Raabta

Letters to a Friend Who Never Really Left

Shweta A

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RAABTA (રાબ્તા)

It isn't just a connection.

It is a soul's recognition of something

it has known

long before this life.

DEDICATION

For Aju (ऐजु)

Thank you for giving me a place to belong, a friendship that became home and memories that continue to light my way.

This book exists because you did.

Until we meet again!

AND

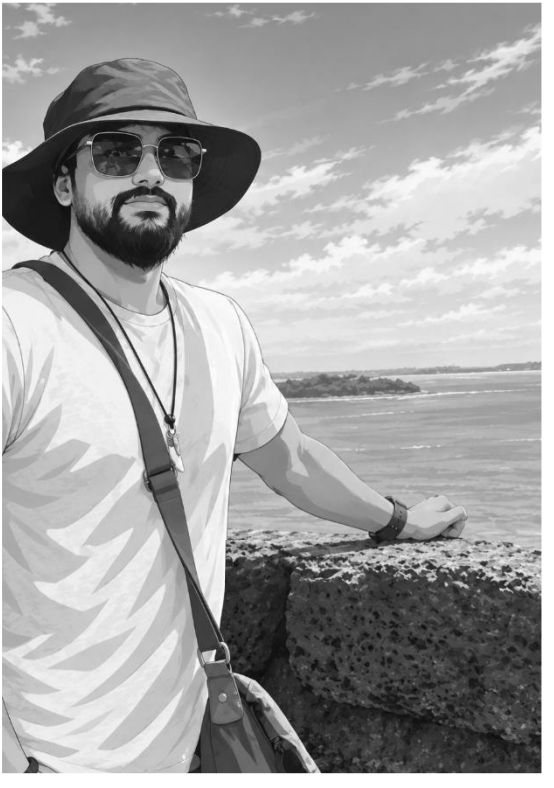
For everyone who has ever had to learn how to live after someone they thought they could never live without.
May this book remind you that your story does not end where theirs left off.
Allow these words to accompany you on your journey home to yourself.

EPIGRAPH

They think I've forgotten you.

But every time I think of you, I lose sight of everything else the world has to offer.

I find you everywhere and in everything.



FOREWORD I

There are some stories that can never be told, some tears that never find a witness and some love that continues to breathe long after it has been lost.

This book is not a story. It is not a novel. Nor is it an autobiography.

It is the quiet voice of a woman who loved deeply, lost completely and chose silence over complaint. Written by a female who was untimely separated from a deep bond that she feels is not confined to a single lifetime. It is the kind of unconditional love that keeps finding each other across births. Sometimes as a parent and child, sometimes as siblings, best friends, lovers or life partners - always connected, always incomplete without the other.

Every word has risen from the depths of longing. Every page carries the weight of absence. Every sentence is touched by the ache of separation, the loneliness of unfulfilled dreams, and the enduring hope that true love, though lost, never truly dies.

This is not a tale meant merely to be read; it is the cry of a soul meant to be felt. It is an attempt—perhaps an imperfect one—to transform silent tears into words, so that the pain hidden within a woman's heart may find an echo in another's.

If these pages touch your heart, if they allow you to feel even a fraction of the silent suffering, unwavering devotion and quiet strength that a young woman carries within herself, then this humble offering will have found its purpose.

May you read these pages not only with your eyes, but with your heart.

{Father of Ajay (Aju)}

FOREWORD II

Ms Shweta is a young and dynamic lady, who has been my colleague for nearly ten years. She is a great professional, who works very hard, in a very sincere and quiet way.

She is also very sensitive and sensible by nature and is extremely compassionate towards her fellow beings. She ruminates about life and its finer aspects in a very subtle and mature way.

She has surprised me with her very touching rendition of an extremely personal account of memories of a close friendship with a very genuine and rooted person and the deep sense of great personal loss and sadness on suddenly losing him to the vagaries of nature.

Her rendition of the memories of the close friendship is drawn in a very sensitive and poetic language, which touches the heart to the core and sometimes brings the reader to the verge of tears.

I am sure, this memoirs of hers will touch millions of hearts and bring forth similar emotions in many souls.

I was particularly greatly moved by it!

God Bless her!!!

Veteran Group Captain Kapil Shukla

(Mentor and Confidant of Ms. Shweta)

AUTHOR'S NOTE

We are all, in the end, stories.

One day, time will gently erase our footprints from the canvas of this world. Yet, every once in a while, a life deserves to be remembered beyond memory—to be entrusted to the pages of a book.

I wrote this book for three reasons.

First, because he lived a life that deserved to be remembered. Some people ought to be written into books so that the passage of time does not blur them into oblivion. If his journey inspires even one person to choose kindness, resilience, or love a little more deeply, this book will be my quiet homage to him.

Second, because there are only a handful of truly sacred bonds we encounter in a lifetime—connections that exist beyond definitions, beyond expectations and beyond conditions. Only the two souls who share such a bond can ever know its depth. I believe the beauty and fragrance of one such bond deserves to outlive both of us.

And finally, perhaps this is the most impossible reason of all. I like to believe that somewhere, someday, in some corner of the universe, he may stumble upon these pages, recognize both the story and the soul that wrote it, quietly smile and hear what my heart has always wanted to tell him:

YOU HAVE ALWAYS BEEN MY PRIDE.

Perhaps that hope belongs only to dreams. But some dreams are worth writing books for.

If these pages remind you of someone you love, inspire you to cherish those who still walk beside you, or encourage you to live a life worthy of being remembered, then this story has found its true home.

With gratitude and affection,

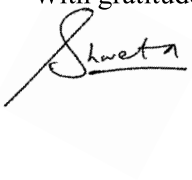


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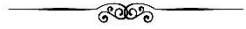
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CHAPTER: 1
A WORLD I NEVER BELONGED TO



(Before Our Paths Crossed)

There are people who seem to belong wherever they go.

They walk into a room and become part of it effortlessly. They build connections easily, trust naturally and move through life with a sense of certainty that has always fascinated me.

Then there are people like me.

For as long as I can remember, I carried an inexplicable feeling that I did not fully belong to the world around me.

It wasn't loneliness in the conventional sense. I was never completely alone. I had family, classmates, colleagues and acquaintances. I attended school, participated in conversations, when necessary, smiled when expected and lived a life that appeared perfectly ordinary from the outside.

Yet somewhere deep within me, there was always a quiet sense of displacement.

As though I was merely passing through.

As though I belonged somewhere else.

Another place.

Another time.

Another world.

For years, I struggled to explain this feeling. Even now, I am not sure I possess the language for it. It was not sadness, nor was it

unhappiness. It was simply an awareness that while everyone else seemed rooted, I remained untethered.

Perhaps that is why nature always felt more familiar to me than people did.

Ever since childhood, I felt drawn toward open skies, distant hills, quiet roads and places where words were unnecessary. Long before I met him, there was a part of me that felt called by mountains.

I never understood why.

I only knew that whenever I imagined peace, I imagined it somewhere close to nature.

Perhaps some journeys begin long before we recognize them.

I watched people form friendships with ease. They laughed openly, shared themselves freely and seemed comfortable allowing others into their inner worlds.

I admired that ability because it never came naturally to me.

I was an introvert long before I understood what the word meant.

My thoughts remained within me.

My fears remained within me.

My questions remained within me.

Over time, I became accustomed to carrying entire conversations inside my own mind.

As a child, and later as a young adult, I developed a habit I rarely spoke about.

Whenever life became overwhelming, I imagined myself talking to someone.

A boy.

I never saw his face clearly.

I never knew where he came from.

Yet his presence felt strangely familiar.

He listened without interruption.

He never judged.

He never misunderstood.

He simply sat beside me in the private landscape of my imagination while I emptied my heart.

Looking back now, I often wonder whether I created him because I needed someone who could understand the parts of me that remained invisible to everyone else.

Perhaps every lonely person creates such a companion.

Perhaps mine simply stayed longer than most.

Over time, I gave him a name.

Ajay.

I do not remember exactly when I chose it. The name simply felt right.

Once I named him, the conversations became easier.

Whenever I felt confused, disappointed or overwhelmed by life, I would speak to him.

Not aloud.

Not dramatically.

Just quietly, within the private world that existed behind my thoughts.

Years passed.

Life moved forward.

Studies.

Responsibilities.

Expectations.

Work.

The imaginary conversations became less frequent, though they never disappeared completely.

Somewhere in the background of my mind, that silent companion remained.

Waiting.

Patient.

Unchanged.

I had no reason to believe he would ever become real.

And yet life has a peculiar way of arranging coincidences that feel larger than coincidence itself.

Years later, I would meet someone whose presence felt strangely familiar.

Someone who listened without judgment.

Someone before whom I could speak without fear.

Someone who would slowly become the safest place in my life.

His name was Ajay.

At first, I did not think much about it.

How could I?

People meet countless individuals throughout their lives. Names repeat. Faces come and go. Connections form and dissolve.

Most remain temporary.

A few remain meaningful.

And then there are those rare people who quietly become woven into the very fabric of your existence.

He would become one of those people.

Though neither of us knew it then.

When I first met him, I could not have imagined the role he would eventually play in my life.

I could not have imagined that one day he would become the person I called during moments of happiness and despair.

The person whose opinion mattered.

The person whose presence brought comfort.

The person who made the world feel a little less unfamiliar.

And I certainly could not have imagined that years later I would be sitting alone, writing these pages to him after he was gone.

Sometimes I wonder whether life was preparing me all along.

Whether the lonely child who spoke to an imaginary boy named Ajay was unknowingly rehearsing for a friendship that had not yet arrived.

Or perhaps grief simply makes us search for patterns.

I do not know.

What I do know is this:

Long before I met him in reality, there was already a space inside me shaped exactly like his presence.

And when he finally arrived, it felt less like meeting someone new and more like recognizing someone I had somehow known forever.

I did not know then that every beautiful story carries within it the possibility of heartbreak.

I did not know that the person who would eventually make me feel most at home in this world would also become the person whose absence would leave the deepest mark upon it.

I only knew that after years of feeling disconnected from the world around me, I had finally found someone with whom silence felt comfortable and words felt safe.

For the first time in my life, belonging no longer felt impossible.

I had found my person.

He was my Aju (ऐजु).



OUR FIRST PHOTO TOGETHER

CHAPTER: 2
THE FIRST REAL CONVERSATION



(Second Half of the year)

When I look back now, it amazes me how quietly life-changing moments arrive.

There is no music in the background.

No sudden revelation.

No voice whispering that the person standing before you will someday become one of the most important people in your life.

Everything appears ordinary.

And perhaps that is why we fail to recognize those moments when they happen.

It was sometime around October.

I was working at a Multinational organization.

Like most young professionals, I was occupied with deadlines, shifts, targets, team meetings and the endless rhythm of work that gradually causes one day to blur into the next.

At that point, you were simply another colleague.

Another face in the office.

Another person occupying the same professional space.

Nothing more.

At least, that is what I believed.

Life introduces us to countless people. Most pass through our story without leaving a lasting impression.

A few remain.

And then there are those rare individuals who quietly become part of who we are.

You were destined to become one of those people.

Though neither of us knew it then.

I still remember carrying a water bottle with a band wrapped around it. The band simply read, "*Live Strong*."

The first-time life introduced you to me, you walked over to my workstation, greeted me with your gentle smile and spoke with the kind of warmth that instantly made you stand out. Then, pointing at the band, you asked, "May I have this? I'd like to wear it on my wrist."

I smiled and said no.

Back then, you were almost a stranger to me and I never imagined that one day you would become the person I would love most in this world.

Even now, my heart shatters every time I remember a moment when I said no to you. Writing these words feels heavier than I can explain. It is almost impossible for me to believe that there was ever a time when I could turn down even the smallest request from you. If I had known what place you would one day hold in my heart, I don't think I would have ever denied you anything.

I still remember the evening we first truly spoke. Though it was just a casual conversation, it quietly changed everything. From that moment on, we became an inseparable part of each other's lives.

Not because anything extraordinary happened.

But because everything ordinary happened.

And somehow, that was enough.

It was during a coffee break.

The evening shift had paused briefly, allowing everyone a few moments away from their desks.

The office carried its familiar rhythm.

Groups gathered.

Conversations floated through the air.

Coffee cups changed hands.

Some people discussed work.

Others discussed weekend plans.

Most of those conversations have disappeared from my memory forever.

Ours remains.

Crystal clear.

As though time chose to preserve it.

We walked outside and sat near the porch area close to the reception.

I cannot remember the exact weather that day.

What I remember is you.

You sat down.

A few moments later, you stood up abruptly and said, in your characteristically innocent manner,

"*Shwetu, yeh chubh raha hai*." (*It's uncomfortable to sit on the floor*)

Even now, I cannot think about that moment without smiling.

There was something wonderfully uncomplicated about you.

Something genuine.

Something almost childlike.

Without thinking much, I took out my small handkerchief towel and spread it on the floor.

"Sit here," I said.

You sat down immediately, completely satisfied with the solution.

It was such a small incident.

So insignificant that anyone watching would have forgotten it within minutes.

Yet memory is a strange thing.

It does not preserve moments according to their importance.

It preserves them according to their emotional weight.

That tiny exchange became our first page.

The beginning of a story neither of us knew we were writing.

As the conversation continued, we drifted away from office matters and toward life itself.

I no longer remember how the topic emerged.

Perhaps it happened naturally.

Perhaps one of us said something that led to something deeper.

What I do remember is the contrast between us.

At that stage of my life, I carried many questions.

Many disappointments.

Many silent grievances against circumstances.

Life often felt unfair to me.

Unpredictable.

Difficult.

I had seen enough to know that effort did not always guarantee reward and that good intentions did not always protect people from pain.

Perhaps I was looking at the world through the lens of wounds I had not yet healed.

You listened patiently.

Without interrupting.

Without dismissing my feelings.

Without trying to prove me wrong.

And then you said something that surprised me.

"*Life is beautiful, Shwetu*."

Such a simple sentence.

Yet it carried remarkable conviction.

You began talking about all the beautiful things that existed around us.

The little joys people overlooked.

The kindness that survived despite hardship.

The reasons to remain hopeful despite disappointment.

The beauty hidden within ordinary days.

I remember listening and thinking that your perspective was unusual.

Life had not been especially easy on you either.

I would learn that more fully in later years.

Yet somehow, you had chosen optimism.

You had chosen gratitude.

You had chosen light.

I, on the other hand, was still negotiating my relationship with darkness.

Years later, I would understand something important.

One of the greatest gifts you ever gave me was not advice.

It was perspective!

You taught me that optimism is not naivety.

It is courage.

The courage to remain gentle in a world that constantly offers reasons to become bitter.

At that coffee break, however, I did not know any of this.

I simply found myself intrigued by you.

There was a sincerity in the way you spoke.

No performance.

No pretence.

No attempt to impress.

Just honesty.

"Brutal honesty," as you would later call it.

That honesty would become one of the foundations of our friendship.

You said what you meant.

You meant what you said.

And although that quality occasionally frustrated me over the years, it also made me trust you completely.

The conversation lasted less than an hour.

Eventually the break ended.

People returned to their desks.

The evening resumed.

Work continued.

Nothing appeared different.

If someone had asked me that day whether this conversation would still matter years later, I would probably have laughed.

How could I have known?

How could either of us have known?

That one day I would revisit that exact moment again and again.

That one day it would become **sacred**.

That one day I would wish desperately to return to that porch, that coffee break, that conversation.

Just once more.

Just long enough to sit beside you and watch the evening unfold again.

Just long enough to hear you say,

"Life is beautiful, Shwetu."

And perhaps this time, I would tell you that you were right.

More right than I ever understood then.

Today, when I revisit that memory, I realize something else.

The significance of that evening was not that we spoke.

It was that we recognized each other.

Not immediately.

Not dramatically.

But slowly.

Over time.

As though two lives travelling along separate roads had quietly arrived at the same intersection.

That coffee break lasted less than an hour.

Yet somehow its echoes have lasted a lifetime.

And even now, years later, when I close my eyes, I can still see the porch.

I can still see the handkerchief spread across the floor.

I can still hear your voice.

I can still see the smile that followed.

And for a brief moment, before memory gives way to reality, everything feels whole again.

Because that ordinary coffee break gave me something I did not know I was searching for.

The beginning of belonging.

The beginning of Shwetu & Aju.

The beginning of US.

CHAPTER: 3
NOT TEMPORARY



(Where Friendship Became Belonging)

Looking back now, I often wonder when friendship transformed into something deeper.

Not love in the conventional sense.

Not the kind of relationship that fits neatly into definitions.

But a bond so profound that it quietly rearranges the architecture of your life.

The truth is, I cannot identify a single moment.

There was no grand event.

No dramatic confession.

No extraordinary turning point.

You simply became part of my everyday existence.

And perhaps that is how the most meaningful relationships are formed.

Not through milestones.

But through accumulation.

One conversation.

One shared silence.

One ordinary day after another.

Until suddenly you cannot remember what life felt like before the person arrived.

In the beginning, we were simply colleagues.

Then we became friends.

And somewhere between countless conversations and unremarkable days, you became my safe place.

I do not think I realized it immediately.

In fact, if someone had pointed it out to me then, I probably would have laughed at the suggestion.

Yet the signs were already there.

Whenever something happened in my life, my mind instinctively moved toward you.

Whenever I was upset, I wanted to talk to you.

Whenever I was happy, I wanted to tell you first.

Whenever life became overwhelming, I somehow felt lighter after speaking with you.

You became my constant without ever trying to be.

That was your gift.

You never demanded significance.

You never inserted yourself into people's lives.

You never asked to become important.

Yet somehow, you did.

You entered people's lives gently.

And then stayed.

I often think about the contrast between us.

I carried storms.

You carried sunlight.

I questioned everything.

You accepted life with remarkable grace.

I found reasons to worry.

You found reasons to smile.

Sometimes I became frustrated with situations.

Sometimes with people.

Sometimes with life itself.

And somehow, in the middle of my complaints, you would quietly say something that shifted the entire perspective.

Not because you were trying to teach.

That was simply who you were.

You possessed an extraordinary ability to find goodness where others saw disappointment.

To find possibility where others saw endings.

To find gratitude where others saw lack.

You carried your burdens differently.

You never wore them as proof of suffering.

You carried them as proof of survival.

Maybe that is one of the reasons people felt comfortable around you.

You made resilience look effortless.

What I never told you was how much I admired that.

Because beneath my arguments, my stubbornness and my tendency to challenge everything, I was constantly learning from you.

Learning how to be softer.

Learning how to be kinder.

Learning how to see beauty despite imperfection.

Learning how to remain hopeful without becoming naïve.

Of course, our friendship was not without conflict.

Perhaps that is what made it real.

I had a habit of withdrawing when hurt.

When disappointed.

When angry.

Sometimes I stopped talking. (Oops! Almost every time)

Sometimes I created distance.

Sometimes I built walls.

Whenever I retreated into silence, you never let the distance settle between us. You reached for me through every unanswered message, every quiet day, refusing to let me drift too far away. I can still hear your voice, steady and certain, saying, "*Shwetu, you may stop talking to me, but I can never afford to lose you.*"

Looking back, I realize that I often expected people to understand what I was feeling without my having to explain it.

Most people eventually gave up.

You never did.

That is what made you different.

Whenever I disappeared behind my silence, you returned.

Repeatedly.

Patiently.

Without resentment.

Without keeping score.

As though our friendship mattered more to you than your pride.

At the time, I took that for granted.

Today, I understand how rare it was.

The truth is difficult to admit.

I was often harsher with you than with anyone else.

Not because you deserved it.

But because I trusted your presence.

I trusted it so completely that I believed it was permanent.

I believed you would always be there.

No matter what I said.

No matter how frustrated I became.

No matter how long I withdrew.

Somewhere inside me existed an unspoken certainty:

Aju will understand.
Aju will forgive me.
Aju will stay.

And you always did.

Every single time.

You absorbed frustration and returned patience.

You absorbed distance and returned warmth.

You absorbed silence and returned understanding.

At the time, I mistook that consistency for inevitability.

I never imagined there would come a day when I could no longer return.

A day when apologies would have nowhere to go.

A day when gratitude would arrive too late.

One memory return to me again and again.

A simple sentence.

A sentence that felt ordinary when you spoke it.

Yet today it feels almost prophetic.

Every time I became upset and stopped talking to you, you would say:

"*Shwetu, our connection is not temporary.*"

At the time, I smiled.

Sometimes I ignored it.

Sometimes I rolled my eyes.

Sometimes I simply changed the subject.

I did not realize those words were quietly embedding themselves inside my heart.

I certainly did not know that years later I would cling to them like a lifeline.

Because after you left, they became the only explanation I could find for why I still speak to you.

Why I still write to you.

Why your absence continues to feel strangely present.

Why certain bonds refuse to obey the rules of separation.

Perhaps you were right.

Perhaps our connection was never temporary.

Perhaps some relationships are not measured by physical proximity.

Perhaps some people continue accompanying us long after the world insists they are gone.

I do not know.

What I do know is this:

The friendship that began over a coffee break became one of the defining relationships of my life.

You became the person who witnessed my strengths and weaknesses.

My kindness and my stubbornness.

My confidence and my insecurities.

My best moments and my worst.

And somehow, despite seeing all of it, you stayed.

That is the part I miss the most.

Not merely your presence.

But the certainty of it.

The quiet assurance that somewhere in this complicated world existed a person who knew me completely and still chose to remain.

As I look at the relationships around me today, I understand that certainty even more.

Most relationships carry conditions, however unspoken.

If we are pleasant, people respond warmly.

If we are patient, they offer patience in return.

If we are at our best, they often give us their best.

That is not a criticism.

It is simply human nature.

But what made you different was that your affection never seemed dependent on circumstance.

You remained kind through versions of me that were not always easy to love.

Through my frustrations.

Through my silences.

Through my mistakes.

Through my moods.

You did not withdraw your friendship every time I became difficult.

You stayed.

Looking back, I realize how extraordinary that was.

The person who accepted me most completely is no longer physically present in my life.

And perhaps that is one of the reasons your absence feels so immense.

I did not merely lose a friend.

I lost the one person whose loyalty never seemed negotiable.

The one person whose presence felt unconditional.

That certainty disappeared the day you left.

But the connection did not.

Maybe that is what you were trying to tell me all along.

Maybe relationships like ours are not measured in years.

Maybe they are measured in impact.

And by that measure, your presence continues.

In memory.

In gratitude.

In love.

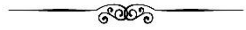
And in the quiet conviction that some bonds are not broken by absence.

They simply change form.

Maybe our connection was never temporary.

Maybe it still isn't.

CHAPTER: 4
THE PLACE CALLED US



(The geography of a shared soul)

There are places that exist on maps.

Cities.
Roads.
Buildings.
Offices.
Homes.

And then there are places that cannot be located geographically.

Places made of conversations, memories, laughter, silences and shared understanding.

Places that cease to exist the moment one person leaves.

You became one such place for me, Aju.

When I think about our friendship today, I do not immediately think of a particular day or event.

I think of a feeling.

A feeling of familiarity.

Of comfort.

Of knowing that no matter what happened in the outside world, there was someone who understood me beyond explanations.

Some people enter your life and become a chapter.

You became an entire place.

A place I could return to whenever life became difficult.

A place where I could be completely myself.

A place where I was neither judged nor misunderstood.

And perhaps that is why losing you felt less like losing a person and more like losing a home, an emotional refuge.

As our friendship grew, talking to you became my second nature.

I no longer remember when it started happening.

One day, I simply realized that you had become part of my daily routine.

If something amusing happened, I wanted to tell you.

If something upset me, I wanted to discuss it with you.

If life felt overwhelming, I instinctively sought your presence.

At the time, I never questioned it.

I assumed life would continue this way indefinitely.

Perhaps that is the greatest illusion we all live with.

We mistake what is precious for what is permanent.

You possessed a remarkable ability to make people feel important.

Whenever you listened, you listened completely.

Not out of politeness.

Not because social etiquette demanded it.

But because you genuinely cared.

In a world where most people listen merely to respond, you listened to understand.

I do not think you ever realized how rare that quality was.

There were countless conversations between us.

Some serious.

Some absurd.

Some meaningful.

Some completely forgettable.

Yet today, I would give anything to relive even the most ordinary of them.

I miss the conversations that had no purpose.

The conversations that went nowhere.

The conversations that existed simply because we enjoyed talking to each other.

Back then, I believed extraordinary moments would become my most treasured memories.

I was wrong.

It is the ordinary moments I miss the most.

The casual messages.

The routine conversations.

The small exchanges that seemed insignificant at the time.

Nobody tells us that one day those moments will become priceless.

Your ability to spot the silver lining in situations where others saw only inconvenience always amused me.

Sometimes frustrate me.

But overall, it was admirable.

You approached life with an optimism that seemed almost stubborn.

Not because your life had been easy.

But because you consciously chose hope.

Even now, whenever I encounter beauty in simple things—a pleasant evening, unexpected rain, a quiet road, a cool breeze—I find myself thinking of you.

Especially the weather.

You loved certain kinds of weather with the enthusiasm of a child discovering a secret.

Even today, when dark clouds gather unexpectedly and the sky turns grey in the middle of the afternoon, my first instinct is to think of you.

I can almost hear your voice.

"Shwetu, dekho naa kitna pyara mausam ho raha hai." (Shwetu, look, what a lovely weather it is!)

For a brief moment, it feels as though you are still here.

Then reality returns.

And silence follows.

Long before I met you, I was drawn to mountains.

Since childhood, I carried a quiet dream of settling somewhere among them.

I never fully understood why.

Perhaps I simply felt called by nature.

Perhaps I was searching for a kind of peace I could not yet name.

What I did not know then was that life would eventually introduce me to someone who loved nature even more deeply than I did.

Someone who found joy in clouds, rain, forests, winding roads and distant horizons.

Someone who could stand before a landscape and see beauty where others saw only scenery.

Looking back now, it feels fitting.

The mountains that once called to me would eventually lead me to a person who felt like home.

And perhaps that is why nature itself feels different now.

Not because the mountains changed.

But because you became part of them.

One memory returns to me often.

Back in 2010, when our friendship was still new, you would sometimes sing a regional song for me.

"O meri chanda, o meri chakora,
Ke bhali roop ke bhali bulaan,
Kile jaan chhe me chhodi tu meri paraana."

At the time, it was simply one of the countless small things that belonged to us.

A song.

A voice.

A moment.

Nothing more.

Or so I thought.

For years, because you were always there, I never felt the need to search for that song.

Why would I?

The person who sang it was only a call away.

Only a conversation away.

Only a message away.

But after you left, I found myself searching for it.

Listening to it.

Replaying it.

Not because I wanted to hear the song.

Because I wanted to hear your voice.

And every time it plays, I realize something heartbreaking.

The melody remains.

The lyrics remain.

The memory remains.

But the voice I miss most exists only in my heart now.

People often reveal different versions of themselves depending on circumstances.

You rarely did.

Whether life was kind or difficult, whether things were going your way or not, your essential nature remained unchanged.

You remained respectful.

Kind.

Honest.

Grounded.

There was no performance in you.

No attempt to appear wiser, stronger or more important than you were.

You were simply yourself.

That honesty sometimes irritated me.

But it also made me trust you.

Because with you, there was never any ambiguity.

You meant what you said.

And you said what you meant.

Over the years, I became accustomed to your presence in ways I never consciously acknowledged.

You became the person I leaned on emotionally without realizing how much support you provided.

It was only after you left that I understood how much space you occupied within my life.

As long as you were here, I never needed to search elsewhere for emotional comfort.

I never felt completely alone.

Because somewhere in the background of my life existed the certainty of you.

That certainty vanished the day you left.

There are photos of you that I never delete.

But I do not always look at them.

They remain quietly stored away.

Neither fully present nor fully absent.

Like memories frozen in time.

Because I know that the moment I open them, something rises within me.

A version of myself I am not always prepared to meet.

And perhaps, just once, I want to tell you what I never fully managed to say while you were here:

Thank you for becoming a place where I belonged.

Thank you for making the world feel less unfamiliar.

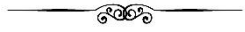
Thank you for being my home away from home.

And thank you for leaving behind enough love that even your absence continues to accompany me.

Some people leave memories behind.

You left an entire world.

CHAPTER: 5
THE THINGS I NEVER SAID



(When tomorrow never came)

There is a peculiar cruelty in grief.

It does not merely take away the person.

It also preserves every unfinished conversation.

Every unsent message.

Every delayed apology.

Every expression of affection that remained trapped inside the heart.

And over time, those unspoken words begin to echo louder than the words that were actually spoken.

Since you left, Aju, I have discovered that grief is not only about missing someone.

It is also about remembering everything you never said while they were still here to hear it.

Whenever I come across something beautiful, my first thought is that you should see it too.
Whenever I eat something delicious, I find myself wishing you were here to taste it too.
Whenever life blesses me with a good day, my heart quietly longs for you to experience it too.

Perhaps that is what love leaves behind—not just memories, but an instinct to keep sharing a life with someone who is no longer there to share it with.

If I am honest, there are many things I wish I had done differently.

Not because our friendship was incomplete.

Not because you ever made me feel unloved.

But because love often becomes most visible only after absence arrives.

When you were here, your presence felt permanent.

Not consciously.

Not deliberately.

But somewhere deep within me, I had convinced myself that you would always be there.

That no matter what happened, I would have another opportunity.

Another conversation.

Another meeting.

Another chance to say what remained unsaid.

I never considered the possibility that time could simply run out.

That one ordinary day could become the last ordinary day.

That one conversation could become the final conversation.

I remember when we began to talk, everyone seemed to call you AJ. It took me quite a while to realize that behind those two letters was a simple, beautiful name—Ajay.

Somewhere along the way, Ajay became AJ, and sooner than I could even realize, AJ became Aju.

Ajay belonged to the world.

AJ belonged to your friends and the people who were close to you.

But Aju…Aju belonged exclusively to me

Perhaps that is why I sometimes treated you differently from everyone else.

I have spent months trying to understand this.

Why was I capable of being patient with strangers yet impatient with you?

Why could I measure my words carefully with others yet speak impulsively with you?

Why did I sometimes hurt the very person whose presence meant the most to me?

The answer is uncomfortable.

But I think I know it now.

I took you for granted.

Not because I did not value you.

But because I valued you so completely that I could not imagine losing you.

You had become such a permanent fixture in my emotional landscape that I stopped appreciating how extraordinary your presence actually was.

I knew you would forgive me.

I knew you would understand.

I knew you would return.

Every single time.

And you did.

As though our friendship mattered more than being right.

As though preserving the connection was more important than winning an argument.

At the time, I saw this as your nature.

Today, I see it as a gift.

A gift I did not fully acknowledge while I still had it.

You gave me the most dangerous kind of comfort.

The assurance that no matter what I did or said, you would never leave my side.

And I accepted that assurance so completely that I stopped noticing its value.

I often think about that now.

Especially when I look at the world around me.

The people who remain in my life are good in their own ways.

Yet relationships feel different now.

Conditional.

Uncertain.

Fragile.

Sometimes it feels as though if I behave well, speak carefully, remain agreeable and constantly guard my words, people may stay.

Or they may not.

There are no guarantees.

No certainties.

No quiet promises.

And perhaps that is why losing you altered my understanding of belongingness.

Because you were good to me regardless of my moods.

Regardless of my stubbornness.

Regardless of my flaws.

You remained.

Not because I always deserved your patience.

But because your affection was never transactional.

The person who accepted me most completely is no longer standing beside me—at least not in the physical world.

And I feel the presence of your absence everyday, everywhere.

How fortunate I was.

How rare it is to encounter someone who loves you through your imperfections.

Someone who sees your flaws clearly and chooses to remain anyway.

You knew my strengths.

You knew my weaknesses.

You knew my stubbornness.

You knew my tendency to overthink.

You knew the parts of me that even I struggled to understand.

And yet, somehow, you stayed.

That knowledge became my emotional safety net.

And like many things that exist quietly in the background of our lives, I did not appreciate it until it disappeared.

Now, after losing you, memory has become a relentless teacher.

It revisits moments I once overlooked.

Moments that seemed insignificant then but feel enormous now.

I replay conversations.

I revisit disagreements.

I remember occasions when I could have chosen kindness more quickly.

Moments when I could have expressed gratitude more openly.

Moments when I could have hugged you a little longer.

Listened a little more carefully.

Loved you a little more visibly.

The most difficult part is knowing that none of those moments can be changed.

No amount of regret can travel backwards through time.

No apology can rewrite history.

No grief can alter what has already happened.

And yet the heart continues trying.

There are days when I find myself mentally returning to old conversations, editing my responses as though life were a manuscript that could still be revised.

In those imagined versions, I choose gentler words.

I express affection more freely.

I say thank you more often.

I tell you how much you matter.

I tell you how proud I am of you.

I tell you how deeply I admire the person you became.

I tell you all the things I assumed I would have years to say.

But memory offers no revisions.

Only reflections.

And so I am left carrying these words in the only direction time allows.

Forward.

Toward a future where you are no longer physically present.

A future I never wanted to imagine.

There are nights when I wake unexpectedly and the realization returns with fresh force.

You are gone.

Not busy.

Not travelling.

Not unavailable.

Gone.

The simplicity of that fact remains impossible to accept fully.

How does a person who occupied so much space within your life simply cease to exist within your daily reality?

How does the world continue functioning as though nothing has changed?

How do mornings still arrive?

How do people continue making plans?

How does life continue moving forward when someone who felt essential is no longer here?

I do not know.

What I do know is that your absence has revealed the true shape of your presence.

How many parts of my life had quietly become connected to yours.

And perhaps that is why the regret exists.

Not because I failed to love you.

But because I loved you deeply and assumed there would always be more time.

There wasn't.

That realization has become one of grief's hardest lessons.

Love should never be postponed.

Affection should never be delayed.

Gratitude should never be treated as something that can wait for tomorrow.

Because sometimes tomorrow arrives.

And the person does not.

If I could speak to you now, I would tell you that, you came into my life during some of its hardest years.

Years filled with uncertainty.

Years when I was struggling more than most people realized.

You stood beside me through those seasons without ever demanding recognition for it.

You became a source of strength when I scarcely knew how much I needed one.

Looking back now, I see an enormous difference between the person you first met and the person I have become.

Life changed me.

Loss changed me.

Time changed me.

But your friendship shaped me too.

And I know, with complete certainty, that those difficult years would have been far harder to survive without you.

Perhaps I never thanked you enough for that.

So let me do it now.

Thank you for helping me carry burdens you never created.

Thank you for standing beside me when life felt uncertain.

Thank you for making difficult years more bearable simply by being there.

And most importantly, I would tell you this:

You gave meaning to parts of my life that once felt empty.

And through your absence, you taught me the depth of grief.

I wish I had said these things when you could still hear them.

But perhaps love has its own way of travelling.

Perhaps words do not always require a physical listener.

Perhaps somewhere beyond my understanding, you already know.

You know Aju:

I will love you until the moment I pass from this existence to the next, and then I will find you again and love you some more.

Not because love demands possession.

Not because love refuses reality.

But because loving you was never conditional.

Perhaps that is why I continue writing.

Not because I expect answers.

But because these conversations never truly ended.

They simply changed form.

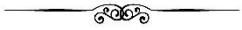
The things I never said have become the pages I now write.

And every page begins and ends with you.



OUR LAST PHOTO TOGETHER

CHAPTER: 6
THE DAY EVERYTHING CHANGED



(When goodbye arrived without warning)

There are days that arrive like any other.

Days that begin ordinarily.

Days that carry no visible warning.

Days that seem entirely unremarkable until a single moment divides your life forever.

And then, without your permission, they become dates you can never forget.

Before that day, my life still contained possibilities.

After that day, it contained an absence.

I have often tried to remember the exact sequence of events.

The precise words.

The exact moment reality changed.

But grief has a strange relationship with memory.

Some details disappear completely.

Others remain frozen with unbearable clarity.

What I remember most is disbelief.

Not sadness.

Not even pain.

Disbelief.

A refusal of the mind to accept what it has heard.

Because there are certain pieces of information that simply do not fit inside the reality we have built.

Your passing was one of them.

Even writing those words feels unnatural.

Your passing!

How can two words contain the destruction of an entire world?

I still remember the day I received the news—exactly twenty-four hours after it had happened.

The very first thing my mind did was wonder where I had been, what I had been doing, when you took your last breath.

Looking back now, I remember that afternoon vividly. I was in a deep sleep when, all of a sudden, a large bubble of water came out of my mouth with such force that it jolted me awake. I didn't think much of it then. I didn't stop to ask why it had happened or what it meant. I simply got up and continued with my day.

But now, I cannot help wondering...

Did you think of me in that moment?

Did you call my name?

Those are questions I know I will carry with me for the rest of my life.

For years, you had existed as one of the constants of my life.

Not someone I questioned.

Not someone I worried about losing.

You simply existed.

Like the sky.

Like the mountains.

Like tomorrow.

And then suddenly I was being asked to accept that you no longer did.

The mind rebels against such things.

It searches desperately for alternative explanations.

There must be a mistake.

There must be confusion.

Someone must have misunderstood.

Perhaps the information is incomplete.

Perhaps there is still hope.

Perhaps this is not really happening.

For a long time, my heart remained trapped inside those perhapses.

Even when reality had already arrived.

Even when truth stood directly before me.

A part of me continued waiting for contradiction.

Waiting for someone to say:

"No, it isn't true."

Waiting for the nightmare to end.

It never did.

And then came the images.

Images that have never fully left me.

Images I never invited into my memory yet cannot remove from it.

The river.

The rocks.

The stillness.

I often wish I could erase those images.

Not because I want to forget you.

But because those were never supposed to become my final association with you.

When I think of you, I want to remember conversations.

Laughter.

Friendship.

Weather forecasts spoken with childlike excitement.

Your optimism.

Your kindness.

The countless ordinary moments that made you who you were.

Instead, grief repeatedly drags me back to that river.

Back to those rocks.

Back to the unbearable knowledge that while I was living an ordinary day, your life was reaching its conclusion.

Sometimes I find myself wondering what your final thoughts were.

Whether you were afraid.

Whether you called out to anyone.

Whether you knew what was happening.

Whether you suffered.

These questions arrive uninvited.

And like many questions grief creates, they have no answers.

Only silence.

For months, I fought those questions.

I searched for explanations.

For reasons.

For meaning.

For something that could make sense of what happened.

But grief rarely offers satisfying answers.

Only different ways of carrying the same heartbreak.

The most painful realization was not that you had left.

The most painful realization was that I would never speak to you again.

Suddenly there is no one to call.

No message to send.

No future conversation waiting to happen.

The world expects us to understand death through philosophy.

I experienced it through interrupted habits.

Through reaching for someone who was no longer there.

Through remembering something I wanted to tell you and realizing there was nowhere to send it.

That was when the reality truly began.

Not on the day itself.

But in the days that followed.

When life continued moving forward despite my refusal to move with it.

People resumed their routines.

The world carried on.

Mornings arrived.

Meetings happened.

Phones rang.

Traffic moved.

The sun continued rising as though nothing significant had occurred.

I found this deeply offensive.

How could the world continue functioning?

How could everything remain unchanged when everything had changed?

Did nobody else notice the missing piece?

Did nobody else feel the fracture?

Because I did.

I felt it everywhere.

In every quiet moment.

In every pause.

In every thought that instinctively searched for you.

And then there was another realization.

One that arrived gradually.

Cruelly.

Unavoidably.

You were not coming back.

There would be no miraculous correction.

No misunderstanding.

No reversal.

The future I had unconsciously imagined—the future in which you simply continued existing alongside me—had disappeared.

Entire decades of imagined conversations vanished in a single day.

Every future memory I assumed we would create.

Gone.

Every future meeting.

Gone.

Every future joke.

Gone.

Every future argument.

Gone.

Aju, you weren't a chapter. You were the plot twist I never recovered from.

Everything after you followed different rules.

The world remained recognizable.

But it no longer felt familiar.

The emotional architecture of my life had changed.

And I was left trying to learn the language of a reality I never asked for.

Sometimes people say grief softens with time.

Perhaps it does.

But grief never asks for permission.

It appears unexpectedly.

In the middle of a grocery store.

During a meeting.

At a traffic signal.

While listening to a song.

On an ordinary weekday when everything seems fine.

And suddenly something reminds me of you.

A phrase.

A memory.

A familiar weather pattern.

A mountain road.

A song you loved.

And there you are again.

Not physically.

But unmistakably.

The pain may soften.

But it never entirely disappears.

Because when someone you love becomes memory, grief becomes your shadow.

And eventually, you learn to walk with both.

And so I found myself doing the only thing grief allowed.

I began talking to you anyway.

Not because I expected replies.

But because silence felt impossible.

The conversation that had begun years ago during a coffee break at the workplace refused to end.

Death had interrupted it.

But it had not erased it.

I still had things to tell you.

Questions to ask.

Memories to share.

Apologies to make.

Love to express.

And so I continued speaking.

At first inside my thoughts.

Then inside journals.

Then on pages like these.

Perhaps that is how this book truly began.

Not as a memoir.

Not as literature.

Not as an attempt to preserve memories.

But as an act of survival.

A desperate effort to continue a conversation that reality had abruptly ended.

Because I discovered something unexpected:

I could not stop loving you simply because you were no longer here.

Love does not obey facts.

It does not follow logic.

It continues moving toward the person it has always moved toward.

Even when that person is beyond reach.

Even when the world insists the conversation is over.

The day you left, Aju, the world divided itself into two parts.

Before.

And after.

Everything that follows belongs to the after.

The letters.

The longing.

The questions.

The regret.

The memories.

The search for meaning.

All of it began on the day everything changed.

And although I continue moving through life, part of me remains standing at the edge of that moment.

Looking back.

Still trying to understand how an ordinary day became the day I lost you.

Still struggling to say *"was"* after your name.

Still instinctively speaking about you in the present tense.

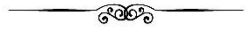
Still carrying a friendship that death ended physically but could never erase emotionally.

And perhaps that is what grief really is.

Love refusing to surrender its language.

Even after loss has rewritten the story.

CHAPTER: 7
LETTERS



(Where absence became conversation)

Even though that year took you away from us forever, it was still so difficult to say goodbye to that year.

Because once it ended, I knew no New Year would ever again give me the chance to make new memories with you.

Losing you is not something I will ever get over.

Nobody teaches us what to do with love after the person is gone.

There are books that explain grief.

There are rituals that acknowledge death.

There are condolences people offer in good faith.

But nobody tells you what happens to all the conversations that remain unfinished.

Nobody tells you where all that love is supposed to go.

For years, whenever something happened in my life, I spoke to you.

It had become instinctive.

Natural.

Effortless.

And then one day you were no longer here.

Yet the urge to talk to you remained.

My mind understood that you were gone.

My heart did not.

The strange thing about grief is that it does not arrive all at once.

Reality enters in fragments.

One realization at a time.

One heartbreak at a time.

One morning at a time.

January was not a month.

January was a series of collisions between memory and reality, as it was the first month of the year that would never see your presence beside me.

Every day brought a fresh reminder that you were gone.

Every day demanded acceptance.

And every day I refused.

So I began writing to you.

Not because I expected answers.

But because silence felt unbearable.

The letters became a place where I could continue existing beside you.

A place where death could not interrupt us.

A place where our conversation remained alive.

And so, Aju, this chapter belongs to you.

These are the words I could not keep inside me.

Letter # 1

Dear Aju,

Now that you are no longer here, I find myself grieving not only your absence but also my own shortcomings.

There isn't a day that passes without regret.

Not regret that I knew you.

Never that.

Knowing you remains one of the greatest privileges of my life.

I regret every moment I failed to express what you truly meant to me.

Every moment I allowed irritation to speak louder than affection.

Every moment I assumed there would be another opportunity.

I often find myself wishing for something impossible.

To hug you.

To talk to you.

To hear your voice one more time.

The mind knows such wishes are futile.

The heart continues making them anyway.

One thought returns repeatedly.

I can never accuse life or God of denying me the opportunity to tell you what you meant to me.

The opportunities existed.

I simply failed to use them well enough.

That realization hurts more than I can explain.

And so I sit here, speaking into your absence.

Still hoping, foolishly perhaps, that somehow you can hear me.

Can you please pay me a visit?

Not in a dream.

Not in memory.

For real.

Love,
Shwetu

Letter # 2 - Around 2:00 AM

Dear Aju,

Sleep has become unpredictable.

Sometimes I wake in the middle of the night and find you waiting in my thoughts.

Tonight was one of those nights.

The darkness feels heavier now.

The silence feels larger.

Whenever I wake unexpectedly, my mind returns to the same questions.

What happened that day?

What did you go through?

How could everything change so suddenly?

How does a person who occupies so much space within someone's life disappear in a single moment?

There are no answers.

Only questions.

And perhaps that is what makes grief so exhausting.

Not the pain.

The uncertainty.

The endless search for explanations that do not exist.

Sometimes I wish I knew less.

Sometimes I wish I could remember only your laughter.

Only your kindness.

Only the life you lived.

Instead, my mind keeps revisiting the day I lost you.

I am trying to stop it.

I hope one day I succeed.

Missing you tonight.

Always,

Shwetu

Letter # 3 - Around 11:00 AM

Dear Aju,

It is raining today.

The sky has darkened so completely that it feels like evening despite being daytime.

The moment I looked outside, I thought of you.

Of course I did.

This was your weather.

Your favourite kind.

I can hear you saying it even now.

"Shwetu, dekho naa kitna pyara mausam ho raha hai." (Shwetu, look, what a lovely weather it is!)

You always noticed beauty before anyone else.

Clouds.

Rain.

Cool winds.

The small gifts hidden inside ordinary days.

I stand by the window and imagine what you would have said.

What expression would have crossed your face.

What excitement would have filled your voice.

For a brief moment, the memory feels real enough to touch.

Then reality returns.

And with it comes the familiar ache.

I miss you.

More than words can hold.

Yours,
Shwetu

Letter # 4

Dear Aju,

Something happened today that made me smile and cry at the same time.

A driver cut across my lane unexpectedly and for a brief moment I became irritated.

The kind of irritation that appears and disappears within seconds.

I was about to mutter something under my breath.

And then, almost instantly, I heard you.

Not literally.

But the memory of you.

A quiet voice inside me saying only one word:

"Shwetu."

It startled me.

Because even now, months after you have left, there are moments when your influence appears before my reaction does.

You never liked anger.

You never liked harsh words.

No matter how frustrated you became, you somehow found a gentler way of responding.

And somewhere along the years, that gentleness found a permanent place inside me.

I realized today that you still calm me.

Not through conversation.

Not through presence.

But through memory.

And perhaps that is one of the strangest things about love.

Sometimes the people we lose continue shaping our behaviour long after they are gone.

You still stop me from becoming someone you would not recognize.

And for that, I am grateful.

Love,
Shwetu

Letter # 5

Dear Aju,

The month is ending.

Some days I function almost normally.

Some days a memory stops the entire day.

A song.

A place.

A sentence.

A cloud-filled sky.

Anything can become a doorway back to you.

What surprises me most is not the intensity of the grief.

It is the persistence of it.

You remain present in everything.

Every thought somehow finds its way back to you.

Every quiet moment becomes a conversation with you.

Perhaps this is what people mean when they say love survives.

Not in dramatic gestures.

But in daily remembrance.

In mundane moments.

In habits that refuse to disappear.

January has taught me something unexpected.

Losing you did not end our conversation.

It simply changed the way we speak.

And so I continue writing.

Because writing feels closer to you than silence ever could.

Goodnight, Aju.

Until tomorrow.

Love always,
Shwetu

Letter # 6

Dear Aju,

Some nights I found myself whispering your name to the stars.

Not because I believed they would answer.

But because I hoped somehow you would feel it.

Somewhere.

Beyond distance.

Beyond understanding.

Beyond whatever separates your world from mine.

I like to believe that love travels farther than sound.

That it crosses spaces we cannot measure.

That it reaches places language cannot.

And if your heart still recognizes mine in some mysterious corner of existence, perhaps it knows.

Perhaps every whispered memory arrives exactly where it is meant to go.

January was the month I learned something I never wanted to know.

The people we lose do not leave our lives all at once.

First they disappear from the world.

Then they slowly begin inhabiting memory.

January was the month you started becoming memory.

And I fought that transformation with everything I had.

Because memory felt too small a place for someone who had once felt like an entire world.

Yet even as I resisted it, another realization quietly emerged.

Love was finding new ways to survive.

January ended without answers.

Without closure.

Without acceptance.

But it left me with something else.

A new way of loving you.

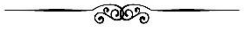
One page at a time.

One letter at a time.

One conversation at a time.

And that conversation, despite everything, was still continuing.

CHAPTER: 8
THE WEIGHT OF YOUR ABSENCE



(Where longing became routine)

If January was disbelief, February was realization.

Not acceptance.

I was nowhere near acceptance.

But realization.

The slow and relentless understanding that your absence was not temporary.

That this was not a nightmare from which I would eventually wake.

That life had changed permanently.

The world looked exactly the same.

Yet nothing felt familiar.

People often describe grief as pain.

For me, grief felt more like weight.

A weight I carried from the moment I opened my eyes until the moment exhaustion forced me to sleep.

And strangely, mornings became the hardest.

Every morning began with the same heartbreak.

No matter what I dreamt during the night.

No matter what memories visited me while sleeping.

Perhaps because every morning demanded the same realization.

You were gone.

Again.

And I had to learn that fact anew each day.

The day has barely begun and already I feel exhausted.

Not physically.

Emotionally.

The world expects me to continue.

To wake up.

To work.

To function.

To participate.

And somehow I do.

But beneath all of it exists a simple truth:

I no longer have the courage I once possessed.

Because courage felt easier when you were part of the world.

The knowledge of your existence gave me strength in ways I never understood.

Now every morning feels like an act of endurance.

A quiet attempt to face a reality I never wanted.

I miss you.

I miss knowing that you existed somewhere under the same sky.

I miss the comfort of your presence.

And most of all, I miss the version of myself that existed when you were still here.

There is a unique cruelty in hindsight.

It allows us to see clearly what was invisible while we were living it.

The friendship itself was never invisible.

I always knew you mattered.

What I failed to understand was how much.

How dependent I had become on the comfort of simply knowing you existed.

The realization arrived only after you were gone.

And by then, there was nothing left to do except grieve.

My first birthday without you is approaching, Aju.

This time of the year is unimaginably nostalgic and heart-wrenching for me. It was around this time in 2025 that I spoke to you for the last time.

I can still hear your voice asking me, "*Shwetu, how are we celebrating your birthday this year?*" Then, with the excitement only you had, "*I have bought a gift for you. When are we meeting?*"

Aju, there is no one now who asks me, weeks in advance, what my birthday plans are. No one who looks forward to it the way you did.

Can you see how left out I feel?

When will we celebrate our birthdays together again?

What a cruel twist of fate this is. At a time when we should have been talking about birthday celebrations, we are instead talking about your prayer meet.

Even writing these words, let alone reading them, feels gut-wrenching.

None of my birthdays will ever be the same again.

Whenever I see two people standing by each other as a team—whether they are colleagues, friends, spouses, or siblings—I instinctively begin looking for you. Because, other than you, no one ever stood beside me through every high and every low, through thick and thin.

Whenever I think of planning a trip, I realize there is no one left to ask me, "*Shwetu, are you enjoying yourself? When are you going to send me the pictures?*"

Nothing—simply nothing—feels right anymore.

Whenever I buy something new, my first thought is how I am going to show it to you. And then reality quietly reminds me that I no longer can.

It is impossible to put into words how deeply I miss you. Even so, I keep trying.

Now all that remains are conversations about you.

There will never again be conversations with you.

Sometimes a thought crosses my mind: if, somehow, you exist in some unknown corner of this universe, perhaps one day you will read these pages and instantly know they were written for you. Perhaps, across whatever distance separates us now, you will still feel our connection.

For years, communication with you felt effortless.

Natural.

Certain.

And now there is only silence.

The silence hurts.

But another feeling hurts even more.

Regret.

Why did I not understand you better?

Why did I not recognize your value more clearly while you were still here?

Why did I allow trivial frustrations to occupy space that should have belonged to gratitude?

I know that I never intended to hurt you.

I know that most of my mistakes came from ignorance rather than malice.

But intentions do not erase consequences.

And sometimes the heart refuses to forgive itself, even when the mind understands.

If somewhere, somehow, you can hear me—

please forgive me.

Not because I deserve forgiveness.

But because carrying this regret feels heavier than I know how to bear.

Missing you endlessly, my refuge!

Grief often disguises itself as guilt.

I did not understand that at first.

I believed my suffering came entirely from losing you.

Later I realized another layer existed beneath it.

The pain of unfinished appreciation.

The pain of realizing too late what someone truly meant to you.

The pain of wishing for one more opportunity.

Not to change history.

But simply to love more openly…

What frightens me is the permanence of unfinished things.

The conversations that never happened.

The gratitude I never fully expressed.

The affection I assumed could wait.

The moments I thought I would revisit later.

Later no longer exists.

And perhaps that is the hardest lesson grief teaches.

Love should never be postponed.

By the time February ended, I understood something that January had not yet allowed me to see.

Grief was no longer merely about losing you.

It was about learning who I was without you.

For years, your presence had become part of the emotional landscape of my life.

A constant.

A certainty.

A place where I belonged.

Now that certainty was gone.

And I found myself standing in unfamiliar territory.

Trying to learn how to live in a world that looked exactly the same—

yet felt entirely different.

I learned to miss you quietly.

Not because the longing diminished.

Not because the love became smaller.

But because grief eventually becomes internal.

Invisible to everyone except the person carrying it.

People see you functioning.

Working.

Smiling.

Participating.

And assume healing has arrived.

What they do not see are the private conversations.

The sudden memories.

The moments when your name appears without warning.

The thousand small ways absence continues speaking.

I carry all of that quietly now.

Not because it hurts less.

But because it has become part of who I am.

And perhaps that is what February taught me.

The weight I carry is not only grief.

It is love with nowhere physical to go.

Love that continues reaching.

Love that continues remembering.

Love that continues existing despite reality.

The weight of your absence followed me everywhere.

And despite carrying it every day, I had not become stronger.

I had only become more aware of how much you mattered.

And perhaps that awareness was the beginning of something new.

Not healing.

Not acceptance.

But understanding.

The understanding that grief and love were never separate things.

They were always two names for the same devotion.

CHAPTER: 9
RANIKHET



(The Place That Keeps Calling Me)

There are places we visit.

And there are places that visit us.

Ranikhet belongs to the second category.

I have spent months trying to understand why that name refuses to leave me.

Why it returns unexpectedly during quiet moments.

Why it appears in my thoughts without invitation.

Why it feels less like a destination and more like a memory I have not yet lived.

Perhaps it is because of you.

Or perhaps it has always been because of you.

Long before I understood what grief would become, there was a question you often asked me.

A simple question.

One that seemed ordinary at the time.

"Shwetu, tum mujhse milne Ranikhet aaogi naa?" (Shwetu, you'll come to Ranikhet to meet me, won't you?)

You asked it so many times.

Casually.

Affectionately.

Repeatedly.

As though the answer mattered.

As though the place itself mattered.

Back then, I never imagined those words would one day become sacred.

I never imagined they would echo inside me long after your voice had fallen silent.

Yet here I am.

Months later.

Still hearing them.

Still carrying them.

Still wondering why.

Sometimes I sit alone and replay those conversations.

I hear your voice exactly as it was.

The same warmth.

The same simplicity.

The same hope hidden inside the question.

And every time the memory arrives, I feel something shift inside me.

A longing.

Not merely for you.

For something connected to you.

Something unfinished.

Something waiting.

I cannot explain it logically.

Perhaps not everything meaningful can be explained logically.

The strange thing is that before you left, Ranikhet was simply a place.

A beautiful place, perhaps.

A town in the mountains.

Nothing more.

But grief has a way of transforming geography into emotion.

Now the name carries weight.

Now it carries memory.

Now it carries you.

Whenever I hear the word *Ranikhet*, I no longer think of roads, mountains or landscapes.

I think of your voice.

I think of your excitement.

I think of all the moments that can never happen.

I think of all the journeys that remained unfinished.

There is another layer to this story.

Long before I met you, I carried a quiet dream.

Since childhood, I wanted to settle in the mountains.

There was something about them that always felt familiar.

Something that seemed to call me long before I understood why.

Nature never felt like scenery to me.

It felt like home.

Little did I know that the same love for nature would one day introduce me to someone who would understand it even more deeply than I did.

You loved mountains differently.

Not as destinations.

But as companions.

You noticed things most people missed.

The movement of clouds.

The changing colours of the sky.

The smell of rain before it arrived.

The silence between gusts of wind.

The way sunlight touched distant hills.

You carried wonder with you wherever you went.

And perhaps that is why Ranikhet became inseparable from you.

Not because it was your hometown.

But because it reflected something essential about who you were.

Sometimes I wonder whether you knew something I didn't.

Not literally.

Not in any mystical sense.

But perhaps some part of your soul understood the importance of things before mine did.

Perhaps that is why you kept asking.

Perhaps that is why the question remains.

Waiting.

Unanswered.

There are days when I feel an overwhelming urge to leave everything behind and travel there.

Not because I expect miracles.

Not because I believe grief can be solved by distance.

But because part of me feels that something of you remains there.

Not your physical presence.

Not your life.

But your essence.

Your laughter.

Your dreams.

Your memories.

Your footprints upon the landscape.

And maybe, just maybe, a version of you still exists in the stories those mountains remember.

I often imagine arriving there.

Stepping onto roads you once walked.

Looking at the skies you once admired.

Watching the sunsets you once witnessed.

Breathing the mountain air you loved.

Would it bring me closer to you?

I don't know.

Perhaps not.

Perhaps grief simply creates these pilgrimages because the heart needs somewhere to go.

Some destination for all its unanswered questions.

Some physical place to carry its invisible longing.

For me, that place has become Ranikhet.

A place I have visited countless times in my imagination.

A place where memory and hope continue meeting.

A place where your voice still feels alive.

What surprises me most is how powerfully a single sentence can survive.

Of all the conversations we shared.

Of all the advice you gave.

Of all the memories we created.

It is this simple question that continues returning.

"Shwetu, tum mujhse milne Ranikhet aaogi naa?" (Shwetu, you'll come to Ranikhet to meet me, won't you?)

The sentence has changed over time.

When you first spoke it, it was an invitation.

Now it feels like a calling.

A thread connecting the past to the present.

A bridge between what was and what remains.

Sometimes I wonder whether grief itself is a journey toward a place we do not yet understand.

A journey through memory.

Through love.

Through absence.

Through acceptance.

Perhaps Ranikhet has become a symbol of that journey.

Not the destination.

The path.

The movement.

The search.

Because if I am honest, I am not searching for a place.

I am searching for you.

For the version of you that continues existing inside memory.

For the conversations that remain unfinished.

For the parts of myself that disappeared alongside you.

And maybe that is why the mountains keep calling.

Not because they hold answers.

But because they hold questions.

The same questions I carry every day.

Questions about love.

About loss.

About connection.

About the strange way certain people become inseparable from the places they loved.

Today, it feels like one of the most important questions of my life.

And perhaps one day I will finally go.

Not because I expect to find you waiting there.

But because some promises deserve to be honoured, even when the person who asked for them is no longer here.

Perhaps I will stand quietly among the mountains.

Perhaps I will look toward the horizon.

Perhaps I will finally understand why the place has been calling me all this time.

Or perhaps I will simply miss you.

The way I miss you everywhere else.

But somehow, I think it will be different there.

Because Ranikhet has become part of our story.

And stories, unlike people, do not die.

They continue living inside the places that remember them.

Until someone returns.

Until someone listens.

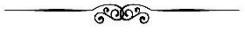
Until someone answers the call.

Maybe one day, Aju.

Maybe one day.

I will finally come to Ranikhet.

CHAPTER: 10
THE UNFAMILIAR



(Learning who I am without you)

There are losses that take people away.

And then there are losses that quietly alter the person left behind.

For a long time after you left, I believed I was grieving only your absence.

But grief is rarely that simple.

Somewhere along the way, I realized I was mourning something else as well.

A version of myself.

The version that existed when you were still here.

The version that laughed more freely.

The version that felt emotionally safe.

The version that never questioned whether she belonged in the world.

Because somewhere in that world, you existed.

And that made all the difference.

Recently, I found myself revisiting the life I was living before I met you.

Not deliberately.

Memory simply took me there.

And as I looked back, I noticed something strange.

Everything seemed dull.

Colourless.

Quiet.

Not unhappy.

Just incomplete.

As though I was moving through life rather than truly living it.

Then I looked at the years that followed.

The years that included you.

And suddenly everything seemed brighter.

Not because life had become easier.

It hadn't.

Life remained complicated.

Unpredictable.

Demanding.

But something fundamental had changed.

You had entered it.

And your presence illuminated things I had stopped noticing.

It is difficult to explain this to people who have never experienced such a connection.

How one person can alter the emotional atmosphere of an entire life.

How their existence can quietly transform ordinary days.

How they can make the world feel warmer without ever trying.

That was your gift.

You infused life into everything you touched.

Not through grand gestures.

Not through dramatic acts.

Simply by being yourself.

You carried a kind of aliveness that was impossible to ignore.

Even now, when I think about you, I rarely remember specific achievements first.

I remember energy.

Warmth.

Presence.

The way you occupied a room.

The way you made people feel seen.

The way you treated others with respect regardless of who they were.

The way you found beauty in things most people overlooked.

And perhaps that is why life feels unfamiliar now.

Not because the world has changed.

But because the light through which I experienced it has changed.

The streets are the same.

The sky is the same.

The seasons continue arriving exactly as they always have.

Yet everything feels different.

Sometimes I look around and feel as though I have become a visitor in my own life.

A participant rather than a resident.

Present but detached.

Moving forward while simultaneously looking back.

The strangest part is that grief has altered time itself.

The years before meeting you feel distant.

The years with you feel vivid.

And the years after you left feel suspended somewhere in between.

As though I am still learning how to inhabit them.

Sometimes I wonder whether everyone experiences this after losing someone significant.

Whether they too feel displaced inside their own lives.

Whether they too spend months searching for familiarity in places that no longer provide it.

Or perhaps this is simply what happens when someone becomes deeply woven into your existence.

When they leave, they take parts of the map with them.

And suddenly familiar territory becomes unfamiliar.

There is another realization that this phase has forced upon me.

One I never expected.

Not many people have ever found their way into my prayers. And even when they did, it was only in moments of extreme crisis.

But from the day you came into my life—and even now that you are no longer here—the prayer I began saying for you has never ceased.

It will never end. It will only end when my own existence does. That much, I know for certain.

You know, Aju, there is another realization that has emerged from all of this.

One that continues surprising me.

I loved you when you were here.

I never doubted that.

But since you left, something else has happened.

I have become your admirer.

Not in the way people admire public figures.

But in the way one human being comes to appreciate the true measure of another.

The more I learn about your life.

The more I hear stories about you.

The more I understand the obstacles you overcame.

The more respect I feel.

Meeting Uncle (your dad) after you left was one of those moments.

I often think why it happened too late.

I wish those conversations had happened while you were still here.

I wish I could have witnessed your pride through his eyes.

He told me stories.

Simple stories.

Stories that revealed the boy you once were.

The son who transformed limitations into achievements.

The son who made his father proud.

Listening to those stories, I felt something shift inside me.

I had known you as my Aju.

My friend.

My confidant.

My constant.

But there were entire dimensions of your life that existed beyond our friendship.

And discovering them only deepened my admiration.

You lived with dignity.

You worked hard.

You created a life that reflected your values.

And perhaps most importantly, you left behind people who speak about you with love.

That is no small accomplishment.

Many people spend their entire lives chasing success.

Very few leave behind genuine affection.

You did.

And that says more about your character than any achievement ever could.

Sometimes I imagine what you would say if you could read these pages.

You would probably laugh.

Perhaps tell me I am exaggerating.

Perhaps change the subject entirely.

You were never comfortable being placed on a pedestal.

But I am writing this not because you were perfect.

You weren't.

None of us are.

I am writing it because you were good really good.

And in a world that often celebrates extraordinary people, I have come to appreciate the quiet power of good people.

People who leave places better than they found them.

People who make others feel valued.

People who remain kind despite life's disappointments.

People like you.

The unfamiliar thing about this phase is that it slowly teaches gratitude.

Not immediately.

At first there is only pain.

Only absence.

Only longing.

But eventually, gratitude begins appearing around the edges.

Gratitude for having known the person at all.

Gratitude for the memories.

Gratitude for the lessons.

Gratitude for the love.

I am not there yet.

Not completely.

The pain still arrives.

The longing still remains.

The mornings are still difficult.

But somewhere within all of it, gratitude has begun taking root.

And perhaps that is how healing begins.

Not by forgetting.

Not by moving on.

But by learning to carry both grief and gratitude at the same time.

The world still feels unfamiliar.

Perhaps it always will.

But every now and then, when I remember your laughter, your optimism or the way you looked at life, I catch a glimpse of something familiar again.

Another significant gift you gave me was the desire to become better.

Through your words, your actions and the way you lived your life, you inspired me to be a better human being in countless ways.

CHAPTER: 11
PREMONITION

(You were preparing me all along)

About six or seven months before everything changed, you had this habit of saying something that seemed completely out of place.

Without any particular reason or context, you would suddenly remind me, "*You know na, Shwetu, you are not alone. I am always with you*."

Every time you said it, I would pause for a moment, puzzled by the certainty in your voice. There was nothing happening that required reassurance. No crisis. No fear. No distance that needed explaining. Yet you kept saying it, as though it was something I needed to hear long before I understood why.

Back then, I would simply acknowledge it and move on. I would smile and reply, "*Yes Aju, I know*." I never stopped to ask why you felt the need to say it so often. I never wondered what made those words so important to you.

But now, looking back through the lens of loss, I find myself returning to those moments again and again.

Perhaps some part of you knew what neither of us could see. Perhaps, at a level beyond logic and beyond words, you sensed that our time in this form was running short. And maybe those gentle reminders were your way of preparing me for a truth my heart would one day need to hold onto—that presence is not limited by physical proximity and love does not end where a life does.

Maybe you were trying to tell me that when the day came for me to search for you and not find you beside me, I should remember that you had already given me the answer.

You are not alone.

I am always with you.

Letter - About Forgiveness

Dear Aju,

There is something I need to ask.

Not because I expect an answer.

But because the question continues living inside me.

Did you know?

Did you know how much you meant to me?

Did you know that beneath every argument, every irritation, every stubborn moment, there existed a love I never fully knew how to express?

I hope you did.

Because I worry sometimes.

I worry that my flaws spoke louder than my affection.

I worry that my impatience overshadowed my gratitude.

I worry that I left too many important things unsaid.

The truth is that I was never afraid of losing you.

And perhaps that was my greatest mistake.

Your presence felt permanent.

I trusted it completely.

Too completely.

If somewhere beyond this world awareness still exists, I hope you know this:

You were loved far more than I ever managed to say.

I'm sorry, Aju, for every tear you had to hide, for every moment you cried in silence while I remained unaware. I should have been there beside you—to tell you that you never had to carry those feelings alone. That you could have poured your heart out without fear. I would have listened, understood and accepted everything exactly as it was, without asking you to be anything other than yourself.

And if I hurt you, knowingly or unknowingly, I hope you forgave me long before I learned how to forgive myself.

Because loving you was never conditional.

It was never dependent upon agreement.

Or convenience.

Or circumstances.

Even now, after everything, that remains true.

Yours always,
Shwetu

Letter - About Loneliness

Dear Aju,

It was only after you left that I truly understood what loneliness means.

Before that, I thought loneliness was the absence of people.

I was wrong.

Loneliness is the absence of one particular person.

The person whose existence quietly made the world feel less frightening.

The person whose presence created emotional shelter.

The person your heart instinctively ran toward.

For years, whenever life became difficult, I came to you.

Sometimes through words.

Sometimes through silence.

Sometimes through nothing more than the comfort of knowing you existed.

Now, when life becomes difficult, my heart still runs in the same direction.

The only difference is that you are no longer there.

And every time that happens, I understand loneliness a little more.

Sometimes the person who made us feel safest leaves this earth long before we are ready.

Yet I have begun to wonder whether your role in my life truly ended.

Perhaps you protected me while you were here.

And perhaps, in ways I cannot explain, you still do.

First on earth.

And now from somewhere beyond my understanding.

Missing you,
Shwetu

The truth is that none of these letters were ever meant to reach you.

They were meant to save me.

To give shape to feelings too large for silence.

To create a place where love could continue existing after loss.

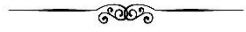
Perhaps that is all writing really is.

An attempt to preserve what time cannot keep.

Or perhaps—

until the day I finally get to tell them to you myself.

CHAPTER: 12
THE SACRED BOND



(I'll Meet You on the Other Side)

When we love and care for someone, we often begin to believe that nobody else in the entire world could ever love them more than we do.

But for me, it is not the real achievement.

The real achievement is when that person themselves attests to the fact that, "*Nobody in the entire world loved them more than you did*."

Thank you for giving me that reward.

Thank you for saying those words to me.

When I first began writing these pages, I thought I was writing about loss.

Now, standing at the end of this journey, I realize this book has never been just about loss—it has been about the sacred bond we shared.

Loss is simply what happens when love has nowhere physical to go.

Love itself remains unchanged.

It continues existing.

It continues remembering.

It continues reaching.

Even across impossible distances.

Aju, there are still moments when I instinctively look for you.

Moments when something happens and my first thought is:

"I need to tell Aju."

The thought arrives naturally.

Effortlessly.

Before reality has time to intervene.

Then comes the familiar silence.

The reminder.

The ache.

And yet, strangely, those moments no longer feel entirely tragic.

Because they remind me of something important.

They remind me how deeply woven into my life you became.

Not everyone leaves that kind of imprint on another human being.

Not everyone becomes part of someone's inner world.

You did.

You still are.

There is another truth I have come to accept.

I will forever struggle to say *"was"* after your name.

My mind understands what happened.

My heart still resists the grammar of loss.

You are not simply someone who existed in my past.

You remain part of my present.

Part of my decisions.

Part of my memories.

Part of my identity.

Language asks me to place you in history.

Love refuses.

And I think it okay, if I am a bit sad forever...it will remind me that you were REAL.

Sometimes I revisit the years before I met you.

The lonely girl who often felt as though she belonged somewhere else.

The girl who carried entire worlds inside her mind.

The girl who often felt unseen.

If I could speak to her now, I would tell her something.

I would tell her that one day she is going to meet someone who changes everything.

Someone who teaches her what emotional safety feels like.

Someone who becomes family without sharing blood.

Someone whose friendship will shape her life in ways she cannot yet imagine.

And I would tell her something else.

I would tell her that she will lose him.

Because life is not always kind.

Because time does not negotiate.

Because love offers no guarantees.

But I would also tell her this:

Knowing him will still be worth every heartbreak that follows.

Every single one.

Because some people are gifts.

Not because they stay forever.

But because they change us forever.

You were one of those gifts.

Some nights I still talk to God about you.

Not because I am searching for explanations anymore.

But because prayer has become another form of conversation.

One of the highest forms of love is to continue carrying someone into your prayers long after they are gone.

So I thank God for you.

For our friendship.

For every conversation.

For every lesson.

For every year we were given.

For every ordinary day that became extraordinary in hindsight.

I thank God every time I remember you.

And somehow, that has become often.

There are moments when I imagine a future beyond this one.

Not out of impatience.

Not out of sorrow.

Simply out of hope.

A hope that love is larger than endings.

A hope that some connections extend beyond the boundaries of this life.

A hope that somewhere, somehow, distance is temporary.

Perhaps someday we will share the same sky again.

Perhaps someday all unanswered questions will become irrelevant.

Perhaps someday all separations will end.

I do not know.

But I like believing that love this deep does not simply disappear into silence.

And so, this is not really a goodbye.

It never could be.

Goodbyes belong to endings.

And despite everything, this does not feel like an ending.

It feels like a continuation.

A different form of togetherness.

A relationship transformed rather than erased.

You remain present in memories.

In stories.

In weather.

In mountains.

In music.

In letters.

In silence.

In prayer.

In love.

And yet, despite the grief, despite the longing, despite the years that should have been ours—

if life were repeated a thousand times,

I would still choose this friendship.

Still choose you.

You.

And again, you.

Perhaps one day, when my own journey reaches its conclusion, I will finally understand all the things that seem impossible to understand now.

Perhaps then the questions will disappear.

Perhaps then the distance will disappear too.

Until that day, I will continue living.

I will continue remembering.

I will continue carrying you with me.

Not as a burden.

But as a blessing.

You once told me that our connection was not temporary.

For a long time, I thought those words belonged to the past.

Now I think they belong to eternity.

So wherever you are—

if somewhere beyond sight, beyond time, beyond understanding, you still exist—

know this:

You were loved.

You are loved.

You will always be loved.

And when my own story is finished,

when my final page has been written

and my final journey begins,

I hope the first thing I hear is your voice.

Perhaps asking a familiar question.

Perhaps laughing at how long it took me.

Perhaps simply saying,

"Shwetu, tum aa gayi." (Shwetu, you came.)

I often wonder what my first moments in heaven will feel like.

Will I run to you?

Or will I simply stand there for a while, smiling, because after all this time, you're finally standing before me again?

I'll want to tell you everything that has happened since you left and ask you everything too—what your journey has been like since then.

I can almost imagine the two of us grinning with moist eyes, as if no time had ever passed.

Until then, my aju.

Until then.

I'll meet you on the other side.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book was never meant to be written!

It began as scattered thoughts, unfinished letters and conversations I could no longer have aloud. Over time, those pages became a place where memory could breathe, where grief could find language and where love could continue its journey.

My deepest gratitude is to Aju. Though these pages were written after you left, every chapter exists because you were here. Thank you for your friendship, your kindness, your unwavering faith in me and for giving me a place where I truly belonged. Your presence shaped these pages long before I ever wrote the first word.

I am grateful to everyone who stood beside me with patience and understanding while I navigated this deeply personal journey. Thank you for allowing me the space to remember, to grieve and ultimately, to write.

My heartfelt gratitude also goes to every reader who has chosen to hold this book. By turning these pages, you have become a quiet witness to a friendship that continues beyond absence. I hope that somewhere within this story, you find a reflection of your own love, your own memories and the comforting reminder that the people who transform our lives never truly leave us.

Above all, I thank God—for bringing two lives together when they needed each other most, for the years we were gifted, for the strength to endure the loss, and for the hope that love is greater than endings.

This book is my attempt to honour a sacred bond that time could not diminish and death could not erase.

GLOSSARY

(Chapter 4, Page 29)

O meri chanda, o meri chakora,
Ke bhali roop ke bhali bulaan,
Kile jaan chhe me chhodi tu meri paraana

"O my moon, o my partridge (chakora bird),
What a beautiful appearance, what a beautiful way of speaking,
Why do you leave me and go away, you are my life."

(https://youtu.be/WIaBTQVJ6QI?si=OK7KRbA4-Z7MEdJS)