “And the non-bhakta?”

Shiva’s eyes softened into pure affection.

“He feels me too...He simply gives me a different name.

He calls it coincidence. He calls it luck. He calls it timing.”

Parvati laughed again, this time with her whole face.

Such a human reaction from a goddess.

Two Paths, One Home

“Swami...” she said thoughtfully. “Their journeys seem opposite.

One surrenders. One rebels.

One sees you everywhere.

One refuses to see you at all.”

Shiva lifted one fingertip and traced a curve in the sky.

A luminous spiral appeared, glowing softly between them.

“All journeys bend,” he said.

“All journeys twist.

All journeys wander.”

He pointed at the glowing spiral.

“But every single one...every last one...leads back to me.”

Parvati whispered, “Even the ones of those who deny you?”

"Especially theirs," Shiva said with a quiet smile.

"They struggle the most.

They question the most.

They break the most.

But when they return...

They return with the deepest understanding."

Parvati's eyes watered...not with sadness, but with overwhelming recognition of cosmic truth.

And Then...

She looked down again...at Nalini sleeping with her head tilted slightly toward Sid, and Sid sleeping slightly tilted toward her.

As if the universe had shifted their weight just by a fraction so their shoulders could touch.

"Swami..." Parvati whispered, "what about these two?"

What happens now?"

A slow smile spread across Shiva's face...mysterious, amused, certain.

"Their karmas," he said, "have begun whispering each other's names."

Parvati's breath caught.

"And what does that mean, Swami?"

Shiva looked at her as if he were looking at the very beginning of creation.

"It means," he said, "that even if they try to walk away now...

Destiny will tug their sleeves."

Parvati laughed softly. "You speak like a poet tonight."

Shiva shrugged. "Love turns everyone into a poet...even gods."

"And Sid?" she teased.

"Oh him," Shiva said with a chuckle, "he thinks he's living an ordinary life.

Wait until he learns that destiny listens even when he is busy making jokes."

Parvati covered her smile with her hand.

"And Nalini?" she asked.

"She," Shiva whispered, his voice almost like a blessing,

"is loved more deeply than she has ever believed.

The universe is simply waiting for her to stop running from that love."

Parvati closed her eyes, letting the words settle in her heart like warm ghee melting on hot stone.

And together, with fingers intertwined, Shiva and Parvati watched the small sleeping airplane drifting across the night sky...carrying two souls who had no idea that gods themselves were patiently waiting for them to open the next chapter of their intertwined destinies.

Riya's Royal Blunder Booking

SEOUL(Korea). HOTEL LOBBY. EVENING

The Korea Disaster

Of all the disasters Nalini had anticipated for this trip—jetlag that clawed at the edges of her brain, miscommunication with suppliers who might as well have been speaking Martian, endless forms and confirmations—the one thing she had not imagined was standing in a Seoul hotel lobby, staring at a receptionist who looked like she had just walked out of a skincare commercial, teeth perfectly aligned, skin that glowed as if it had never known a sunburn or a sleepless night, cheerfully announcing:

“One deluxe room. One king size bed.”

For a full heartbeat, the world didn’t move. Time paused. Nalini blinked. Sid blinked. The receptionist smiled. Like she knew something. Like she *always* knew something.

Sid and Nalini both leaned forward, blinking like faulty car headlights.

“One... what?”

The receptionist beamed.

“One very large king bed. Good for couples,” the receptionist added, tilting her head in the way that made Nalini want to shove the nearest potted plant at her. *Couples*. She felt her blood pressure spike, her lungs tighten. Her hands curled into fists she didn’t even realize she was making.

Sid turned toward her slowly, like a man discovering betrayal in 4K clarity. “Did we just get booked... on a honeymoon package?”

Nalini ground her teeth so loudly she could have sworn even the Buddha statue outside the lobby flinched. She muttered something darkly about burying Riya in a suitcase. Sid’s shoulders twitched, and for a brief second she thought he might actually collapse into laughter or rage—she couldn’t tell which.

And then they entered the room.

There it was. The majestic, cloud-like, impossibly soft king bed. One. Singular. And beside it, a tiny couch that looked allergic to humans. No extra mattress. No fold-out salvation. Nothing. Just... white sheets glowing under the hotel lights, teasing them, mocking them.

Sid let out a low whistle. “Look..... at..... that,” he said, hands on his hips, voice dripping with mock horror. “The romantic tension of a horror movie.”

Nalini ignored him. Picked up her phone. Dialed Riya. Eyes burning with fury. Fingers trembling like she hadn’t eaten in days. The video call connected. There was Riya. Sipping bubble tea. Smiling. Oblivious. Obliterating two lives with the casualness of a cat stepping on a paper.

“Hey guys! Reached? Isn’t the room soooo cute? They had a limited offer on shared suites! Saved the company so much money!”

Nalini stared at the screen. The universe contracted. “There is ONE BED, Riya,” she said, voice trembling somewhere between disbelief and menace.

“Oh yes!” Riya chirped, zooming in on her drink like it was more important than human suffering. “But it’s a king sized bed, na? Big enough for dreams and distance!”

Sid muttered under his breath, “I hope your Wi-Fi dissolves.”

Riya winked, and disconnected saying, “Relax! Build a pillow wall. Goodnight!” . Just like that. Leaving behind the faint echo of her laughter, like someone had tossed acid into the air.

Sid tossed his bag onto the floor with all the subtlety of a falling cupboard. “Alright. I’m taking the bed.”

Nalini froze. Her heart stalled for three beats. “I’m sorry, what?”

“I earned it,” Sid said, reclining slightly, hands behind his head. “Fourteen hours of turbulence, security pat-downs, and surviving your Olympic-level sarcasm. I *deserve* the mattress.”

“Oh perfect,” she shot back, teeth gritted. “Then you’ll be absolutely comfortable on the floor. Matches your vibe.”

They stood on opposite sides of the bed, two warriors sizing each other up, negotiating peace terms they would never admit out loud. Sid grabbed the hotel notepad.

“Rock, paper, scissors?”

Nalini’s laugh was sharp, dry, lethal. “We are *not* resolving adult problems with kindergarten activities.”

Sid smiled. Collapsed onto the bed. “Then I officially claim this land. Colonization 2.0.”

“Get up,” she hissed.

“Or I’ll turn the A/C to minus eighty.”

Sid held up the remote like a shield.

“Try me. I sleep in hoodies.”

Ten minutes later, they lay stiff-backed on the same bed, opposite directions, separated by a barricade of hotel pillows. A peace treaty of sorts. Silence settled, not calm, just exhaustion.

Sid broke it first. "If you try to steal the blanket, I will retaliate."

Nalini didn't turn. "If you roll even an inch to my side, I'll file a workplace conflict form in English, Korean, and Hindi."

"Fine."

"Fine."

Then, softly, almost in confession: "I hope Riya gets locked out of her email forever."

Nalini snorted, a tiny, guilty laugh escaping despite herself. "I can't believe she put us in a sitcom."

And just like that, their phones buzzed. A message from Riya.

"Sleep tight you two :D #TeamBonding #1RoomChallenge"

Sid froze. Nalini buried her face in a pillow.

And that was it. The beginning. The chaos neither of them ordered, but both were going to live. Every single awkward, absurd, ridiculous second. And somehow, in the middle of the hotel lights, the pillow walls, the tension, and the distant hum of Seoul outside, it already felt like a memory they wouldn't forget.

Boardroom Meeting & Traditional Rice Wine

Seoul — The Day Fire and Ice Entered a Boardroom

The morning sky in Seoul looked washed and quiet, the kind of blue that feels crisp enough to slice. Nalini and Sid walked into the towering corporate building together, though no one would guess it from the stiff, overly professional space between them. Both looked polished, calm, ready. Almost *too* ready - the kind of calm that comes after surviving a shared trauma... like a honeymoon suite neither signed up for.

The Korean boardroom was a pristine aquarium of glass and quiet authority. Executives sat neatly, men in dark suits, women in elegant muted tones, a tray of rice cakes arranged with mathematical precision at the center of the table. The hum of efficiency filled the air.

The Korean lead executive with gentle smile, sharp eyes welcomed them with a nod.

“Hotel was comfortable, I hope?”

Sid smiled a shade too brightly.

“Oh yes. Very... accommodating.”

Nalini’s answering smile was all diplomatic sweetness with an undercurrent of murder.

“Everything was extremely... unified.”

Their eyes met for half a second - tiny sparks of mutual threat and went back to pretending professionalism.

And the presentation began.

As always, when the world turned to numbers and logic, they shifted from frenemies to frighteningly efficient partners.

Numbers. Graphs. Projections. Logistics.

Sid spoke first—easy, confident, slicing through the hum of the room like a scalpel. Supplier volatility. Risks. Probabilities. Nalini followed, precise, surgical. Timelines that chopped weeks off expectations, solutions that seemed almost unfairly clever. Clearing all doubts and bringing clarity that even a transparent glass could not have. The kind that make people in the room sit back and go, *huh. Damn.*

The senior-most executive, Mr. Han, watched them closely. He barely reacted, just a thoughtful “Hmmm...” that made both of them momentarily question their entire careers.

But then Ms. Choi, younger, observant, spoke with genuine warmth.

“This is very sharp work,” she said. “You both are... very aligned.”

Aligned. The word nearly made Sid choke and Nalini glare at him. But before either could ruin the illusion, Mr. Han smiled broadly.

“You two are good team. And funny.”

Nalini immediately replied, “We’re funny by accident.”

And moment later, meeting ended with everyone laughing in room.

And then it happened. Mr. Han extended an invitation neither of them had prepared for.

“A traditional Korean team dinner for our guests. Tonight. Many dishes... many drinks.”

Sid perked up like a labrador at the word *dinner*.

Nalini accepted with a polite nod, already regretting her existence.

As they walked out, Sid murmured under his breath,

“This is karma. For the bed.”

Nalini didn't miss a beat.

“Then you better learn to eat fermented food without crying.”

The Beginning of the Downfall

Korean BBQ Night.

The restaurant they arrived in was warm and buzzing, a cozy maze of low tables, sizzling grills, and side dishes arranged like edible art. Shoes came off at the entrance. Sid managed to sit cross-legged with the grace of a newborn deer attempting yoga. Nalini gave him a look that said she would never let him live this down.

When Mr. Han lifted his shot glass to toast, Sid followed—unaware, holding a tiny glass of Soju in his right hand.

That shot burned through him like holy fire.

“That,” Sid whispered hoarsely, “that....was not water....aahgg!!.”

Nalini found this far more entertaining than she should have.

Soon the table filled with grilled pork, kimchi, garlic, tiny bowls of mysterious pickles, and sauces so aromatic even Sid forgot his suffering. He tried to wrap meat in lettuce the way Ms. Choi demonstrated.

His piece fell. Twice.

“It just fled your chopsticks like your logic in meetings,” Nalini murmured.

Sid accepted his fate. Then came the garlic incident.

He thought it was tofu...but it wasn't.

"It feels like my throat is melting," he whispered.

Mr. Han roared with laughter.

"You are very brave!"

Nalini was laughing too - real, unarmored laughter that softened her entire face. Even Sid paused a second, noticing.

Then someone passed Nalini a tiny glass of milky-white liquid. She sniffed it, intrigued.

"It smells like vanilla and snow."

"Makgeolli," Ms. Choi explained. "This...this is a Traditional rice wine...Try, you will love it."

Sid eyed it suspiciously. "It looks like yogurt and danger had a baby."

(But Nalini? She drank it like it was a story waiting to unfold.

And soon... it did.)

Fifteen Minutes Later. A New Nalini Emerges

By the third glass, she was gently swaying, cheeks glowing, eyes soft in a way Sid had never seen.

"It tastes like rice pudding went to a spa," she announced happily.

Sid blinked. "You're unusually cheerful. This is not normal. Are you okay?"

"I feel light," she said dreamily. "Like I've transcended project deadlines."

“That’s not transcendence,” Sid muttered. “That’s you detaching from reality.”

Mr. Han was delighted.

“You enjoy Makgeolli very much, Ms. Nalini!”

“Mak-go-lly,” she repeated, raising her glass, “is my new partner.”

Sid leaned in, whispering, “She’s naming the drink. This is definitely not going good..”

Later..

The Great Exit. A Messy, Memorable Night

Outside the restaurant, the team waved goodbye with smiles. Sid reached for Nalini’s elbow just as she attempted to walk straight—and failed with artistic confidence.

She held her heels in one hand, mumbling Korean phrases she barely remembered.

“Gon... bae... Sid, let’s gonbae more...”

“No more gonbae,” he said, guiding her firmly. “We’re going home.”

She stopped suddenly, poking his arm.

“You know what your problem is? You’re too... too... horizontal.”

“Do you mean serious?” he asked.

“No,” she said dramatically. “You walk like you always know where you’re going. It’s annoying.”

Sid laughed despite himself.

“Well somebody has to guide the human noodle that used to be Nalini.”

In the hotel lobby, she suddenly shushed him.

“Ssshh. They’ll know I’m drunk.”

“Who?” he whispered.

She pointed at a potted plant.

“That guy. He’s judging.”

Sid almost collapsed laughing.

He somehow checked them in, somehow dragged her to the hotel room. She stumbled onto the bed and mumbled into the pillow:

“You’re not terrible, Sid. You’re like... a dependable power cut.”

“A what?”

“You go off at the wrong time,” she slurred, “but people still trust you.”

Then she went completely quiet. Fast asleep.

Sid stood there for a moment, just watching her breathe, watching the walls she carried crack open for the first time since he met her.

He set a glass of water by her side, tugged a blanket over her shoulders, and turned off the lights.

Then, finally, he collapsed onto the couch, texting Riya:

“She’s alive. Barely. Thanks for the single-room disaster.”

Riya replied instantly.

“Welcome! That’s what I call bonding under beverage.”

Sid groaned aloud.

And yet... he smiled.

Outside, Seoul sparkled in the night oblivious to the quiet chaos unfolding on the twelfth floor.

Mr. Han - Thoughtful or Flirtful

Seoul. Day Two: The Kind of Morning That Changes the Air Between People

The second morning in Seoul had a strange brightness to it, as though the city had polished itself just for them. Sid and Nalini walked side by side into the luxury boardroom once again, where their Korean hosts were waiting.

Mr. Han, in a faultlessly tailored white suit, rose with a courtliness that seemed almost old-world.

“Ms. Nalini. Mr. Sidharth. Welcome again. It is our honor.”

Nalini offered him a warm, measured smile.

“Thank you, Mr. Han. Your hospitality has been wonderful. And thank you for your... patience.”

Sid added, with the polite sincerity of someone masking exhaustion,

“Especially for tolerating a risk team so sleep-starved we almost mistook your elevator for a meditation pod.”

The table chuckled. Even Mr. Han’s lips twitched.

The meeting unfolded smoothly. Nalini led most of it—her voice steady, her explanations so clean that even the translators found themselves nodding in rhythm. She spoke as if she were slicing open a puzzle to show the pieces inside.

Mr. Han watched her with rare intensity.

“You are sharp,” he said at one point, almost admiringly. “A rare combination - clear and bold.”

Nalini smiled at that, though only a corner of her mouth gave her away.

"It's sometimes the only way to cut through noise."

"Then you," Mr. Han said, eyes warm, "are silence with precision."

Sid leaned toward his laptop, muttering very softly,

"Okay, Shakespeare, take it down a notch."

When the meeting ended, applause echoed warmly around the room. People rose, shook hands, traded cards. Sid was halfway through collecting cables when he noticed Mr. Han approaching Nalini, not with businesslike formality, but something gentler.

He took her business card with both hands, bowed slightly... and then, with an almost European fluidity, kissed the back of her hand.

A hush rippled across Sid's spine.

"You must join us tonight," Mr. Han said, still holding her hand lightly. "A small celebration!! Let's celebrate success of this meeting with more relaxed gathering."

Nalini blinked, surprised but composed, and before she could think of words to reply, she accepted.

"We'd be honored."

Behind her, Sid whispered to the universe,

"Oh perfect. Another relaxed event where people kiss things unexpectedly."

A Corridor, Two Colleagues, Something Unspoken

They walked down the hallway together afterward, the faint scent of cedarwood from the conference room still clinging to

them. Nalini looked genuinely radiant—pleased, a little flushed, her eyes glittering with professional satisfaction.

“That went well,” Sid said casually.

“Better than I thought,” she replied. “Mr. Han is... thoughtful.”

Sid snorted.

“Thoughtful? Or flirtful?”

Nalini turned her smile on him, amused.

“Jealousy doesn't look good on you, Sid.”

“Jealous?” he scoffed. “I'm merely concerned with diplomatic protocol. Pretty sure hand-kissing isn't in the business manual.”

“Maybe he just appreciates confidence,” she said sweetly.

“Something you tend to lose around raw garlic.”

He pressed the elevator button a little too firmly.

In the lift, Sid leaned against the wall.

“So if I kiss your hand in tomorrow's meeting, does that earn us a ten percent discount?”

“No,” she replied dryly. “But it might earn you a slap... and a hashtag.”

“Worth the gamble,” he said with a grin.

The elevator chimed. She stepped out smiling. Sid stayed back a moment, muttering under his breath,

“Great. Now we've got Flirtful Shakespeare in the mix.”

The Rooftop Reception — Seoul Wearing Its Prettiest Smile

That evening the rooftop garden looked magical—string lights glowing like warm constellations, the city's skyline shimmering

in the distance. The air carried a mix of jazz and traditional Korean instruments, something ancient threading through the modern sky.

Nalini walked in first, elegant in an ivory dress that moved like quiet silk. Sid followed, looking sharp in black, though the way he kept adjusting his sleeves betrayed nerves he'd never admit to.

Mr. Han saw Nalini immediately.

"Ms. Nalini... you are the brightest light in Seoul tonight."

She accepted it with a polite smile.

"You flatter me."

Sid muttered into his champagne,

"Man's definitely reading dialogue from a K-drama."

Mr. Han guided her to a seat near the musicians, promising special wines and "a peaceful experience." Sid trailed behind like an unwilling chaperone.

At the round table, small plates of delicacies appeared - tiny, intricate snacks that looked like edible jewelry. Mr. Han poured Nalini a rare Korean wine with such ceremony that Sid felt like he was intruding on a ritual.

A guest leaned toward Sid, observing Nalini's popularity.

"Your colleague... very admired."

Sid gave a polite, strained smile.

"Oh yes. She's a national treasure. I just... carry her laptop."

Nalini overheard and laughed - a sudden, bright burst that made her tilt her head back. Sid froze for a heartbeat, glass halfway to his lips.

Mr. Han watched Nalini with the soft pride of someone discovering a new favorite melody.

"I would like you to consult on a private strategy portfolio," he said. "You bring balance—sharpness and calm."

Sid cut in quickly.

"Don't forget the spreadsheets that bite. Very important talent."

Mr. Han smiled.

"And you bring... enthusiasm."

"I bring backups of *her* backups," Sid muttered.

Then the music changed...a soft, graceful traditional dance starting up. Mr. Han turned to Nalini, offering his hand with gentle certainty.

"In our culture," he said, "when we admire someone, we invite them to dance."

Nalini hesitated, eyes flicking to Sid.

He kept his expression easy, even playful.

"Go ahead," he said. "I'll hold the wine and... whatever's left of my dignity."

She went.

And Sid felt something unspoken stir uneasily beneath his ribs.

(Definitely, a tough moment to digest right before his eyes...)

Sid began taking back steps without turning around and slipped out to the balcony, away from the music and the gentle swirl of compliments aimed at Nalini. The air outside seemed cooler, cleaner. He leaned on the railing, letting the city lights blur a little. The balcony could feel the heat inside his chest despite, cold breeze.

Not long enough, the balcony's door opened again. He didn't turn immediately. He didn't need to - he felt her presence settle beside him like a familiar weight.

"You okay?" Nalini asked.

"Perfect," Sid said, still looking at the skyline. "Never better watching a poetic billionaire waltz with my risk reports."

She laughed softly, a warm curve in the quiet.

"You're jealous."

"I'm not jealous," he said too quickly. "I just don't trust men who rhyme compliments with spreadsheets."

She nudged his arm.

"You're jealous."

He finally looked at her then. Her face still carried a flush from the dance, her eyes searching his in a way that made the moment feel suspended.

"Maybe..." he said quietly, "I just liked it better when your sarcasm was aimed at me. Not danced away."

The honesty surprised her...stilled her for a second.

"Sid," she said softly, "it was just a dance."

"Yeah," he replied, stepping back. "Whatever. Time to head out."

He turned and walked toward the door without looking back, the lights casting long shadows behind him.

Nalini stood there for several seconds...motionless, almost breathless...watching him go, her expression - unreadable but her eyes refusing to blink...

Wine & Confession?

Seoul — The Night That Didn't Go How Either of Them Expected

None of them spoke a word on the way back to hotel. It seemed, both of them just wanted to either burst out what was inside or not a word to be spelled at all(which seemed more comfortable). The hotel room door swung shut behind them with a soft click, and somehow the silence they'd carried back from the rooftop party followed them inside like a third, awkward guest.

The room's lights glowed to life. Too warm. Too romantic. Or almost embarrassing.

And there....on the bed....Seoul decided to prank them again.

A chilled bucket of plum wine glistening like temptation, a tray of artisan chocolates arranged too seductively for corporate travelers, and a note card resting in the middle, absolutely delighted with itself:

“For our favorite honeymoon guests. Enjoy the magic of Seoul.”

Sid stared at it as though it personally insulted him.

“...Did we just walk into someone else's romantic subplot?”

Nalini's left eye twitched.

“No. We walked into ours. Curated by Matchmaker Riya.”

Sid held the card up with theatrical disappointment.

“‘For our honeymoon guests.’ Amazing. This hotel truly believes in giving doomed couples a second shot.”

Nalini marched toward the phone like she was pursuing vengeance.

"I'm calling reception."

A brief dialing noise. Then her professional smile—sharp enough to cut glass.

"Yes, this is Ms. Desai from 1204. We've just received wine, chocolates, and... emotionally charged ambiance. We did not order it."

But the receptionist cheerfully destroyed her patience:

"It's part of your Romantic Seoul Nights package, ma'am. Non-refundable. Enjoy!"

Click.(with this, receptionist disconnected the call swiftly)

Sid leaned back, grinning.

"Did they just hang up on you? The woman who terrifies our entire division?"

Nalini placed her hands on her back, defeated.

"Apparently love is non-refundable."

Sid uncorked the wine.

"Well. Since the universe insists we're a couple..."

"No." she snapped.

"Oh right," he murmured, "Only Mr. Han is allowed to pour you fancy fermented beverages."

She snatched the bottle.

"Alright...Give it."

"I knew it. Predictable," he said, but he smiled.

On the Balcony - Seoul Below, Plum Wine Above

They sat on the balcony a little later — two glasses, one city, and air full of things neither dared admit.

Sid broke the silence first.

“I still can’t believe he kissed your hand. Twice. In the boardroom. That’s HR’s nightmare in four countries.”

Nalini smirked.

“I thought it was sweet. Elegant.”

“Elegant?” Sid gasped. “Okay. Next meeting I’ll bow, quote poetry, and carry a rose in my laptop bag.”

“You’d stab yourself with the thorns before finishing a sentence.”

They laughed — really laughed — the wine tinting their breaths warm.

After a moment, Nalini set her glass down, quieter.

“You know... you’re not always annoying.”

Sid pressed a hand to his chest dramatically.

“I’m framing that.”

Nalini (quietly, almost surprised), “You defended me today. At the party. In subtle ways.”

She looked at him sideways, her voice softer.

“You defended me today, Sid. At the party. You don’t... say things. But you do things. Subtle ones.”

Sid turned toward her slightly.

“I always do, Nalini. Even when you don’t notice.”

Their eyes met. Something quiet settled between them.

A Few Glasses Later - The Kind of Honesty Plum Wine Forces

Nalini leaned back, her eyes glossy, swirling the wine like it held answers.

"This wine is... dangerously good. Sweet. Tricky. Kind of like hope."

Sid smiled gently.

"You're drunk."

"Not drunk. Just... cracked open."

She stared at the lights below, her voice small.

"You asked earlier what's behind the armor. You won't like the answer."

Sid waited.

"There was someone," she whispered. "Or... something like someone. Family had opinions. Expectations. Control disguised as concern."

She swallowed. "I left. Lost pieces of myself. And somehow I'm still the one blamed for it."

The glass trembled in her hand.

Sid took it quietly from her.

"They were wrong."

She laughed bitterly.

"They were family."

"Still," he repeated, softer. "They were wrong."

Her breath hitched unexpectedly.

"Why does kindness hurt more than criticism sometimes?"

"Because you're not used to carrying it."

A single tear escaped her eye before she even knew. She didn't wipe it.

"I hate plum wine," she whispered, with fake smile.

Sid smiled softly.

"I think the wine finally introduced me to the real you."

"Don't fall for her," Nalini murmured. "She's temporary. Like a glitch."

"I'm still glad I met her," he said.

The night deepened.

Seoul glimmered below like stars scattered on earth. The bottle of plum wine is nearly empty now. The laughter has quieted. Words have slowed.

Nalini's head rests gently on Sid's shoulder. He doesn't move...as if the moment might slip away if he even breathes too loudly. He froze, then softened into it.

"Your head feels heavy," he whispered.

She didn't move.

Didn't deny it.

"No one's ever rested their head here before," he said, softer. "It's... weird. But warm."

She murmured into his shoulder,

"I hate you."

He laughed lightly.

"Lovely. New territory."

She added, almost inaudibly:

“But I also... like you.”

The world stilled.

That lands like a stone in still water. Sid stares forward, unsure how to process it. Then he does what he always does with serious moments...tries to lighten it. Sid stared at the skyline like it suddenly made sense.

Sid, with a crooked smile, “Well, great. Should I get that printed on a T-shirt?

‘I hate you... but I like you.’ Classic corporate romance merchandise.”

“Shut up.” she whispered, laughing, “You’re impossible.”

Sid, “And yet, here I am. Shoulder rental — no charge.”

Another pause. Nalini slowly lifts her head from his shoulder, sits upright - suddenly strong,

“No. No more wine talk. I’m strong. I take care of myself.”

Sid gently looks at her, “You are. You’re stronger than anyone I know.”

Nalini looks back at him with half-smile, “Say it like you mean it.”

Sid in soft but steady words, “You’re beautiful. Intelligent. Stronger than you let anyone believe.”

Then he adds, quietly, with heart: “And that’s not just me saying it. That’s... my heart saying it.”

Nalini freezes.

Her eyes search his...not for answers, but for truth.

A drop of tear escapes her left eye. She doesn’t wipe it. Doesn’t blink.

She just keeps looking at him - as if, for the first time, seeing all of him, and realizing he's been right beside her all along.

Sid (seeing the tear, whispers), "Nalini..."

He looks away. Suddenly bashful. Nervous. He tries to stand, to break the weight of the moment.

Sid attempts to stand abruptly, "Okay. Yep. Too much wine. Too much emotion. Need water. Maybe ice. Possibly a new planet."

Nalini still sitting with soft voice, "Don't run away, Sid."

He stops. Turns back slowly. Their eyes meet again.

Sid, "I'm not. Just scared I'll say something... you'll remember tomorrow."

Nalini, "What if I want to remember?"

Silence. They stare. The air between them heavy, trembling.

Sid sits again, surrendering himself to Seoul. Both of them sitting, quietly. Not talking. Not touching.

Slowly, She Opened All the Doors

After a long quiet stretch, she whispered,

"Can I ask you something?"

Sid sighed.

"You called me a human rice cooker two hours ago, so fine. Ask."

She ignored the joke.

"Why do you care about me?"

He blinked.

"You're... you."

"No. Not vague," she said. "Real. Why?"

Sid stared at her, then away.

“Because someone should.”

He pours another small drink for her. Then one for himself. No more jokes. Just honesty.

Sid (raising his glass), “You pretend to be iron. But you crack under silence. Someone has to be there to... notice before it happens.”

They clink glasses gently. No words. Just understanding.

She let that sit.

Then she spoke ... voice trembling but honest.

“You rearranged my desk when I was on leave. You keep my glass turtle facing east. You swap tasks with me. You pretend the complex sheets are yours. You feed me when I skip. You sit next to me when I panic. You notice me when I’m silent.”

Then, barely audible.....

“How do you notice so much?”

He sighed, as if admitting something heavy.

“Because you break quietly. And I... can’t stand watching someone pretend they don’t. Also, I really hate that turtle. It judges me.”

A quiet clink of glasses.

“No one’s ever told me that,” she whispered.

“They don’t have to say it,” Sid said softly. “But they should show it.”

She laughed through her tears.

“You confuse me.”

“Welcome,” Sid muttered, “to my kingdom.”

She leans her head gently against his shoulder. He doesn't move. Doesn't breathe too loud. Just... lets her rest.

The wind brushes past them. Seoul glows beneath.

The wine is sweet. The pain softer.

And with time - they both fade Out.

Pretend Nothing Happened Last night, not even a word.

Following morning, the sunlight came in too aggressively for people who had clearly made poor decisions the previous night. It sliced through the curtains and straight into the messy Seoul hotel room where Sid lay diagonally across the couch... one sock missing, hair honest about its suffering, while Nalini woke up half-buried under a blanket, her blazer still buttoned like she had fought sleep and lost terribly.

The plum wine bottle had tipped onto its side inside a room-service tray, defeated.

And the glass turtle on the table had rotated halfway to the horizon, looking at them with the exact judgment they deserved.

Nalini checked her phone, squinting.

“Four... it’s four PM?!”

Sid rubbed his face. “Oh no. We died. We definitely died in Korea and resurrected on a Sunday afternoon.”

She paused. “Wait. Isn’t it Monday?”

“Pretty sure it’s Sunday,” he said, sighing like a man who wished it was Wednesday already.

Nalini let out a massive breath. “Good. No office. Perfect. Amazing. Everything is fine.”

Sid watched her with the kind of stare that had been rehearsed over years of observing her denial patterns.

“You’re doing it.”

She frowned. “Doing what?”

"The whole 'nothing happened, it was just the wine, please ignore that my soul temporarily leaked out of my mouth' routine."

Nalini grabbed a water bottle. "Obviously nothing happened, Sid. Unless you count me giving a heartfelt TED Talk to a glass turtle."

He raised an eyebrow. "You also told me you hated me and liked me in the same breath."

She sipped the water dramatically. "Wine hallucinations. Common phenomenon. Saw it on the internet."

Sid blinked. "Ah. So it's going to be that version of the morning."

"What version?" she asked, pretending to type an invisible report.

"The version where you act like you didn't call me beautiful or collapse your entire emotional firewall on my shoulder."

She looked up just long enough to deny it. "Nope. No recollection. Must've been the turtle."

Sid nodded slowly. "Of course. The glass turtle is responsible for all our emotional breakthroughs now."

A tiny smile tugged at her lips.

"Look, I had a lot of plum wine and a functional amount of self-respect. So unless you have a full transcript from last night, I think we should both move on with our lives."

"Absolutely," Sid said, grabbing a bottle of water like it was an escape rope. "Normal colleagues. Normal business trip. Zero emotional nudity."

They stared at each other.

Sid cleared his throat. "Good. Because I don't remember anything either. Not a single poetic compliment or meaningful confession."

"Excellent," Nalini said, falling onto a beanbag with the grace of a wounded cat. "Perfect."

And thenRiya video-called.

Both froze.

"If she asks about the wine," Nalini whispered, "I'm blaming you."

Riya's face appeared on the screen, smiling like she'd engineered their downfall.

"Good morning, almost-lovers! Did the Romantic Seoul Nights package work the magic?"

"No," Sid said instantly. "Just wine. No romance. Mostly emotional therapy."

Riya squinted. "Why does Nalini look like she's in post-confession denial?"

"This is my 'I need a new intern' face," Nalini replied.

"And Sid," Riya continued, "is wearing a very 'She said something meaningful and now I'm spiraling' expression."

Sid pressed the end-call button like he was defusing a bomb.

"Goodbye, Riya."

"Goodbye unresolved tension!" she sang before disappearing.

Silence returned.

The hangover settled. The awkwardness brewed.

And then ... as if cued by some cosmic director ... they both burst into laughter.

"This is so stupid," Sid wheezed.

"I know," Nalini said, wiping her eyes. "We sound like two emotionally constipated squirrels."

"Who woke up in Seoul at 4 PM."

"I'm starving."

"Oh hell ya, me too", said Sid.

"How about we explore Seoul today?", she asked.

"Aye aye Captain, lets do it !!",

They changed, left the hotel, and by five o'clock were wandering through a quiet street market lined with sizzling stalls. The air smelled like comfort. A violinist played something soft nearby, and somehow it fit the whole scene absurdly well.

They each held a warm cup of tteokguk, blowing steam off the surface.

Sid pointed to a tray of fried octopus.

"Want to try that?"

"Is that the thing with the tentacles that look like warnings?" she asked.

"Exactly," he said. "Let's eat fear together."

She laughed. "Deal."

They ate on a tiny wooden bench, watching people move through the evening like they had nowhere urgent to be. The city breathed around them — gentle, curious, forgiving.

Sid glanced at her.

"Even if you 'forgot' last night..."

"I forgot everything," she cut in, too fast.

He smirked. "Right. Of course. But in case I ever say something meaningful again—"

"I'll record it and blackmail you with it."

Sid grinned. "I'd expect nothing less."

Later, while they walked side by side, their shoulders brushed together. A tiny touch. Not accidental. Not acknowledged.

They walked on, sipping soup, laughing at a street sign they both misread.

They didn't talk about the night. They didn't need to....Unaware of the universe's plan that would shake their soul out.

Nalini is Gone!!

The evening was beginning to soften over Seoul, its sky folding into shades of orange and rose. Lanterns flickered awake above the streets, one by one, until the whole market looked like a living constellation hanging just low enough to touch. Vendors shouted over one another, skewers hissed on open grills, and the air tasted faintly of sweet smoke and spices.

Sid and Nalini walked shoulder to shoulder, sometimes brushing arms, sometimes drifting apart only to fall back in step again without noticing.

“Look at those,” Sid said, pointing at a stall overflowing with octopus skewers. “Come on. YOLO.”

Nalini made a face so dramatic it would’ve earned her an award.

“I’d rather eat the stick, Sid.”

They laughed, weaving through the crowd, past rows of sizzling pancakes and dizzying scents.

Sid stopped near a vendor frying something that jiggled in a suspicious way.

“At least smell this! It’s basically a rite of passage. Seoul won’t let you leave till you’ve burnt your tongue.”

“I don’t trust foods that move before I do,” she said, smirking.

He turned to pay the vendor. It couldn’t have been more than five seconds.

But...when he turned back..(shocked & surprised)

Nalini is Gone!!

She wasn't beside him anymore.

He spun, scanning the immediate circle of people.

She had paused just a moment ago to look at some delicate hand-painted fans. Now the crowd had shifted, like a tide that had rolled in and swallowed her whole.

"Nalini?" he called.

Nothing.

Meanwhile, Nalini had realized the same truth in the opposite direction. The stall owner had just finished explaining something she didn't understand, and when she turned to share a sarcastic comment with Sid....he was gone.

"Sid?" she called lightly at first. Then louder. "Sid!"

But her voice dissolved into the swell of chatter, the clatter of pans, and the low hum of evening energy.

Every face was unfamiliar. Every direction looked the same.

She reached for her phone. No signal.

Just her reflection staring back....small, anxious, foreign.

She tried approaching people, but the moment she opened her mouth—

"Hi—excuse me—do you speak English? I'm looking for—"

They only smiled politely. Bowed. Apologized without words.

Someone even tried to sell her a skewer in the middle of her panic.

The lantern light grew brighter. The shadows deeper. And the world louder.

Nalini couldn't breathe for a moment. Her eyes stung. She hugged her arms around herself, but it didn't stop the tremor in her chest.

"I'm strong," she whispered. "I'm strong. I'm...."

Her voice wavered, failed.

She sat on a low concrete step, bent her head, and let the tears comethen tried to stand and wipe them away, refusing to crumble but unable to stop her eyes from searching the crowd.

He had to be somewhere. He had to be.

Across the market, Sid was pushing through groups of people, breath uneven.

"Nalini!"

"NALINI!"

But his shouts drowned in the swell of noise.

Then..he saw something.

A helium turtle balloon floating lazily above a stall.

Then another. Then a cluster.

(Of course it had to be turtles. Of course...!)

Sid bought every single one, tied them together like a floating beacon of idiocy, climbed onto a wooden cart, and lifted both arms above his head — waving the balloon cluster back and forth with a sincerity so ridiculous it bordered on heroic.

It was stupid. It was desperate. But it was unmistakably him.

And from a distance, Nalini..eyes blurred with tears..noticed a strange movement in the air. Something colorful and frantically wiggling like a distress signal made by an overgrown child.

Her steps slowed. Then quickened. Her throat tightened. Her vision doubled.

And then, without warning, tears spilled again not from fear this time, but from the overwhelming relief flooding her chest so suddenly she could barely breathe.

She wiped her eyes again and again, but her vision kept returning to the same figure:

Sid. Standing on a cart. Holding a swarm of turtle balloons.

Waiting.

Frozen as if the universe had paused him there until she found her way back.

She walked. Then quicker.

Then she ran.... pushing gently through people who somehow seemed to part just enough for her to slip through.

Sid saw her approaching.

He lowered his arms.

The balloons drifted lazily above him.

His expression softened in a way she had never seen...not even last night.

For a moment, they simply stared across the buzzing, glowing chaos.

When she finally reached him, her breath came in broken pieces.

"I thought I lost you..." she cried, the words collapsing as soon as they left her mouth.

Sid stepped off the cart and pulled her towards him in a hug so tight, so steady, she didn't fight it even for a second.

"You didn't," he murmured against her hair. "You just found me."

She buried her face in his chest, sobbing with the kind of relief that strips you of everything...ego, armor, pride.

His hand rested on the back of her head.

He didn't say anything else.

He didn't need to.

Just two people finding each other again in the middle of a city that didn't know their names—but somehow knew this moment mattered.

And for that minute, nothing else existed. Not the market...Not the noise....Not the world.

Just Nalini and Sid.

Found again.

Three Words Game

The chaos of the market slowly dissolved behind them as they wandered into a narrow side street, the kind that glowed softly under old street lamps. The world here felt gentler—no shouting vendors, no crowds, just the smell of broth simmering somewhere nearby.

They ended up at a tiny plastic table outside a noodle shop run by an elderly man with a crooked cap and a radio playing faint old Korean pop. He ladled steaming broth into bowls with the concentration of someone who'd been doing it for decades.

Sid took one loud, unapologetic slurp of his noodles.

“I swear this is either the best thing I’ve ever tasted... or I’m too emotionally exhausted to care.”

Nalini laughed, still a little hoarse from everything that had happened.

“You cried more than I did.”

He looked personally offended.

“I did not. That was eye sweat. Very different.”

“You panic-sprinted into a man carrying squid. You smelled like soy sauce for ten minutes.”

Their laughter echoed down the quiet street—loose, unguarded laughter, the kind that shakes tension off your shoulders and leaves something softer in its place.

Later, with their bowls empty and their bellies full, they walked again. The side streets had quieted even more, paper lanterns bobbing gently above them, swinging with the night breeze.

Nalini nudged him with her elbow.

"Alright. Game time. Seoul edition. You ready?"

"Oh God," he groaned. "Am I about to suffer?"

"No punishments." She grinned. "But you have to answer all my questions in exactly three words."

Sid laughed. "Oof. Dangerous. Okay. Hit me."

She walked a few steps ahead, then slowed.

"What did you feel," she said softly, "when you saw me crying?"

He hesitated...not out of uncertainty, but because three words felt painfully small.

"Broke. Inside. Ran."

Nalini nodded once, a small smile tugging at her lip.

"Three words. Impressive. Your turn."

He stuffed his hands in his pockets.

"Favorite thing tonight?"

She didn't think long.

"Lanterns. Noodles... you."

He stopped walking for half a second, blinking.

"You said you."

She shrugged dramatically. "Too late. Move on."

They continued down the quiet road.

"What's your biggest fear?" he asked after a while.

Nalini's voice lowered.

"Getting lost... again."

His answer came a moment later, quiet but certain.

"You won't be."

She turned to him sideways. "That's four words."

"Worth breaking rules," he said, smirking.

They reached a crosswalk. The little red man blinked above them, and a street guitarist nearby began strumming something soft and slow. A couple passed by, holding hands loosely, as if it were instinctive.

Nalini watched them for a moment before she spoke again.

"Okay, last question. No rules this time."

"Shoot," he said.

"If we weren't colleagues," she said, eyes ahead, "what would you do right now?"

He didn't even need to think.

"I'd take your hand."

This time, she looked directly at him.

"Then take it," she whispered.

And he did.

No ceremony. No hesitation. Just the simple closing of a distance that had been shrinking for days.

They crossed the street like that...hand in hand. Seoul's night glowing around them. They didn't say anything. They didn't need to. There was a quiet, shared smile between them, the kind that settles gently in your chest and refuses to leave.

They weren't a couple. Not yet. But something had shifted...something soft, real, and unmistakably theirs.

For the first time in days, maybe weeks, there was no space between them.

Only warmth. Only the night. Only them.

Ego or You | Universe's new plan ?

Ego Blinds us, can break even the purest destined bond.

Next Morning arrived slowly, almost shyly, spilling warm, golden stripes across the room as if trying to soften whatever bruise the night had left between them.

Nalini woke up...not dramatically... just a quiet blink, a stretch, a soft “ugh” escaping her throat.

Her head still carried the ghost of last night-
lanterns...

his hand in hers...

the faint warmth of his shoulder where she'd rested for too long,
too willingly...

the stupid plum wine that loosened things she usually kept
bolted shut.

For a moment, she allowed herself to smile.

(And then she heard his voice.)

Clear. Professional. Too professional.

Sid stood near the window, half-turned away from her, laptop open, sunlight outlining him like some calm, golden statue.

His posture was crisp. His tone steady.

No trace of last night. No softness. No hesitation.

“.....yes, Mr. Han. Phase 2, I can take full lead.”

(Her breath stopped. Not slowed. Just stopped.)

The words hit her harder than she expected, sharper, colder...and the remnants of last night's warmth evaporated instantly, like someone had opened all the windows.

He kept talking. Calm. Confident.

Agreeing, nodding, promising.

And then she heard him say it:

"It might be simpler this way."

Simpler.

Something inside her clenched...old, unwelcome, but familiar like a nightmare she thought she'd outgrown.

Simpler... without her?

Had he really moved on that easily? Had he really agreed to take the entire project lead...just like that...without even a conversation?

The kind of insecurity she hated, the kind she fought so hard to bury, clawed its way up her throat.

She tried to steady her breathing but she failed.

When Sid closed his laptop and turned around, he looked annoyingly happy to see her. Soft smile, soft eyes...the man actually looked like he wanted to say something sweet.

"Morning," he said, cheerful. "You look..."

"What was that?" Nalini's voice was cold enough to freeze the room.

He paused. "What was what?"

"That call."

"It was just Han..."

"Han assigning you Phase 2?" she cut in, folding her arms. "And you calling it 'simpler' without me?"

Sid's expression shifted...confusion first, then mild disbelief.

"Nalini, that's not..."

"You said it!" she snapped.

"You said you'd take full lead. You said it'll be simpler. What? Am I suddenly a complication?"

Sid's eyebrows pulled in. "Wait...no. No, no. That's not what the call was about at all."

She let out a disbelieving laugh. "I heard you Sid...you all are same...!"

(And that....that hurt Sid.)

"Yeah, and you heard *half* a sentence," he said, frustration creeping in. "Han wants to run two parallel streams. You're heading the new regulatory project. I'm handling Phase 2. We need two leads, not one. You weren't replaced—you were promoted."

She blinked. The words lodged in her throat.

A hot wave of embarrassment rose in her chest...but wounded pride shoved it aside.

"You could've told me," she muttered. "Instead of sounding like you're... taking over everything."

"Because you were asleep," Sid replied, exasperated. "And I didn't think I had to file a morning report before talking to my own partner."

"That's not the point."

"Then what *is* the point?"

"That you didn't think about how that sounded!"

"And you didn't think before accusing me of screwing you over!"

(Silence...sharp...painful.)

Nalini looked away, her jaw tight.

Sid ran a hand through his hair, pacing once.

"You always do this," he said softly...too softly. "You take a fear and make it my intention."

Her head snapped up.

"Oh, so now I'm paranoid?"

"Not paranoid," he said, voice cracking with tired honesty.

"Just...unwilling to believe I'm ever on your side."

"That's not true."

"Then tell me," Sid said, stepping closer.

"Why is your first instinct that I'd push you out? Why is it easier to believe the worst about me?"

Her throat tightened.

She didn't have an answer she was willing to expose.

So she attacked instead.

"Because you don't exactly have a spotless record of prioritizing me."

Sid's expression shattered...like someone had struck him.

"That's low," he whispered, "And unfair."

She looked away, swallowing anger that was mostly hurt.

"And you," she said, voice shaking & loud now, "you always assume you're the hero. That your version is the right one. That I'm just overreacting."

Sid laughed once...bitter, not amused.

"Maybe because sometimes you do."

Her breath hitched. He instantly regretted it...but the words were out, hanging between them, poisonous and alive.

"Oh," she whispered. "So I'm dramatic now."

"Nalini..."

"You know what? Save it. I don't want explanations anymore."

His shoulders tightened.

"And I don't want to keep proving I'm not the enemy."

(There it was...the crack...the break. Two people standing in a hotel room in Seoul, saying all the wrong things for all the right reasons.)

Her voice dropped to a whisper meant only for him.

"Let's just... stop whatever this is. Whatever we're trying to be."

Something in his face closed. Slowly. Finally.

"Fine," he said, stepping back.

"Consider it stopped."

Her heart twisted painfully.

She nodded...because pride was cruel like that.

"Good."

"Good," he repeated, though his voice betrayed him.

She turned away first, still murmuring, "You're just like the others. Nice on the surface. Manipulative underneath."

Sid, "And you're just like every person who thinks pain gives them the right to be cruel."

Silence.

After few seconds, Sid in exhaustion, "Fine...after we return... I'm requesting to be off this project".

Nalini in quiet & flat tone, "Good. I don't want to see your face again"...and leaves the room.

He watched her go - watched the distance grow, watched the softness of last night drain away like it had never existed.

When the door shut behind her, Sid let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding.

And when she finally reached the elevator, Nalini realized her hands were shaking that she had to hide in her pocket.

The elevator doors closed with a muted *ding*, and suddenly the world outside disappeared. The metallic walls felt like a cage, tight and suffocating, pressing against her chest, echoing the heaviness that had settled there since Seoul night.

Nalini sank to the floor, knees drawn up, arms hugging them like fragile armor. She let herself collapse, though she knew she shouldn't. She knew she was "too much," too sensitive, too...human.

The memories of the night came crashing in, relentless: Sid's hand brushing hers, the warmth of his shoulder when she had rested there for far too long, the quiet laughter that had felt like a soft promise. That moment—the one fleeting night where the world seemed gentle—kept replaying in her mind like a cruel loop.

And then the questions started.

Why did I let myself trust him?

Why did I let myself feel something so easily, so fully?

Even if I made a mistake...why didn't he understand?

Her chest constricted, breath coming in jagged, uneven bursts. Tears spilled over, unstoppable now, wetting her sleeves, her hands, pooling onto the elevator floor. She didn't care that she was crying openly, that her sobs echoed in the confined metal box. No one was there to see, to judge, to dismiss her.

Am I broken? the thought whispered, cruel and insistent. *Am I doomed to feel alone, abandoned, every time I allow myself to open up?*

Each memory cut like a knife—the warmth of his hand, the gentleness in his eyes, the quiet understanding she had felt for the first time in years. And yet...he hadn't stayed. Not in the way she needed. Not in the way she had hoped.

Her body shook. She pressed her face into her knees, trying to muffle the sobs, but they kept spilling out. She wanted to scream, to let it all out—the frustration, the grief, the heartbreak that felt too deep to name.

Was it my fault? Did I misread him? Did I...expect too much?

Even as the questions tumbled over her mind like relentless waves, another, sharper pain pierced her: fear. Fear of being left alone again, fear of feeling that hollow emptiness she thought she had buried long ago. Fear of her own vulnerability, exposed, raw, unprotected.

She hugged her knees tighter, wishing—wishing more than she had ever dared—that someone would see her, truly see her, without her having to explain herself, without judgment,

without words. Just hold her. Just hold the fragile pieces she had spent years patching together.

Her sobs slowed, not because the pain had passed, but because exhaustion claimed her. Her body and soul trembled, spent from carrying so much hurt, so much longing. And yet, even in that quiet surrender, the ache remained. It clung to her ribs, to her heart, stubborn and unyielding, a reminder that healing was not a moment—it was a process.

She whispered into the empty lift, voice hoarse, barely audible:
I don't want this pain again. I can't go through it again.

And as the elevator descended, silent and indifferent, Nalini realized with a brutal clarity: She is much okay being along as she was then keeping hopes.

Inside the life,...all she had was the echo of her own sobs and the harsh, cold reflection of herself in the polished metal walls.

Strange, brave, foolish way humans learn love.

Above the Clouds. Where Gods Watch What Humans Break

Far above the roar of cities, above the thin breath of mountains, where only silence and snow exist, that is where the Himalayas hold their secrets.

Parvati Ji sits beside Lord Shiva. No throne. No spectacle.

Just the stillness of the universe wrapped around them like an old shawl.

Before them floats a shimmering orb of light...not quite a mirror, not quite a memory, but something sacred that holds human moments the way a mother holds her child: gently, even when it cries.

Inside the orb, two figures flicker.

Sid, walking away with that stubborn determination that fools even himself.

Nalini, phone in hand, desperately texting Riya for return flights & staring at same text she can't bring herself to answer.

Between them lies a silence thick enough to bruise.

Parvati Ji - "Why do they suffer like this?" she murmurs, her voice carrying more ache than anger... "Why does love collapse so easily... when all it needed was one moment of honesty?"

(Lord Shiva does not rush to reply.)

His eyes rest on the two mortals below...not with pity, but with that profound, impossible patience of someone who understands heartbreak as part of creation.

Finally, he says, "Because the truths that matter cannot be handed to them, Devi. They must be discovered in the quiet aftermath of their own breaking."

Parvati Ji sighs, watching Nalini's shoulders curl inward, the way people fold when they are trying not to collapse.

"But she cared," she whispers. "She always cared. And he... he stood by her in ways she never recognized. Must love always taste like bitter fruit before it sweetens?"

Shiva smiles (a tiny, understanding curve of the lips), "When ego wraps itself around love, even sweetness feels sharp. And when pride delays the truth, even affection turns poisonous."

Below on earth, Nalini wipes a tear she didn't realize had fallen.

Sid begins to pack his luggage, eyes moist.

Above, Parvati Ji's eyes glisten.

"She didn't know," Parvati Ji says. "She misunderstood. And when she tried to correct it, the moment was already slipping away."

"Not too late," Shiva says softly.

"Just not ready. Even fruit that looks ripe may hide its sweetness inside. Time will coax it out... not force."

Parvati turns to him, a quiet plea in her gaze.

"Will they meet again, Mahadev?"

Shiva looks not at the orb now, but at Goddess eyes now -

"If they choose heart over hurt," he says.

“If they learn that forgiveness does not always wait for apology. If they understand that love is not noise... but courage in silence...”

His voice drifts like mountain wind.

“...then yes. Their paths will cross again. As surely as rivers return to the sea.”

“And if they don’t?” Goddess’s question disturbs the air on earth for a moment.

“Then.....then story would be re-written...because Sid is not wrong” Lord takes a moment and breathes....“Then the lesson will be different, but not wasted,” Shiva answers.

“For some storms don’t come to break. They come to cleanse. And even shattered hearts sow seeds of who they are meant to become.”

Parvati Ji nods, though her eyes remain on the fading image of Nalini standing still, clutching her phone like a lifeline frayed at the edges.

And high above it all, the Gods keep watch...not intervening, not judging, simply witnessing the strange, brave, foolish ways humans learn love.

He is going, She is watching

When They Returned — The Office That Didn't Feel Like Home Anymore

There is a strange cruelty in how life returns to normal even when people don't.

The morning after their flight back from Korea, the office looked exactly the same — same glass partitions, same familiar hum of printers, same overwatered plants by the window. But the air... the air had changed.

Or maybe *they* had.

Sid walked in first. Coffee in hand, backpack slung over one shoulder, looking like someone who had packed too many unspoken words in the luggage he didn't check in.

Riya bounced toward him with her usual chirpy grin.

"Sid!! You're back! How was Seoul? Did you..."

He didn't snap...he didn't frown...he just gave a thin, tired smile that didn't touch his eyes.

"Yeah. Productive trip," he said, voice flat but polite...too polite. Like a man rehearsing distance.

Riya's smile faltered.

"Oh. Um... okay. Good."

Sid nodded once and walked away, not hurried, not awkward, just deliberately neutral.

Neutral enough to make it obvious something was terribly wrong.

Across the hall, Nalini stepped into the office at nearly the same time.

She looked immaculate, sharp, precise — a woman who had spent an entire night reminding herself how to hold her spine straight. Karishma ran up to her, practically vibrating.

“Nalini! You’re back! Tell me EVERYTHING - the food, the presentations, the...”

Nalini stiffened almost imperceptibly.

“It was fine,” she said, voice crisp, clipped at the edges.

Not rude...not warm...just cold.

Karishma blinked, confused. “Oh. Uh... you okay?”

“I’m busy,” Nalini replied, already walking away...just like that.

Two greetings that should have been normal became warnings...!

As if detonations without sound.

They avoided each other with precision - Sid by choosing another lift, Nalini by shifting her desk time.

They had once walked together through a crowded Seoul night, laughing over noodles and lanterns.

Now they couldn’t cross a hallway without the air stiffening.

And suddenly, one day...

Sid packed his desk quietly that afternoon. Not hurriedly, not like someone eager to escape, but with a kind of deliberate care that made it look almost ritualistic. Files were stacked neatly, pens aligned, notebooks closed with a satisfying click, like he was sealing off a chapter of his life that he hadn’t fully agreed to leave. There was something in the way his hands lingered on

the edges of folders, the slight tremor when he slid a photo into his drawer, that suggested he knew exactly what he was doing and also had no idea at all.

Riya spotted him before he could vanish entirely. Her voice cut through the hum of the office, bright and curious, tinged with panic.

“Wait... Sid, you’re... moving floors?”

He shook his head slowly, the kind of movement that carries more weight than words. “No. Moving projects.”

There was a pause, a breath too heavy to be casual. “Actually... stepping away entirely, for now.”

“For how long?” Her voice cracked like brittle glass.

Sid smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. Behind that polite curve of his lips, there was something dark and quiet, like a shadow had decided to camp there and make itself comfortable. “Does it matter?”

And then he left. Just like that. No further explanation. No dramatic farewell. Just a quiet, almost cruel severing of a connection that everyone on that floor had relied on, laughed at, leaned on.

Nalini came out of her meeting just in time to see him hand in his badge. She didn’t meet his eyes, and he didn’t glance at her, and in that perfectly timed avoidance, the space between them felt like it was charged, electric, ready to snap. Of course, Nalini, true to form, looked anywhere but him. At the ceiling. At the floor. At her own fingers. Anywhere.

Riya sidled up to her, coffee in hand, pouting like a small, melodramatic child who’d just discovered the world wasn’t fair.

“I miss him,” she sighed, the words dangling like a confession in the air. “He used to make the whole floor laugh. Even lunch

felt alive. Now? Now it's like a funeral. I swear even the AC sounds quieter without him."

Nalini's jaw tightened sharply, almost visibly. The muscle flickered like a warning light under her skin. "Can we not talk about Sid?" Her voice was cold, precise, sharp—like breaking glass, like the sound could cut through the absurdity of grief and levity all at once.

Riya blinked, caught somewhere between confusion and hurt. "Why not? I mean... you two—"

"No," Nalini cut her off, a surgical slice of denial. "Just... no."

Riya shrugged, stepping back as though Nalini's barrier was a wall she couldn't climb, could barely even peek over. Confusion lingered in her eyes, wounded in a way that made the office suddenly feel smaller, quieter, emptier than it had even an hour ago.

Nalini turned away from Riya, from Sid, from the echoes he left behind in the room. She stared at the window instead, the sunlight hitting just right so that the dust motes floated lazily in the air like little ghosts. And she wondered, quietly, not admitting it even to herself, how someone could leave a room—and a life—so completely, and still linger everywhere.

Later

When the floor emptied for the day, Nalini stayed behind. She didn't move. Didn't check her phone. Didn't even really look at the spreadsheet open in front of her. Numbers stared back, cold and bold, perfectly arranged in rows and columns...but she couldn't see them. Couldn't care. Her mind had other spreadsheets to sort: loss, irritation, a kind of ache she hadn't given a name yet.

Her phone lay beside her. Silent. Blank. Stubborn. She imagined it mocking her, the way it always seemed to do when she wanted something to happen fast. No pings, no vibrations, no sign of him. She tried to tell herself, in that painfully rational way she had mastered over years of corporate survival: *He left because he wanted to leave. He didn't fight. He didn't care enough to stay.*

The ugly voice inside her chest...ugly, shrill, insistent...whispered: *If he doesn't care, then I don't care.*

And for a moment, she believed it. She clenched her fists, pressed her palms against the cold edge of table, letting the hard surface steady her trembling hands. But the truth has a way of sneaking in sideways, and her hands trembled anyway...the way truth does, right before it breaks free, before it insists on being recognized, even if it's inconvenient.

Outside her cabin glass, the world moved on as if nothing had shifted. Employees walked past in neat lines, small clusters, coffee mugs in hand, laughter spilling, screens glowing. To anyone looking in, everything was normal. Everything was intact. But inside Nalini, something was cracking. A quiet, insistent fracture spreading through the floor of her chest. It didn't ask for permission. It didn't knock first. It just came, a slow fissure, widening with each heartbeat, each inhale.

And somewhere else in the building, Sid walked out the office doors for the last time... Not with a grin. Not with relief. Not even with anger. Just that peculiar, eerie kind of silence...the one that only comes when you lose something you didn't even realize you'd been holding onto, and suddenly, it's gone.

He hadn't slammed the door. He didn't make a scene. He just moved, folding himself out of the space they'd shared in quiet, efficient, human chaos. And Nalini, alone in the dimming light of the cabin, felt the weight of his absence like gravity had

doubled, pulling at her ribs in ways that spreadsheets and deadlines could never measure.

She leaned back in her chair, staring at the ceiling tiles. Counting them. Thinking about all the things she would never say. All the arguments that would never happen. All the jokes that would never make him laugh. And she realized, in a way she hated, that the silence he left behind was louder than any words could ever be.

THE QUIET COLLAPSE OF A MAN WHO LOVED LOUDLY

Sid didn't go home ...not immediately.

He sat in his car for almost forty minutes, hands on the steering wheel, staring at the faint reflection of his own eyes in the windshield. He looked tired. Older. A little lost. Like someone who had run too fast, too far, and wasn't sure where the road even ended anymore.

His chest felt heavy, but not in an obvious way...more like something was jammed between two ribs, refusing to dissolve.

The fight & argument replayed in loops. Her voice, sharp and cold.

His words, sharp and tired. Her last sentence.

Silences that hurt worse than the shouting.

He hated it.

Hated how easily she cut him down.

Hated how easily he reacted.

Hated how they both pulled the trigger the second pain appeared.

And hated...most of all...how much he still wanted her to care.

He finally drove home when the sky started turning a bruised shade of purple.

The city lights blinked awake one by one, but his apartment stayed dark when he entered...

lights off, curtains half-closed, shoes still where he had tossed them two days ago.

There was a stillness in the air that felt almost accusatory.

He dropped onto the couch, elbows on his knees, head bowed. He stayed like that for a long time—long enough for his phone to ring twice (he didn't check), long enough for the hum of the refrigerator to start feeling like company.

He hated ego in relationships. He had always hated it.

He had seen it kill good things, soft things, things people would regret losing five years later.

And somehow, he had walked straight into the same trap with Nalini.

He didn't blame her entirely...neither blamed himself entirely.

Some bonds just... snap under the weight of unspoken fears.

In the quiet, he whispered something he hadn't dared to admit out loud: "I just wanted to be loved... without being punished for it."

Around 11 PM, Robert texted him.

A new project.

Solo. Isolated.

It should have stung.

Instead, it felt like relief...like being allowed to disappear without needing to explain why.

Sid wrote back in two words.

“Sure Rob, Send details.”

He didn't even think. Or maybe he did.

his apartment still dark, still too quiet—

Sid finally picked up his phone.

He opened the gallery. The Seoul folder stared back at him, bright and mocking.

He clicked it open.

God.!!

There were so many pictures.

Her half-smile over the ramen bowl.

The lanterns she made fun of before secretly loving.

Her shadow against the river.

The one picture she didn't know he took....her looking at him when she thought he wasn't looking.

His throat tightened.

He stared at them long enough for the screen to blur.

Then...slowly...he began deleting.

Not all at once.

Not with the quick, merciful “Select All” button.

But one by one.

Deliberately. Painfully.

Like he wanted to feel every memory leave him.

Tap.

Delete.

Another.

Delete.

Her laugh in mid-motion. Her annoyed eye roll.

Her hand near his in that restaurant.

His reflection in her sunglasses.

Delete.

Delete.

Delete.

He reached the last photo -the Seoul skyline.

The one she had said was “beautiful.”

He swallowed hard.

“It wasn’t,” he whispered. “You were.”

And then he deleted that too.

Soon after, his screen went black. His room felt darker.

And for the first time in years, Sid, strong, calm, reasonable Sid-pressed the heels of his palms to his eyes and let himself break quietly.

Not loudly.

Not dramatically.

Just... quietly.

The way a man breaks when he has loved softly, and lost loudly.

The Hurt worsening | Or Universe torturing till she realizes

The Kind of Hurt You Carry Without Limping

Nalini moved through days like someone walking through fog...not lost, just surrounded by a thickness she couldn't name, something that dimmed everything but didn't stop her from functioning. She did what she always did when her heart felt unreliable: she locked it behind work.

It wasn't denial. It was survival.

She answered emails with the precision of someone performing surgery.

She reviewed numbers until her eyes burned. She forced her mind to hold logic like an anchor, because feeling anything right now felt like a luxury she couldn't afford.

She didn't even look at Sid's desk when she passed it.

Not because she didn't want to. But because she wanted to too much.

And when she felt her chest tighten for absolutely no sensible reason during a budget review, she excused herself for "fresh air," walked to an empty conference room, closed the door as quietly as possible, pressed her palms against the table...

and breathed.

Just breathed.

Not cried.

Not broke.

Not trembled.

Just inhaled the kind of breath that fills the lungs painfully because you've been holding it for too long.

She stood there...still, composed...but her body felt like it was made of hairline fractures.

Later, when she reentered the office, no one knew anything. That was the point.

She saw his name pop up on the shared drive around 4:13 PM.

That was when the day started to feel a little less manageable.

Even the appearance of his initials in the corner of the spreadsheet felt like someone brushing against a bruise she had been pretending didn't exist.

She opened the file.

She didn't know what she expected...maybe a mistake she could correct, maybe a note she could roll her eyes at, maybe a single, stupid comma he placed in the wrong place so she could at least have the dignity of being annoyed at him.

But no.

His work was spotless.

Clean.

Cold.

Practiced.

Mathematical.

As if whatever softness once existed between them had been scrubbed away in a single night.

She kept scrolling even though it burned. She felt ridiculous for feeling anything at all.

But the pain was real, quiet, almost dignified...like grief wearing a business suit.

For a moment, she just stared at the file, her hand hovering near the mouse, her throat tight in that way it gets when emotion builds but refuses to surface.

Then she closed it.

Not abruptly. Not angrily. Just... gently.

As if closing a door she wasn't sure she'd ever be brave enough to open again.

Post Office

On her way out of the office, she mechanically wished the security guard goodnight.

She walked to her car, slid into the seat, and let her head fall back against the headrest.

She didn't sob.... didn't scream...didn't crumble.

She just sat there, her breath shallow, like her lungs had turned into something too small, too fragile for the life she was living.

She wanted someone...anyone...to ask:

Are you okay?

What happened?

Who hurt you?

But no one did.

Because no one saw anything.

The Glacier Melts

The Life She Pretended to Want

Months slipped by the way dust gathers on unused books...quietly, steadily, without asking permission.

Nalini lived with a kind of stubborn discipline that almost looked admirable from the outside.

Wake up.

Gym.

Black coffee.

Emails.

Meetings.

Silence.

A routine wrapped so tightly around her that nothing new could breathe inside it.

Everyone said she was “back to normal.”

But normal felt like chewing paper.

The office felt colder too, though no one touched the AC.

It was just... less alive.

Every morning she walked past the pantry ...that same old stupid fridge ... and for a fraction of a second her eyes flickered to the spot where a sandwich used to appear, carefully labeled in Sid’s handwriting:

“Don’t eat, Nalini. This is mine.”

(Though he always made two anyway.)

Now the shelf was empty.

Too empty.

Lunch tasted pale.

Meetings were efficient but colorless. Not a single sarcastic whisper in her ear. Not a single ridiculous joke slipped under the table. Not a single reason to roll her eyes and secretly smile.

Her team noticed the difference too, though they never said it aloud.

People laughed softer. The corridors felt longer. Even her heels sounded lonely when she walked. Some evenings she stayed late, pretending she had work to finish.

Truth was, going home felt heavier than staring at spreadsheets.

In those quiet hours, surrounded by blue monitor light and a half-eaten salad, she told herself firmly,

“I don’t miss him...I’m fine...everything is exactly as it was before him.”

But the lie tasted bitter every time she swallowed it. Because the truth sat somewhere behind her ribs, small and stubborn: Life *was* exactly like before Sid had arrived.

And that was the saddest part...until Riya ruined her crafted peace.

The Glacier That Didn’t Know It Was Loved

Late in the day, Nalini was pouring herself tea the way she always did...carefully, quietly, the entire ritual almost meditative. She had just taken her first sip when the pantry door banged open as if powered by dramatic fate.

Riya entered like a mild hurricane.

Tiffin box swinging from one hand, sticky notes glued to her wrist like she had battled them and lost.

"Tell me, Nalini ma'am," she groaned, collapsing against the counter - trying to be funny, "what's more cruel: Excel sheets or microwaves that heat only the edges of your food?"

Nalini didn't even blink. "Excel sheets," she said flatly. "Microwaves don't judge you."

Riya squinted with funny smile,. "No, *you* judge me. Excel just assists you."

Nalini exhaled a soft snort...her version of a laugh. "You're the only person I know who can lose a file and a spoon in the same five minutes."

Riya puffed her chest. "Hehehe...What can I say? I bring chaos. You bring... whatever the opposite is. Like 'Boss-who-can-burn-a-person-with-one-glance' energy."

Nalini lifted her tea. "Glad to be of contrast."

Riya's hyper commentary bouncing off Nalini's calm, cool walls.

It was normal.

And then...!

Riya ruined normal.

It happened casually, almost carelessly, like someone knocking over a vase without realizing it's heirloom.

She was picking at her noodles when she said, "You know, Sid once called you a glacier."

Nalini froze mid-sip.

“...Excuse me?”

“Yeah,” Riya continued, completely oblivious to the grenade she had just lobbed. “I was complaining about how you don’t smile much and how you made me reprint the report because the font was ‘inconsistent’ ...whatever that means.”

Nalini stared, expression unreadable.

“And he just shrugged and said,” Riya went on, imitating Sid’s voice poorly,

““She’s like a glacier...you think she’s cold... but underneath is an entire ocean.””

(Time seemed to shift. Even the pantry’s buzzing fridge felt too loud.)

Riya kept talking, laughing, stirring her noodles.

“I told him that was the most poetic thing he’s ever said. And you should’ve seen him — he blushed like a full tomato! Then he added...most people never get close enough to see the warmth... and she likes it that way. But if you do, you’ll never forget her.”

The words landed gently...too gently. They didn’t stab - they seeped into her...slowly...sorrowfully. Nalini whispered, almost to herself, “He said that?”

Riya blinked, finally realizing the moment was no longer light.

“Oh... uh... yeah.” Her voice lowered. “I wasn’t supposed to repeat it....Oops!?”

A silence settled between them.

Nalini placed her cup down carefully...as if afraid it might shatter if she wasn’t gentle enough.

She didn't say another word. Just turned and walked back to her desk, the tea warming her palms but not her chest.

The corridor felt longer than usual. Her heartbeat louder. Her steps slower.

She sat down at her desk, fingers resting on her keyboard but unmoving.

And in that quiet, crowded office...something inside her cracked.

Not because Sid apologized...not because he returned...not because they spoke.

But because for the first time, she heard a truth he once said when she wasn't listening:

He saw her. The real her.

The glacier with an ocean underneath.

And she had pushed away the one person who had ever said it out loud.

Truth She Couldn't Deny

The office had emptied long ago. The hum of the AC was steady, indifferent. Nalini sat alone at her desk, fingers hovering over the keyboard, unmoving, as though the keys had suddenly lost their purpose. Her monitor glowed softly, but it didn't illuminate the heaviness pressing against her chest.

Riya's words, spoken with all her usual chaotic innocence, kept looping in her mind: *She's like a glacier... but underneath is an entire ocean.*

Nalini's chest constricted at the memory. She pressed her palms over her eyes, trying to stop the replaying, trying to force the thought away, but it wouldn't leave. Every corner of her mind was crowded with the image of him...the man she had pushed away, yet could not forget.

I don't miss him.

I'm fine. I've moved on.

The lies tasted bitter. The more she repeated them in her mind, the more they scraped against something deep inside her.

No. She wasn't fine. She missed him.

Not the casual Sid, the professional Sid everyone else saw. Not the man who could be infuriatingly precise, annoyingly sharp, or maddeningly confident. She missed the *real* Sid...the one who softened when she was near, the one whose teasing was only half mischief, whose jokes could make a day feel lighter even when everything was heavy. The one who saw her, really saw her, without judgment, without expectation, and somehow still stayed.

Her hands shook slightly. She wanted to lock the feelings away. She wanted to return to the tight, controlled routine she had built...wake up, gym, black coffee, emails, meetings, silence...but the truth refused to be ignored.

Days had passed, and yet, a single comment, a single thought, had undone all the careful walls she had built.

Why now? she asked herself quietly, almost pleading. Why now, when I've pretended to be fine for so long, does it hurt this much?

The memory of Seoul night came unbidden, vivid and merciless. The way his hand had brushed against hers, so fleetingly yet deliberately, had sent a warmth through her that she hadn't allowed herself to feel in years. The way he had held her shoulder when she'd leaned too long, too willingly, the way the quiet laughter and soft smiles had seemed to form a small, private world around them.

And she had walked away.

Her chest tightened. She pressed her palms harder to her face, trying to contain the wave of emotion. It felt like grief, but not for a loss that had happened...grief for a choice she had made, a choice that now felt like a betrayal of her own heart.

Even if I made a mistake... she whispered to herself, voice breaking. *Even if I misread him...even then...he should have understood.*

Tears escaped despite her efforts, sliding down her cheeks, dampening the collar of her blouse. She didn't try to stop them. She couldn't. The sobs were quiet at first, restrained, like a fragile whisper. But the longer she sat, the more they grew...soft gasps, choked breaths, the kind of desperate crying that comes from the realization that you have been denying yourself something essential for far too long.

Her mind reeled with memories: his patience during late-night meetings, the way he remembered details she thought no one noticed, the way he had somehow created moments of lightness, laughter, and comfort even in the most tedious days. And yet...she had convinced herself it didn't matter. That she didn't care.

The truth, however, pressed against her ribs like a stone.

She missed him.

She missed him in ways she hadn't allowed herself to articulate. She missed the subtle ways he had touched her life: the way he noticed when she was tired, the faint teasing that lifted the weight off her shoulders, the quiet understanding when she had no words left. She missed the warmth he had offered, even when she had insisted she wanted none.

Her chest ached. She pressed her forehead to the desk, fingers curling around the edge as though holding herself together physically might somehow make the pain bearable.

Why does missing him feel like betrayal?

Because it was betrayal. Betrayal of the life she had carefully constructed, betrayal of the pride she had nurtured, betrayal of the armor she had built to protect herself from hurt. But it was also an undeniable truth: the part of her that had been quietly alive, quietly longing for warmth, had been seen. And she had rejected it.

Her breath hitched. She whispered into the emptiness of the office: *I can't go back. I can't undo what I did. I can't...fix this.*

And yet, a part of her longed to. Longed to reach out, to hear him say something that would dissolve the distance between them, to feel that quiet, fragile safety she had once felt in his presence.

Her body shook. She hugged herself, as though the embrace could replace the absence. She pressed her hands against her eyes, willing the tears to stop, but they refused. They were a testament to everything she had denied herself...grief, longing, regret, and a subtle, stubborn hope that somewhere, somehow, he might feel it too.

The office clock ticked loudly, marking the passage of hours, indifferent to the storm inside her. The blue glow of the monitor reflected in her tear-streaked face, highlighting the vulnerability she had always tried to hide. She was exhausted...not just physically, but emotionally, spiritually, painfully.

I miss him. I miss him more than I can bear, she admitted, voice barely above a whisper. *I miss him, and it hurts. And I can't stop it.*

Her chest tightened even more at the realization that it wasn't just fleeting longing...it was a deep, unyielding ache. Months of pretending, of building a fortress around her emotions, had only delayed the truth. She missed him every single day, even when she convinced herself she didn't.

Her gaze wandered around the office, to the empty chairs, the quiet corridors, the silent hum of machines. Everything reflected her own internal emptiness...the absence of color, of warmth, of connection.

And yet, in that emptiness, the memory of him stood out like a single, brilliant flame.

I miss him. I miss him with a kind of desperation I didn't know I was capable of. I miss him, and I hate that I do, because it means I still care. It means I'm still vulnerable. It means I am still alive...

Her tears slowed, not because the pain had gone, but because exhaustion claimed her. She rested her forehead on the desk,

letting herself surrender to the truth. For the first time in months, she allowed herself to feel fully...not controlled, not disciplined, not distant, but fully human.

She pressed her hands to the sides of her face, feeling the heat of her own skin. She could not change the past. She could not undo the choices she had made. But she could honor the truth now, acknowledge it, even if silently.

I miss him. And that is real. And maybe...maybe that is the only thing that is real.

A shaky breath escaped, and she whispered again, a vow to herself in the quiet office: *I won't lie to myself anymore. I won't pretend I don't feel. I won't pretend I don't care. I can't...not anymore.*

For a moment, the weight of denial lifted, replaced with a raw, aching clarity. The absence of Sid, the distance she had enforced, the pride she had clung to...all of it could not erase the truth: she missed him. And that fact alone, though painful, felt strangely freeing.

She remained there long after the office lights dimmed, long after the hum of the AC became background noise, long after the world outside moved on without her. She sat, letting the truth settle into her bones, letting herself remember what it meant to care so deeply, so completely, for someone else.

Because she did. She had never stopped. And even if the world, even if circumstances, had tried to teach her otherwise, her heart knew it clearly now what it wanted.

And in that acceptance...painful, tender, and utterly human...Nalini realized something she had been avoiding for far too long: the heart does not care for convenience, for timing, or for pride. It cares only for truth.

And hers was screaming his name.

And the mug rolled | Universe's funny way of tricking

The Night Nalini Broke Her Own Silence

The city outside had gone quiet in that strange way only late nights know ... the kind of silence that makes even the hum of the refrigerator feel loud, the kind that forces thoughts out of hiding. The kind that leaves you alone with yourself... with the truth you try to outrun all day.

Nalini lay on her bed, hair loose, knees drawn to her chest though she wasn't aware of curling into herself. Her room was dim, lit only by the weak glow of her laptop. She stared at the blank document on-screen, pretending she was working, pretending she still lived inside her discipline and not inside the ache she'd been avoiding for months.

She hadn't meant to think of Sid.

She hadn't planned to.

But memory is stubborn... and love...unexpressed, unresolved, unburied...has its own pulse.

Every time she blinked, he appeared.

His stupid grin.

His soft eyes.

The way he said her name like it was a secret he held carefully in his mouth.

She let out a sharp breath, as if exhaling could push him out of her rib cage.

It didn't.

She turned her face into her pillow and groaned softly, frustrated with herself, with the world, with the haunting warmth that refused to die.

"Stop," she whispered. "Just stop."

But her chest tightened instead.

Minutes passed. Maybe hours. She wasn't sure. Time moves differently when your heart won't leave you alone.

Finally...out of weakness, out of exhaustion, out of loneliness she would never admit...she did something she normally mocked others for doing.

She opened Instagram...her old account that she barely opened.

The one still carrying pieces of a life she pretended she didn't miss anymore.

Her fingers hesitated above the search bar.

Typing his name felt like confessing something foul, something forbidden.

But she typed it anyway.

And there he was.

Sid.

Sid in Seoul, with his lopsided goofy smile.

Sid in the office, pretending spreadsheets were jokes.

Sid with dumb filters that made him look like a carrot.

Sid pointing the camera at her half in annoyance, half in affection.

Sid sending memes at 2 a.m.: "This is literally you, Nalini."

Her throat tightened painfully.

Scrolling through his posts felt like rubbing salt over a bruise she'd pretended had healed.

Her breath wavered.

Her chest felt too full.

Then she saw that picture.

The one she forgot existed.

Sid with a clown filter, holding his cheek dramatically like she had slapped him, though she never had.

The caption in bold yellow letters:

"You rock, Nalini. Keep smiling."

She felt something inside her quietly collapse.

No sound...just... something giving way.

Her fingertips hovered over the screen.

Not to like.

Not to comment.

Just to breathe through the truth she had been swallowing for far too long.

Her vision blurred. She wiped her eyes aggressively, scolding herself in her head.

Then... without understanding why, without thinking about consequences, without planning the anything in her mind as she always did... she typed something in comment box.

Slowly.

Softly.

Truthfully.

“Be happy. But don’t ever say I didn’t love you.”

She stared at the words.

Her heart thudded.

Raw. Exposed. Bold.

A line she would never say out loud.

A line that tasted like surrender.

She didn’t send it...Of course she didn’t.

Nalini wasn’t impulsive...she wasn’t that reckless.

She wasn’t the type to pour her soul into a comment box.

She shut her eyes, sighed deeply, and reached for her coffee mug.

And that was when the universe...that absurd, mischievous, timing-obsessed universe...intervened.

Her mug slipped.

Just a fraction of a second.

One splash.

One jerk.

Coffee spilled... not much, but enough to cause chaos ...and the laptop sprang to life like she had electrocuted its conscience.

The mug jumped on the keyboard.

Right on ENTER(sent).

Then ESC.

The screen blinked.

Instagram closed.

The mug rolled onto her bed like a guilty child pretending innocence. But that innocence just sent the message to Sid, with just one jump.

Nalini froze.

Her entire body went cold.

“No... no no no no...” she whispered, voice shaking as she scrambled for the trackpad.

Her hands shook so badly she mistyped her password three times.

When she finally got back in to her Instagram and reach that comment section...

Her stomach fell.

The message.!!

The message she never meant to send.

The message she barely had the courage to read, let alone confess...

Was sent.

Worse...

Seen.

And beneath it, glowing like a punch to the chest:

Sid: “What... and you’re telling me this now?”

Nalini’s blood rushed to her ears.

She felt dizzy.

She whispered to herself, "No... no... this wasn't... I didn't mean to..."

She typed frantically:

Sorry, by mistake.

I didn't...

I mean I did...

But not...

I didn't...

It was the coffee...

Forget it.

Please.

Just ignore it...

Before she finished humiliating herself further, his reply popped up.

Instant.

Sharp.

Soft.

Sid: "Come back."

And universe didn't stop just with this, as it had funny way to ensure to give a push...or more like a jolt.

Response from Riya in comment box : "I cant believe I am crying seeing this. #GoToSid."

Nalini stopped breathing.

Literally.

Her lungs refused to move.

Her heart refused to beat normally.

Come back.

The two words echoed.

Drummed.

Vibrated through her bones.

She reread them once.

Twice.

Ten times.

Come back.

Her fingers trembled uncontrollably.

Everything she had spent months suppressing ... the hurt, the regret, the longing, the love she had buried alive ... rose to the surface in one devastating sweep.

But her pride... wounded, stubborn, desperate ... whispered in her ear:

“No. Don’t run to him. Don’t be that woman. Don’t lose yourself.”

She snapped her laptop shut.

Hard.

As if slamming it could shut down her feelings.

She turned off the lights.

Buried herself under the blanket.

But silence wasn't kind tonight.

Her phone buzzed.

Once.

Then again.

Then again.

She ignored it.

But it kept buzzing.

She finally tossed a pillow over it to mute the sound.

But even muffled, the vibration was relentless.

She gave up.

Her hands shook when she lifted the phone.

37 messages.

12 voice notes.

All from Sid.

Her heart jumped.

Her stomach dropped.

Her throat tightened.

She opened the first voice note.

Sid's voice crackled ... rough, tired, vulnerable in a way she wasn't used to hearing.

"Why now?

Why didn't you tell me this before?

Do you know how many nights I waited for one sign from you?

Just one, Nalini.

Just one.”

Her eyes burned.

She wiped them angrily.

The next note:

“You fight for everything else. For work. For others.

But you never fought for me.”

A tear slipped out before she could stop it.

He was right.

And she hated that he was right.

Another:

“Yes, I messed up too.

But God... I still want you.

I don't know how to stop wanting you.”

She covered her mouth with her hand, muffling a sob.

Then the last note.

The one that knocked the ground out from beneath her.

“I'm coming.

Same place.

Same restaurant.

Same corner table.

See you there.”

It was 3:56 a.m.

Nalini lowered the phone slowly.

Her limbs felt like they weren't hers.

Her breath came in shaky pulls.

She walked ... or floated ... to her cupboard.

Opened it without thinking.

Her fingers reached for the simplest kurta she owned.

White.

Soft.

Uncomplicated.

Something she only wore when she didn't want to hide behind fabric.

She held it against her chest.

No makeup.

No speeches.

No explanations scripted in advance.

Just breath.

Uneven.

Fragile.

Human.

She sat on the edge of her bed, clutching the kurta, her fingers digging into the cloth.

She didn't know if she was brave enough.

She didn't know if she was stupid enough.

She didn't know if she was strong enough.

But she didn't put the kurta back.

She just sat there.

Half-ready.

Half-terrified.

Completely undone.

The night stretched around her, heavy and alive, asking her a question she had avoided for too long:

“Do you still love him?”

And for the first time in months...

Nalini didn't lie to herself.

The Unexpected Motorcycle Brigade: Glacier on the Run

Nalini had been perched on her bed for what felt like hours, clutching the white kurta to her chest as though it were a life raft. Her phone buzzed violently—37 messages, 12 voice notes—all from Sid. Her pulse was still rattling from the Instagram fiasco, the accidental confession, and the tiny apocalypse that had been her own laptop. She hadn't moved. She hadn't planned to.

She hadn't even exhaled properly in hours.

Then—*HONK!*

It was sharp, abrupt, and aggressive enough to wake every single soul in the society, including stray dogs, an irate pigeon, and probably the streetlight that had gone out last. Nalini jumped, dropping the kurta.

Blinking, she stumbled toward the balcony.

And there...there it was.

Riya.!!

On a black cruiser bike. Black leather jacket. Black helmet. Black shades that reflected the pale, rebellious sunrise. The kind of sunrise that seemed to bow in fear of her audacity. And yes... there were two helmets dangling. One obviously for Nalini.

Nalini froze mid-step.

"Uh... excuse me... what?" she whispered, clutching her chest as if the sudden heart-attack potential was Riya's fault.

Riya honked again. Twice. A rhythmic, commanding signal, like a general calling the troops to war.

“Hop on!” Riya called (or more like yelled), voice amplified by her helmet and a sense of utter fearlessness that Nalini had never imagined.

Nalini’s brain short-circuited. “Hop... on... WHAT? You... ride? You... THIS?!”

Riya’s sunglasses caught the first rays of sunlight and flared like she was some cinematic anti-heroine. “Yes. THIS. And today, Nalini – The Glacier, you ride with destiny. Now, put the helmet on. Chop-chop.”

Nalini rushed towards the door and comes to avoid another honking that could wake up entire society – as Riya didn’t seem as if she cared.

Nalini squinted at the helmet like it was a rattlesnake. “Wait... helmet? I—no. I—this is... I’m not ready... I—”

“No excuses. Helmets on. Now.” Riya’s tone left no room for negotiation. Not that Nalini had ever been good at negotiating with a leather-clad street fighter version of her timid colleague.

Swallowing a scream, Nalini slid the helmet on. It barely fit, and her hair immediately went into chaos mode. She looked like a malfunctioning bobblehead.

“Glacier energy: panic, uncertainty, confusion. Excellent. You’re ready,” Riya declared as she swung her leg over the bike, revving the engine to a level that made the windows of the entire neighborhood tremble.

Nalini’s grip on the passenger seat made her feel like a human burrito. “Wait! Stop! There’s traffic! There are animals...dogs! There are—there are...”

“Nope. Don’t think. Feel. Experience. Live dangerously!” Riya shouted, leaning forward like she had memorized every physics principle that made bikes impossible to crash, while completely ignoring the laws of common sense.

The city streets became a blur. Nalini’s hair whipped around her face like wild snakes, the kurta flapped like a flag in a hurricane, and the helmet felt like a coffin for her dignity.

“Are you insane?!” she screamed, though the wind ripped the words out of her mouth before they reached a coherent decibel.

“Exactly!” Riya yelled back. “Insanity is optional. Fear is required. And screaming... mandatory.”

A stray dog yelped. Nalini almost joined in. A vegetable cart wobbled perilously. Nalini almost fainted. A man waved a stick. Nalini almost kicked it. And somewhere, somewhere deep inside her, she realized she was having the most adrenaline-fueled panic attack of her life.

“Wait—WAIT!” Nalini screamed as they narrowly swerved around a lamp post. “I—I don’t even know the way! How do you know the—”

“I don’t. That’s part of the thrill. Trust me, glacier. Adventure waits for no one,” Riya shouted, tossing her head back in triumph, as if she were the very wind incarnate.

After what felt like ten lifetimes (or maybe ten seconds), Nalini’s phone buzzed. She fumbled for it mid-bike, trying to check Sid’s location. Or guessing if Sid meant that old restaurant which Nalini liked but Sid didn’t due to its AC rarely working. And then she nearly had a cardiac arrest.

From behind... honk.

Not one. Not two. Continuous honking. Relentless, rhythmic, almost tactical.

Nalini froze mid-scream. "What now?!"

Riya looked back over her shoulder, one gloved hand dramatically flipping a loose strand of hair. "Oh... that's... a surprise."

And it was.

Karishma.!!

On a bright red scooter. Hoodie up. Helmet on. Shades. Black jeans. Sneakers. Full street-agent vibe. If Nalini thought Riya looked like a Marvel anti-heroine, Karishma looked like a street-level spy from an alternate reality where office politics required combat gear.

Nalini blinked twice. "Wait. She... she... How... why... WHAT?!"

Karishma waved cheerfully, honking aggressively. "Hey! Don't mind me! Just making sure glacier meets volcano! Integrity of office romance is at stake, people!"

Nalini's mouth went slack. "Office... romance... INTEGRITY?!"

Riya laughed over the wind. "See, glacier? You're not the only one who takes missions seriously. Karishma is like... stealth backup. She's here to enforce fate."

Nalini clutched her kurta. "I can't... I... THIS IS... WHAT IS HAPPENING?!"

The three of them, two on motorcycles, one on scooter; as if one chaotic destiny—wove through sleepy streets. Cars honked. Street vendors screamed. Old men waved canes at their audacity. Nalini screamed herself into a new octave.

“You know, I’m not meant for this life,” Nalini shouted, clutching Riya like she could somehow fuse their bodies for mutual protection.

“You’re doing great! Glacier mode: maximum panic, minimum control. Ideal,” Riya replied with complete sincerity. “Oh, and curve ahead—lean with me. Lean.”

Nalini leaned. She fell. Her scream became one with the wind. Her kurta slapped her like a wet towel. She nearly toppled backward.

“Perfect!” Riya yelled. “We’re alive! You’re alive! Glory! Life!”

From behind, Karishma honked again. Nalini turned her head, trying to see. Karishma was waving one hand, keeping the other steady on the scooty handle, perfect posture, hoodie flapping like a flag, shades reflecting the sun. She gave a thumbs-up.

Nalini couldn’t breathe. “I... cannot... survive this... physically... mentally... socially...”

Riya’s voice cut through the chaos. “Glacier! STOP THINKING! THINKING KILLS YOU! FEEL EVERYTHING! FEEL THE ROAD! FEEL... SID WAITING!”

Nalini screamed a little louder. She was vaguely aware she sounded like a dying dolphin.

A pothole loomed. Riya swerved like a pro. Nalini’s helmet nearly flew off. Her stomach attempted a complex acrobatic maneuver. Karishma honked again, in perfect, timed harmony with Riya’s engine revs.

Nalini thought - *I am going to die. And if I survive, I will never, ever, in any lifetime, look at motorcycles again.*

Finally, the restaurant appeared...and Nalini Spotted...and shouted....”STOP!! STOP!! STOP!!”. Riya noticing Sid’s Bike parked outside ,”Yeah, that’s what we are talking about. The man reached before time for the first time”. The neon sign blinked innocently in the morning haze. Nalini nearly toppled off. Riya skidded to a dramatic halt, hair whipping, glasses askew, victorious.

Karishma pulled up alongside them with a screech that could have shattered glass and dignity alike. “Mission accomplished,” she said, helmet lifted slightly, hair wild, hoodie giving her an almost superhero silhouette.

Nalini, still trembling, tried to untangle her kurta. “I... I... what... did... just... happen?!”

Riya hopped off, striking a pose like she’d just won a war. “What happened? Adventure happened, glacier! Reality happened! Panic happened! And now... the final act begins. Sid!”

Nalini looked at Karishma, who removed her shades like a mysterious agent revealing the final twist. “We... we... you two... coming too?!”

“Yes,” Karishma said firmly, as if it were the most logical thing in the world. “You needed backup. Someone to ensure the glacier doesn’t freeze in front of the volcano. Office peace must be restored. Also...no thanks....you’re welcome.”

Nalini sank onto the curb for a second, trembling, half-laughing, half-crying. “I... I... can’t... This... my life... my sanity... my dignity... everything...”

Riya and Karishma exchanged a glance, nodded imperceptibly, then turned to Nalini: “Glacier. Deep breath. Sid is waiting. Go. Melt.”

Nalini blinked, took a shaky step forward, and realized that somehow... absurdly... hilariously... impossibly... the world had conspired to push her towards Sid in the most dramatic, laughable, cinematic way possible.

And somehow, between the leather jackets, the honks, the motorcycles, and her own panicked heartbeat, Nalini realized she had never laughed and screamed and panicked this much in her life. And maybe... just maybe... she was finally ready to face Sid.

THE TABLE THAT WAITED |

The mug knew more than me

7:17 AM ...

The café door did that tiny jingle sound - it always did. Honestly, it sounded more awake than the waiter inside, who was wiping the tables like someone who had fought with his alarm clock in the morning and lost.

Even the coffee machine next to him looked like it wanted to go back to sleep. Steam puffed like annoyed sighs.

And into this half-sleepy place, she walked in. Nalini.

Plain cotton kurta. Hair tied loosely in a knot that said, *"Please, God, don't ask me any questions today."*

No makeup. Not even kajal.

Just... her. Bare. Honest. And probably one tight breath away from crying.

She paused at the doorway.

A tiny, shaky breath.

Her fingers trembled ... not dramatically, not theatrically ... just the kind of trembling you get when the heart is doing the drum version of "TUN-TUN-TUN-TUNNNNN."

Her eyes scanned the room.

Empty table. Empty table. Another Sleeping waiter. Too-bright sunlight.

And then...

Him.

Sid.

Sitting at their old corner table like the universe had politely dragged him there and told him, "*Sit. Behave. Don't run.*"

Same posture as always ... half-slouched, half-alert.

Right foot tapping rhythmically against the floor like impatience and nervous hope were wrestling inside him.

His coffee sat in front of him ... untouched ... like even the coffee knew:

"Not today, brother. Today emotions are more important."

He looked up.

Their eyes met.

Two seconds.

Two full, excruciating, silent, heartburning seconds.

Where the entire café faded. The waiter froze mid-wipe. Even time took a break.

Then Sid spoke...too loudly, because his emotions do not come with volume control:

"You're late. I almost married someone else out of boredom."

Nalini's mouth twitched.

Not a smile ... just the shy, traitorous hint of one.

"Calm down, Devdas," she said, crossing her arms. "You don't even have the patience to finish a coffee, forget waiting for a bride."

Sid rolled his eyes dramatically.

"Oh, so you *do* stalk my Instagram. Good to know I'm a celebrity in your world."

"Only out of deep professional concern," she muttered, flicking her hair.

Which was a lie.

A beautifully shameless lie.

Sid stood. Slowly.

As if every inch carried some kind of emotional weight he wasn't ready to admit.

His expression changed. The sarcasm faded.

Something softer, kinder, worn at the edges came through.

"I missed fighting with you," he said.

It was stupid.

It was simple.

But somehow it hit harder than any poetic confession.

Nalini swallowed. Hard.

"I missed you tricking me into doing your work," she whispered.

Sid laughed.

Really laughed.

The kind of laugh she hadn't heard in weeks ... open, unfiltered, loud enough to make the sleepy waiter flinch.

But she... didn't laugh.

Not because it wasn't funny.

But because her chest had suddenly become a glass bowl filled to the brim.

Sid stopped laughing the second he saw her eyes shine.

"Nalini..." he breathed, gently, as though even her name needed careful handling.

Silence quietly pulled a chair between them.

Sid looked down, then up again, voice a whisper wrapped in caution:

"I wasn't supposed to fall for you."

A pause.

"But I did. Completely. Miserably."

Her lips parted ... but nothing came out.

Except a tear.

A single, traitorous tear that betrayed every brave front she had put up.

She wiped it. It didn't help.

"I wasn't supposed to wait," she whispered back.

Her voice cracked like a thin branch.

"But I did. Silently. Stupidly."

The table between them became a metaphor for all the unsaid things.

Sid took one step.

Slow. Careful.

Like approaching a frightened deer he didn't want to startle.

He tilted his head slightly.

"Still think that text was an accident?" he murmured.

Nalini sniffed. "Well, apparently your coffee mug knew more about your emotions than I did."

He smiled.

Soft. Real.

Sid lifted his arms the tiniest bit ... not a hug, not a demand ... just... an invitation.

A question made of trembling fingers.

But Nalini didn't think.

Not this time.

She moved.

Fast.

Very fast.

One second there was space.

The next second ... she crashed into him.

Like breath returning.

Like warmth rediscovered.

Like a dam finally breaking after months of holding.

Sid's arms wrapped around her instantly ... not cautious now ... fierce, protective, as if afraid she would dissolve if he held a little less.

It wasn't their first hug.

But this one felt like all the other hugs were just rehearsals.

They stayed like that.

Not talking.

Not apologizing.

Just breathing into each other's broken bits.

The sleepy waiter cleared his throat gently.

“Ummm... cappuccino?” he asked, holding two cups like a peace offering.

Sid didn't even turn.

“Two,” he said into her hair. “And a muffin. She eats the top, I get the bottom.”

Nalini pulled back.

Eyes wet.

Face soft.

“You still remember that?”

Sid smiled.

“I remember everything.”

His voice stumbled there, just a little.

“Even the dumb glass turtle on your desk facing north.”

Nalini burst into a wet laugh.

The kind of laugh that comes out when sadness and relief share custody of your heart.

Sid laughed too ... because that's what they always did.

Cry. Laugh. Fight. Repeat.

They sat down at the table.

Their old table.

The muffin arrived ... its top already leaning toward her like destiny had a sense of humor.

Sid poked it. “Take it.”

She shook her head. “You take it.”

He pushed it closer. “Don't ruin the tradition.”

She pushed it back. "You need more sugar in life."

He pushed it back again. "You need the carbs. You get cranky."

The waiter watched this ping-pong of affection with mild confusion.

"So... one muffin or two?" he asked.

"Just one!" both snapped at the same time, glaring at each other.

The waiter backed away slowly.

Very slowly.

Like a man retreating from unstable explosives.

**And somewhere high above, far from the little café,
on the quiet, eternal mount of Kailash...**

Parvati Ji looked at Shiva, eyes soft with motherly ache.

"Is this the end?" she asked hopefully.

Shiva smiled ... a slow, ancient smile, full of secrets carved before time existed.

"No, Devi," he said gently.

"This is just where they stopped being strangers to themselves."

He looked down at the café, where two humans sat with a shared muffin and shared history tangled between their fingers.

"Now," Shiva said, voice echoing like a blessing,

"The real story begins."

The Walk

THE WALK AFTER THE COFFEE

The moment they stepped out of the café, the air felt different...lighter in some places, heavier in others, like the sky hadn't quite decided what mood it wanted. The morning sun was still shy, glinting off the little glass windows of the shops around them. The road outside was just waking up: a stray dog stretched like he'd done overtime, a fruit vendor yawned theatrically, a child walked past humming off-key.

And the two of them...Sid and Nalini...stood there like two characters who had walked off a page and suddenly realized they didn't know their next line.

Sid shoved his hands inside his pockets and stared at the pavement like it owed him money. Nalini stared everywhere except at him, her fingers continuously rolling-playing at one loose thread on her kurta sleeve. It was almost comical. Two grown adults...two people who had once argued about almost everything...now standing in silence because they didn't know if their hearts were allowed to speak yet.

A rickshaw guy passed and glanced at them twice, probably trying to figure out whether they were fighting, reconciling, or just constipated.

The silence felt like a third person standing between them, tapping its foot impatiently.

Finally, Sid inhaled like a man preparing to jump off a cliff.

"You want to... uh... walk?" he asked.

He said it so carefully, almost like he thought the word *walk* might bite.

Nalini didn't answer for a moment. She simply looked around, pretending to examine the street as if she were a civil engineer evaluating the drainage system. Then she looked at him and said, very dryly,

"We're already standing outside the café. It's not exactly a trek."

"That's not what I asked," Sid replied, eyes narrowing.

"Then ask better questions," she muttered.

His lips twitched...the beginning of a smile he didn't want to show too quickly. "Okay," he said, softer but clearer this time. "Nalini... Walk with me."

There was a beat of hesitation. Long enough to hurt. Short enough to hope.

Unaware to herself...she just nodded...even she doesn't know why she die. May be she already wanted to.

They started walking, slow steps, the kind that aren't planned but happen because legs need something to do while hearts try to keep up.

The lane behind the café wasn't anything special...just a cracked, narrow road with little houses on one side and a bakery that always smelled like burnt sugar on the other. Yet for them, it held memories. It was the lane where Sid used to complain about his miserable daily calorie count requirement. It was the lane where Nalini used to tell him to shut up about being hungry. It was where they used to take stolen five-minute breaks pretending to discuss "field updates," which was code for *let's just breathe away from everyone else*.

As they walked, Sid kept sneaking glances at her. Nalini kept pretending she didn't notice.

And then...very suddenly, Sid spoke again.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Just that. Two words. No drama, no explanation.

But those two words felt heavier than any of the silence before them.

Nalini stopped walking.

Sid took one extra step, then froze, realizing she was no longer beside him. He turned around slowly, like maybe the earth's gravity depended on his movements.

"You're sorry," she repeated, softly. Not mocking. Not angry. Just... repeating, as if trying to taste the weight of it.

"Yeah," he said. "I am."

Nalini exhaled sharply and looked away for a moment before turning back. "Sorry doesn't fix everything, Sid."

"I know."

"It doesn't undo what happened."

"I know."

"It doesn't bring back the months we lost."

His voice lowered. "I know, Nalini. I know all of that."

She stared at him for a long second, her eyes doing the talking her lips refused to.

Then she said, in the calmest, most heartbreaking tone, "You didn't check if I broke."

Sid's face fell...not dramatically, not theatrically...just... quietly, in that way pain settles into a person's features without permission.

"Nalini..."

She held up a hand. "Let me finish."

He shut his mouth instantly.

"You didn't check," she said again, gentler this time, as if easing the truth into the space between them. "And I didn't ask you to." She paused. "And that's the part that hurts."

Sid swallowed. "I thought you didn't need me."

Nalini looked at him as if the sentence itself wounded her. "You assumed," she said. "You always assume things for me... and about me."

"I was scared," he admitted. "I was scared I'd cling too much. Scared I'd become a burden. Scared I'd make your life harder. Scared I'd... ruin us."

She blinked. "Ruin us? Sid, we were already ruined by that time. And neither of us said a word."

Sid ran a hand through his hair. "Because I'm an idiot."

"Yes," she said immediately.

He glared at her. "That was not supposed to be agreed upon so quickly."

She shrugged, not even pretending to apologize.

Before either of them could speak again, a milkman on a bicycle zoomed past yelling,

"Aage hatto! Hero-heroine banne ka time nahi hai!"

Sid jumped aside. "What even..."

Nalini burst into laughter. Small, unexpected, uncontrollable laughter. She covered her mouth, trying (and failing) to look composed.

Sid watched her laugh, eyes softening in a way he couldn't hide.

"You look nice when you laugh like that," he said quietly.

Nalini instantly stopped laughing. "Don't say stupid things."

"They're not stupid."

"Sid."

"What?"

"Focus."

"I *am* focusing."

"On what?"

"You."

She rolled her eyes so hard it could've powered a windmill.

They resumed walking. This time, their shoulders occasionally brushed. Not intentionally. But intentionally enough.

After a few seconds, Sid said, "You know what I missed the most?"

"Oh no," Nalini said under her breath.

"What?"

"Your lists."

He brightened. "I still have them, you know."

She stopped mid-step. "What?"

Sid nodded casually. "Every time we disagreed. I made a list.
disagree#1...office pantry. disagree#2...meetings.
disagree#3...airport..."

"Stop talking," she whispered, horrified.

Sid grinned. "What? It's romantic."

"It's creepy."

"It's organized emotional data."

"Goodbye," she said, turning as if she would walk away.

He grabbed her sleeve lightly, not enough to pull her...just enough to keep her moment from leaving. "Wait."

She didn't move.

He stepped closer, speaking softer. "Nalini... I meant what I said inside."

She looked at him, eyes uncertain.

"I wasn't supposed to fall for you," he said. "But I did."

Her voice trembled. "You hurt me."

"I know."

"You could've tried harder."

"I know."

"You didn't fight."

He inhaled. "I want to fight now."

Silence again.

The breeze carried the smell of fresh bread. A rickshaw driver honked at a pedestrian. Life happened around them while the two stood still, suspended in a moment that didn't know whether to break or heal.

Finally, Nalini whispered something she hadn't been ready to say until now:

"I missed you."

Sid stopped breathing.

Then, very quietly, very honestly, he said...

"I never stopped."

She turned her face away, blinking fast. "Don't say things like that."

"Why? Because they're true?"

"Because I don't know what to do with them."

Sid's voice softened. "Then don't do anything. Just... walk with me."

She didn't answer.

She didn't need to.

She stepped closer.

They continued walking, and Sid's hand brushed hers again...once, twice...like the universe was nudging their fingers together. Finally, frustrated, he extended just his pinky finger.

Just one.

Like a small, ridiculous, fragile offer.

Nalini stared at it as if he'd offered her a baby snake. "What is that?"

"It's a peace treaty."

"That's not a thing."

"It is now."

She shook her head. "You're unbelievable."

"Hold it."

"No."

"Hold it."

"Sid..."

"You held worse things in life."

“What does that even mean?!”

“Just hold it, woman.”

With an extremely dramatic sigh, she hooked her finger around his.

Sid's entire face lit up like a festival decoration.

“I hate you,” she murmured.

“No, you don't,” he murmured back.

And she didn't reply, because silence betrayed her.

They walked like that...a pinky promise in motion...until they reached the restaurant back again, where paths split. Their hands slipped apart slowly, as though their fingers weren't quite ready to let go. Riya & Karishma was watching both of them secretly from behind the big giant tree, as if mother in law keeping an eye on son-in law.

Sid turned to her. “Don't disappear again today, okay?”

Nalini's voice softened. “Then don't say stupid things.”

He laughed. “Deal.”

He kicked start his bike and goes away first, half smiling, half stunned by everything that had just happened.

Nalini stood there a few moments longer, staring at the sunlight spilling on the road, feeling the echo of his pinky still warm against hers.

For the first time in months, her heart didn't feel like an abandoned room.

It felt... inhabited.

Awake.

Alive.

She whispered into the quiet air,
“Maybe... this time... we’ll get it right.”
And the world felt small enough to hear her.

THE TWO GHOSTS WHO COULDN'T MIND THEIR OWN BUSINESS

There are many kinds of mornings in the world.

Soft ones.

Loud ones.

Sluggish, sleepy ones.

And then there was **this** morning ... the kind in which reality wakes up, sighs, looks at the humans involved, and says, “Ah yes. Today we shall be *stupid*.”

Nalini stood for too long at the café doorway after Sid left, her fingers touching her own cheeks as if checking whether they had melted off. They hadn't ... which was surprising, given the internal temperature she had just experienced in that hug.

A very dangerous hug.

A hug that had approximately 1% decency and 99% emotional CPR.

Her knees were still shaking.

“God,” she whispered to no one. “This is why I should stay indoors. I’m not built for emotional field trips.”

The café bell gave a soft ding.

Outside, the early sunlight stretched across the street like a lazy cat.

A few pigeons hopped around, discussing politics or leftovers, she wasn't sure which.

And then it happened.

A sound.

A rustle.

A muffled squeak.

Another rustle.

A small “ow!”

Followed by a very suspicious whisper:

“Karishma, stop breathing so loudly! She’ll HEAR US!”

“I have a deviated septum, Riya, I CAN’T HELP IT!”

Nalini froze.

She blinked once.

Twice.

A third time, slower, because her brain was buffering.

They did NOT.

Oh but they DID.

And suddenly ...

POP!

Like two badly timed Jack-in-the-boxes, Riya and Karishma LEAPT out from behind the giant potted plant near the window.

Their hair messy.

Their clothes crumpled.

Their expressions unhinged.

Their eyes the size of full moons.

Karishma still had a dried leaf stuck in her ponytail.

Riya still had dust on her nose like a malfunctioning raccoon.

For a moment, all three of them stared at each other.

Nalini broke first.

“WHAT,” she hissed, “oh common....you guys were spying on us...I thought you would have left by now?!”

Riya pointed at her dramatically, as if accusing a war criminal.

“ANSWER US FIRST. DID. YOU. HUG.”

Karishma gasped, clutching her chest. “He looked emotional when he left! We saw everything.”

Nalini stared. “Saw everything? Why do you two sound like CCTV?”

Riya comes closer. “We waited outside for forty-two minutes.”

“FORTY-SEVEN,” Karishma corrected, rubbing her cramped calf. “I know because my leg went numb at thirty-six.”

Nalini put a hand over her face.

“Where were you hiding?”

Both of them pointed proudly at the huge tree.

Karishma added, “It was a very tight squeeze.”

Riya whispered loudly, “Karishma farted twice.”

“I HAVE A STRESS DIGESTION ISSUE!”

Nalini wished she could rewind time and choose different colleagues.

Nalini blinked.

“What in the name of all chaos you want to hear?”

Karishma cleared her throat, pushing her glasses higher in full nerd mode.

“Interview notes.”

Nalini groaned loudly enough..

Riya clapped her hands.

“Okay. Start talking. What did he say? How did he say it? What pitch? What tone? What volume? Was there background music?”

Nalini blinked. “Background music? It’s a café, not a Bollywood set.”

“STILL,” Riya insisted. “Sometimes God adds effects.”

Karishma nodded earnestly.

“Especially for people whose Instagram comments go viral.”

Nalini kicked the road lightly.

“Both of you. Calm down. For heaven’s sake.”

Riya gasped theatrically. “She is BLUSHING.”

Karishma nodded. “Confirmed. Cheeks tinted. Increased heart rate. Classic symptom: early-stage reconciliation.”

Nalini pushed both of them and moved few step forward leaving them behind.

They laughed.

Finally, Riya catching up the speed with Nalini. Her voice softened ... the first time all morning.

“So... what actually happened?”

Nalini inhaled as if someone had asked her to recall her birth.

“He said... he wasn’t supposed to fall for me.”

Both girls squealed like malfunctioning sirens.

“And I said... I wasn’t supposed to wait for him.”

Riya HYPERVENTILATED.

Karishma clapped like she was encouraging a toddler to eat mashed peas.

“And then... we just... hugged.”

Nalini's voice dropped so low it sounded embarrassed to exist.

They froze.

Dead still.

Like three statues in a museum called *Women Witnessing Idiotic Life Choices*.

Then the explosion:

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

Both screamed in perfect harmony.

A near by pigeon flew away in panic.

Riya grabbed Nalini's hand, shaking it violently. “WHY ARE WE NOT RECORDING THIS FOR HISTORY?”

Karishma, “This is better than every Korean drama put together.”

Nalini, “Okay, okay, enough. It was just a hug.”

Riya leaned in, whispering as if unveiling truth.

“Nothing is *just* a hug between ex-almost-soul mates.”

Nalini covered her face with her hands.

Karishma slid her notebook to Nalini.

At the top of the page she had written, in big bold letters:

“NALINI’S LOVE PROGRESS REPORT ... REVIVAL CHAPTER”

“Oh God,” Nalini muttered. “What is wrong with you two?”

Riya snorted.

“Everything.”

Karishma nodded. “And nothing.”

Then Riya suddenly gasped.

“WAIT. One question. Important.”

Nalini braced herself.

“What?”

Riya leaned forward like a detective in a crime documentary.

“Did he SMELL GOOD?”

Nalini blinked.

“W... what?”

Karishma slammed the notebook shut as if this was now classified.

“Riya. Please. That’s a Level-3 privacy breach.”

“No it’s not!” Riya protested. “Smell is romantic data!”

Nalini rubbed her forehead.

“I’m not answering that.”

Riya crossed her arms. “So he did.”

“OH MY GOD,” Karishma yelled, pointing. “She didn’t deny it.”

“OW... love makes her violent,” Riya whispered dramatically.

Karishma suddenly clasped her hands together like a schoolteacher about to start a poem.

“Okay. Tell us EXACTLY how he looked at you.”

“He looked...”

“No,” Karishma interrupted. “Start from when he saw you walk in.”

Nalini sighed.

“Fine. He looked... surprised. Soft. A little scared.”

Riya grinned. “Good. He SHOULD be scared. Emotional interest creates anxiety.”

Karishma nodded seriously. “It’s biology.”

Nalini stared at her two juniors ... these two gremlins she had somehow accepted into her life ... and burst out laughing.

A real laugh.

Unfiltered.

Warm.

Ridiculous.

The kind she hadn’t had in months.

Riya froze, dramatically placing a hand over her chest.

“She’s laughing. She’s REALLY laughing.”

Karishma wiped an imaginary tear.

“Our mission is successful.”

Nalini covered her face with both hands.

“Stop making your own spy agency in public.”

Riya pouted. "What agency? We are already the *Self-Appointed Love Intelligence Bureau*."

Karishma added proudly, "SALIB for short."

Nalini stared.

"That acronym sounds like a stomach disease."

Riya shrugged. "We're still working on branding."

The three girls standing in front of café, laughing like idiots ... the kind of laughter you only share with people who have seen your worst moments and still show up the next morning with bigger stupidity.

After a while, when they were finally tired from teasing and shrieking and inhaling too much second-hand caffeine, they stepped out of the café.

The sunlight was brighter now.

Riya looped her arm through Nalini's.

Karishma took the other side.

Three mismatched humans walking down the footpath.

Nalini in the middle ... calm, exhausted, alive.

Riya bouncing like a hyperactive puppy.

Karishma analyzing the romance like a science fair project.

Riya tugged Nalini's sleeve.

"Nalini."

"Hm?"

"If you ever try to run away from him again..."

Her tone turned dramatically dangerous.

"...I will drag you by your hair to the next café."

“And I,” Karishma added, “will book the table in advance.”

Nalini burst into laughter again ... loud, free, messy.

And for a moment ...

just long enough to feel real ...

she wasn't their senior,

and they weren't her juniors.

They were... just three girls

in the middle of their chaotic, hilarious, ridiculous lives...

creating a memory

that would one day make all three of them

laugh until they cried.

THE STATUS UPDATE ON INSTAGRAM : OFFICE INTO A COMA

Sid walked in with the same shell-shocked expression of a man who had just survived a meteor shower of emotions. He closed the front door behind him, leaned his back against it, and let out a sigh so long that even the house plants looked at him in concern.

Helmet in one hand. Phone in the other. Brain? Somewhere on the road near the café, still clinging to Nalini's pinky finger like a koala.

He walked to the sofa as if gravity had doubled for him alone and dropped onto it with the grace of a potato falling off a truck.

"I am going to post," he whispered dramatically to the empty room, as if announcing a royal decree, as if the walls should straighten up and take notes.

He unlocked his phone. The brightness stabbed his eyes but his determination held firm. His thumb hovered over the status bar. He cleared his throat, cracked his knuckles like he was preparing for delicate brain surgery, and then...very slowly, very deliberately...he typed:

"Found the girl who makes even Excel exciting. #FoundHer #MiracleOfTheCentury 

He did not breathe until he hit POST.

And then he froze.

Nothing happened at first. No lightning. No divine choir. No text from his mother demanding explanations. No earthquake shaking the building in dramatic approval.

Just silence.

But then...

A soft notification ping.

Someone liked it.

Then another.

Then three more.

Then eight suddenly.

And within ten seconds, the number jumped as if someone had spilled coffee on the WiFi router.

Sid blinked.

Then blinked again.

“Why is EVERYONE online right now?” he muttered, horrified. “It’s SATURDAY. DO THESE PEOPLE HAVE NO LIVES?!”

(Probably they did not...)

Meanwhile, Nalini in her room..

Nalini was peacefully drinking water at home, minding her own quiet little business, trying to not replay Sid’s voice in her mind every two minutes, when her phone lit up with a notification.

She glanced at the screen casually.

Then did a double take.

Then a triple take.

Sid’s name.

Sid’s post.

Her name tagged.

Her *existence*.

In a borderline poetic, very public, very dramatic status.

Nalini inhaled wrong.

Choked on nothing.

Coughed like a wounded buffalo.

“NO NO NO NO...WHY WOULD HE...WHY...WHY LIKE THIS?” she muttered, pacing in tiny steps around her bed like an anxious hamster.

Her soul left her body for a few seconds, floated around the room like a confused ghost, and then returned only to whisper, “You’re doomed.”

She sat down.

Took a deep breath.

Took another.

And then...without thinking, without planning, without breathing...

She tapped the heart reaction.

Just one little red heart.

Polite.

Dignified.

A silent “Okay fine but please stop embarrassing me in front of the country.”

She put the phone down and covered her face.

“Oh God. Stupid. Stupid.”

Back at Sid’s place

Sid saw the heart.

THE HEART.

His entire face melted into a grin so wide it could've powered streetlights. He screamed into a cushion...long, muffled, and extremely dramatic.

And then, because he was Sid and thus beyond help, he typed a comment:

“Should I take this as a yes?”

He hit enter.

It was the worst, bravest, most idiotic decision he had ever made. Because the office arrived.

Not one by one.

Like a flood.

Like a tsunami.

Like buffaloes running during stampede hour.

THE COMMENT SECTION: PURE, UNFILTERED MADNESS

In under a minute, the comment box transformed into a wildlife documentary.

Riya:

“Woahh !!!.....”

Karishma:

“It is Yes you mad. If you don't take it as yes, go for brain MRI.”

Team Lead:

“Please confirm so we can update the HR gossip sheet.”

HR Representative:

“Reminder: declare your relationship within 48 hours to avoid compliance issues.”

Accounts Uncle:

“Very good. I was waiting for this since Diwali.”

Intern #1:

“I don't know what's happening but YES MA'AM SAY YES SIR.”

Intern #2:

“Is this compulsory for attendance?”

Someone posted a GIF of two goats kissing.

Someone else posted image as a lookalike Sid's face with the caption:

“Man who waited months for courage.”

Another uploaded a skeleton sitting at a desk:

“Me waiting for Nalini to reply.”

Even the building security guard commented:

“Congratulations sir. Sorry for checking your bag every day.”

Chaos.

Absolute, high-density, office-grade chaos.

Nalini's POV: The Downfall

Nalini held her phone like it was a grenade with the pin halfway removed.

Ping.

Ping.

PINGPINGPING.

Her notifications were exploding.

She opened the post again and nearly fainted.

The comments were an avalanche.

A riot.

A festival.

A mock wedding procession.

And hundreds more GIF of cupid, heart exploding, skeleton kissing, Mummy from Egyption coffin coming alive.....etc.,

“Say yes!”

“Please say yes!”

“We have bets!”

“Don’t let the skeleton wait!”

Nalini groaned loudly into a pillow.

“Oh kill me, somebody kill me.”

She paced.

She sat.

She stood.

She lay face-down on her bed.

Finally, after another wave of unhinged comments, she typed:

“Yes.”

One word.

One gentle, shy, absolutely terrified “yes.”

She pressed send.

Immediately...

The office exploded like India won the World Cup.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAH SHE SAID YES!”

“I WAS HERE BEFORE 100 LIKES!”

“Somebody open sweets!”

“Planning committee meeting today 5 PM.”

“HR APPROVED.”

Even the Prakash wrote:

“Congrats. Now finish your tasks by Monday.”

Sid at Home

He saw the yes.

He let out a scream that made the neighborhood dogs bark.

He laughed.

He kicked the air.

He fell off the sofa.

He rolled on the carpet like a happy burrito.

He said “Oh my god” seven times in increasing volume.

He quickly typed:

“You just made my century.”

Nalini replied:

“You just embarrassed me publicly.”

Sid:

“Worth it.”

The comments:

“NOW KISS.”

Nalini threw her phone away, face-first into her pillow.

“I need new coworkers,” she groaned.

But deep inside, beneath all the embarrassment, beneath the panic and the chaos and the ridiculousness...

Her heart whispered something warm.

Something she felt but didn't yet know how to say aloud.

That yes wasn't just a reply.

It was relief.

It was hope.

It was the quiet beginning of something she thought she had lost.

But Riya...her excitement was on seventh cloud..

Riya immediately posted a photo of a heart-shaped samosa with:

“Wedding starter idea.”

Karishma commented:

“Checklist updated:

✓ Step 1: Make them say yes

✓ Step 2: Control Sid

Next step: Buy ladoos.”

The office janitor wrote:

“Party kab hai?”

Nalini buried her burning face in her hands.

“God,” she mumbled. “Why me.”

But somewhere under the embarrassment, under the ridiculous uproar, under all the noise, was something fragile and glowing and alive.

Sid had found his way back to her.

She had said yes.

And the whole world...loud, nosy, dramatic...had witnessed it.

A beginning.

A messy, stupid, beautiful beginning.

THE CALL THAT BEGAN WITH ROMANCE AND ENDED WITH A CASTE-BASED HEART ATTACK

There are phone calls...

and then there are *those* phone calls.

The kind where the moment your screen lights up, your soul behaves like it's riding a roller coaster without a seatbelt. Nalini had just finished panicking into her pillow for the forty-eighth time after saying *yes* on Sid's viral status, when her phone buzzed again.

Sid Calling...

Her stomach dropped with enough speed to qualify for Olympic diving.

She stared at the name glowing on the screen as if it were a bomb with a very cheerful ringtone.

“Okay,” she whispered to herself. “Act normal. Just... normal. Like a normal human. Not a deranged squirrel.”

She inhaled.

She exhaled.

She answered.

"Hello?" she said, attempting her calm voice but sounding like someone pretending to be calm for the first time in her life.

On the other side...

Sid had rehearsed his greeting thrice.

Practiced his tone.

Even fixed his hair for a phone call. (Tragic but true.)

The moment she said hello, all his preparation evaporated like water on hot tawa.

"Nalini?" he breathed, his voice embarrassingly soft. Like buttery soft. Like "I-should-not-be-this-in-love-but-here-we-are" soft.

Nalini felt something in her chest go flip-flip-flip.

"Yes?" she said, but this time even softer. Her voice had melted into some liquid form.

For exactly three seconds, both of them forgot English, Hindi, geography, biology, and every worldly concept.

Then Sid, being Sid, blurted:

"So... Miss Yes-Only-Heart-Reaction..."

Her cheeks heated instantly. "Sid, don't start."

"Why not?" he teased. "Do you know how loudly I screamed? My neighbor thought I died."

Nalini laughed before she could stop herself. "Good. You deserved it."

"I did," he agreed warmly. "I deserved every bit of this happiness."

Nalini stared at her bedsheet, suddenly shy. "Stop talking like that."

"Why?" he said softly.

"Because I don't know where to look."

"You're on a *phone call*, Nalini."

"Exactly," she muttered. "Look at my suffering."

He laughed...one of those low, warm, slightly shaky laughs that sounded like he was smiling with his whole face.

There was a pause.

A good pause.

A comfortable one.

Then Sid said quietly,

"I still can't believe you said yes."

Nalini whispered, "I can't believe you asked."

"You make everything feel... safe," he murmured. "Even when you're scolding me."

"Don't romanticize my scolding..."

"I will. I absolutely will. Your scolding is character development."

Nalini pressed her palm over her mouth to hide her grin...even though he couldn't see her.

"And also," Sid continued, voice lowering, "you know what my parents are going to say?"

"Hm?" she asked, feeling her heart soften a little more.

"They're going to look at me," he said, "and they're going to say..."

He switched to a dramatic deep-voice imitation...

"Aiyo baba... finally... after all these years of being useless, you found a girl."

Nalini burst into such a sudden laugh that she choked on air again.

Sid continued, fully committed to the performance:

"Not an Excel sheet. Not a timepass crush. Not your video game. But a real girl. And that too such a nice girl."

Nalini shook her head. "You're ridiculous."

"I'm serious!" he insisted. "My parents will be so proud of you. Especially because you're exactly the kind of girl they've always hoped for."

She froze.

Just... completely froze.

The laughter on her face evaporated like it was never there.

She swallowed. "Wait... what?"

Sid, oblivious, continued cheerfully:

"I'm telling you, Nalini, my mother will adore you. You're polite, hardworking, traditional enough..."

Nalini's eyes widened. "Sid..."

"And my father? OH my father will start chanting shlokas out of happiness..."

"SID."

He paused. "Huh?"

Nalini spoke slowly, carefully, like someone diffusing a bomb.

“Sid... what... what do you mean by ‘*Aiyo Baba*....and...the kind of girl they hoped for’?”

“Oh!” Sid brightened. “I just mean... they always said they wanted a grounded, soft-spoken girl for me. You know, the kind that can handle them. And you...”

“Sid...” she interrupted, dread curling into her stomach, “...your family is... which caste?”

“Caste?” he repeated, confused.

“Yes,” she whispered. “Just... say it.”

“Oh,” he said casually. “South Indian Brahmin. Why?”

Silence.

The kind of silence that vacuum-sucks every molecule out of the room.

Nalini had two emotions simultaneously:

Her soul leaving her body.

Her ghost fainting.

She whispered, “Brahmin... SOUTH... INDIAN... BRAHMIN?”

“Yeah?” Sid replied, unaware of the nuclear explosion he’d just triggered.

Nalini clutched her forehead.

“Oh no. No. No no no no no. Sid, why would you be Brahmin? Why would you be South Indian? Why would you...why would you...of all the things you could be...WHY THAT?!”

Sid blinked, deeply puzzled.

“I didn’t... *choose*?”

Nalini stood up from her bed and started pacing like a prisoner planning escape routes.

"My mother already gets emotional if we eat idli on Thursday!" she whispered in horror. "And my Bua Ji? Oh God... Bua Ji will combust. She will genuinely combust."

Sid's voice went from confident to frightened in 0.5 seconds.

"Wait...what? Why? What's wrong with being South Indian Brahmin?!"

"EVERYTHING!" Nalini cried. "Do you know what my Bua Ji says about inter-state matches? Forget inter-caste... inter-state itself is enough drama!"

Sid sat up straighter on his couch, panic rising in his voice.

"Are you saying they... they won't accept me?"

Nalini squeaked, "They'll reject you like bad tomatoes!"

Sid's mouth fell open.

"I JUST PROPOSED TO YOU IN FRONT OF THE WHOLE OFFICE...AND NOW YOU'RE TELLING ME YOUR FAMILY WILL REJECT ME BECAUSE I EAT IDLI?!"

"It's not the idli!" Nalini whispered. "It's everything else!"

Sid buried his face in his hands.

"Oh God. Why am I Tamil... why was I born Tamil... WHY couldn't I be North Indian for one day...just *one* day..."

Nalini groaned. "Sid, this is serious."

"I KNOW!" he yelled. "My whole romantic mood just died. It fell off a cliff."

"Sid..."

“NO. I was imagining your mother feeding me sweets and calling me beta. Now I’m imagining her chasing me with a rolling pin.”

Nalini winced. “That’s not ...unrealistic.”

Sid gasped. “WHAT?!”

She sighed dramatically. “My mother will think you’re too... gentle.”

“GENTLE?!” Sid exclaimed. “I’ve fought monkeys before!”

Nalini blinked. “Why?”

“It’s a long story!” he snapped.

She sat back down. “Sid. Listen. My Bua Ji is already suspicious of any boy. And she wanted me to marry someone from our own community.”

Sid’s voice cracked in despair. “So I’m automatically disqualified?!”

She whispered, “Not disqualified. Just... extremely confusing.”

Sid flopped back onto his sofa like a defeated warrior.

“So you’re telling me,” he said slowly, “that my biggest enemy right now is your Bua Ji.”

Nalini whispered, “Yes.”

Sid inhaled deeply.

Then, with dramatic conviction, he declared:

“Fine. I’ll fix this.”

Nalini blinked. “Fix what?”

“I will impress your mother.”

“How?”

"I don't know! I'll Google it!"

"And Bua Ji?"

"I'll... I'll... Namaste very politely?"

Nalini burst into helpless laughter. "Sid, oh my God...this is not how India works."

He sat upright, determined.

"Fine. Then tell me everything I need to know. Rules. Customs. Traps. Whatever."

"It's not traps!"

"It sounds like traps!"

She sighed. "Sid..."

He softened. "Hmm?"

"Are you scared?"

He whispered, "Terrified."

She smiled without meaning to. "Me too."

There was a pause.

Then Sid said, gently,

"If we're both scared... then maybe that means we actually want this."

Nalini's breath caught.

He wasn't wrong.

Another pause.

A warm, soft, terrifying pause.

Finally Sid inhaled and said, firmly:

"I don't care how scary your Bua Ji is. I'll face her."

Nalini snorted. "You say that now. Wait till she questions your kundli."

"I have a kundli!"

She blinked. "You... do?"

"YES. My mother laminated it."

Nalini put a hand over her mouth to keep from laughing.

Sid groaned. "Don't laugh. I'm emotional."

She laughed harder.

He whined. "Nalini...stopppp...this is serious..."

"It is," she said, still laughing. "But you're very cute."

Sid froze.

"Repeat that," he whispered.

"No."

"Repeat it."

"Sid..."

"Just once."

"SID..."

"I'll fight your Bua Ji if you repeat it."

Nalini sighed dramatically.

"...You're very cute."

There was silence on the other side.

Then Sid squeaked.

A tiny, high-pitched, undignified squeak.

Nalini whispered, horrified, "Did... did you just squeak?"

"No," he lied.

"You DID!"

"It was emotion leaking!"

She laughed so hard she fell sideways on her bed.

He calmed eventually and said, softer:

"Don't worry. We'll figure the family part out. Together."

Nalini stared at the ceiling, heart warm and frightened and hopeful all at once.

"Together," she echoed.

The night wrapped around them...two terrified idiots, whispering across a phone line, plotting against parental expectations, caste traditions, and the unstoppable Bua Ji.

They didn't have a plan.

They didn't know the next step.

But for the first time...they weren't standing alone. And that was enough. For now.

Nalini was still staring at the ceiling, phone pressed to her ear, Sid's "together" echoing in her head like both a promise and a warning, when another call buzzed in.

Call waiting.

Riya Calling.

Nalini flinched like she'd been caught doing something illegal.

"Sid, I—Riya's calling," she said.

"Of course she is," Sid sighed. "The office investigative department."

"I'll call you back," Nalini whispered.

"Don't disappear," he said softly.

"I won't."

She cut the call and answered Riya's.

"HELLOOOO FIANCÉE—" Riya screeched straight into Nalini's soul.

Nalini winced and pulled the phone away. "Riya. Please. Lower your voice. My walls have ears."

"Oh my GOD," Riya giggled, "do you realize what you two have DONE? HR is already asking about team restructuring because 'emotions are high'."

Nalini smiled despite herself. "I hate all of you."

"No you don't," Riya said smugly. "You're glowing. Now TELL ME. Did he call? What did he say? Did he cry? Did he faint? Did he propose again?"

Nalini hesitated.

That hesitation was enough.

Riya went quiet. Dangerously quiet.

"...Nalini," she said slowly. "Why did you pause?"

Nalini sank onto her bed. "Because the romance... kind of crashed."

"What do you mean *crashed*?" Riya asked. "Like small turbulence or full Air India landing?"

Nalini closed her eyes. "Full crash landing. With relatives."

Riya gasped. "WHAT relatives?"

Nalini took a breath. "Sid's from a South Indian Brahmin family."

Then—

"OHHHHHHH," Riya said, the sound of immediate understanding and second-hand fear. "Oh no."

Nalini laughed weakly. "You see the problem."

"I see the PROBLEM," Riya said. "I see your Bua Ji sharpening emotional weapons as we speak."

Nalini groaned. "She will *never* accept. Riya, she barely accepted my cousin marrying someone from Jaipur. JAIPUR."

Riya whistled. "That's... still north."

"Exactly."

"So South Indian Brahmin?" Riya continued. "With idli. And Sanskrit. And probably a laminated kundli?"

Nalini blinked. "HOW DID YOU KNOW ABOUT THE KUNDLI?"

Riya snorted. "Guessing. They seem very disciplined families like they laminate EVERYTHING."

Nalini buried her face in her pillow. "Riya, I'm scared. Sid thinks he can 'impress' my family."

Riya burst out laughing. "Oh sweet summer child."

"I tried telling him," Nalini said. "Bua Ji won't accept. She just won't."

Riya softened. "Did you tell Sid that?"

"Yes," Nalini whispered. "And he still said he wants to try."

There was a pause.

Then Riya said gently, "Okay... listen to me."

Nalini lifted her head.

"You know what that means, right?" Riya continued. "If he knows this and still wants to stand there... that's not drama. That's intention."

Nalini swallowed.

Riya cleared her throat on the call.

"Okay," she said. "Don't worry."

Nalini frowned immediately. "That's never a good sentence when it starts with you."

"No, listen," Riya continued, already speeding up. "We've got this covered."

Nalini sat up. "Covered how?"

"We'll train Sid."

Nalini closed her eyes. "Riya."

"Proper training," Riya said. "How to talk. How to sit. How to touch feet without falling. How to say 'Ji, Bua Ji' with the correct amount of fear and respect."

Nalini's stomach twisted. "Riya, you'll make it worse."

"I will make it *better*," Riya corrected. "Much better."

"You once taught my cousin's boyfriend to say 'Namaste' and he saluted."

"That was one time."

“And you told him to compliment my cousin’s mother and he said she looks ‘fit for her age’.”

Riya coughed. “Okay but Sid is different.”

“How.”

“He listens,” Riya said confidently. “And he’s scared. Scared men are very trainable.”

Nalini pressed her forehead into her palm. “Riya, please don’t turn my life into an experiment.”

After a brief pause...Riya lowered her voice dramatically.

“Don’t worry, glacier,” she said. “Lemme do my magic.”

Nalini opened her mouth. “Wait—”

The call disconnected.

Nalini stared at the screen.

“...She hung up,” Nalini whispered to the empty room.

Her phone felt heavier now. Like it knew something terrible was about to happen.

Somewhere in the city, Riya was already planning.

Somewhere else, Sid was completely unaware that his biggest challenge was no longer Bua Ji.

It was training season.

Nalini lay back and stared at the ceiling.

“I should’ve let the fan fall on me,” she murmured.

The fan continued spinning. Indifferent.

TAINING SID TO SURVIVE INDIAN AUNTY-STANDARDS

There are many things a man prepares for in life.

Interviews.

Fitness tests.

GST returns.

But absolutely *nothing*...and I repeat, NOTHING...prepares a man for the emotional hurricane known as “Meeting the Girl’s Mother & Bua Ji.”

Sid had no idea what he was walking into.

He had merely told Nalini,

“I want to face your family. I want to impress them.”

A noble statement.

A brave statement.

A foolish, foolish, absolutely foolish statement.

Because the next morning, sharply at 9:03 AM, Sid’s doorbell rang like someone was pressing it with the aggression of a lizard trying to commit suicide.

Sid opened the door sleepily.

And there stood...like two FBI agents disguised as overexcited kids...

Riya and Karishma.

Wearing sunglasses.

Holding clipboards.

Carrying a duffle bag that looked suspiciously like it had weapons inside.

Sid blinked. "Uh... did I miss a meeting?"

Karishma pushed her glasses down dramatically, like a villain in a cartoon.

"No, Sid. YOU asked for help."

"I did?"

"Yes," Riya said, stepping forward. "You want to impress Nalini's mother."

"And survive Bua Ji," Karishma added gravely.

Sid scratched his head. "Okay... but..."

"No BUT," Riya snapped. "We are here for a mission."

Sid pointed at their outfits. "Why do you look like bouncers at a nightclub?"

"It's part of the training environment," Karishma declared. "Serious situations require serious outfits."

Sid sighed. "Fine. What are we doing?"

Riya marched into his living room with the confidence of someone entering her own sasural.

Mission Board Setup:

Karishma placed a giant whiteboard on the center table and uncapped a marker like a surgeon about to begin open-heart surgery.

On top she wrote:

"OPERATION: SURVIVE NALINI'S FAMILY"

Riya added a subtitle:

“(Sid, Don’t Die)”

Sid stared. “...Is that necessary?”

“Yes,” both replied in unison.

PHASE 1: VOCABULARY TRAINING

Riya cleared her throat.

“Sid, say the word ‘Aunty.’”

Sid shrugged. “Aunty.”

Karishma immediately banged her marker on the table.
“WRONG!”

Sid jumped back. “WHAT...why?!”

“You said it casually,” Riya lectured. “Do you want to die casually too?”

“What do you mean...?”

Karishma stepped forward. “Repeat after us.”

She clasped her hands together, tilted her head, and said in the sweetest, butter-soft, palak-paneer-melting voice:

“Auntyjiiii...”

Sid blinked. “Auntyjee...”

“NO!” Riya screeched. “Where is the emotional begging tone?! Where is the ‘please-don’t-kill-me’ vibration?!”

Karishma took his shoulders.

“Sid. Imagine Nalini’s mother standing in front of you holding a belan.”

Sid froze.

“Feel it,” she whispered dramatically. “FEEL the fear.”

Sid gulped.

Then he tried again.

“Auntiiiiiii... jiii?”

Silence.

Riya stared at him as if he just recited a poem in Urdu.

Then slowly she nodded. “Not perfect. But acceptable for Level 1.”

Karishma wrote:

Auntyji Pronunciation → 6/10

Needs emotional trauma to improve.

Sid groaned.

PHASE 2: TOUCHING FEET PROTOCOL

Karishma cracked her knuckles like a martial arts teacher.

“Sid,” she said firmly, “you must master the ancient Indian tradition.”

She pointed at the carpet.

Sid blinked. “Touching feet?”

“Yes,” Riya nodded, “but not just touching. There are three levels.”

She demonstrated:

1. **Basic Respect Feet Touch** – the normal one.
2. **Seeking Blessings Feet Touch** – slight bow, hand stays longer.
3. **I’m Sorry Please Forgive Me Feet Touch** – used when you have done something stupid.

Sid squinted. "Why would I need the third one?"

Karishma and Riya exchanged a look.

Riya patted Sid's shoulder lovingly.

"You're a man, Sid. You WILL need it."

Karishma pushed him lightly. "Do one round of practice."

Sid bent down.

Halfway through, he wobbled and fell sideways like a dying flamingo.

Riya clutched her stomach laughing. "What is this yoga asana?!"

Karishma wiped tears. "He touched the floor... but spiritually offended it."

Sid stood up, offended. "My core strength is bad, okay?!"

"No problem," Riya said, "We will train you."

She placed a cushion on the floor.

"Pretend this is Nalini's mother."

Sid froze. "You want me to touch a pillow's feet?"

"Yes," Karishma said. "Respect the pillow."

Sid sighed and did it properly this time.

Riya clapped like a proud kindergarten teacher.

"GOOD BOY!"

Sid glared. "Don't call me good boy."

Karishma wrote on the whiteboard:

Feet Touching – 8/10

Excellent recovery. Flamingo form corrected.

PHASE 3: AUNTY-APPROVED ANSWERS

Riya pulled out a stack of flashcards.

"Sid, you must be prepared for Auntie Questions Level MAX."

Karishma cleared her throat.

"Example Q1: Beta, what do you do?"

Sid answered confidently, "I'm a..."

"WRONG," Riya shouted. "Never tell the truth directly."

Sid's face fell. "What?! Why?!"

"You must answer," Karishma explained,

"Auntiji... I TRY MY BEST."

Sid blinked. "That means nothing."

"Yes," Riya said, "but aunties LOVE that."

Karishma demonstrated the tone:

"Auntiji... main apni poori koshish karta hoon..."

Riya nodded. "Perfect. Shows humility. Shows obedience. Shows you're not useless."

"I'm not useless!"

"Say it again," they yelled in unison.

Sid sighed.

"Auntiji... main apni poori koshish karta hoon..."

Riya clapped again. "GOOD BOY..."

"STOP CALLING ME THAT!"

Karishma flipped to the next flashcard.

Q2: Beta, how much do you earn?

Sid's chest puffed up. "Well I..."

Karishma threw a cushion at him.

"NO! You NEVER say your salary!"

Riya crossed her arms. "You answer: 'Auntyji... bas theek-thaak. Enough to keep your daughter happy.'"

Sid stared. "...This is manipulation."

"YES," they both announced proudly.

Next flashcard.

Q3: Beta, tumhare ghar mein sab kaise hain?"

Sid answered mechanically: "They're fine..."

"No!" Karishma shouted. "Too short! Too boring!"

"You must add EMOTION," Riya said.

Karishma demonstrated:

"Auntyji... sab aapke aashirwad se bahut ache hain..."

Sid almost choked. "ARE YOU MAD?! She hasn't even blessed me yet!"

"Doesn't matter," they said in harmony. "Assume her blessings. Aunties love that."

Sid repeated it lifelessly.

Karishma wrote:

Aunty-Q&A Skills – 7/10

Emotion needed. Currently sounds like call center agent.

PHASE 4: THE “BUA JI SURVIVAL TRAINING”

This was the part Sid dreaded.

Riya removed her sunglasses. Karishma folded her arms.

Both stood like bouncers auditioning for a soap opera.

Riya whispered ominously:

“Buaji is the final boss.”

Karishma nodded. “If Nalini’s mother is a peaceful river... Bua Ji is the waterfall that kills you.”

Sid sat straighter. “What do I do?”

Riya handed him a notebook titled:

“How To Impress Terrifying Aunties”

Sid flipped through it.

Page 1:

Give Compliments. A LOT. Even when they make no sense.

“Like what?” he asked.

Karishma demonstrated with a straight face:

“Bua ji, your aura is glowing.”

Riya added:

“Bua ji, this house feels blessed because of you.”

Karishma:

“Bua ji, I have never seen such organized almirah arrangement.”

Sid stared. “That’s creepy.”

“That’s Aunty Science,” Riya corrected.

Next:

Page 2: Never disagree. EVER.

Sid: "What if she says something wrong?"

Riya gasped. "Sid. Are you mad?"

Karishma shook her head. "If Bua Ji says the sky is green, you say..."

"YES BUA JI," they shouted together.

Sid nodded reluctantly.

Next:

Page 3: The three forbidden topics:

Karishma read dramatically.

"1. Politics

2. Religion

3. How long you and Nalini have known each other"

Sid swallowed. "... Why?"

Riya answered, "Because aunties don't want logic. They want *their version* of the story."

"And what is their version?"

Karishma took a deep breath.

"That you met Nalini yesterday."

"WHAT?! Why?!"

"Purity," Riya whispered.

Sid groaned into his hands.

PHASE 5: ROLEPLAY (THE HORROR)

Riya and Karishma suddenly switched roles.

Riya became Nalini's mother.

Karishma became Bua Ji.

Sid's soul left his body.

Riya softened her face, adopted the motherly tone.

"Beta... baitho... chai loge?"

Sid panicked. "I...I don't like tea..."

Riya slapped the table. "YOU WILL DIE!"

Karishma roared, "YOU WILL DRINK TEA. AND ENJOY IT."

Sid shouted, "OKAY FINE...CHAI ...YESS.....I LOVE CHAI!!!!"

Riya nodded proudly. "Good start....PERFECT."

Karishma leaned forward, eyebrows raised to heaven.

"Beta..." she said in a tone dripping with suspicion,

"tumhari caste kya hai?"

Sid froze so hard his internal organs melted.

"I...I...I...uh...BRAHMIN...SOUTH..."

Riya leapt forward and covered his mouth.

"NEVER reveal first!" she whispered like a spy. "Let THEM say it and then agree!"

Karishma continued the interrogation.

"Beta... tumhare mummy-papa kya karte hain?"

Sid stuttered. "They...they...they exist...?"

“GOOD ANSWER!” Riya cheered. “Confuse the aunty before she confuses you.”

Karishma leaned even closer.

“Beta,” she said, eyes narrowing, “tum hamari Nalini ko kabse jaante ho?”

Sid panicked again. “Uhm... months..like....”

Riya screamed like a dying peacock.

“NOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

Karishma held her chest dramatically. “My God... he’s hopeless...”

Sid yelled, “What was I supposed to say?!”

Riya held his cheeks like a strict teacher.

“Say: *Bua ji, bas yad nahi....aisa lagta hai humesha se....*”

Sid blinked. “What does that even mean?”

Karishma said,

“Translation: ‘Please don’t kill me.’”

Sid repeated mechanically, “*Bua ji, bas yad nahi....aisa lagta hai humesha se.....*”

Karishma wrote:

Bua Ji Survival → 5/10

High-risk candidate. Might die.

PHASE 6: EMOTIONAL PREP

After one full hour of torture, roleplay, shouting, crying (Sid), and encouragement (the girls), they finally sat down.

Sid lay on the couch like someone who fought 12 dragons and lost to all 12.

Karishma handed him a juice box.

"For energy," she said kindly.

He sipped it miserably. "I hate this."

Riya sat beside him. "Sid... listen."

He looked at her pitifully.

"You love Nalini, right?"

Sid didn't hesitate. "More than anything."

"Then," Riya said gently, "this is part of the rituals."

Karishma nodded. "Every Indian boy must face his girlfriend's family like a gladiator entering the arena."

Sid sighed. "Does it always happen like this?"

Riya whispered, "No."

Karishma added, "Sometimes it's worse."

Sid covered his face.

Riya squeezed his shoulder.

"You'll be fine."

Karishma added,

"Or you'll die. But at least you'll die loved."

Sid groaned loudly.

THE END OF TRAINING

Riya clapped once.

"Okay! Let's summarize!"

Karishma wrote final scores:

FINAL SID SCORECARD

- Aunty Tone: 6/10
- Feet Touching Technique: 8/10
- Flashcard Answers: 7/10
- Bua Ji Survival: 5/10
- Overall Aunty Approval Chance:
- **52%**

Sid stared. "ONLY FIFTY-TWO?!"

"Yes," Riya said kindly.

"That's more than most Indian men."

Karishma added,

"And you're South Indian Brahmin. Extra difficulty."

Sid threw his head back and muttered, "I'm dead."

Riya and Karishma grinned at each other.

Then Riya said with pride,

"You'll survive, Sid. We'll train you again before the actual meeting."

Karishma nodded. "We believe in you."

Sid smiled weakly. "Thanks."

They began packing up.

But right before leaving, Riya turned back dramatically and said,

"And Sid...?"

“Yes?”

“Don’t call Bua Ji ‘ma’am.’”

Sid froze. “Why would I...”

“JUST DON’T.”

Karishma added, “And if she asks if you eat garlic and onion, lie.”

Sid threw his hands up. “WHY DOES EVERYTHING REQUIRE LYING?!”

They patted his shoulder sympathetically.

“Welcome to North India,” Riya said.

And they left.

Leaving Sid standing in his living room, holding a juice box, wondering why proposing to a girl had turned into an advanced government exam.

THE GREAT FAMILY SUMMIT

WHERE EVERYONE PRETENDS TO BE SURPRISED... BUT NO ONE IS.

NOTE TO SELF: *Universe is officially mischief. I swear it sat somewhere, sipping chai, and says in that calm, deadly way, "Achha beta... let's see how much chaos and comedy you can endure before spontaneously combusting."*

Today, as fate would have it, was that day. Today was the day Sid's perfectly South Indian, Brahmin-to-the-bone parents were coming to meet Nalini's ultra-alert, suspicious, North Indian mother and her unstoppable, nuclear-powered Bua ji.

And standing in the middle of this cultural, emotional, diplomatic battlefield were Riya and Karishma, the Two Pandits of Confusion, officially part-time referees, translators, and full-time chaos managers.

Sid's parents arrived **exactly on time**. Not a minute early. Not a microsecond late. His father got out of the car like he was walking onto a red carpet in a slow-motion Bollywood montage (as if a background music was being played).

Hair smoothly and carefully combed.

Straight posture.

Pure white shirt.

Tiger Balm in the pocket.

Sid's mother followed next, gold chain glinting in the fading sunlight, jasmine garland perfectly pinned in her hair, her expression simultaneously welcoming and ready to launch an interrogation that could rival any FBI debrief. Nalini nearly

fainted—not because she was meeting Sid's parents, but because of the *terrifying potential energy* emanating from Bua ji in the corner. The subtle, lethal, “I know it all and will handle everything today easily.” energy that only an unstoppable aunt could radiate.

Nalini's mother, whispering as if she was about to transmit top-secret intelligence to Bua ji, murmured: “Dekha? Dekha? Kitne sophisticated hain. Lagta hai matching outfits pehen ke aaye.” Bua ji whispered back, smirking like someone who had predicted an earthquake weeks in advance. Nalini, standing silently, could feel her brain short-circuiting like a malfunctioning computer. *Why did I think love was easy?* she thought desperately. *Why did I ever imagine these meetings would be normal?*

Meanwhile, Sid's parents whispered in rapid Tamil. Words flowed like intricate, dangerous rivers.

His father: “I think that is the mother.”

His mother: “Aama, aama. And that must be the famous Bua Sid told us about...”

Father: “She looks... strict.” Mother: “Strict? No. I will deal with her.”

Sid, caught between two colliding storms of authority, stood as still as a bonsai tree, trying with all his might to maintain equilibrium.

Riya, hands on waist – both side, whispered to Karishma: “Yeh sab..... English subtitles ke bina main kaise samjhu?” Karishma, ever wise, replied: “Pretend. That's how politics works.”

The grand face-off began.

Everyone assembled in the living room. Sid's parents on one side, like judges presiding over the universe's most important trial. Nalini's mother and Bua ji on the other, formidable and radiant, radiating suspicion and scrutiny in equal measure. Sid and Nalini sat in the middle like hostages whose lives hung on the next five minutes of conversation.

Riya and Karishma hovered behind them, scanning every expression, every twitch, ready to intervene with whispered guidance like secret agents at a high-stakes negotiation. The silence was so thick that the tick of the clock felt like a loud, deliberate drumbeat echoing in their chests.

And then, almost synchronously, both sets of parents smiled politely. A calculated, precise smile. Sid's mother spoke softly: "So nice to meet you." Nalini's mother replied: "Ji ji, hum bhi bahut khush hain."

And immediately, almost like a battle plan being executed, both mothers leaned toward their respective allies to whisper with subtle precision.

Sid's mother murmured in Tamil to her husband: "Avanga saree romba nalla iruku." (Her saree is very nice.) Nalini's mother whispered to Bua ji in Hindi: "Aunty ji toh bahut sundar lag rahi hain... par unke earrings asli honge na?" (She looks beautiful... are those earrings real?) Sid's forehead now had the beginnings of a personal swimming pool.

Riya hissed from behind: "Rule #1. Smile. ONLY smile."

Karishma added: "Rule #2. Don't talk too much. Boys fail at this every time."

Negotiations began.

Sid's father, calm and deep and terrifyingly measured, spoke: "We heard a lot about your daughter. Very talented. Very

intelligent.” Nalini’s mother blushed like a schoolgirl caught in a compliment ambush.

Bua ji whispered loudly: “Haan haan... aur sundar bhi hai...mujh par jo gayi hai!!” Sid’s father blinked once, trying to process. Sid’s mother whispered: “Avala quiet ah irukku. Something big is coming.” Riya jumped in like a cricket commentator: “Aunty ji ka matlab: Nalini is all-rounder!” Karishma added: “And Sid is mostly round. So it matches.” Sid glared. Nalini nudged him with her foot, suppressing laughter.

And then it happened.

The Whisper War.

A symphony of overlapping languages, conspiratorial murmurs, and rapid-fire commentary. Sid’s parents whispering in Tamil, Nalini’s family whispering in Hindi, Riya and Karishma whispering in Hinglish.

A cacophony only God could understand. Mother (Tamil whisper): “Boy looks too nervous.” Father: “Because he loves the girl.” Mother: “Appo good.” Nalini’s mother (Hindi whisper): “South Indian families are strict!” Bua ji: “Arey hum bhi kam nahi hain! Hum bhi seedhe nahi hai!”

Riya: “Sid, sit straight!”

Karishma: “Smile like polite bank customer!”

Sid sat like a malfunctioning robot. Nalini hid her face, wondering if she could disappear into the carpet.

Sid performed the training they had secretly practiced for hours. “Aunty ji, Bua ji... I highly respect your family values. I promise to support Nalini in all aspects... emotional, financial, spiritual...”

Karishma whispered: “Spiritual was mine. Aunty log love that.”

Sid continued: "Marriage is teamwork." Nalini's mother nodded slowly.

Bua ji whispered: "Dialogue filmy, but fine." Father whispered to mother: "Good boy. He practiced." Mother nodded proudly: "Namma paiyan." Nalini stared at Sid like he had somehow transformed into a softer, braver, gentler person right before her eyes.

And then... laughter happened.

Not polite laughter.

Not small chuckles.

Full-bodied, auntie-approved, air-stealing laughter.

First Nalini's mother snorted. An actual snort.

Then Sid's mother covered her mouth and shook like a kettle about to whistle.

Then Bua Ji—Bua Ji—leaned back and laughed so hard her bangles clanged like alarm bells.

Finally, Sid's father let out a slow, defeated laugh, the kind men laugh when destiny has already won.

The room lost all dignity.

Sid and Nalini stood there like two statues someone forgot to warn.

Nalini blinked. "Maa...?"

Her mother wiped tears from her eyes. "Oh beta... we all already knew."

Nalini's soul exited her body.

"KYA?!" she shrieked, voice cracking like a dropped plate.

Sid froze.

Already knew *what*?!

Bua Ji cleared her throat with unnecessary drama and raised her phone like evidence in court.

“Instagram,” she announced proudly.

Swipe.

Sid's post.

Zoomed.

Highlighted.

“Found the girl who makes even Excel exciting.”

Swipe.

The comment.

“Should I take this as a yes?”

Swipe.

Nalini's tiny, traitorous red heart.

Even the skeleton GIF.

Nalini grabbed the back of a chair. “I am going to faint.”

Sid buried his face in his hands. “I want to dissolve.”

Sid's mother smiled serenely. “Such a sweet boy. Very expressive.”

Sid's father nodded. “Yes. Too expressive.”

Nalini's mother sighed. “Beta, do you really think Riya wouldn't show me?”

Nalini whipped her head around. “RIYA?! ”

From the corner, Riya and Karishma high-fived like victorious athletes.

"We were subtle," Karishma said.

Riya beamed. "Very subtle."

Bua Ji sniffed proudly. "School-time detective skills," she said, tapping her temple, "plus matchmaking logic."

She leaned forward. "Perfect exposure."

Sid peeked between his fingers. "So... nobody is angry?"

Bua Ji smiled slowly. Dangerously. "Angry? No."

Nalini held her breath.

"We are entertained," Bua Ji continued. "But don't think this means you're safe."

Sid nodded immediately. "Yes. No. Thank you. I mean—"

Nalini's mother laughed again. "At least next time," she said, "don't declare love like an election manifesto."

Sid whispered, "Noted."

Nalini wanted the floor to open up.

Riya whispered loudly, "See? Magic."

Nalini glared at her. "I will end you."

But even she was smiling.

Because somehow—against all logic, tradition, and social media algorithms—

the worst exposure had turned into the loudest laughter.

And nobody had been disowned.

Yet.

Finally, the gold ceremony.

Sid's mother opened a red velvet box, revealing a gold kada for Nalini. "This... is for you. Pakka pakka approval."

Nalini froze.

Sid's father nodded solemnly: "Welcome to the family."

Then Nalini's mother, not to be defeated, opened her own small pouch and brought out a **gold chain**.

"So he remembers he now belongs to us too." Sid's mother gasped: "Aiyo, super!" Sid and Nalini looked at each other. Fear melted. Chaos melted. Cultural divides melted. Two families, two worlds, one giant hilarious, emotional, gold-encrusted approval.

Bua ji grabbed phone her phone quickly, turned on the front camera: "Chalo... sab idhar dekh k bolo... Cheese!!!". And in that room, filled with chai, laughter, whispers, gold, nerves, love, and a thousand tiny explosions of emotion, and with all this, new chapter of their life begins...

Shaadi Mein Zaroor Confusion Hogi | The version no one asked for

Where Sid & Nalini get married while the universe runs its own comedy show.

By the time evening arrived, the lawn looked like a toddler had been handed the keys to a craft store and told, “*Go wild.*” Fairy lights tangled with marigold strings, glitter scattered across the grass in every possible pattern (and some impossible ones), and somewhere a stray dog had become an official barati. It sat on a chair, tail wagging, as if judging everyone silently.

Precautionary Majors -

Chintu. Oh Yes, Certified chaos agent. This time, was strapped to a chair with a golden ribbon to ensure he doesn’t jump on food plates. The golden ribbon made him look like a present that was also plotting world domination. Happily humming and kicking at imaginary enemies.

Chacha Ji, bless him, had been positioned under the DJ table like a fragile relic. Every bass drop sent him wobbling in slow motion, like a pendulum for disasters. Somebody thoughtfully labeled him: *Do Not Disturb (Unless Rasgulla Emergency)*. Genius. Pure genius.

This time, enormous rasgullas were being served—round enough to qualify as sports equipment. Bua ji inspected one critically and announced, “*Yeh toh mooh mein phatt se fatega bhi nahi!*”

This was considered a glowing review.

The priest's assistant...the historical flirt, breaker of hearts (three aunties confirmed), and coconut-dropping champion, was wearing actual blinders. Full-on horse-blinders. Aunties aged 43–50 were blocked from him like a cricket fielding strategy.

Suddenly, the Tamil Barati stormed in—veshtis brighter than the sun, shirts screaming for attention—and they sang a Carnatic version of tamil movie song. Aunties choked on their rasgullas, some nearly exploded in shock. Bua Ji shrieked loud enough to cause minor seismic activity: *“Are these... are these the Barati from Sid's family?!”* Sid's mother whispered, calm as a Buddha statue: *“Shhh...they're Tamil Brahmins. Respect.”*

And Dia. Dia, self-appointed Shaadi Auditor, was already standing in the middle of the lawn with a clipboard, two colorful pens behind her ears, a mic, and more confidence than the state of Tamil Nadu. “Checklist number 15: Groom arrived with sunglasses as requested. Tick.” She jabbed her pen. “Checklist 23: Random aunty crying without context. Tick-tick-tick. Multiple sightings.” At the dessert table: “Checklist 47: Rasgulla roundness—4.9/5. Slight dent. Acceptable.”. Tick!

There they are...both of them are at the Mandap Now -

Finally, after surviving every minor apocalypse the universe could throw, Sid and Nalini were at the mandap.

Nalini – looked no less than a breathtaking beautiful celestial damsel in red & sparkling jewellery with white gajra (fragrant flower garland) in her hair bun.

Sid—looked like he had accidentally wandered out of a carnatic shampoo commercial and into a Hindu wedding. He leaned toward her, because of course he did.

Sid whispered: *"If you change your mind now, I have an escape Vespa behind the halwai(cook)."*

Nalini, eyes locked on the sacred fire: *"If you run, my Bua will chase you barefoot to Tamil Nadu."*

"Worth it," he murmured.

The priest began chanting slokas. Fire flickered. Birds seemed to somewhere cried, even in the dark.

And suddenly....Dia yelled: *"STOP!"*

"I have not taken the emotional candid yet!" The havan fire looked confused, like it had been recruited into some indie theater performance. Five clicks later, Dia nodded in satisfaction and allowed the universe to resume its normal chaotic operations.

The Pheras commenced.

Chintu rolled his chair like a cruise passenger on a slightly dangerous tour. Chacha Ji snored under the DJ table. Somewhere, a rasgulla bounced onto the mandap, everyone assumed it was part of rituals from Tamil side. Sid gently tugged Nalini's dupatta away from the fire. Nalini—looking at him like the man who once walked away and somehow found his way back into her life—felt the chaos blur into silence.

They walked, step by step, ring by ring, mantra by mantra, while the world spun like it had lost its mind. Spilled raita? Check. Random flower garlands in odd places? Check. Mid-pherra rasgulla catastrophe? Check. Emotional aunties? Check, check, check.

The 7th Phera

Just as they started the **7th phera**, a strange “*whoosh*” echoed across the lawn. Everyone froze. Sid’s thought: *What now?* Nalini’s thought: *Universe, enough.*

From the corner of the lawn, **an extremely fair, impeccably dressed Asian man appeared in full Indian wedding attire.** Hands folded politely. Eyes wide, slightly confused. Everyone gasped. Fairy lights bounced in astonishment. The dog barked. Rasgullas trembled.

Sid whispered: *Wait... is that... Mr. Han?!*

Nalini whispered back: *Oh no. Universe, why are you like this?*

Riya finally admitted, squeaking: *“I... um... accidentally CC’d him while sending invites to office colleagues!”*

Mr. Han cleared his throat, smiled like he had just solved world peace, and in **broken but hilarious Hindi** announced:

“Namasthee!(with his Korean accent) & Congratulations! I bring... very strong Korean plum wine. For courage. And... maybe dance later?”

Sid’s jaw nearly hit the floor. *Did he just offer to dance after alcohol at a wedding he wasn’t even invited to?*

Nalini blinked. *Universe, please stop sending extra guests.*

Sid leaned toward Nalini: *“I told you. This wedding is officially the universe’s sitcom.”*

Nalini: *“Uhhh Oh God !!.”*

Yet, in the eye of this storm & awe, Sid and Nalini found the quietest corner of all. Not in the lawn, not in the rituals, not even in the professional photographer’s frame—but in each other’s eyes. A glance that said: *I see you. I survived this nonsense with you. I choose you.*

Bua Ji finally declared: *"I am done. This was the only marriage I had been waiting to see...ab aur shaadiyon mein nahi jaaungi. Bas hogaya."* (Lies! She already had two more invitations tucked in her bag.)

Sid squeezed Nalini's hand once. The smallest, softest gesture. But it carried every truth: love survives chaos, laughter can coexist with tears, and even when the universe orchestrates absolute madness, two people can carve out a quiet world just for themselves.

Love won. Rasgullas survived. The escape Vespa remained gloriously untouched.

It's just the beginning...your beginning...!

The planets were lowering itself gently behind the walls as if to bless them, its last golden breath settling over the mandap where Nalini and Sid circled the sacred fire for the final time. The air was warm, alive, almost trembling with something unseen. And then, without warning, the sky loosened a shower of soft white petals. They drifted down as lightly as blessings, but the moment each petal kissed the earth, it melted into a tiny drop of cool rain, as though heaven itself could not contain its joy.

Far above, in the quiet brightness of the celestial realm, Parvati Ji watched everything with a smile so full it could soften the sternest mountain. She lifted her palm, letting a few of the falling petals dissolve into shimmering light upon her skin.

“You truly take care of everything at the end, Swami,” she murmured.

Lord Shiva stood beside her, calm as the eternal truth, the hum of the cosmos woven into his voice.

“I do not write their stories, Devi,” he replied with gentle smile. “I only shape the paths when they choose to walk them. Every outcome rises from their actions. Every magic is born as opportunity...not the result.”

Parvati Ji listened, her heart still and attentive, as though every word was a petal landing in her own palms.

“When you ask for wisdom,” Shiva continued,

“I give you a challenge.

When you ask for strength, I give you a storm.

And when you ask for love...”

His voice softened. "I give you separation...so you may learn what love truly is."

Below them, Nalini and Sid burst into laughter as another wave of petals fell around them in form of rain drops.

"The universe responds," Shiva said with a faint, knowing smile. "But only when you act. Wait neither for signs, nor for guarantees... Take the first step. I am watching from above... and I will move what must move."

Divine Questions & Lords Eye Opening

Answers – Life's Clarity

*A conversation meant to be read slowly,
like sipping warm tea on a quiet morning.*

As the last vestiges of twilight surrendered to the embrace of night, the peaks of Kailash glowed with a luminescence beyond mortal comprehension.

Parvati Ji sat beside Shiva, her form bathed in the silver residue of moonlight, her heart an echo chamber for the wisdom that had already been shared. Yet, even amidst the serene quiet, deeper questions rose within her like subterranean rivers seeking release. These were not questions of astronomy or ritual, but of life itself ... the delicate, painful, and sacred unfolding of human experience: the tender cry of the newborn, the trembling hope of youth, the heartbreak of love, the solitude of old age, and the ultimate surrender to the eternal.

She spoke softly, as if fear of disturbing the stars themselves restrained her words:

“Mahadev... permit me to ask ten final questions ... questions that the human heart carries from its first breath to its last.”

Shiva turned to her, eyes like molten galaxies, infinite and patient. His voice came, low as a distant bell, resonating through the valleys of both earth and spirit:

“Ask, Devi. Every question of the human heart is a thread of the universe. Every inquiry deserves illumination.”

Even the wind hushed itself. Even the constellations leaned closer. The mountains themselves seemed to bow, as if to bear witness to the unfolding discourse.

*Twilight melted into night's embrace,
Kailash gleamed with ageless grace.*

*Stars stood still in silent plea,
While time itself bent patiently.*

*Parvati's heart beat questions deep,
From birth to death, from wake to sleep.*

***“Mahadev,” she whispered, steady yet shy,
And the universe leaned closer—curious why...***

1. Dreams and the Impossible

Her first question does not rush. It arrives like dew on sacred ground, gently, “Mahadev, why do dreams sometimes feel so far away at the beginning of life's journey? Why do the first steps toward ambition seem insurmountable?”

Shiva smiled, a smile like starlight reflected on a river of shadow:

“Because dreams are mountains, Devi. They must inspire awe. If they were easily attained, they would not transform humans. Every setback strengthens skill; every failure sharpens focus; every attempt builds discipline. Impossible is the name of a dream too vast for one lifetime ... until courage begins to climb.

“Do not despise the distance,” He said, voice gentle as wind on stone. “Every moment of striving is sacred. Every misstep is a teacher. The summit exists not merely to be reached, but to awaken the soul.”

*Mountains rise to teach the climb,
Patience grows with passing time.*

*Impossible hides lessons true,
Each fall a note in mastery's hue.*

***Step by step, unseen, untamed,
Dreams bow down to hearts that aimed.***

*Mountains loom, majestic, high,
Impossible shimmers in the sky.*

*Steps may falter, hearts may strain,
Yet every struggle hones the brain.*

***The summit waits, the climb refines,
Dreams awaken in patient lines.***

2. The Orphaned Soul

“Mahadev,” she asks softly, “when even dreams feel heavy in the beginning of life, when the path itself feels too steep for young feet...why do some children lose their shelter at the very age meant for dreaming? Why must those who are still learning to hope be asked to build reality without hands to guide them? If growing is already hard, why is the burden made heavier, for hearts that have only just begun to beat with desire? *Why must some children lose the ones who were meant to nurture them?*”

Shiva's gaze grew stormy yet luminous, holding galaxies and compassion in equal measure.

“The soul chooses its beginning, not out of punishment but of purpose. Some arrive already fortified with ancient strength, prepared for trials that might overwhelm others. When a child loses a mother, My Shakti becomes their mother; when a child

loses a father, I become their father. The world may not see, but these children are never alone, they will always find someone secretly helping them.

“They grow differently. Pain becomes their first language, resilience their second, courage their breath. These children, though lonely in human terms, are carried by destiny itself. Many of such rise higher than most, for they are forged in the fire from which heroes, saints, and visionaries are born.

“Loneliness,” He continued, softer now, “is the soul’s way of hearing Me directly. A child without earthly parents is not abandoned; they are cradled in the invisible arms of eternity, learning to turn suffering into empathy, darkness into wisdom, and absence into understanding.”

“When a child loses shelter at the age of dreaming, it is not because hope has been taken—it is because hope must rise from within.”

*When parents vanish, stars lean near,
Whispered winds speak what hearts hear.*

*Loneliness hums a sacred song,
Pain becomes the voice of strong.*

*Resilience blooms where shadows fall,
The divine cradles, embracing all.*

*Tears touch earth, yet reach the skies,
And souls grow wings where sorrow lies.*

*Shadows leave marks, both deep and wide,
Yet wounds are maps where truths reside.*

*Compassion grows where pain has kissed,
Courage awakens in the mist.*

*Healing slow, yet sacred, bright,
Each scar a lighthouse in the night.*

*Shadows stretch on tender ground,
Each hurt a note, a secret sound.
Wounds are maps, not chains that bind,
Roads to wisdom, gentle, kind.
Healing hums in slow embrace,
Each scar a lantern, each tear a grace.
The heart that learns from early ache
Becomes the light that others take.*

3. The Suffering from early age...

Parvati Ji does not step back. Her concern deepens now, her voice quieter but firmer...

“Swami... but why do some children suffer so early in life? Why must innocent souls bear the weight of hunger, loneliness, illness, or loss even before they have learned the simplest joys?”

Shiva's gaze softened, like the first light of dawn brushing against the darkness of night.

“Childhood suffering is not fate's cruelty. It is the continuation of the soul's ancient journey. Each child arrives carrying the residue of lives past ... lessons half-learned, courage yet untested, wisdom yet unborn. Their tiny bodies may tremble under the weight of challenge, but within them lies strength older than empires.

“They are not born to be protected; they are **born to become protectors**. They are not here to be taught love; they are here to turn into it. When hunger, loneliness, illness, or loss walks beside them from childhood, it sharpens their sight. They learn to recognize suffering in others without needing explanations.

Pain becomes their first language, silence their second, compassion their instinct. These lives may look small, unfair, even forgotten from the outside—quiet rooms, empty hands, tired bodies—but inside them entire universes are forming. Every loss carves depth. Every long endurance builds strength that does not seek applause.

“Even before they speak, the children are blessed ... for the divine walks beside them, unseen but unyielding.” Parvati’s lips parted, her mother-heart trembling:

“Do these wounds ever truly heal, Mahadev?”

Shiva’s eyes closed briefly, as though hearing the silent cries of every wounded child across time.

“Healing is sacred. It is neither swift nor simple. It requires what the child never received: patience, gentleness, self-compassion, validation, boundaries, and love. Childhood wounds may shape adult life, but they do not determine it. The adult who learns to soothe their inner child becomes a guide, a healer for humanity. The soul is never broken ... only unfinished, waiting to awaken.”

*In every tear, a seed will gleam,
In trembling hands, a hidden dream.*

*Paths unseen beneath the skies,
Whispered wings where courage flies.*

*Pain’s soft murmur, sorrow’s flame,
Shapes the soul yet knows no name.*

*From tiny hearts, the brave arise,
To touch the sun, to claim the skies.*

*Suffering teaches, wings are made,
For flights of soul that shall never fade*

4. Sudden Turns of Destiny

She continues... “And why do lives change with a single twist, a single moment? Why must suffering strike unannounced ... accident, loss, heartbreak, disaster?”

Shiva's voice, low and resonant, carried the weight of the cosmos:

“Because the soul does not evolve along paths of ease. Destruction removes what the soul refuses to release. Sudden upheaval awakens, redirects, and strengthens. One moment of turmoil may teach more than ten years of comfort. Loss is not punishment; it is propulsion. Collapse is cleansing. Endings are beginnings.

“The universe never destroys without purpose. It only seeks alignment. Each painful turn is a whisper: ‘This road is done. Turn.’ Each heartbreak, each failure, each loss is a teacher of awakening.”

*Life shifts with hands unseen, unknown,
Destruction wears creation's tone.*

*Pain propels, each loss a key,
Opening doors we cannot see.*

*Upheaval whispers, soft, profound:
“Go deeper, further, inward bound.”*

*Loss and rupture, pain and fear,
Open doors we cannot clear.*

*Each twist a teacher, each fall a guide,
Urging the soul to move inside.*

*Destruction dances, creation sings,
From brokenness, new wisdom springs.*

5. Love, Loneliness, and the Unloved Soul

The stars hung silently above Kailash, their light piercing the darkness like a thousand tiny lanterns, each a witness to human sorrow and longing. Parvati's voice fell soft, almost a whisper now, carried on the mountain breeze:

“Swami, it's hard to understand sometimes that why do some souls feel unloved their entire lives? Why does love seem to avoid them, though they seek it earnestly?”

Shiva's eyes darkened with depth, as if reflecting every lonely heart that had ever existed. His voice was a river of compassion, slow, deliberate, eternal:

“There are two kinds of loneliness: one imposed by the world, one chosen by the soul. Some souls are born with a frequency of depth, feeling, and observation that ordinary love cannot reach. They seek connection that is profound, aligned, sacred. The world may seem indifferent, yet the soul is never unworthy.

“Those who feel invisible are not unloved ... they are preparing for a connection that matches the magnitude of their heart. Ordinary affection cannot satisfy them; their souls demand resonance. Patience becomes their virtue, waiting becomes their path, and depth becomes their companion.”

“And what of those repeatedly abandoned?”, she asked.

“Abandonment reflects not the abandoned, but the abandoner. The deepest souls often endure repeated separation, not as punishment, but as preparation. The universe trains them for uncommon love. Tell humanity, *‘You are not hard to love. You are hard to forget.’* A rare soul will never be satisfied with the ordinary because the extraordinary awaits them.”, Lord replied.

*Some hearts beat rare, their depths profound,
Ordinary love cannot be found.*

*Waiting sacred, longing true,
Prepares the soul for love that's due.*

*Loneliness hums a hidden song,
For hearts where only truth belongs.*

6. Repeated Failures and the Soul's Timing

Parvati leaned closer, her curiosity mingled with sorrow:

“And... why do some people face repeated failures despite sincere effort? Why does life seem to conspire against those who try their best?”

Shiva's voice was deliberate, carrying the rhythm of timeless patience:

“Because sincerity does not dictate timing. Life is never behind, yet never early. Some paths are blocked, not to punish, but to redirect. Some setbacks are protection, some failures whispers: *‘Not yet. Not this way.’*

“Every failure carves resilience, every obstacle sharpens awareness. The soul grows quietly, invisibly, often unnoticed. When the moment is right, the doors open, and the culmination arrives with astonishing swiftness. Life teaches not through avoidance of struggle, but through endurance, reflection, and evolution.”

“Then struggle itself is sacred?”, She asked, with curiosity.

Shiva nodded, “Every tear, every frustration, every effort is a thread in the tapestry of awakening. No moment is wasted, for every experience molds the soul's readiness for its next chapter.”

*Each setback carves, each block instructs,
Delay is teacher, timing instructs.*

*Seeds of effort nurtured slow,
Blossom when the heart will know.*

*Sincerity plants, patience tends,
Until the soul its goal attends.*

*Setbacks sculpt the quiet soul,
Each delay a hidden goal.*

*Blocks instruct, and patience tends,
Until the path at last ascends.*

*Sincerity sows, resilience rains,
Timing waters, removes the chains.*

***Every stumble, every fall,
Shapes the being to answer the call.***

7. Heartbreak and the First Love

Parvati's voice grew soft, almost fragile:

“Swami does the first love so often break the heart? Why is it a universal sorrow?”

“Sometimes the first love is not meant to last. It is a sculptor of the heart, shaping it, opening it, teaching the soul how to feel. The first love shatters innocence, awakens depth, and prepares the heart for the love that is truly meant. The second love teaches growth; the final love teaches endurance.

Heartbreak is not punishment. It is preparation. The wound left by the first love becomes the doorway through which true love eventually enters. Cherish it, not for its permanence, but for its transformative power.

The heart learns in stages ... and each heartbreak is a sacred tutor.” Lord replied.

*First love cracks shells, awakens heart,
A sacred sculptor, divine in part.*

*Pain carves valleys, wisdom streams,
Preparing hearts for deeper dreams.*

*Without the wound, the soul can't see
The masterpiece of love to be.*

8. Confusion, Despair, and the Death of Old Selves

The mountains seemed to lean closer this time, and even the stars dimmed slightly, as if the weight of human suffering hung upon them. Parvati spoke, voice heavy with empathy:

“and...why do humans fall into periods where life makes no sense? When despair overwhelms, when purpose evaporates, when the heart feels numb?”

Shiva's eyes lifted to the sky, heavy with cosmic understanding:

“... confusion is not failure. It is the death of an old version of the soul. When a snake grows, it sheds its skin. When the soul evolves, it must shed identity, beliefs, and attachments that no longer serve it.

“Despair appears when the mind cannot interpret the language of the soul. It whispers: *Pause. Reflect. Realign.*’ The darkness is sacred, for it heralds the birth of clarity. Human confusion is the cocoon of transformation. Inside it, the soul stretches, sheds, and emerges renewed.

“Devi, Tell humans, *‘You feel lost because something magnificent is trying to be born within you.’* Trust the darkness. Trust the stillness. It is the midwife of awakening.”

Parvati's voice softened further, “And the emptiness?”

Shiva responded, "Emptiness is the soul's canvas. It is not absence, but preparation. In emptiness, new visions, new dreams, and new understandings take root. It is the sacred pause before the next step of evolution."

*In darkness deep, the soul may weep,
Yet seeds of light are sown so deep.*

*Through shadowed nights, your spirit fights,
Yet fire grows in hidden heights.*

*Confusion comes to strip the old,
And make the spirit brave and bold.*

*Confusion bends the mind, yet frees,
The soul that dares to storm the seas.*

*Embrace the pause, the silent night,
For in the stillness shines your light.*

*Embrace the dark, the hollow, the pain,
For through the tears, the light will reign.*

*From empty space, new dreams are born,
Awake, arise, and greet the dawn.*

*From shattered dreams, new visions rise,
Awake, ascend ... claim boundless skies.*

9. Old Age, Loneliness, and the Soul's Return; Fear of Death

Parvati's tone sank into the sacred softness of the universe's oldest truths:

"Why must old age arrive with loneliness, silence, and the slowing of life? Why do the final years carry a weight that youth does not know?"

Shiva breathed deeply, a sound that resonated with the mountains, the wind, and the stars:

“Old age is not punishment. It is the preparation of the soul for transcendence. In youth, humans run outward ... toward ambition, desire, connection, and distraction. In old age, they return inward ... toward reflection, acceptance, and peace.

“Loneliness is not absence. It is an invitation to meet the soul directly, without masks, without roles, without expectation. It teaches introspection, forgiveness, clarity, surrender, and the understanding that the external is ephemeral, but the soul is eternal.

“The weakening body reminds the soul: *‘Prepare to return home.’* Pain in old age is not cruelty; it is guidance. Silence is not emptiness; it is sacred counsel. The final years polish the soul, preparing it for its ultimate journey.”

Parvati murmured, “And yet, humans fear the end. Why do they fear death when the soul is eternal?”

Shiva’s eyes became the infinite void, infinite love flowing through them:

“Because they believe they are ending, when in truth they are beginning. Death is not darkness. It is a gentle turning of the page, a crossing into a room of light. The body dissolves; the soul slips into freedom.

“Share with humans Devi, *‘Do not fear death. Fear an unlived life. Every breath, every tear, every moment of joy, every shadow of sorrow, is the sacred practice of awakening.’* Death is not the end; it is the doorway to eternity.”

*Old age turns the soul within,
Silence teaches, peace begins.*

*Old age turns the gaze within,
Silence speaks where noise has been.*

*Death is not end, but page anew,
The body fades, the soul shines through.*

*Death a door where life abides.
Body fades, the soul takes flight,
Fear not the closing, embrace the light,
Eternal stories flow through night.*

*Weakness whispers, stillness guides,
Fear dissolves in endless light.*

*Each closing chapter, every night,
Reveals the story infinite.*

10. Guidance, Karma, and Free Will

Parvati, still seated beside Shiva, asked quietly:

“Then... Mahadev, do we ever interfere? Do we guide directly, or always through the paths of karma and timing?”

Shiva's gaze, infinite and calm, answered before His words:

“We guide, but always subtly. Signs, whispers, intuition, opportunity and **by way of words written in books...** these are our invisible hands, nudging without forcing. The soul must act of its own accord. Freedom is sacred. The lessons are only complete when the heart chooses willingly, fully awake.

“Even the most faithful devotee may falter; even the skeptic may act righteously. The universe allows both to learn, to grow, to awaken. All souls are seen, all hearts are loved, all journeys are sacred.”

Parvati Ji nodded, understanding dawning like the first light across Kailash, “So it is not the end that matters, **but the living ... the feeling, the learning, the enduring.**”

Shiva smiled, a smile both fierce and gentle:

“Yes, The journey itself is the miracle. Every heartbeat, every tear, every joy, every challenge ... all are sacred. Nalini and Sid, like all souls, are never outside this flow. Their lives, their struggles, their triumphs ... every moment is divine. Life itself is a manuscript of awakening, written in the ink of experience, read in the light of consciousness.”

And so, high above the clouds, the sacred words drifted into the night, infinite as the stars, eternal as the mountains, sacred as the human heart.

*The path unfolds, unseen, untamed,
Each choice a spark, each step proclaimed.*

*The unseen hand moves, silent, wise,
Through storms that tear and darkened skies.*

*The heart must act, the soul must rise,
Through shadowed doubts and open skies.*

*No hand forces, yet all is near,
Signs whisper truths for those who hear.*

*In pain and joy, the truth is spun,
The heart awake, the race begun.*

*Life's every tear, each joy, each strife,
Is sacred ink that scripts your life.*

*Each choice ignites the soul's own flame,
No path repeats, no step the same.*

Life writes in fire, tears, and light...

“Awaken now, emerge from night.”

The Final Blessing

“Every setback, every sorrow, every fear has hidden purpose,” Shiva concluded.

“Even heartbreak, failure, illness, poverty, or despair teaches lessons that awaken strength, wisdom, and resilience. Each moment of life, each challenge, each joy, each sorrow, is a guide ... leading you to realize your full potential.

Act. Dream. Move forward. Believe. Even when unsure. Even when afraid. Even when alone. You are supported, guided, protected, and blessed. And every step you take, no matter how small, carries you closer to the truest expression of yourself.”

Parvati Ji looked on, heart swelling with awe and gratitude.

“Together,” Shiva whispered, “we ensure that no soul walks alone. Every life, every experience, every heartbeat is sacred, guided, and blessed.”

The Call to Live Fully

“Step forward into life, dear soul. Dream boldly, act fearlessly, love without hesitation. Every heartbreak, every failure, every loss carries wisdom and growth. Do not wait for perfect conditions. Do not wait for life to give permission. The smallest step taken in courage awakens blessings. You are guided. You are protected. You are supported.”

Even in darkness, even in pain, even in uncertainty, the soul is never alone.

A message in echo of Damru !

The wind stirred, carrying with it the soft trembling of wind chimes and the distant echo of a Damru. Lord stood flying high in air with his trishul resting beside him, his right hand raised in benediction.

Magic does not arrive wrapped in miracles, child.

It hides inside opportunities.

The results you chase are only keys.

The intention you carry ... that is the lock.

You are not late.

You are not lost.

You stand exactly where your next step can begin.

Even a flower must break its shell to bloom. And so must you.

"The heavens are not far," he whispered. "I am not far. I walk with the one who walks. I move with the one who chooses.

I bless the one who acts with truth. Do not wait for fate to knock.

You are the door.

Now rise.

Choose.

Walk.

And as you walk, I walk by your side.

I see you. I bless you."

**You are never alone. Step forward.
Get Started. Trust. Believe in self.**

And Win.