

OBSCURED PATHS

Obscured paths teach us to trust the steps
not just the road

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Preface

Life rarely unfolds the way we expect. Sometimes, the path ahead is clear—lit by purpose and planning. Other times, we find ourselves standing at the edge of uncertainty, faced with a choice to step forward without knowing what lies ahead. Obscured Paths was born from such a moment. This book is not just a story—it is a journey. A journey of a young soul who dared to dream beyond his circumstances, who struggled to match his desires with the greater design of life, and who eventually discovered that surrendering control doesn't mean giving up—it means gaining something far deeper: faith, strength, and a new understanding of success. Every chapter in this book is a reflection of that inner conflict and the eventual peace that follows when we let go and trust the unknown. It is my hope that in these pages, readers will not only see a story but feel their own courage stirring—reminding them that it's okay to not have all the answers, as long as they have the strength to take the next step.

Acknowledgment

Writing Obscured Paths has been a journey filled with challenges, discoveries, and immense personal growth. This book would not have been possible without the support, encouragement, and inspiration of many individuals. First and foremost, I am deeply grateful to my family, whose unwavering belief in me gave me the strength to keep going even when the path seemed unclear. Your patience and love were my foundation. To my friends and mentors, thank you for your honest feedback, thoughtful conversations, and the encouragement that helped shape this work into what it is today. A special thanks to [Ms. Mahi], whose insights and suggestions added depth and clarity to my writing. Your guidance was invaluable. To the readers who choose to walk this path with me—thank you. Your willingness to explore the unknown gives this book its true meaning. Finally, I dedicate this work to anyone standing at the edge, unsure of the next step. May you find the courage to keep moving forward.

With Gratitude,

Yousuf A. Nomani

Introduction

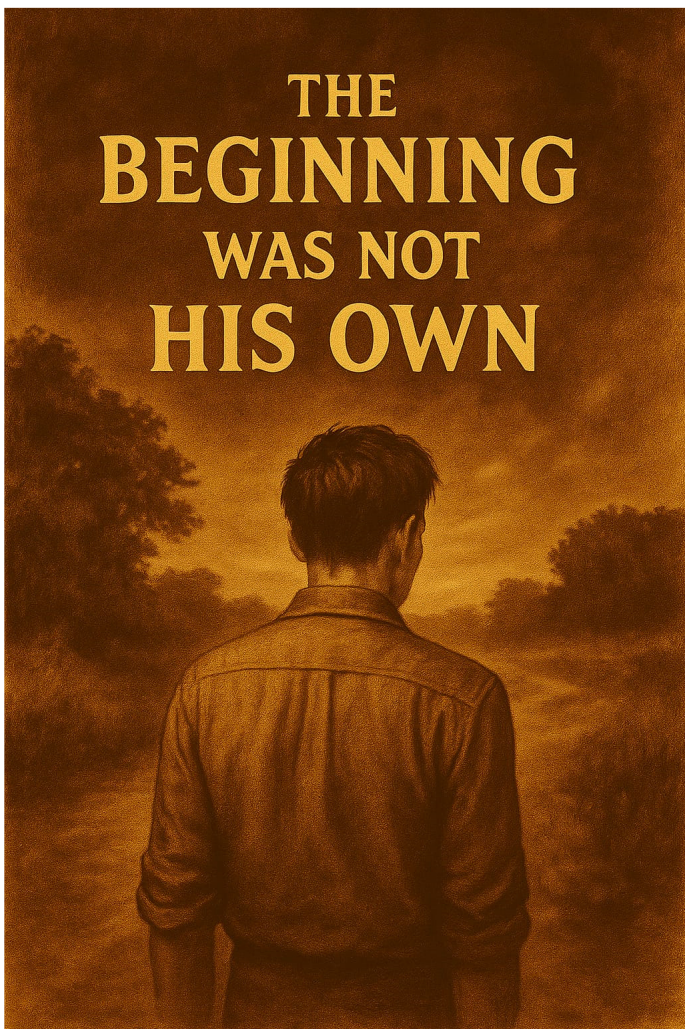
Life often feels like walking down a path shrouded in fog—uncertain, unpredictable, and full of hidden twists. Obscured Paths invites you to journey into that mist, where every step taken reveals something unexpected. This is a story woven from moments of love that ignite hope, challenges that inspire strength, and mysteries that keep you guessing. Each chapter opens a door to the unknown—no one truly knows what lies ahead, and that uncertainty is where life's most profound lessons and deepest connections live. Whether it's the thrill of uncovering secrets or the quiet power of a heartfelt bond, these tales will take you through the shadows toward light. Step carefully, but don't hesitate. The path may be obscured, but it's yours to explore.

Obscured Paths Before you move forward, take a
breath— you're about to wander where light fades and
wonder begins. Not all who travel know the way, but
every step still matters.

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THE
BEGINNING
WAS NOT
HIS OWN



Chapter 1

The Beginning Was Not His Own

Riyan always dreamed of doing something big. Not just big—different. While others were happy with college degrees and safe jobs, he wanted to create something of his own. A startup, a business, something that would carry his name and his story.

But dreams don't always begin the way we hope they will.

At twenty, Riyan had already tried—and failed—three times. His first idea was an online clothing store. He had saved money from a part-time job and built a website from scratch. He ordered shirts, designed a cool logo, and even convinced his friends to model for free. But within three months, the store closed. The supplier cheated him, and most of the clothes were poor quality. He lost everything he invested.

“Failure is normal,” he told himself. “I’ll try again.”

Next came a food delivery app, something local and personal. He teamed up with two friends and worked day and night. But this time, the mistake wasn't even his. One friend quit halfway. The other took money from the business and disappeared. Once again, Riyan was left alone. People didn't even blame the others—they blamed him.

His third try was a digital content page —videos, quotes, storytelling. It actually gained attention for a few weeks. But algorithms changed, views dropped, and sponsors never came. Slowly, the fire faded.

Every time he started, something pulled him down. People began to talk.

“Some people just aren’t made for business.”

“Maybe he’s not as smart as he thinks.”

“Give up, bro. Try a job.”

Even his parents started saying, “Why can’t you just settle? Do something stable.”

But Riyan couldn’t. He didn’t want to settle. And yet ... he was tired.

One night, after another long day of scrolling through rejected email sandbank messages with zero balance, Riyan sat alone on his terrace. The sky was cloudy. His chest felt heavy, not from the weather, but from doubt.

What if it’s true? he thought. What if I’m not meant for this?

He looked back on everything. Every idea. Every sleepless night. Every small success that ended in silence.

That’s when it hit him.

Maybe the problem wasn’t him.

Maybe the problem was how everything began.

Maybe... the beginning was not his own.

He had always started with borrowed money, borrowed advice, borrowed dreams. His first business idea wasn't even his own—it was something he saw trending online. His partners were never really committed. His content page was just copying what worked for others.

Every “start” had been based on someone else's foundation. Someone else's vision.

He had never really built his own beginning.

And that's when something shifted inside him.

The next day, he woke up early. He didn't open his laptop. He didn't check social media. He just took out a notebook and wrote one question at the top of the page:

“What do I care about?”

He wrote nonstop for an hour.

He wrote about how he felt every time he failed. He wrote about the pressure to succeed. He wrote about the things no one talks about—the mental exhaustion, the self-doubt, the loneliness behind trying to build something alone. He wrote about how startups look cool from the outside but feel painful on the inside.

Then an idea was born—not a flashy business, but something real.

What if I built a space for people like me?

A digital home for failed founders, learners, first-time dreamers?

A place to share stories, lessons, and raw truth—not just success reels?

This idea didn't feel borrowed. It wasn't about money first. It was about meaning. And for the first time, Riyan felt calm. Not excited. Calm. Like this idea fit him. Like it was his.

He started small—no big website, just a page. A blog. A name: “Broken Start”—because not every journey begins perfectly.

He shared his story. Then another. And another. Within a few weeks, messages started coming in.

“Bro, I thought I was the only one.”

“Thank you for saying this out loud.”

“I gave up after my first failure. You gave me hope.”

This time, there were no partners to betray him. No borrowed templates. No fake trends.

This time, the beginning was truly his own.

DREAMS MADE ^{OF} DUST



Chapter 2

Dreams Made of Dust

In the heart of a dry, forgotten town stood a small house made of clay and broken promises.

It belonged to a boy named Ishaan.

His world was cracked—like the earth pulled out from beneath his feet. His father had passed away when he was ten. His mother, though loving, worked in fields until her hands bled just to put food on their table. Their village had no high school, no hospital, no internet, and barely enough water.

But Ishaan had something the others didn't.

He had dreams.

Big ones.

While others talked about escaping the village, he imagined building something within it—a school, a library, a place where other kids like him could find the sky even if they were born in dust.

Every night, under a flickering kerosene lamp, he studied torn books given by a traveling teacher. He wrote notes on the back of old newspapers. He asked questions no one around him had answers to.

But dreams, in places like this, are fragile.

Every time he seemed to move forward, something pulled him back.

When he won a scholarship exam, the letter arrived two months late.

When he finally found someone to mentor him, the man died of illness before the second meeting.

One night, while walking home from a long day of field work, Ishaan looked up at the stars and whispered:

"Why is every door closing?"

But the sky didn't answer.

Only the wind did—dusty, dry, and cold.

His mother once told him, "Dreams here are like footprints in dust. The wind wipes them away if you stop walking."

So, he didn't stop.

He kept reading. Kept failing. Kept starting over.

Years passed.

He applied to colleges outside the village. Rejected—again and again and again.

People laughed.

"You? A boy from nowhere?"

But Ishaan kept walking.

Then, one day, a woman from a nearby town visited to photograph rural life. She saw him teaching younger children in a shaded corner using chalk and a cracked wall.

“Who taught you all of this?” she asked.

“No one,” he said, embarrassed. “Just ... dust and determination.”

She smiled and took a picture.

That photo found its way to an education foundation in the city.

Weeks later, Ishaan received a call.

A full scholarship to study education and opportunity to teach in his village.

He dropped the phone. Fell to his knees. And cried—not because the journey was over, but because it had just begun.

Years Later...

Where once there was only dust, now stood a school.

Built by Ishaan.

Painted in bright colours. Stocked with books. Filled with hope.

He didn’t leave the village.

He lifted it.

People now brought their children from other towns. Newspapers called him The Man Who Dreamed in Dust.

One day, a journalist asked him, “Didn’t you ever feel like giving up?”

He looked out at the children playing under a tree and said,

“I did. Many times. But I realized ... some dreams aren’t meant to come easy. They’re meant to test you, break you, shape you. And if you still believe in them after all that, then those dusty dreams? They become the foundation of something stronger than stone.”

Epilogue:

Not all dreams are born in comfort.

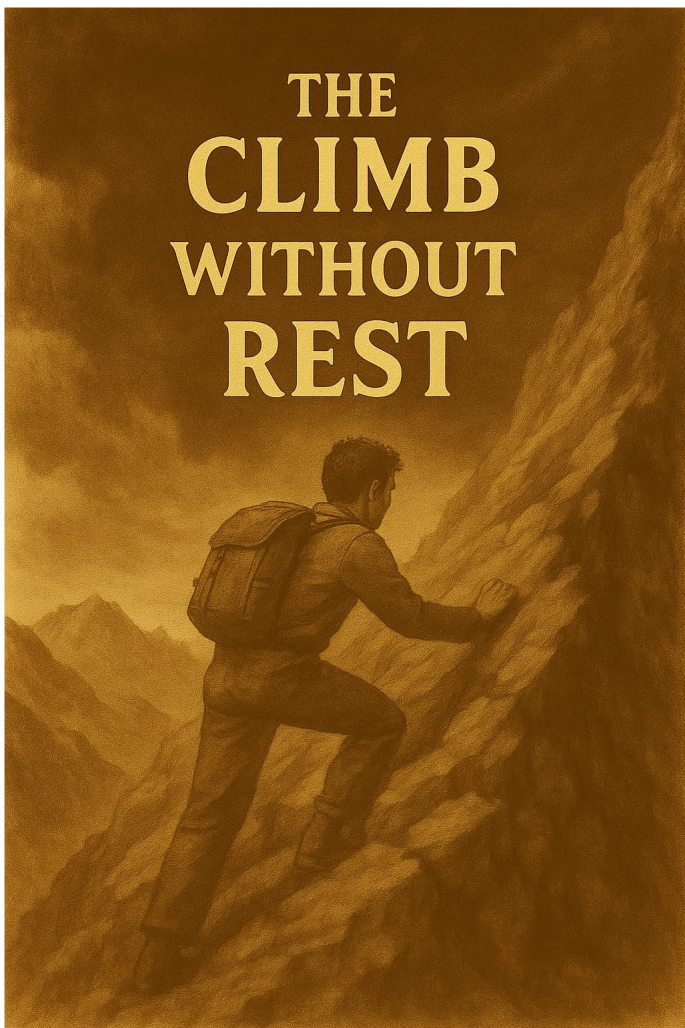
Some are born in struggle—in pain, in dirt, in silence.

But even dust can rise—if the wind is strong enough.

Be the wind.

Be the one who doesn’t stop.

THE CLIMB WITHOUT REST



Chapter 3

The Climb Without Rest

Arjun was never be kind to sit still. From a young age, he believed life was a ladder, and the only way to reach the top was to keep climbing. He wasn't born into wealth, nor did he have any special advantages. But what he did have was fire—an endless drive to prove himself. He watched others waste time in small talk, in sleep, in laughter—and he told himself, “I’ll rest when I’m successful.”

By the time he was 25, Arjun had already built a small business from scratch. He woke up before the sun and slept well after midnight. He barely ate, ignored weekends, and said no to every party, family function, or friendly outing. His phone was always buzzing, his mind always racing. His friends called him “The Machine,” and he smiled proudly every time he heard it.

Success came quickly. His business grew beyond what anyone imagined. He bought a car, then a house. His parents were proud. People in town spoke his name with respect. Young entrepreneurs came to him for advice. They admired his discipline, his sacrifice, his work ethic. But behind the achievements, Arjun was slowly crumbling.

He began to feel tired—but not the kind of tired sleep could fix. His body ached. His chest felt tight at times. His doctor warned him: “You need to rest, Arjun. You’re burning yourself out.” But Arjun laughed it off. “I’m fine,” he said. “There’s no time for rest. I have goals.”

The truth was, Arjun was afraid. He believed that stopping, even for a day, meant falling behind. He thought rest was for the weak. He told himself, “Success needs sacrifice.” So, he kept pushing. Every day. Without pause. Without refecction.

Time passed, and though his business reached new heights, his health fell to new lows.

He began forgetting things. His hands trembled occasionally. The headaches got worse. He ignored them all.

One afternoon, during a meeting with his staff, Arjun suddenly stopped speaking. He looked confused, as if the words had slipped from his mind. Then, he collapsed.

His employees rushed to help him. An ambulance was called. But Arjun’s heart, the same heart that had powered through years of stress, finally gave up. He was just 32.

News of his death shocked everyone. People mourned. Hundreds came to his funeral. Many cried not just because Arjun was gone—but because they knew they

were following the same path. His story became a mirror, forcing people to reflect on their own choices.

Arjun had achieved everything—except peace. He had climbed every mountain—except the one within. He had reached the top—but never stopped to breathe.

His family sat silently in their home, surrounded by Arjun's awards, certificates, and business plans. None of it could replace him. His mother whispered through her tears, "He gave everything ... but forgot to live."

In the weeks that followed, his story became a lesson. His staff started leaving the office on time. His younger brother, once inspired by Arjun's tireless drive, began to take evening walks and have dinner with their parents. His friends spoke openly about stress, health, and balance. People in the community started using the phrase: "Don't climb without rest."

Arjun's life wasn't a failure—it was a powerful story. A reminder that while hard work can take you far, it should never take all of you.

The moral of his journey is simple, but vital:

Work hard, but don't forget to rest.

Chase your dreams, but don't run past your health.

Make time for success, but also for sunsets, smiles, and slow mornings.

Because what good is success if you're too tired, too sick,
or too gone to enjoy it?

Rest isn't laziness—it's preparation. It's healing. It's what
allows you to climb further without falling. Life isn't a
race to the end; it's a journey to be lived, savoured, and
shared.

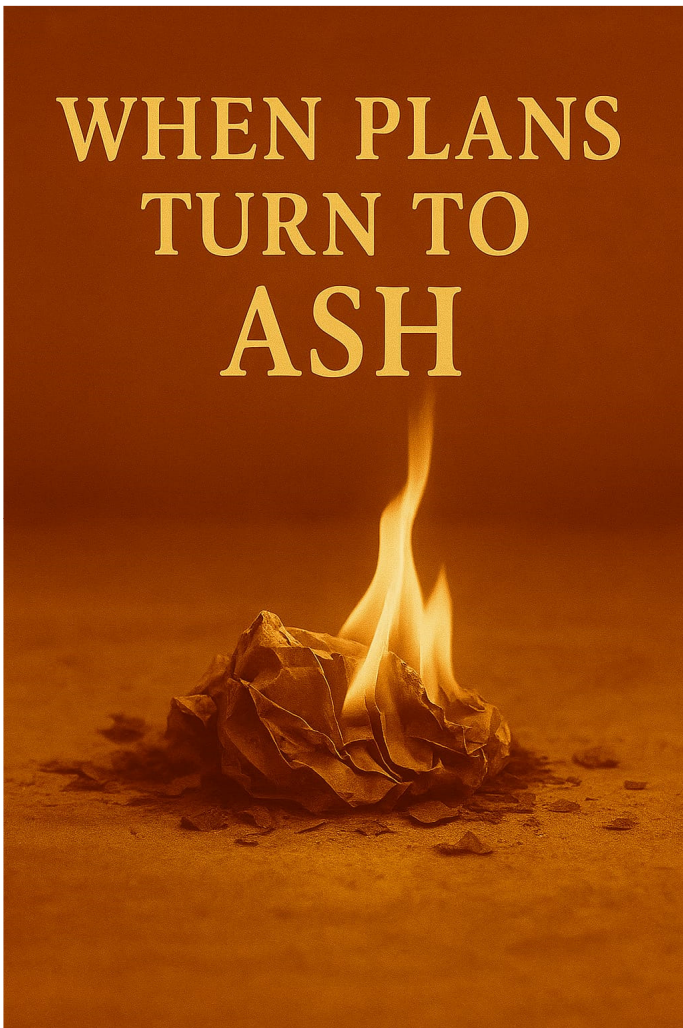
So, let Arjun's story live in your heart as a guide.

Climb high.

Climb strong.

But never climb without rest.

WHEN PLANS TURN TO ASH



Chapter 4

When Plans Turn to Ash

Arman had always lived with a plan. His life was a series of carefully drawn lines—study hard, get a job, get promoted, buy a house, settle down. He was the kind of man who didn't believe in "see where life goes." He believed in knowing where you were going before taking the first step.

At 29, everything was on schedule.

He had a decent job at a mid-sized tech company, a small apartment with a growing list of future improvements, and a savings account that gave him quiet satisfaction. He was engaged to Aanya, a woman as thoughtful and driven as he was. They had a wedding date set. They had already chosen names for future children. He even had a folder on his computer labelled "Life Blueprint."

Then, over the course of six months, everything changed.

It started with layoffs at his company. He wasn't too worried—he was competent, loyal, consistent. But when the cuts reached his department, his name was on the list. The email was brief, cold. He read it twice, not out of disbelief, but because his brain refused to accept something that wasn't part of the plan.

Still, he told himself it was a setback, not a collapse. He'd find another job soon. Maybe something better.

But days turned into weeks, and weeks into months. The job market was tougher than he expected. Interviews came and went, but no offer stuck. His routine—once filled with purpose — slipped into long, quiet days and longer, quieter nights.

Then came the second blow.

Aanya sat across from him at their favourite café, hands wrapped around a cup she hadn't sipped from. Her eyes didn't meet his. She spoke softly.

"I don't know if this is the life I want anymore."

At first, he thought it was the stress talking. She'd come around, he thought. But she didn't. She moved out two weeks later.

Arman's apartment grew quieter than ever. He removed her toothbrush from the sink. Her slippers from the door. Her name from the Wi-Fi.

And in the silence that followed, all the things he thought were secure began to feel like smoke.

The "Life Blueprint" folder remained untouched.

He tried to revise it once, but every time he opened it, he felt a strange heaviness. The plans no longer felt like goals—they felt like lies he had told himself.

One night, he sat on his balcony watching smoke rise from a building in the distance. Not fire — just chimney smoke—but it reminded him of something burning. Something disappearing.

He thought: This isn't what I planned.

But there it was.

He began to walk more. Not for exercise—just to get away from the stillness. On one of those walks, he passed a group of children drawing with chalk on the sidewalk. The lines made no sense. A sun with six arms. A house with wings. A tree drawn upside down.

None of it was part of a plan. It just was.

He stood watching for a while. A little boy looked up and grinned. “Want to draw something?”

Arman hesitated.

Then he took a piece of chalk.

He drew a line.

Just a line.

No goal. No destination. Just colour on concrete.

That evening, back at home, he didn't open the old folder. He didn't apply to jobs. He didn't try to fix anything.

He just made dinner.

Simple food. Just enough.

That became a quiet habit. Small steps. Nothing grand. Nothing ambitious. He began journaling—not goals, but moments. What he felt. What he saw. Sometimes, just a sentence.

“Saw a bird land on my railing today. Stayed longer than usual.”

One day, a recruiter called him. A new opportunity. Part-time. Not what he had imagined years ago—but he said yes.

Another day, he met a former co-worker for tea. They laughed more than he expected.

Little by little, life began to fill in—not like a puzzle fitting together, but like paint on a blank canvas, Unpredictable, Uncontrolled.

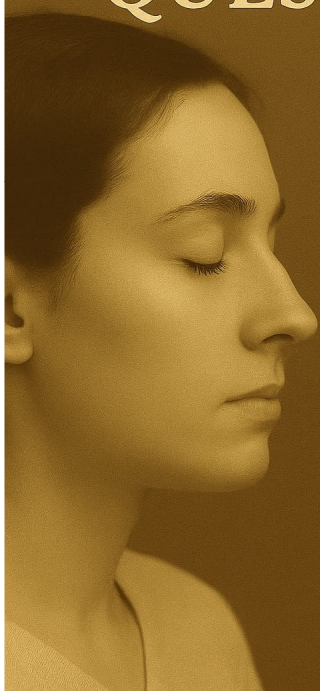
But alive.

His plans had turned to ash.

But from that ash, something softer grew.

Something real.

THE SILENCE BETWEEN QUESTIONS



Chapter 5

The Silence Between Questions

Mira was used to asking questions.

As part of her university project, she was interviewing strangers to learn how people shared stories about their lives. She set up a quiet room, a camera, and a recorder. She had a list of questions printed neatly on paper:

“Tell me about a moment that changed you.”

“What is your biggest fear?”

“Who is someone you miss?”

She asked these same questions to everyone.

Some people laughed. Some cried. Some told stories that surprised her.

Then came Participant 27.

He was an older man, maybe in his 50s, with grey in his beard and a calm, quiet way about him. His name was Rehan. He sat down across from Mira and looked at her kindly, but said nothing.

Mira smiled and started the recorder. “Let’s begin,” she said. “Tell me about a moment that changed you.”

Rehan didn’t answer.

He didn't frown. He didn't look upset. He just ... waited. Looking at her, but also far away, like he was lost in a memory.

Mira tried again. "It's okay to take your time."

He finally spoke, but not in the way she expected.

"Why do you want to know?"

His voice was soft but strong.

Mira hesitated. "Because ... I think stories help us understand people better. I want to know what shapes someone's heart."

Rehan nodded slowly. Then asked, "Do you ever listen to what's not being said?"

Mira blinked. "What do you mean?"

"The silence between questions," he said. "The moments when someone hesitates before answering—that's where the real story lives."

Mira had never thought of it that way. Her project focused on the answers, not the pauses.

He leaned forward. "Do you want a real story?"

"Yes," she said softly.

He took a deep breath.

"When I was younger, I had a daughter named Naila. She was everything to me. Always asking questions. Curious about everything. She once asked me, 'Why do

stars disappear in the day?' I didn't know the answer, but I loved how she thought."

Mira smiled. "She sounds wonderful."

"She was. But when she turned nine ... she got sick. Cancer."

Rehan looked down at his hands. "The doctors said it was fast. Aggressive. They gave her one year, maybe less."

Mira didn't say anything. She let the silence fill the room.

"She never stopped asking questions," he continued. "Even in the hospital. One day, she looked at me and asked, 'Why do bad things happen to good people?'"

He paused.

"I couldn't answer. I didn't know what to say. I told her I'd think about it and tell her later."

Rehan looked up. His eyes were glassy.

"But I never got the chance. She passed away three months later."

Mira's throat tightened. "I'm so sorry."

He nodded slowly. "It's alright. But that silence ... the silence between her question and the answer I never gave... I still carry it. It's louder than anything."

Mira looked at him with her list of questions. They suddenly felt too simple. Too clean. Real stories, she realized, were messy.

Rehan asked gently, “What’s your silence, Mira? What haven’t you said?”

Mira blinked. No one had ever asked her anything during the interviews.

She took a deep breath.

“When I was thirteen, my mom left,” she said. “She just walked out. No note. No goodbye. She never came back.”

Rehan listened quietly.

“I always told people it didn’t matter. That I was okay. But sometimes ... I wonder if I did something wrong. Or if she ever missed me.”

Her voice cracked. “I guess I’m afraid someone will ask why I never looked for her. And I’ll have to admit ... I was scared she didn’t want to be found.”

Rehan gave a small, understanding nod. “That’s your silence. And it matters.”

For a while, neither of them spoke.

And that silence—was full of meaning.

When Rehan left, Mira sat in the room, thinking about everything he said.

She replayed the recording—but this time, she didn’t skip the silences. She listened to the pauses, the breaths, the hesitations. And she realized ... Rehan was right.

The most powerful parts weren't in the answers.

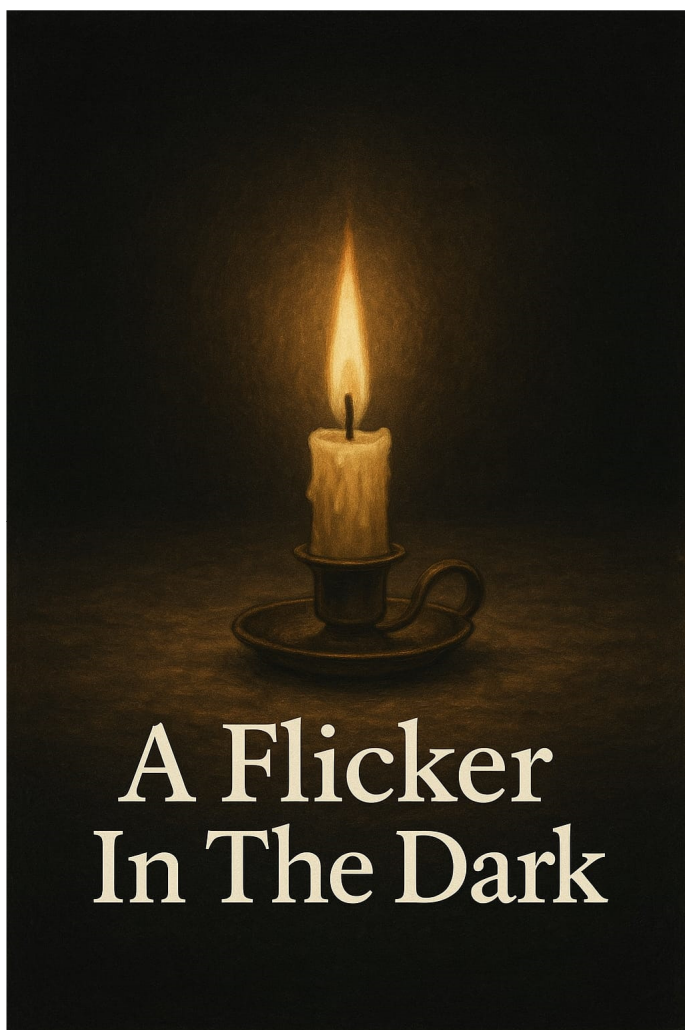
They were in the quiet spaces in between.

From that day on, Mira changed her project.

She stopped trying to just collect stories.

She started listening—really listening.

Because sometimes, the silence between questions says more than words ever could.



Chapter 6

A Flicker in the Dark

The electricity was out again.

In the small, crumbling house on the edge of the town, Meera sat in silence. The only sound was the occasional drip from the kitchen tap and the faint wind rustling through a crack in the window frame. The night wrapped around her like a heavy blanket—quiet, thick, and full of memories she didn't want to face.

This was the third power cut of the week. She didn't even reach for the switch anymore. The ceiling fan above her bed stood still, like it had given up too.

She lit a candle.

The flame wavered uncertainly, casting long shadows on the walls.

She watched it for a long time.

Her fingers traced the chipped edges of a photo frame on the table beside her. In the picture: a younger version of herself, her parents, and her younger brother Aryan, grinning with a front tooth missing. That photo was five years old. It was the last time they'd all been together. Before the accident. Before the silence.

When Aryan stepped into the shadow, her parents had slowly turned into strangers. Conversations grew shorter. Her mother started sleeping during the day and staying up at night, staring at the television even when it showed only static. Her father worked longer hours, though the money still wasn't enough.

Meera, once a bright, talkative girl, became quieter too. She still went to school. Still helped around the house. But everything felt dimmer. Like someone had turned the volume of life down to almost mute. Her dreams of studying journalism and moving to a big city felt distant now. Almost foolish.

What was the point of dreaming in the dark?

The candle flickered again, threatening to go out. She leaned closer, cupping her hand around the flame.

A single flicker, and yet, it changed the whole room.

It cast a circle of light around her, bringing old books and photographs into view. Dust danced in the candlelight. For a moment, it felt like magic—fragile, but real.

She pulled out a worn-out notebook from under her bed.

It had been months since she last wrote anything. She flipped through old entries—some hopeful, others angry, a few just full of questions. On the last page was a sentence she had scribbled months ago:

“I don’t know if the dark ends, or if we just get used to it.”

She picked up her pen

and beneath that sentence, she wrote:

“But sometimes, even one flicker is enough to keep going.”

The words came slowly at first. Then faster.

She wrote about Aryan—how he used to sneak extra biscuits from the kitchen and hide them under his pillow, how he had once convinced her to pretend they were twins just to trick the neighbours. She wrote about her parents—what they had been, what they had become. She wrote about herself—not the version others saw, but the version she felt trapped beneath the silence.

And for the first time in months, something inside her loosened.

The dark didn’t go away. But it didn’t feel endless anymore.

Later that week, the electricity came back. The lights blinked on, the fan whirled to life, and the hum of life returned to the house.

But Meera kept lighting the candle at night.

Not because she needed it anymore.

But because it reminded her: even the smallest light matters.

And though the pain didn't vanish, and her family didn't suddenly become whole again, something had shifted.

She applied for a writing competition at her school. She didn't tell anyone. Just submitted a short story titled A Flicker in the Dark. It wasn't polished. It wasn't perfect. But it was hers.

A few weeks later, she received a call from her teacher.

She had won.

It was a small competition, nothing big. But when her name was announced in the school assembly, something inside her glowed brighter than any lightbulb.

After school, she found her mother sitting in the kitchen, staring blankly at her tea. Meera placed the certificate on the table in front of her.

Her mother looked at it for a long time.

Then, slowly, she smiled. A tired, quiet smile.

That night, for the first time in what felt like years, they ate dinner together without the TV on. Her father even mentioned something about a poem Aryan had once written.

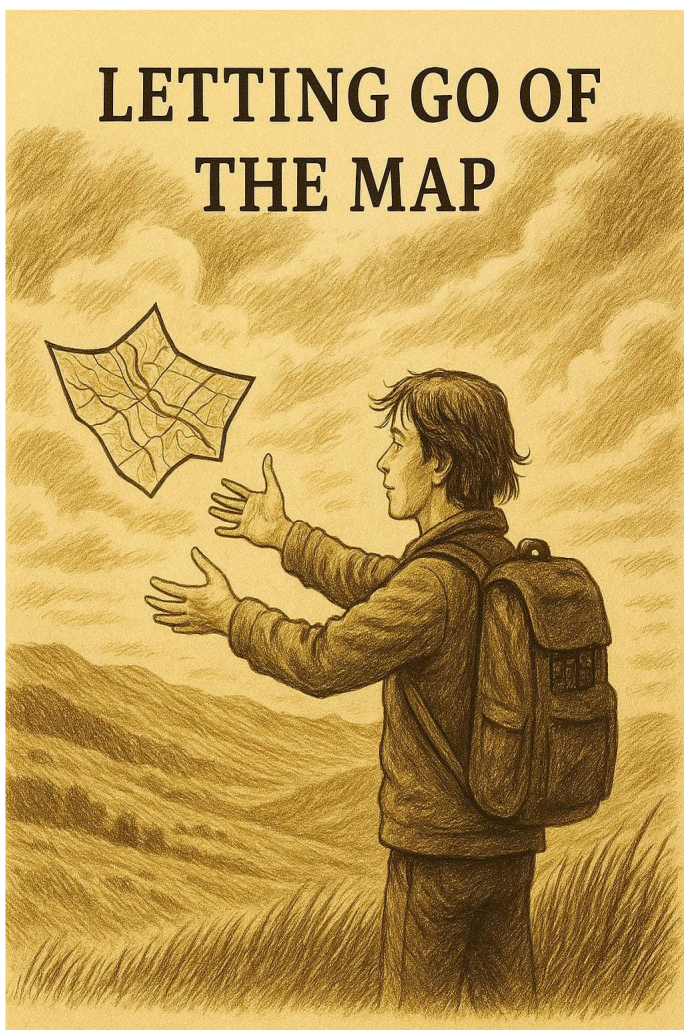
It wasn't a full conversation.

But it was something.

A flicker.

In the dark.

LETTING GO OF THE MAP



Chapter 7

Letting Go of the Map

Ravi had always believed life was a journey, and like any proper journey, it needed a map.

He didn't trust spontaneity. Detours made him anxious. Surprises, even the good ones, left him unsettled. From a young age, he had learned to chart his course and stick to it. His room had once been filled with hand-drawn diagrams—routes to success, lists of steps to happiness. By adulthood, those drawings had been replaced by digital calendars, planners, and color-coded to-do lists.

His map was his comfort.

And for a while, it worked.

He graduated on time, found a job, and moved into a clean, affordable apartment. He planned his finances, his weekends, even his conversations. When he met Mira, it was because he had scheduled a night out with a friend who happened to bring her along. She fit perfectly into his carefully measured life—organized, calm, and logical.

They dated for three years.

Planned a wedding.

And then she left.

Not with anger, not with shouting—just quiet honesty over coffee.

“I don’t want this kind of life anymore, Ravi,” she said, her voice soft but firm. “Everything feels... boxed in. Like we’re following a script someone else wrote. And I don’t want to live like that.”

He wanted to ask what do you mean but deep down, he understood.

She was right.

He didn’t chase her. He didn’t try to negotiate. He just stood in the stillness of what was left and stared at the empty space on the map.

In the weeks that followed, Ravi tried to regain control. He revised his routines. Wrote down “Healing Plan: 6 Weeks.” Made a checklist of self-improvement tasks. Meditated. Journalled. Worked late.

But nothing worked the way it used to.

One afternoon, he sat at his desk, looking at his schedule—every block of time filled with something: read, work, call, eat, sleep, repeat. All perfectly timed.

He stared at it.

And then he shut his laptop and left the apartment without his phone.

He didn’t know where he was going. He just walked. Turned left when he felt like it. Right when the light caught a building a certain way. No destination. No plan.

It was unsettling and freeing.

For the first time in years, he noticed the city. The chipped paint on a bakery sign. A boy running with his shoelace untied. A street musician playing a violin with his eyes closed.

He stopped and listened.

There was no task for it. No checkbox to mark.

Just a moment.

Ravi didn't tell anyone about that walk. But the next day, he did it again. And the next. Always different streets. Always unplanned. He stopped trying to track his steps. Deleted his planner app. Let his alarm clock stay off.

He began to write again—not lists, not plans. Just thoughts. Observations. A feeling from a dream. The colour of the sky when the sun dipped behind buildings.

And he realized something strange:

the more he let go of the map, the more present he felt in his own life.

One evening, while sitting on a park bench, he met a woman named Neela. She had a sketchbook and charcoal-stained fingers. She asked if she could draw him. He said yes.

They talked.

She told him about how she quit a job she once thought she loved. How she lived by “gut feeling,” something

Ravi had spent most of his life avoiding. But the way she spoke wasn't chaotic. It was honest. Peaceful.

They met again a week later. And again, after that.

He didn't try to define it. Didn't force it into a timeline. Didn't wonder if she fit into a future he hadn't planned yet.

He just let her be part of his now.

One afternoon, Ravi returned home and found his old map—a folder buried deep in his desk drawer. Inside, a timeline he'd made at 25: goals for each year, relationship milestones, salary targets, travel destinations.

He smiled.

Not in regret,

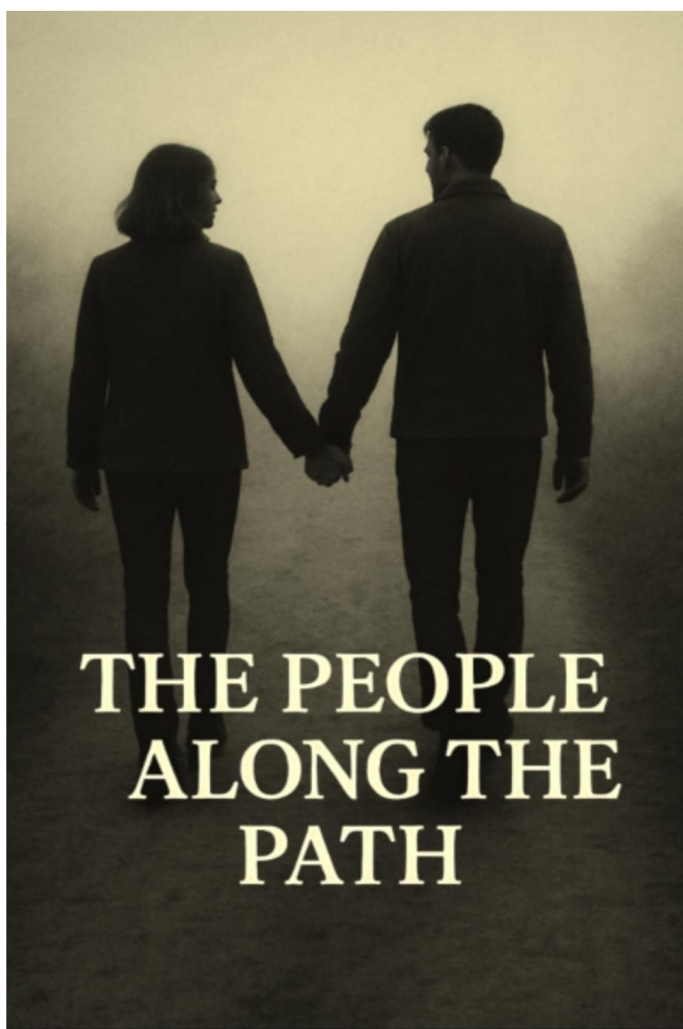
but in quiet acceptance.

He folded it once. Twice. And slipped it into the back of his bookshelf, behind the novels he never had time to read.

Because life wasn't a map.

It was a river.

And sometimes, to move forward, you have to stop paddling so hard and just let yourself drift.



Chapter 8

The People Along the Path

Ali always believed life was a solo journey.

He liked walking alone, traveling alone, thinking alone. Crowds made him restless, conversations drained him, and deep connections—well, they felt too risky.

Until her.

Until Mahi.

He met her on an early winter morning at a train station in a small hillside town. He had come to escape the noise of the city—to breathe, to write, to be forgotten for a while.

She, on the other hand, had missed her train.

She was sitting on a cold bench, wrapped in a yellow scarf, sketching something in a small notebook with a broken pencil. Her suitcase sat beside her, covered in stickers and scuffed at the corners.

Ali, trying to find a place to sit, asked politely, “Mind if I join?”

She looked up, smiled, and moved her bag. “Sure. You look like someone who doesn’t belong here either.”

That made him laugh. “Is it that obvious?”

“You’re wearing city shoes,” she said, glancing at his polished black boots.

He noticed she had hiking shoes on. Muddy and worn, but strong.

“What are you drawing?” he asked.

She turned the notebook toward him. It was a quick sketch of the train station—simple, almost messy, but full of warmth. People, signs, birds on the wires. All drawn with care.

“I try to capture the places I wait in,” she said. “Every stop has a story.”

He nodded, interested. “I write stories about the people who don’t wait.”

She tilted her head. “Then we’re opposites.”

That was how it started.

They both missed the next train.

Maybe on purpose.

They got coffee, sat on the edge of the quiet platform, and talked for hours. At first, about small things—books, movies, favourite tea flavours. But then the words grew deeper.

Mahi was a traveling artist. Not famous. Not trying to be. She just went where her feet wanted to go, painted what

her heart felt, and lived as if the world was soft and welcoming.

Ali was a ghostwriter for novels he didn't care about, working under names no one would recognize. He used to write poetry, once—back when he believed words could change his life.

That day, she asked him, “Do you think people are the destination or the journey?”

Without thinking, he replied, “I think people are just the scenery. You walk past them, appreciate the beauty, but you keep moving.”

Mahi smiled gently. “Then maybe you haven't walked with the right ones yet.”

They spent the next three days together.

They explored the mountain paths near the town, traded thoughts about love and regret, sketched trees, and wrote short poems on the backs of receipts. It felt simple. Unplanned. But perfect.

One evening, they watched the sunset from the highest cliff they could find. The sky looked like a painting—orange melting into purple, clouds dancing across gold.

“I think I'll remember this moment forever,” she whispered.

Ali didn't speak, but he reached for her hand, for the first time, and held it gently.

In that moment, he wasn't walking alone anymore.

But real life always catches up.

Mahi had a train to catch. Another town, another story, another set of faces waiting to be sketched.

She packed her things slowly. Ali sat on the edge of the bed in the little lodge they had shared for two nights.

"You could come with me," she said, not looking at him.

He wanted to say yes. He wanted to drop everything—his laptop, his half-written deadlines, his fear—and go.

But he stayed quiet.

Mahi smiled sadly. "You're still walking alone, aren't you?"

He looked at her. "Not because I want to. I just don't know how to stop."

She kissed his forehead. "Then maybe I was just someone you were meant to meet along the path."

She left.

And Ali felt her absence in everything—in the way tea didn't taste the same, in the silence of the empty train station, in the way the wind carried no more laughter.

He walked again. To other places. Through other towns. But every face he saw reminded him of one that had truly looked into his soul.

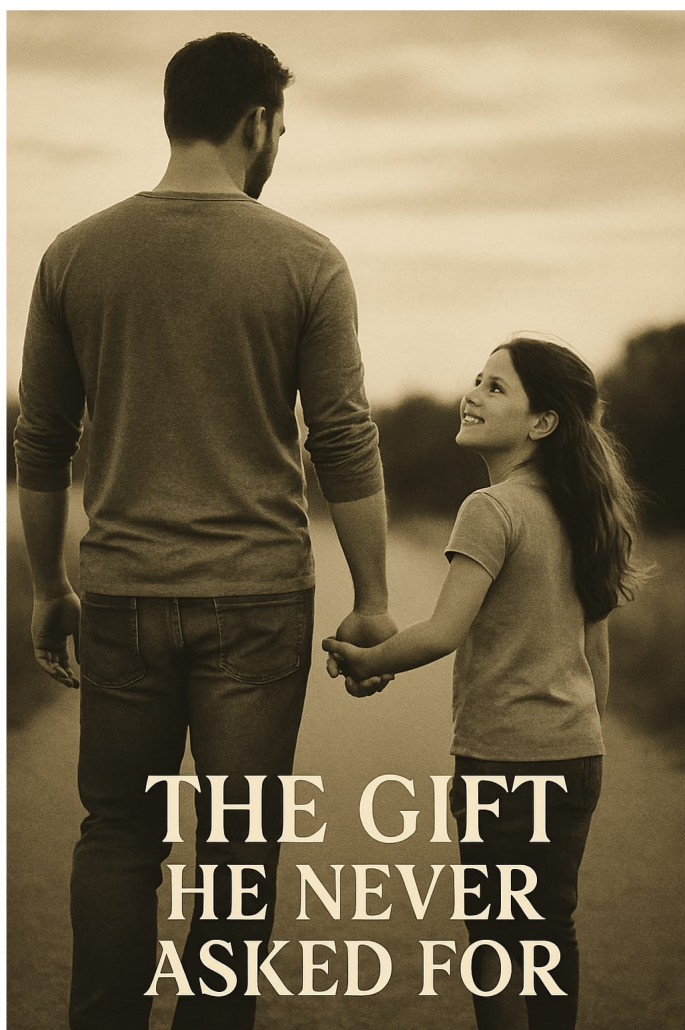
Months later, he published something under his own name.

A small book of poetry. Simple, raw, and personal.

He titled it: The People Along the Path.

And on the dedication page, he wrote:

“For the one who didn’t wait for me to catch up,
but showed me the view anyway.”



THE GIFT HE NEVER ASKED FOR

Chapter 9

The Gift He Never Asked For

Arin was an unassuming man—quiet, content, and comfortable blending into the background. He spent his days at a small repair shop on the corner of an aging street, where time itself seemed to move more slowly. The rhythmic hum of soldering irons, the clink of screws, and the scent of oil and dust filled his hours.

He never complained, never asked for more, and firmly believed that life owed him nothing. Long ago, he'd stopped dreaming.

But life, as it often does, had other plans.

It began with a phone call on a rainy evening—one of those calls that shatters the ordinary with no warning.

“Is this Arin Mehra?” a woman’s voice asked, trembling with formality.

“Yes?”

he replied. “There’s been an accident. It’s about your brother... Dev.”

Silence followed, stretching like a taut rope between them.

Dev. A name Arin hadn’t spoken in over eight years.

Their last conversation had ended in a sharp, bitter fight. Harsh words had been exchanged—Arin accusing Dev of selfishness, and Dev calling Arin a coward, someone too afraid to chase anything. They had walked away from each other that day and never looked back.

But Now, Dev was gone. Killed by a drunk driver. There had been no time for apologies, no chance to mend what had been broken.

At the hospital, a nurse handed Arin a sealed envelope and a small backpack—Dev’s final belongings.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” she whispered.

Back in his small apartment, Arin sat on the floor, staring at the envelope for hours, as if it weighed a thousand pounds.

When he finally opened it, he found a letter inside.

As he read it, his breath caught.

Dear Arin, if you’re reading this, I’m probably gone. And there’s so much I never said—maybe because I was proud, maybe just stubborn, or maybe because I thought we had more time.

I was wrong about many things. But not about you. You were always the anchor—the one who kept things together. I was the storm that drifted away.

This isn’t about apologies, though. It’s about a gift—one I hope you’ll accept, even though you never asked for it.

Her name is Myra. She's six years old. She's... my daughter.

I never told you because I didn't want to burden you. I was afraid. And the truth is, I kept failing her. I wasn't who she needed. But maybe you can be.

In my bag, there's a folder—custody papers. I named you as her guardian. She's in foster care now, but I hope you'll bring her home. If not for me, then for her.

It's a lot to ask. But you're her family. And maybe, just maybe, this could be the beginning of something better.

Love,

Dev

Arin sat frozen. A daughter. His niece. A family he never even knew existed. The reality crashed down on him like a wave.

He wasn't a father. He hadn't even been a brother in years. How could he possibly care for a child?

Part of him wanted to walk away, to pretend none of it had happened. But then he saw her name—Myra.

Tucked into the folder was a photo of a small girl with wide eyes and a crooked smile. She looked nothing like Dev, yet she was unmistakably his.

A week later, Arin found himself at the foster centre, his heart pounding. When Myra entered the room clutching a stuffed rabbit, she looked up at him with wary curiosity.

“Are you, my uncle?” she asked quietly.

He nodded, unsure of his voice.

She looked at him a long moment, then asked, “Are you going to leave too?”

The question hit him like a blow.

“No,” he whispered. “Not this time.”

Bringing Myra home was not easy. She was quiet, guarded, and withdrawn. She didn’t laugh much at first. But over time, little cracks appeared in the wall she had built. She started following him around the apartment, asking questions about the tools in his shop. One day, she even smiled when he made her a small robot from spare parts.

At night, Arin would sit by her door, listening to her gentle breathing, wondering if Dev had ever done the same.

Parenthood was nothing like he had imagined. It was messier, harder, and far more beautiful than he ever expected.

One morning, as he prepared her cereal, Myra looked up and said, “Uncle Arin? I think Papa would be happy I’m with you.”

Arin nodded, eyes stinging. “I hope so, Myra.”

Years later, he would look back on that hospital moment as the beginning of everything.

The letter had brought pain—but it had also brought Myra.

She became his world. His reason. His second chance.

It was a gift he had never asked for. One he never expected.

But it changed him.

And in the quiet warmth of their small home, filled with the laughter of a little girl who had finally found family, Arin came to understand something he never thought he would:

Sometimes, the greatest gifts in life are the ones you never ask for.



THE UNKNOWN BECOMES HOME

Chapter 10

The Unknown Becomes Home

No one in the quiet village of Bansipur knew where the boy had come from.

He arrived just after the monsoon rains had swept the paths clean, with nothing more than a cloth bag slung over his shoulder, a tired expression, and eyes that seemed to search for something invisible. His name was Arjun—but to the villagers, he was simply the stranger.

He spoke little. He worked where he could—carrying sacks, tending to crops, fixing carts. Some whispered that he was running from something. Others paid him no mind. But Arjun never complained. He stayed.

On the outskirts of Bansipur, hidden behind a line of old neem trees and rusting iron gates, stood a crumbling haveli that once belonged to Devnath, the wealthiest man in the region. Devnath now lay bedridden, surrounded by walls that echoed silence and memory.

His three sons had long since moved to the city, too busy with their lives to visit.

The servants came and went. Doctors stopped by occasionally. But most of the time, he was alone.

One morning, Arjun was sent to deliver milk to the haveli. The caretaker let him in. As Arjun entered the dim room,

he paused. Devnath, frail but sharp-eyed, studied him carefully.

“You’re not from here,” the old man rasped.

“No, sir,” Arjun replied gently. “Just passing through.”

Something about the honesty in his voice made Devnath nod.

“Sit. Talk.”

And so, it began. Just a few words, exchanged in the stillness.

Arjun came back the next day. Then the day after. He brought food, cleaned the neglected room, and even read aloud from the dusty books that lined the shelves.

Days turned into weeks.

The once-cold silence of the haveli began to warm. Devnath spoke more—of youthful days, old fairs, lost loves, and deep regrets. Arjun listened quietly, always present, never interrupting.

One golden evening, as sunlight poured through the lattice windows, Devnath looked at him and said,

“I have three sons. Not one has seen me in two years. And here you are, a stranger, talking to me like I matter.”

“You do matter,” Arjun replied simply.

Devnath’s eyes welled with tears, but he said nothing more. Soon after, his health began to fail rapidly. The doctor warned it was only a matter of time. The sons were notified.

None came.

On what would be his final morning,

Devnath reached for Arjun’s hand. His grip was weak but determined. “You gave me something my own blood could not—dignity and peace,” he whispered.

Later that day, with a soft breath and a faint smile, Devnath passed away.

The village buzzed with confusion after the funeral. The sons eventually arrived, not in mourning, but in a fury—arguing over what remained. Then the lawyer came, holding a sealed letter.

Devnath had written: > “To my sons, I leave my name. But to Arjun, I leave my home, my land, and my gratitude.

For he was a stranger who became my son, when my sons became strangers.”

There was a stunned silence.

Shock.

Outrage. Protests. But the will was legal. And final.

Arjun said nothing.

He didn't boast.

He didn't change.

He remained in Bansipur, in the same haveli, living simply and helping the villagers—repairing homes, assisting farmers, feeding the hungry.

Over time, the villagers stopped calling him the stranger.

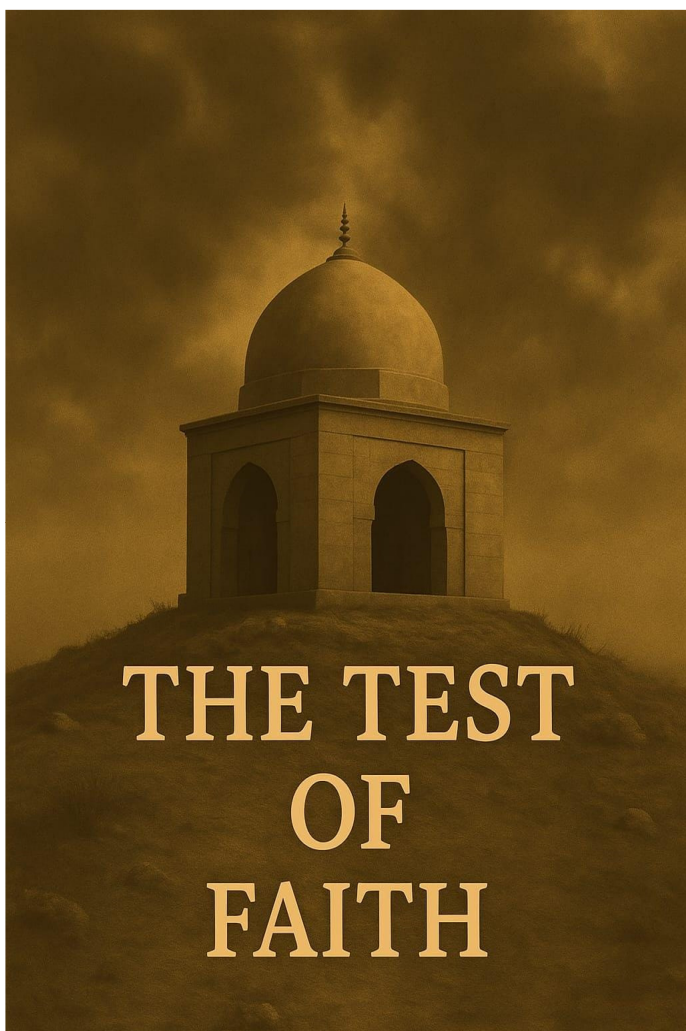
They began calling him Arjun bhai.

He had arrived with nothing. But in time, he left behind something rare

A life where the unknown became home.

Not because he claimed it.

But because he cared for it.



Chapter 11

The Test of Faith

The sky hung low over the village of Rahmat, its heavy clouds like unspoken doubts pressing down on everything below. Silence filled the air. People walked slowly, eyes cast downward, voices barely above whispers. It had not rained in seven months. The land was brittle with drought—crops had crumbled into dust, rivers murmured their thirst, and even the animals stared at their owners with silent, desperate hunger.

In the heart of Rahmat lived Eshan, a humble weaver. His home, a modest hut beside the aging mosque, held little beyond his faith. Each day, he prayed five times, lifting his calloused hands skyward with unwavering devotion.

Once, neighbours admired this devotion. But now, their smiles had turned into quiet pity.

“Faith doesn’t feed the hungry,” one merchant muttered.

“God helps those who help themselves,” another added with a shrug.

But Eshan continued. He wove what little he could. He prayed.

And he believed. Yet, deep inside, a hairline fracture of doubt had begun to form. It appeared subtly, like a whisper he tried to ignore.

It started when his teenage son, Arif, stopped going to the mosque.

Then, Leyla, his wife, began crying into her pillow at night, thinking her husband couldn't hear. They had already sold nearly everything: furniture, jewellery, even Eshan's beloved loom. All that remained was an old clay water jug and a worn prayer mat.

And then came the day that would push Eshan's faith to its limit—Leyla collapsed.

It was not illness that brought her down, but sheer hunger and exhaustion. The village doctor examined her and then turned to Eshan with grim eyes. "She needs food, Eshan. Not prayer. If she doesn't eat soon, she won't last the week."

That night, Eshan sat on his prayer mat, tears drying on his cheeks as the sky stared back in silence. He didn't offer a prayer—only a question whispered into the void.

"Are You still listening?"

The next morning, with desperation in his heart, he made a decision. He would walk to the capital city, two days away. Perhaps there he could find work, or at the very least, mercy.

Before leaving, he placed a hand on Arif's shoulder.

"Take care of your mother. I'll be back in four days," he said. "Keep believing... just a little longer."

Arif didn't reply. He looked away, unable—or unwilling—to share in his father's faith.

The journey was brutal. Eshan walked for hours under the merciless sun, his feet blistering, his throat dry and raw. Still, he pressed on.

On the second day, he saw smoke rising ahead and quickened his pace, hopeful he'd found a settlement.

But it was not a village he came upon—it was the wreckage of a caravan. Three wagons were overturned, horses dead or dying, and a man lay beneath one of the wagons, crying out in pain.

Eshan ran to him.

The man's leg was crushed under a wheel. With all his strength, Eshan lifted the broken frame and pulled the stranger free.

The man, a merchant who had been traveling alone, gasped through the pain.

"You saved me."

"I was just passing through," Eshan murmured.

But the man gripped his hand tightly. "Then your passing was my miracle."

That night, Eshan stayed with the merchant, tending to his wounds and building a fire to keep them warm.

By morning, the merchant insisted he accept payment.

Eshan refused at first.

“I ask for nothing,” he said sincerely. But the merchant would not yield.

He opened a hidden compartment in the wagon and retrieved a satchel filled with silver coins. He offered half to Eshan.

Eshan hesitated. Accepting it felt wrong. He hadn’t helped for a reward. He had simply done what was right.

But then Leyla’s face came to his mind—her hollow cheeks, her shallow breathing.

He accepted the silver with a bow. “Thank you,” he said. “My family... they need this.”

The merchant smiled weakly. “Then perhaps both of us were saved.”

Eshan returned to Rahmat carrying baskets of food, medicine, and clean water. The villagers stared in disbelief as he passed them. They whispered, some in shame, others in awe.

Leyla was slowly nursed back to strength. Eshan wept as he watched colour return to her cheeks.

One evening, Arif sat beside him. “Did you beg for help?” the boy asked softly.

Eshan shook his head. “No. I was tested. And along the way, I met someone else who was being tested too.”

For the first time in many months, Arif knelt beside his father and joined him in prayer. Weeks passed.

Then, finally, the rains came.

The fields turned green once more. The river flowed, its song vibrant and alive.

Slowly, people began returning to the mosque. Faith was finding its way back into their hearts.

One evening, the village elder approached Eshan.

“You never lost your faith,”

Eshan smiled humbly and said “I almost did,” he admitted. “But sometimes, when we’re at our weakest, we are closest to God. Faith doesn’t mean the absence of struggle—it means walking through the storm even when you see no end in sight.”

The villagers listened.

Some wept.

Others simply nodded.

But all of them understood.

Eshan had come to see that faith wasn’t about never asking questions.

It was about choosing to believe even when the world gave you every reason not to.

And in the end, it wasn't only his faith that had been tested. It was also his heart.

And that, above all else, was the true trial.

THE UNKNOWN BECOME THE WAY



Chapter 12

The Unknown Becomes the Way

When Yuzu left the city, he wasn't running from something.

He was searching.

His job was stable, his friend's kind, and his life... fine. But that was the problem. Everything was fine. Nothing more. He longed for something raw, something real—a feeling he couldn't name, but his soul whispered for every night.

So, he gave up his apartment, took a single backpack, and disappeared into the unknown.

He travelled with no destination. From noisy cities to quiet hills. From coastal towns smelling of salt to forests breathing in monsoon mist. Every step felt lighter, as if a weight he didn't know he was carrying had finally slipped off.

And then he found her.

In a quiet village nestled between green hills and flowing rivers, he met Manha.

She was painting the side of a crumbling school wall—bright sunflowers and laughing children. A smear of blue ran across her cheek, and a strand of hair danced over her forehead.

“Need help?” he asked, without thinking.

She looked at him, suspicious, but then smiled. “Only if you can draw a butterfly.”

He couldn’t. But she let him stay.

That was the beginning.

They met every day—at the school, at the river, at the open market under strings of fairy lights. She showed him the rhythm of her world: how to make tea over firewood, how to read clouds before rain, how to listen without needing to speak.

He told her about the life he’d left behind.

“You had everything,” she said once. “Why leave it?” He looked at her for a long moment and replied, “Because I hadn’t found this.”

They fell in love quietly.

Not like the city stories—no loud declarations, no drama.

Just simple moments: walking barefoot on the grass, sharing ripe mangoes, laughing over bad poetry, leaning on each other when the nights got too quiet.

One night, during a local festival, the village square glowed with lanterns and music. Manha took his hand and pulled him into a slow dance. Her eyes sparkled.

“Promise me something,” she whispered.

“What?”

“Don’t leave when the road calls again.”

He hesitated. "What if the road leads to something greater?"

She smiled softly. "Then take me with you."

But roads are cruel sometimes. Weeks later, Manha received a call. Her mother—ill, far away. She had to leave.

"I'll come with you," Yuzu said immediately.

She shook her head. "No. Your journey's not over."

"But you're a part of it now."

She cupped his face gently. "We met in the unknown. Maybe love is meant to test if we can find each other again."

And just like that, she was gone.

Yuzu stayed for a while. Waited. Wrote her letters he never sent. Drew butterflies on the school wall. Days blurred. Seasons passed.

He could've returned to his old life.

He didn't.

Instead, he kept walking—village to village, not searching for her, but trusting something deeper.

The love they'd kindled had changed him. It had cracked him open and poured something beautiful into the hollow spaces.

He began teaching children to paint. He told stories under trees. Every person he met added a brushstroke to his soul. But Manha's was always the brightest colour.

And then, one morning, on a hill overlooking a sleepy valley, he saw a figure waiting.

Paintbrush in hand. Blue on her cheek.

She had found him.

"You came back," he whispered.

"No," she said, tears in her eyes. "I never left. I just walked another part of the way."

They stood there—wind in their hair, hearts beating like drums in a shared rhythm.

"I thought I lost you," he said.

She smiled, pulling him into an embrace. "Love like this doesn't get lost. It becomes the way."

Epilogue:

Not all journeys have maps.

Some roads begin with questions. Others with heartbreak. But the most beautiful ones?

They begin with two people walking side by side into the unknown...

...and finding home in each other.

“Even when the paths are obscured, the journey is never without purpose.”

A Quiet Thank You

To each and every one of you who picked up this book, turned its pages, and allowed its words to become a part of your journey—thank you.

Writing this book was a path of discovery, reflection, and courage. But it's your presence as a reader that gives it life and meaning. Your time, your thoughts, and your willingness to walk through these pages with me mean more than words can express.

Whether this book made you pause, think, feel, or simply escape for a while—I'm truly honoured to have shared this space with you.

With all my heart,

Yousuf A. Nomani

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