

*A Book By Mokshi Khatana*

# SEARCHING

*Still*



BlueRoseONE<sup>.com</sup>  
Stories Matter

New Delhi • London

## BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

India | U.K.

Copyright © Mokshi Khatana 2025

All rights reserved by author. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author. Although every precaution has been taken to verify the accuracy of the information contained herein, the publisher assume no responsibility for any errors or omissions. No liability is assumed for damages that may result from the use of information contained within.

BlueRose Publishers takes no responsibility for any damages, losses, or liabilities that may arise from the use or misuse of the information, products, or services provided in this publication.



BlueRose ONE<sup>com</sup>  
S t o r i e s   M a t t e r  
New Delhi • London

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

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

[www.BlueRoseONE.com](http://www.BlueRoseONE.com)

[info@bluerosepublishers.com](mailto:info@bluerosepublishers.com)

+91 8882 898 898

+4407342408967

ISBN: 978-93-7139-856-5

Cover design: Daksh

Typesetting: Tanya Raj Upadhyay

First Edition: June 2025

## Prologue:

They say our bodies are made of five sacred elements—earth, fire, air, water, and ether. So simple in essence, yet impossibly intricate in existence. I used to believe I wanted little from life—just quiet corners, honest smiles, and enough meaning to hold myself together. But even the smallest desires, when unmet, begin to ache like unanswered prayers.

Somewhere along the way, in the pursuit of making life meaningful, I lost all meaning I once held dear. Dreams faded into numbness. Hope dissolved into silence. There came a time when I had no expectations left to mourn, and no spark left to chase the morning light. I didn't want to move forward—not out of rebellion, but resignation.

And yet, before surrendering to the final silence, I chose to take one last swing—one last wild, reckless attempt at rediscovery. I didn't imagine that this moment, unplanned and uncertain, would end up crossing a boundary I didn't even know existed within me.

It's strange, even amusing, that someone who has never followed cricket would use a cricket metaphor to explain her own resurrection. But that's exactly what it felt like—an unexpected shot in the dark turning into

the match-winner. Not for the world. Not for accolades.  
But for me.

This journey, born of discomfort and carried by zero expectations, didn't change my career. It changed my self.

I never planned the narrative. I didn't sit down with a plot or an outline. But I wrote with a kind of rawness I hope you'll recognize—because these words don't come from intellect. They come from experience. From the heart. From the soul of a girl who had once forgotten how to feel alive—and slowly remembered.

And if you're still reading this, maybe, just maybe...  
you're searching too.

---

# Table of Contents

Chapter 1: The Silence Between Alarms.....	1
Chapter 2: The Friend Who Still Waves.....	6
Chapter 3: Swipe Right, Spiral Harder.....	12
Chapter 4: Mirror Talk, Missing Men & Matchmaking Mayhem.....	17
Chapter 5: Siddharth Shenanigans.....	22
Chapter 6: Dinner Date & Dangerous Smiles.....	26
Chapter 7: Between Heartbeats & Hangovers .....	30
Chapter 8: High Hopes, Hot Coffees & Hollow Chairs.....	34
Chapter 9: The Silence, The Snap, and The Sinking Heart .....	38
Chapter 10: Crushed Grapes & Crashing Walls .....	42
Chapter 11: Halwa & Healing.....	46
Chapter 12: Back to the River .....	49
Chapter 13: A New Thread .....	53
Chapter 14: Whispers on the Wind.....	58
Chapter 15: Reflections in the Riverlight .....	63
Chapter 16: The Rematch and the Rain.....	69
Chapter 17: Chai, Chaos, and a Little Bit of Magic ...	74
Chapter 18: Noor & Zaroon—The Names We Borrowed .....	79
Chapter 19: Lost and Found .....	84

Chapter 20: Rain, Reckonings, and Bougainvillea Kisses.....	89
Chapter 21: The Morning He Stayed .....	92
Chapter 22: Between River and City.....	98
Chapter 23: The In-Between of Us.....	105
Chapter 24: The Night That Held Us.....	112
Chapter 25: One More Day .....	119
Chapter 26: The Illusion of Being Known.....	127
Chapter 27: The Echo of Everything Unsaid.....	133
Chapter 28: Coffee, Chaos, and a Chapter Called Closure.....	139
Chapter 29: Bougainvillea Blooms and Closure Whispers .....	147
Chapter 30: The Promise, the Payal, and the Pathani.....	153

# **Chapter 1:**

## **The Silence Between Alarms**

Have you ever felt what it's like to do the same task, every single day, until even breathing feels mechanical?

Can you really answer that?

Can you imagine it?

Better yet—can you feel it?

It's a strange kind of numbness. One where even the sunrise doesn't stir you, and your bed feels like both a cocoon and a cage. You lie there, wide-eyed, praying—yes, praying—that someone from the office sends a message: “Power outage, maybe a short circuit... Work from home for the next two weeks.”

I admit it. I wished for disasters—not out of laziness, but because I had quietly stopped finding joy in what I once loved.

I didn't hate my job. But I no longer felt it.

I was the kind of person who never liked staying inside boundaries.

Yet, there I was—trapped within one for four long years.

Mornings were still my favorite.

They held a kind of sacred pause the rest of the day refused to offer.

The cool breeze, the open sky, the distant birdsong—it was all textbook poetic, but somehow, it still calmed me. Even the pigeons, annoying on most days, didn't bother me then.

I would sit on the balcony of my 15th-floor studio apartment, a warm mug of coffee in hand, no phone, no distractions—just me and the vast sky. I'd stare into the blankness of it, hoping, maybe today, some colour would bloom.

But of course, the stillness never lasted.

Because then came the alarm. The second one. The one I'd set intentionally to break the bubble.

Back to reality. Back to the uniformity of my 9 to 5.

With a sigh, I'd drag myself into the kitchen, staring at the fridge like it might magically decide my lunch for me. I'd usually settle on cutting some fruit. Maybe a salad. Nothing too complicated. Nothing that felt like effort.

Some days, I was so weighed down I didn't even want to look nice—not for others, not even for myself. I stopped dressing up. I wore the same black flared pants nearly every day, paired with the first kurti I found ironed. I wouldn't comb my hair properly—just pulled it



into a bun with a scrunchie. No makeup, just a quick swipe of lip balm.

In an office full of well-dressed professionals, I looked like the forgotten footnote.

And honestly, I preferred it that way. I didn't want attention. I didn't want conversation. I wanted to exist quietly at my desk—unnoticed, untouched.

But then—

My silent prayer was shattered by the most irritating voice on Earth.

It was my boss. Of course

Shouting my name

“Are you deaf or what? I've been calling you. Why won't you answer?”

He hovered beside me, voice sharp. “I asked you to rework that draft and mail me your reviews. Did you forget? It's going for publishing in two days. Where is your mind? Get it done by lunchtime. No excuses.”

Before I could even nod, his phone rang and he vanished, leaving a trail of stress in his wake.

And just like that, I was back. Back in a world that functioned on deadlines, not dreams.

You know, I never understood why people are so obsessed with love stories.

The whole formula of boy meets girl, they fall in love, the families object, then a dramatic reunion, and finally, a wedding soaked in confetti and shehnai.

Where's the after part?

No one talks about the post-happy-ending chaos.

The heartbreaks.

The resentment.

The losing-yourself-for-love kind of madness.

The quiet misery of staying when you know you should've left.

As a full-time junior editor, I read these love-infused manuscripts all the time. Each one more dramatic, more romantic, more sugar-coated than the last.

And every time I finish one, all I can think is: Who is this for? Who still believes in this?

But my boss knows the market. Love sells.

Romance is always trending.

So, he hands me these syrupy drafts filled with declarations of eternal love, expecting me to find errors while I'm mentally gagging at every "forever yours" paragraph.

Meanwhile, I sit there craving stories that feel like life—raw, unfiltered, painfully real.

Not tales dressed in glitter, but ones soaked in truth.

I didn't want fairy tales.

I wanted humanity.

The kind that cracks you open and makes you uncomfortable. The kind that doesn't promise healing but at least shows the wounds.

Because that's what I was—

Wounded.

But still here.

Still trying.

Still... hoping, in my own strange way.

///

## Chapter 2:

### The Friend Who Still Waves

“In what world are you living, ? Check your phone—I’ve called you a thousand times! No reply! Are you still sulking over that idiot boss? I’ve told you before—stop mixing work with life. You need to get out, meet real people, breathe some fresh air!”

That was Poorva. She didn’t wait for the door to open fully before bursting into the apartment like a well-dressed tornado of opinions and concern.

“I was working, Poorva,” I said in my usual half-dull, half-reassuring voice—just enough for her to know I wasn’t entirely dead inside.

Every quiet soul has that one loud friend—the kind that grabs your hand just when you’re about to fall into the dark. Poorva has been that person for me since college.

With a dim, drifting life she is that one friend—the human version of sunshine on a thunderous day. The one who won’t let you drown, even when you’re actively trying to sink.

We met in the most unimpressive way. We’ve known each other since college. Our beginning was anything but magical—she asked for glue during registration, and despite me giving it to her, she decided I was a rude,

uptight snob. And I, of course, thought she was one of those overly chatty girls I'd never get along with. We were both wrong. Or maybe we were both right, and it just didn't matter.

Our roll numbers placed us side by side, and eventually, so did life. One class project turned into casual conversations. I still remember her waving at me during class breaks, calling out in a sea of strangers, saving me a seat before I even asked. And somehow, she never stopped waving—even when I stopped showing up fully.

From that day, she waved. And I always found my way to her.

Now, years later, she's still waving—just in different ways.

Today was no different.

“Why do you always let your job eat you alive?” she said, flopping on the couch like she owned the place. “Look at yourself! You resemble a homeless poet—like a tortured artist but without the art. And your hair— idiot, it looks like a nest built by depressed birds!”

I groaned. “I haven't combed it. I was working. Way ahead of my deadline this time,” I lied, conveniently skipping the fact that I'd only moved my cursor around for two hours with zero progress.

Poorva scoffed. “I don't get it. You're doing what you love, and you're still miserable. You live independently, earn well, your family is supportive, and with God's

grace—you've got the looks too. Beauty with brains. A whole package. And yet, here you are, hiding from the world like some recluse! This level of anti-social behavior is not cute anymore."

She paused for breath, only to continue with full force.

"I swear, I was supposed to meet Raghav today. But here I am, babysitting you again, delivering the same lecture on your dying social life. Thank god he understands our weird mother-daughter friendship dynamic. Other guys would run far from a girl whose best friend is a half-cracked, emotionally unavailable editor who lives like a ghost."

I tried not to smile, but failed.

"I swear, if you ignore my calls again, I'm dragging you back to your parents' place. I don't understand your obsession with living alone when you have a perfectly warm, welcoming home in the city. And don't think I'll keep defending your hermit life to Uncle and Auntie either—"

Before she could launch into another monologue, I hugged her tightly, offering my best sheepish smile.

"My phone was on silent mode. I wasn't ignoring you. I promise I'll reply next time. And ask Raghav to come pick you up—I've got work, or else I'd have tagged along. Third wheeling, as usual."

She pulled away and scowled, mock-offended.

“You better stop calling yourself a third wheel,” she huffed. “And don’t think I don’t know you’re just making excuses. You never want to come. But, seriously—you need to meet people. You can’t keep drowning in your loneliness and pretending it’s freedom.”

She raised an eyebrow.

“I’ll set you up, if you like. Raghav has some good-looking friends. Or better—we’ll make you a dating profile! Let’s go full modern drama.”

Her eyes sparkled with mischief as she snatched my phone like a woman on a mission. She was already downloading an app as I stared at her with wide, horrified eyes, half-amused and half-ready to fake fainting.

Why is it that women like Poorva—and my mother, too—think a guy will magically change the deadpan expression I carry like a second skin? The problem with friends who love you like mothers is that they don’t just suggest things—they make them happen. And then expect a thank you.

“There,” she said, proud like she’d just won a battle. “Your profile is complete. I’ve uploaded that picture from your 4 years ago Rishikesh trip—you actually look like a human in it. Promise me you’ll give it a shot.”

I wanted to protest. I wanted to tell her love isn't a fix, and I'm not broken in the way she thinks I am. But she was trying. Trying to wake up the version of me who used to laugh too loudly, gossip over chai, make up scenarios for fun, overthink over text, and cry about things that actually mattered.. So, I nodded.

She hugged me again, her tone suddenly gentle and handed me a lunch box.. "I brought kadhi chawal. Eat it, okay?. I know you haven't eaten since morning. I'll message you when I get home."

she was gone, leaving behind the scent of her fruity perfume and the warmth only a true friend carries.

As the door clicked behind her, I walked into the kitchen. On the lunchbox was a small slip of paper that read:

**"Eat this...!! xo."**

And just like that, something inside me softened. I smiled. Not the kind that makes it to Instagram selfies, but the kind that arrives with a sense of being known. Of being loved, even in your ugliest moods.

I sat down with my comfort food, and just as I took the first spoonful, my phone buzzed.

A notification from that dreaded dating app.

A match.



The message read:

"Mujhe pahadon mein jaana hai, phir se Himalaya dekhna hai, bike rides, sunrise, bonfire jalana hai..."

A line straight out of Rockstar. One of my favorite films. And for a second, I just stared at the screen, stunned.

What are the odds that someone—a stranger—looked at my profile picture and quoted the very line that echoed the ache in my heart?

The mountains.

The escape.

The longing.

The fire.

A strange flutter filled my chest.

Maybe it was just coincidence.

Maybe not.

Maybe—just maybe—some strangers do understand the parts of us we've forgotten.

But something about it cracked open a forgotten part of me—

The girl who used to dream of the mountains.

The one who believed in firelight, not fluorescent office bulbs.

The one who still waited for something real. Not magical but peacefully real.

## Chapter 3:

# Swipe Right, Spiral Harder

I glared at my phone like it had just sent my deepest secrets to a public WhatsApp group.

Twenty minutes.

That's how long I sat on my bed, wrapped in a burrito of confusion, staring at one line on the screen like it held the meaning of life:

“Mujhe pahadon me jana hai...”

Seriously? Who gave this complete stranger the right to dive into my soul like that?

I mean, yes, quoting Rockstar is cool. Classic, even. But quoting it at me, when I hadn't smiled at a meme in two weeks, was just... unfair. That wasn't flirting. That was sorcery.

What was it about those words?

The mountain air?

The bonfires?

The imaginary bike ride with the wind in my hair and no deadlines in sight?

Ugh.

It wasn't even sure about the guy anymore—it was about the idea of him.

The idea of someone out there who somehow got it .

Who, by pure accident or divine algorithm, sent a line I hadn't said aloud but had felt every single day.

Naturally, I did what every mature, well-balanced adult does in a moment of emotional overwhelm.

I cleaned.

But not the “let me light a candle and play lo-fi” kind of cleaning.

No.

This was emotional crisis Bollywood cleaning.

I attacked the kitchen like it owed me money.

Scrubbed the slab.

Mopped the floor. Twice.

Rearranged the furniture.

Threw out a sock that hadn't had its partner since 2020.

And yet, while the apartment sparkled, my brain stayed messy .

His voice, or the imagined version of it, echoed:

Mujhe pahadon me jana hai...

Imtiaz Ali, kindly stop narrating my breakdown.

Finally, I sat down with my journal—my old, faithful companion. Hoping I could maybe bleed the confusion into some poetic lines or shayaris about love, loss, white shirt and moon like I used to. But nope.

Just like the past three years...

Random spirals. Doodles. A cactus with sunglasses.

My inner poet had ghosted me too.

Just then, my phone buzzed.

My heart skipped—not the romantic kind, the heartburn-from-too-much-caffeine kind.

What if it was him again? Mr. Rockstar fan? Dropping another line straight from my emotional playlist?

I tapped the screen like I was diffusing a bomb.

It wasn't him. It was Poorva.

Worse.

> “Dude. Don't hate me. I accidentally shared your dating profile in my office group. Was trying to send it to Raghav's friend and... yeah. Tech boys saw it. Called you cute. You might get random messages. Love you, please don't kill me.”

EXCUSE ME WHAT.

My soul left my body, went to Rishikesh, and sat quietly on a rock.

I mean, Poorva's heart is gold, but her thumbs are a national hazard.

She turned me into some sort of limited-time crush offer on the office group chat of future coders of India.

Before I could call and scream into the void, my phone began vibrating like it had a personal vendetta.

> "Hey pretty "

> "You like coffee?"

> "I work with Poorva, she's crazy but you're gorgeous btw."

Make. It. Stop.

WHAT.IN. THE. NAME. OF. UNWANTED  
ATTENTION. JUST. HAPPENED.

Did I want attention?

Maybe.

Did I want 17 back-to-back DMs from boys profile named Fitzone.rs and Wandersalot asking about my Netflix preferences?

No.

So, like a true drama queen with commitment issues, I deleted the app.

Gone. Poof.

Like that one sock.

Only after my digital meltdown did it hit me.

I didn't even check his name.

You know, Jordan guy. The original match . The one who caused this spiral.

All I remembered was the profile photo—black cap, black tee, black trackpants, olive puffer jacket.

Sitting on a rock. Face half-covered.

The kind of mysterious wilderness boy Pinterest makes boards about.

And the background?

Oh, that rock?

It looked exactly like one of mine from Rishikesh.

Same vibe. Same sky above. Same quiet.

Coincidence?

Or had the universe just whispered, "Plot twist, babe"? to which I hadn't signed up for yet.

Either way, I had officially become a protagonist in someone else's love story meme—and I wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry.

---

## Chapter 4:

# Mirror Talk, Missing Men & Matchmaking Mayhem

It had been 36 long hours since I committed what I now refer to as The Double Sin—downloading and deleting that godforsaken dating app. In that time, I had gone from denial to despair to full-blown obsession. I searched every corner of the internet—Instagram, Pinterest, hashtags like #RishikeshRockstar, #MountainMen, #MujhePahadonMeinJanaHai—hoping the algorithm would somehow reunite me with Mr. Puffer Jacket. Nothing. Not a pixel. Not a clue.

I mean, what was wrong with me? I've always wanted a realistic, zero-nonsense life with absolutely no trace of love.

And yet, here I was. Spiraling over a half-hidden face and a movie quote.

“He was just a random match,” I whispered to myself for the 48th time in front of my mirror. “You were happy before. You’ll be fine now. Dive into work. Pretend it was just a dream. You’re obsessed with travel stories and romance only in movies. Imtiaz Ali is a magician. Jordan was fictional. That guy isn’t Jordan. He doesn’t even know you exist, and he definitely

doesn't care. So stop acting like a hormonal high schooler. Get. It. Together."

After my TED Talk to myself, I marched back to my laptop like a soldier returning to duty. This was my life. And I had work to do.

Not that it was a *bad* life. Just... *hollow*. The fun had fizzled. The colours had dulled. Somewhere between promotions, deadlines, and being a "functioning adult," I had lost the version of me who used to find joy in the little things.

I missed her.

The last time I *truly* felt alive? My job celebration trip to Rishikesh. The Ganga Aarti, those winding alleys, the chaotic cafés. Seven days of laughter, chai, thrill, and wind in my hair. Not only was I in the mountains, I was *happy*.

And right when I was trying to crawl back into that peace, the universe did what it does best—sent in Poorva.

"Got to tell you something. Meet me at Ninth Café at 5:30. Don't be late. It's serious AF."

Great. When Poorva says "serious," it's either a national crisis... or a new boy.

Spoiler: It was both.



Now, *Ninth Café* in Noida wasn't just any place. It was vibey, aesthetic, and suspiciously romantic for "serious" discussions.

And of course, the queen of punctuality made *me* wait.

Sipping my coffee and watching the door, I caught a glimpse of a guy. Black polo. Khaki pants. Off-white sneakers. Hair slightly messy, but shoes? Immaculate. Clean, crisp, sipping his espresso while scanning through documents. He looked like the CEO of *Calmness* and the COO of *Clean Vibes*.

Something about him screamed... composed chaos.

And while I told myself not to look, I kept... looking.

He wasn't *Jordan*, obviously. But there was something—maybe the black outfit, maybe the silence, maybe the fact that my brain refused to shut up—that made me *look*.

"Sorryyy," Poorva huffed as she dropped into the seat across from me, ordering coffee mid-apology. "Fought with Raghav. Anyway, how are *you*? Found him yet?"

I gave her the death glare. "What do you think? Does this face say 'Mission Accomplished'?"

"You're not even into feelings or apps, you don't even need a guy as you've said ... What happened to *that*?"

"I'm just... curious, okay?" I mumbled, not even convincing myself anymore. "He's like this unsolved

puzzle piece stuck in my brain. I can't focus. I feel... miserable."

"And I feel guilty," Poorva said softly. "This whole thing was my fault. Look, I know I can't undo what happened, but maybe I can *redirect* the damage? Just hear me out—I want you to meet someone. His name is Siddharth. Tall. Handsome. Beard. Owns a business. Responsible. Clean shoes."

"Poorva. I don't need a man to fix me."

"I'm not saying that. I'm just saying *maybe* a distraction won't hurt? If not him, your mother will keep sending you biodatas, and even my mother is excited about you, I swear she already considers you her daughter-in-law."

"Fine," I sighed. "But just to stop *you* and your matchmaking WhatsApp group. No promises. And if I hate him, I reserve the right to ghost him mid-conversation."

"Deal! Oh—and... can I call him now?"

I blinked. "Now?! What do you mean 'now'?"

She turned and *waved enthusiastically* across the café. And in walked the guy I had been sneakily side-eyeing for the last fifteen minutes.

"Hi," he said, holding out his hand. "I'm Siddharth."

Readers, I choked on my coffee. And in that moment, my soul left my body and floated above the café ceiling.

Because standing in front of me was not just *any* Siddharth. It was *that* Siddharth. Mr. Polo-and-Khaki. The one I'd just mentally described as a soft Pinterest aesthetic meets business casual charm.

He smiled. My heart *absolutely betrayed me*. Skipped a beat. Maybe two.

And that's how I met the guy who looked nothing like Jordan... but somehow made my stomach flip the same damn way.

## Chapter 5:

### Siddharth Shenanigans

If I had known I'd meet *this* version of a man today, I'd have worn kohl or little concealer. Or at least not the shirt with the suspicious coffee stain shaped like a dying bird.

Because there he stood — tall, confident, oozing the kind of charm you usually only see in indie film protagonists and the occasional dangerously hot TED Talk speaker.

Siddharth.

He had this way of smiling — not wide, not showy — just a subtle curve of the lips like he knew he'd been living rent-free in your head before you even *knew* him. His beard was neatly trimmed, his hair casually perfect, and those eyes? *Brown with mischief.*

"So you're Poorva's favorite human and, according to her, someone who has violently strong opinions about chai ratios?"

I blinked. Then laughed.

"Only because she makes hers like hot milk with a tea bag floating like a corpse."

Siddharth laughed, deep and warm, and pulled the chair opposite me.

"So..." he leaned forward slightly, fingers laced, chin tilted in curiosity. "You like coffee, mystery men, and giving death stares to your best friend?"

"Only on Thursdays," I replied, trying to sound breezy while mentally praying my blush wouldn't reach my ankles.

His laugh—deep, smooth, and deliciously slow—danced over my skin like velvet. "I like you already."

Jesus. Take the wheel.

I forgot Jordan's face. Just—poof. Gone. Like he was a trailer I skipped before the real movie began.

"So, tell me something that's not on your resume. Something about *you*."

My breath hitched. No one ever asked me that. Not on a first meet. Not even on my last date, which had been less date and more LinkedIn networking event with bad coffee.

"I... write. Or at least I used to. Poetry. Stories. Sometimes just random thoughts that feel too loud to keep inside."

"That sounds like art," he said, eyes twinkling. "Do the loud thoughts ever quiet down?"

"Only when I'm in the mountains."

He raised an eyebrow. "So, you're a pahad-prefered person. Figures. You have that vibe. Like you belong somewhere the Signals are bad, and the sunsets are really good."

I blushed. BLUSHED. Full-on high-school-movie, tuck-hair-behind-ear blushing.

"Okay, your turn," I said, trying to sound unfazed. "Tell me something *you* don't usually tell people."

He smirked. "Currently? The fact that I can't decide if your eyes are hazel or honey. And whether you'd slap me or kiss me if I said I wanted to see you again."

I nearly choked on my coffee. "Bold," I managed.

"Honest," he shrugged. "You don't meet a woman like you every day. You're like... a wild page in an otherwise boring book."

Cue the blush. Cue the stomach butterflies doing a full-blown salsa routine.

"And what do you do, when you're not pretending not to stare at me across cafes?"

My mouth dropped. "I was *not*—"

"You were. It's okay. I was staring first."

The man was dangerous.

Somewhere in the corner, Poorva was pretending not to eavesdrop while mouthing, *I told you so* like an irritating fairy godmother.

Siddharth sipped his coffee like he had all the time in the world.

"You're trouble," I said, narrowing my eyes.

"Only the good kind."

And as he walked me to my cab, his hand brushed mine. Just briefly. But enough to send an electric current straight through me. "Dinner next?" he asked, voice low, like a secret. I nodded, biting back a grin.

Siddharth wasn't just a distraction.

He wasn't the plot twist—I knew better. He was the beautifully-timed distraction the universe sent in a tailored shirt and sinful cologne, just when I needed to forget the face I couldn't find.

~~~~

## Chapter 6:

### Dinner Date & Dangerous Smiles

The entire next day, I was floating.

Like, literal cloud-nine, sun-is-shining-through-my-soul kind of floating.

I was supposed to be working on a presentation, but all I did was stare at my laptop and replay every smirk, every word, every lazy blink Siddharth threw my way. The man was a walking serotonin boost, and I was high on whatever invisible cologne he wore that smelled like rainy nights and bad decisions.

Poorva obviously noticed. Because best friends *always* know.

She barged into my room, tossed a packet of popcorn at me like it was an intervention, and said, "Okay, spill. You're smiling like you've just seen Ranveer Singh shirtless in your dreams. Was he *that* hot or am I projecting?"

I tried to be chill.

I failed.

"Poorva... he's... he's not real. Like, he *cannot* be. He has this ridiculous way of talking, like he knows he's setting your soul on fire. And he listens! With eye



contact! And when he laughs, I swear my ovaries applauded."

She gasped dramatically. "Girl, you've got it bad. Like, Jordan-who?!"

"Exactly!" I threw a pillow at her. "Jordan who? Siddharth is flesh and blood and—ugh—charm in a Polo T-shirt."

"So what now?"

"Dinner. Tonight. 8 PM. He picked the place and I swear, if he shows up in that all-black look again, I might combust."

Poorva squealed. "You better wear that wine red dress. The one that hugs you in all the places that should be hugged."

~~~~~

### **8:07 PM - The Dinner Date**

Sevilla, Delhi.

The place looked like a dream dipped in golden hour. Think: Spanish courtyard kissed by fairy lights, Mediterranean arches draped in jasmine vines, candle-lit tables under canopies of orange trees. Soft Spanish guitar notes floated in the air like they knew secrets. The breeze was warm, the scent of grilled garlic and slow-cooked wine danced through the air, and everything felt like a slow-motion movie moment.

And then—there he was.

Siddharth.

Leaning back in his chair, black shirt rolled up to his elbows, fingers tracing the rim of a wine glass. That infuriating, heart-melting smile slowly spread across his face as he stood up.

“You came,” he said, like it was his favorite word.

“Hey,” I replied, sounding way more breathless than intended.

He pulled the chair out for me, all suave and old-school. “I’ve been thinking about your eyes. Still haven’t decided their colour.”

“You’ll need a few more dates for that,” I said, raising an eyebrow.

“Challenge accepted.”

Dinner was... *intense*.

Not because of the food—I couldn’t even taste it. But the way he looked at me while talking about travel, about running his own business, about reading Murakami in silence with jazz playing in the background. He spoke like he wasn’t in a hurry. Like time stopped at the table. Like I was the only thing worth seeing in that candlelit room.

At one point, he leaned in, voice lower now, like velvet against skin. “You know what’s dangerous?”

“What?”

“Finding someone who makes you forget time, names, logic... even exes with puffer jackets.”

I choked on my wine.

He grinned. “Too soon?”

“Just enough.”

By dessert, the space between us felt electric. His fingers brushed mine while passing the spoon, and neither of us pulled away.

The night ended with him walking me to the car, standing way too close, heat radiating off his body.

“Still not sure about your eye colour,” he whispered.

“Still not kissing you,” I whispered back.

He laughed, hands in pockets, gaze heavy. “Then I guess I’ll have to keep taking you out.”

As I sat in the car, cheeks flushed, I realized something.

He wasn’t just a distraction. He was *dangerous*—the kind that makes you smile without realizing, the kind that makes you forget old scars, and the kind that might just be the story before the storm.

And God... was I ready for it.

## Chapter 7:

### Between Heartbeats & Hangovers

The morning after Sevilla felt like waking up from a dream dipped in honey—sticky, sweet, and dangerously addictive. I lay sprawled on my bed, still in the afterglow of candlelight, red wine, and that stupidly charming smirk Siddharth wore like a weapon. My phone buzzed beside me, and I reached for it, expecting the flood of work emails or some random spam from Zomato.

But it was him.

*Last night was something else.*

*I know a place quieter than Sevilla. Just us, dinner, tomorrow?*

*No pressure. Just more... eye colour analysis. 😊*

My heart did this little thing—it danced. That ridiculous, foolish kind of skip that makes your cheeks warm and stomach flutter. I re-read the message four times before tossing the phone aside like it was a grenade and I wasn't ready for the explosion.

And then came the second buzz. Poorva.

*Wake up, dreamy eyes. 11 AM and not a single debrief?*

*Unacceptable. I demand coffee and scandal. 5 PM. Ninth Café. Don't flake or I'm calling your mom.*

I smiled despite myself. Of course she picked Ninth Café—our usual refuge from reality, nestled between two bookstores in Noida. With its mismatched chairs, moody lighting, and menu scrawled in chalk, it was where heartbreaks were healed and secrets spilled over cinnamon cappuccinos.

Work was... barely happening. My laptop stared at me like it knew I was bluffing through the day. As a junior editor at one of Delhi's top publishing houses—where we published everything from buzzy fiction to fiery opinion columns—I was supposed to be knee-deep in manuscripts and feedback notes. Instead, my fingers hovered over my keyboard, typing and deleting a reply to Siddharth.

Yes? No? Play it cool?

Why did my job feel like a background score today? The passion I usually reserved for dissecting stories, sharpening plots, suggesting better endings—none of it compared to last night's conversation about music, Murakami, and that smirk when he said I was dangerous in wine red.

Was I blushing again? Ugh.

4:55 PM. I changed outfits three times before reaching Ninth Café. The place looked like a curated mood board—plants in macramé hangers, indie vinyl records for sale, and low jazz humming from the corners. The barista knew us by name.

Poorva was already there, iced latte in hand, eyes sharp with curiosity.

“Okay, start. From the beginning. I want slow-mo details. Was he wearing black again? Did he say anything swoony? Did you kiss?”

I plopped into the chair, grinning like a fool. “He said my eyes are unreadable. That he’s still figuring out their colour.”

Poorva did a dramatic swoon. “Girl, he’s flirting like he wrote a thesis on charm. What else?”

I leaned forward. “He listens, Poorva. Like, full eye contact, phones away, the whole old-school romance package. And he talks about books. Real books—not just random quotes from Instagram. Like... he read Kafka and actually understood it.

Poorva gasped. “A hot man who reads Kafka and flirts in wine bars? are we sure he isn’t fictional?”

“I thought the same,” I laughed. “And he wants to meet again tomorrow.”

Her eyes sparkled with a mix of mischief and glee. “You *have* to go. But also—tread carefully. You’ve been in a mood ever since Jordan-Puffer-Jacket guy. Don’t lose your balance just because Siddharth makes you feel seen.”

I nodded. A small part of me knew she was right. This wasn't a love story yet. It was just a chapter. A beautiful, blush-coloured chapter.

But oh, I was hooked.

And tomorrow night? Might just be the next page I couldn't wait to turn.

## Chapter 8:

# High Hopes, Hot Coffees & Hollow Chairs

I had never been so excited to finish a weekly planner in my entire junior editor life. I was firing emails, red-marking manuscripts, finalizing blurbs, and even replying to client follow-ups with actual enthusiasm. My fingers were moving across the keyboard like they were being chased by ambition itself. Why? Because the sooner I ticked off that checklist, the sooner I'd be slipping into that black silk top with my hair pinned up just right and sitting across from Siddharth at the restaurant he picked for tonight's dinner.

Yes, *the* Siddharth. The same man who managed to say things like "still not sure about your eye colour" with a smile that made my knees question their purpose.

I was floating through the day, humming in the office pantry while microwaving my soup. Even my editor, — the human embodiment of deadlines and decaf—gave me a side-eye and asked, "Are you... okay?"

"Oh, totally. Just... productive."

Productive. Pfft. Understatement of the century.

By 6 PM, my to-do list was gleaming in digital satisfaction. Everything—every damn thing—was done.



I gave myself a little high five in the mirror, touched up my lipstick, spritzed on my good perfume, and slipped on the heels I rarely trusted. I was glowing like a freshly lit candle, nerves dancing, heart sprinting, and hope pinned high.

Cab booked. Hair fixed. Restaurant name triple-checked.

Siddharth had texted the name earlier that afternoon:

> 8 PM. Let's make it even better than last night. Can't wait to see you again. — S.

So there I was. At 8:02 PM. Standing outside **Perch Wine & Coffee Bar**, a cozy, upscale nook nestled in the quieter lanes of Khan Market. The kind of place with French windows, acoustic playlists, and couples lost in each other's eyes over truffle ravioli.

I walked in, expecting to find *him* already there, leaning casually in a chair, sipping something dark, flashing that devil-may-care smile.

But the chair across the table was empty.

Okay. Cool. I was early. *Technically*. So I waited.

Ordered a cappuccino, scrolled Instagram, replied to Poorva's texts (she wanted a live update the moment I blinked at him), and refreshed my inbox for the 56th time.

Still no Siddharth.

8:10. 8:15. 8:22.

I texted:

< Hey, I'm here. Did I mix up the time?

No reply.

Called once. No answer.

Called again. Straight to voicemail.

I ordered another coffee. This time, iced. Not because I wanted it, but because I needed a reason to stay.

8:34 PM.

I checked his Instagram. He hadn't posted anything. No story. No clue. No sign.

By 8:45, the charm of the fairy-lit walls began to dull. The music was suddenly louder. The air colder.

By 8:48, I stood up, gathered my bag, and left a polite smile to the waiter who had definitely seen that look before.

The look of someone who had been *stood up*.

I sat in the cab, staring out the window with my phone in my hand. A mix of disappointment and confusion flooding my chest.

Why wouldn't he show up? What happened?

It wasn't until 11:26 PM—almost three hours later—that I saw the message.

> I'm so, so sorry. Something came up. I'll explain.  
Please don't hate me.

That was it. No explanation. No voice note. No call.

Just a single, vague sentence that now held the power to either make things right... or ruin the whole damn fairytale.

And I didn't know which way it was going to go.

Not yet.

## **Chapter 9:**

# **The Silence, The Snap, and The Sinking Heart**

There's a kind of silence that screams louder than chaos.

It had been over 36 hours. Thirty-six hours since I sat at that restaurant, fidgeting with the sleeve of my dress, hoping—no, expecting—him to walk in, flash that heart-thief smile, and say something that would make me roll my eyes and melt all at once. Thirty-six hours since I last believed in the giddy magic of it all.

And in all those hours... nothing. Not a message. Not a call. Not even a stupid emoji.

I hadn't replied either, not to his last vague "Sorry, I'll explain." Not that there was anything to explain now.

I tried to call Poorva, but her voice note came chirping back that she was drowning in month-end submissions and would call soon. I didn't want to dump this mess on her just yet.

So I kept quiet. Slipped back into routine like an old sweater you'd forgotten in the closet.

At work, I stared blankly at manuscripts, words dancing on the screen like a cruel joke. The editor passed by my desk again. His voice was soft, maybe even kind. "Everything okay?"

I just nodded. Because if I opened my mouth, I might shatter.

Back home, the loneliness crawled in. Not the peaceful solitude I used to love—the one that helped me recharge and think and read Murakami until 3 AM. No, this was heavy. This one felt like heartbreak, even if I didn't want to call it that.

I tried watching something, anything. Tried tidying up. Even considered doing laundry. But my body didn't move. I just sat there, curled up, hugging a cushion, fighting tears like I was in a movie I didn't audition for.

Eventually, I picked up my phone and typed one word. "Okay."

That's it. That's all I sent him.

And he didn't reply.

Two hours later, I was still staring at my phone like a fool. My thumb hovered over the call button, heart doing gymnastics. But I didn't press it.

Ego. Self-respect. He's the one who didn't show up. He's the one who ghosted me.

So I did what every heartbroken millennial does. I scrolled.

And that's when the universe kicked me square in the stomach.

Snapchat. He was tagged in a story. A party. Flashing lights. Whiskey glasses clinking. Loud music. And *her*—some random girl draped all over him like they were sewn together. Her hand on his shoulder, her smile lazy and flirty, her body swaying into his like they'd been doing this forever.

He didn't flinch. Didn't lean away.

And what broke me most? He gave her the same smile he gave me. That slow, knowing, soul-touching smile I thought was special. Mine.

The timestamp? The same night he asked me to dinner.

Wow.

Wow.

All I could do was stare, gut twisted into something sour and furious and stupidly hurt.

What stung more? His betrayal? Or my belief that this could've been something real?

I buried my face in the pillow and let the tears fall, quiet and humiliating.

How did I end up here?

Was I foolish for allowing myself even one second of magic? For thinking someone like him would choose someone like me? For forgetting Jordan and the mountains and the girl I was before all this flirt and fog?

And then... came the confusion. A deeper ache. Not just about Siddharth—but about me.

What *was* happiness? That brief flutter in your chest when someone calls you beautiful? That wild rush when you're laughing over wine and candlelight? Or something steadier? Safer? Quieter?

I couldn't tell. All I knew was—I didn't feel happy anymore. Not even close.

And somewhere deep inside, something cracked open. Something that had nothing to do with Siddharth and everything to do with me.

And that crack... might just lead me back to the girl I left behind.

She's still in there. Somewhere. And she's not done yet.

## Chapter 10:

# Crushed Grapes & Crashing Walls

Waking up felt like rewinding to square one.

Numb. Blank. Dull.

The high from the fairytale was gone. The spark, the rush, the butterflies—all of it vanished, replaced with a heaviness that settled in my bones. The city noise outside my window felt louder than usual, like it was mocking my silence.

And just when I had managed to not check my phone for the last two hours, it buzzed.

**Siddharth:** *“Hey. Really sorry about the other night. Can we do lunch today?”*

Lunch? Seriously?

I stared at the message, blinked twice, and tossed the phone aside like it burned.

No. Not today. Not ever.

He didn’t deserve a reply. He didn’t deserve the version of me that waited in a black silk top and brown pants or searched frantically for the fastest route to the restaurant.

But the universe wasn’t done poking me.



Poorva showed up two hours later, unannounced as ever, with a bottle of white wine and her usual chaotic energy. “Alright! Tell me everything about the big night! Was he dreamy? Did he kiss you? Oh my god, I’ve been dying to hear about it since two days! Work just didn’t let me breathe!”

I didn’t even look up from the couch.

She paused. “Wait... what happened?”

I took a deep breath and then it all poured out.

“He didn’t show up, Poorva.”

Her face dropped. “What? Are you serious?”

“Yeah. And you know what’s worse?” I stood up, pacing now. “I saw a post. He was out. With someone else. And not just out—cozy, intimate, whisky-sipping, hip-swaying cozy. That same night.”

Poorva looked stunned, the wine bottle still dangling from her fingers.

“And you know what else?” My voice cracked now. “I never needed this. I never needed *him*. Or anyone, to be happy. I was okay in my world of books and coffee and lonely walks. I didn’t need a man to define joy for me.”

“hey listen...” she started.

“No, listen,” I snapped, tears stinging. “It’s all because of you. Because of your constant pushing, the app, the pep talks about ‘getting out there.’ I was fine before.

Quietly, calmly, invisibly *fine*. And now? Now I feel like I'm unworthy of something as simple as affection. As attraction. As—whatever the hell this fake love stuff is.”

She stepped back, guilt painted all over her face. “hey... maybe you misunderstood him. Maybe there's something else. Maybe it's not what it looks like—”

“I don't care.” My voice was sharper than I intended. “I don't want to hear ‘maybe’. I don't want to guess. I don't want to analyze someone else's silence while mine has been loud enough to drown me.”

She was quiet for a moment.

And then I said it. The thing I hadn't wanted to admit to even myself.

“It's not just about him, Poorva. This... thing... this heartbreak or disappointment or whatever—it's only a trigger. I've been walking this tightrope for a while. Pretending like I've got it together. Like I love my job. Like I'm okay being alone. Like I don't miss the old me—the one who dreamt wildly and felt things fully. The one who didn't flinch when someone let her down.”

“calm down...” she whispered.

“But now?” I said, snatching the wine bottle from her and pouring myself a glass. “Now I feel like everything's a performance. Like even being ‘fine’ is exhausting. Maybe happiness is a lie. Or maybe it's just something

people chase because they're too scared to sit with their emptiness."

I looked at her, eyes tired.

"Please go."

She hesitated.

"I just... need to be alone. I don't want to be convinced or comforted. I just want to be."

Poorva nodded slowly, quietly backing towards the door.

I sat on the floor, back against the couch, glass in hand.

The wine burned on the way down.

But not more than the truth I'd been avoiding.

I wasn't crying for Siddharth. I was crying for everything I had buried beneath smiles and soft jokes and book deadlines.

This wasn't heartbreak.

This was a reckoning.

## Chapter 11:

### Halwa & Healing

I slept late. Drunk. Disoriented. Drained.

Woke up tangled in sheets like they were trying to hold me together while everything else was falling apart. My head pounded, my eyes burned, and my mouth tasted like regrets and white wine.

Work was no mercy either.

I dragged myself into the office with a half-hearted bun and yesterday's kajaI smudged enough to look like war paint. My inbox had a fresh wound:

**Subject: Deadlines must be served on time—especially for junior editors.**

CC'd to everyone.

I read it once. Twice. And then a third time, hoping maybe it would hurt less with repetition. It didn't.

This was it. The moment I feared—when passion turned into performance, and performance into public humiliation.

I worked mechanically, robotic keystrokes filling blank pages. The article I once cared about now just a checkbox on an endless list. At 6:07 PM, I shut my

laptop with finality and walked out like a ghost who knew her own story had no plot anymore.

When I reached home, Ma opened the door with her usual warmth.

"What a beautiful surprise! Aaja beta, I made kadhi today—your favorite!"

I gave her a faint smile and walked straight to my room.

She didn't follow immediately. Maybe she knew. Mothers always do.

After a few minutes, she knocked gently and came in, holding a bowl of warm halwa, its aroma soft and nostalgic.

"Sweets can help lift the mood," she said, sitting beside me, placing the bowl on the table.

I didn't reply.

"Beta... kya kaam ka stress hai? Ya Poorva se jhagda hua?"

I shook my head to everything. Every guess, every nudge.

She didn't push. She just sat there, brushing my hair back with her fingers the way she did when I was ten and heartbroken over a lost pencil.

And then she said something so simple, it cracked me.

"Beta, kabhi kabhi hum dil ki sunte nahi. Sirf dimaag se jeene lag jaate hain. Aur dimaag thak jaata hai. Toh

thoda meditate kar... apne aap se baat kar... tu hi toh sabse achi dost hai apni.”

I looked at her—at her gentle eyes, at her steady hands—and for the first time in days, I let myself breathe.

And then I whispered, “Ma, I’m going to Rishikesh tomorrow.”

She blinked. “Accha?”

I nodded. “Not for a break. For something I left behind long ago. My book... my thoughts... my words. Maybe there, I’ll find the pieces of myself that still make sense.”

She pulled me into a hug, her warmth melting the walls I had built.

And in that moment, I knew—I wasn’t running away.

I was walking back to myself.

## **Chapter 12:**

### **Back to the River**

This was it.

The trip I had imagined a thousand times. The one I believed would somehow save me from myself. The one I needed now more than ever.

Packing wasn't a task—it felt almost sacred.

A few clothes, my battered old laptop, my vintage camera, and my diary—the one that had survived every high and low with me.

That was all I needed.

I zipped my bag slowly, almost like sealing a prayer inside it.

"Please, let me find the pieces I lost," I whispered under my breath.

I wasn't really hoping for anything grand. I didn't expect miracles.

I just wanted to breathe easier.

Just... relief.

Before leaving, I dropped a mail to my boss, typing with the mechanical precision of someone trying not to feel anything:

"Severely sick. Need time to recover. Requesting leave for a week, maybe two."

No lies there.

Sickness doesn't always come with a fever or a runny nose.

The bus I caught at dawn rattled its way out of the city like it was helping me shed my old skin.

I sat by the window, pressing my forehead to the glass, letting the early morning chill numb my face.

As the city thinned out, giving way to wild fields and rugged hills, something inside me cracked and sighed in the same breath.

When Rishikesh appeared on the horizon, it was like being punched and hugged at the same time.

The sight of those mountains, those endless skies, nearly undid me.

I wanted to cry—but I didn't.

I wrapped my arms tighter around myself.

"You're all you have now. Don't fall apart."

Because this time, there was no one beside me, laughing and pushing me to dream bigger.

This time, it was just me—and the silent ghosts I carried.

For a second, my fingers itched to text Poorva.

"Hey, I made it."

But the thought faded just as quickly.

Some distances are better left untraveled.

My homestay was tucked away in Tapovan, a small colourful house framed by wild bougainvillea.

It was run by Ammaji—a woman who looked like she belonged to the mountains themselves, with her silver



hair, soft wrinkled hands, and that serene smile that spoke louder than words.

My room was waiting for me on the first floor.

Bright yellow curtains danced with the wind, filling the space with a gentle golden light.

From the balcony, I could see the Ganga shimmering like liquid silver, the town sprawling lazily on the other side, held tenderly by the arms of the mountains.

It was beautiful.

Too beautiful.

It made the ache inside me sharpen.

I stood there for a long time, watching the river, trying to swallow the lump in my throat.

This wasn't the same as before.

Back then, I had come here full of dreams and laughter.

Now, I was nothing but a collection of regrets and unanswered questions.

As I sat cross-legged on the bed, trying to piece myself together, there was a soft knock at the door.

Ammaji entered, carrying a small tray.

Two cups of steaming chai and a plate stacked high with golden, crumbly cookies.

She took one look at me, saw everything I wasn't saying, and smiled.

A real smile—the kind that didn't pity, didn't push, just understood.

She placed the tray down and, resting her hand gently on my head, said,

"Shiva and Maa Ganga will guide you, beta. Have patience."

Her touch felt like a blessing I didn't even know I needed.

I managed a tiny nod, my throat too tight for words.

The first sip of chai—sweet, spiced, and so achingly familiar—was enough to tear open memories.

Running barefoot along the ghats.

Singing badly in the car.

Snapping random photos of sunsets and strangers.

Back when I believed life was one endless, chaotic, beautiful adventure.

A soft, fragile hope stirred inside me.

Not joy—not yet.

But something quieter.

Something real.

Maybe, just maybe, this place would help stitch me back together.

Maybe, somewhere between the sacred winds and the eternal river, I would hear my own voice again.

For now, I let myself sip the chai.

For now, I let myself believe.

## Chapter 13:

### A New Thread

The evening sun melted into a golden haze across the Ganga, and a restless hum vibrated under my skin.

I couldn't stay locked inside my room anymore — not with the chaos in my head clawing at the walls.

Throwing on a loose white kurta and jeans, I tied my hair into a messy bun, slung my old camera over my shoulder, and slipped into the buzzing streets of Tapovan.

The city pulsed with life — fairy lights strung between buildings, the scent of coffee and incense tangling in the breeze. It felt alive in a way that hurt a little — a reminder that the world didn't stop spinning just because I had.

I wandered aimlessly until I saw her.

A girl crouched beside a stubborn scooter, cursing under her breath, fighting with a jammed chain while passersby barely gave her a second glance.

Something about her — maybe the way she was talking to the scooter like it was an old friend who had betrayed her — made me stop.

"Need a hand?" I asked cautiously.

She looked up, strands of hair plastered to her forehead, and broke into a grin so infectious it disarmed me instantly.

"You're officially my favorite person today," she said, theatrically placing a hand over her heart.

Together we wrestled with the scooter — a clumsy, ridiculous effort punctuated by laughter until it finally sputtered back to life.

"Victory!" she shouted, throwing her arms up dramatically.

Then she looked me up and down, squinting in mock-seriousness.

"You're not from around here, are you? Delhi?"

I stiffened slightly. Was it that obvious?

Before I could respond, she chuckled.

"Totally got that *Dilliwali* vibe," she declared. "You know, stylish but suspicious."

I smiled despite myself, a little tight at the edges.

Sensing my guardedness, she softened her voice.

"Hey, listen. I get it. New place. Stranger danger. I'm not some crazy lunatic, promise."

She pulled a crumpled flyer from her canvas tote and waved it at me — *Moonlit Brews*, her café.

"Ira," she said, tapping the name on the bottom. "Yoga

trainer. DJ sometimes. Professional bad scooter mechanic. Full-time harmless weirdo."

Her energy was like sunshine after a week of rain — too stubborn to ignore.

"I was actually heading to a live music jam near the ghat," she said. "It's super chill. Lots of music, floating candles, good people. Come with me? If you feel weird even for a second, I'll ride you back here myself. Pinky swear."

I hesitated.

Maybe it was foolish.

Maybe it was what I needed.

"Okay," I said, surprising even myself.

"Yes!" she whooped, bouncing a little on her toes. "Hop on, Dilliwali!"

Before I could protest the nickname, she handed me a spare helmet, jumped onto her battered scooter, and patted the seat behind her.

Laughing under my breath, I climbed on.

We zipped through narrow alleys and winding streets, Ira talking non-stop over her shoulder — about the best jalebi shop in Rishikesh, how the monkeys once stole her yoga mat mid-class, how she once DJ-ed for a spiritual retreat by accident.

Despite myself, I laughed along.

The city blurred into a patchwork of lights, river mist, temple bells.

Finally, we skidded to a halt near a ghat where soft music floated in the air.

Candles drifted along the Ganga like tiny prayers.

People sat barefoot on the marble steps, guitars and drums weaving an organic rhythm that rose and fell like the river's heartbeat.

We parked the scooter and waded into the crowd.

Ira plopped down on a step, patting the space beside her. "Come on, Dilliwali. This is where the magic starts."

I sat, knees tucked to my chest, letting the pulse of the evening soak into my skin.

And then it happened.

Across the soft cluster of people, someone caught my eye.

He wasn't part of the music — not playing, not singing.

He sat quietly, slightly apart, a vintage-looking camera resting in his hands.

He wasn't photographing the scene like a tourist — he was studying it, almost reverently, like trying to memorize the feeling before it could slip away.

And then he looked up.

Our eyes locked.

It wasn't just a glance; it was something slower, heavier. Like he could see something in me even I didn't want to admit was there.

I felt exposed — cracked open — like he was quietly flipping through my unsaid thoughts.

My heart thudded painfully.

"Ira," I whispered urgently, tugging her sleeve. "I think I'll head back."

She blinked, surprised. "Already? We were just getting started!"

"I promise I'll come to your café tomorrow," I said, forcing a smile. "Moonlit Brews, right? Near the banyan tree?"

Her pout morphed into a mischievous grin. "You better, Dilliwali. I'll save you a seat and the best cappuccino."

I squeezed her hand, murmured my thanks, and slipped away before the night — or those eyes — could pull me any deeper.

Behind me, the music rose like a tide.

I didn't look back.

But somehow, I knew I hadn't left that moment behind completely.

Some connections, once made, stayed stitched under your skin.

## Chapter 14:

### Whispers on the Wind

I tossed and turned all night, trapped in a dream that felt too vivid to be fiction.

Those eyes.

Those impossibly deep, soul-stripping eyes.

I woke up abruptly, heart pounding, as if the dream had grabbed hold of me and yanked me into consciousness.

The early morning air was cool against my skin, but I was burning inside — restless and unsettled.

Without thinking too much, I dragged myself into the shower, letting the cold water jolt me awake.

I dressed quickly in a soft cotton dress, slipped into my sandals, grabbed my diary and camera, and left my little homestay room behind.

The streets of Tapovan were slowly stretching awake.

Chants floated through the mist, and the sharp, comforting scent of incense sticks lit outside temples mixed with the chill.

I needed coffee.

I needed Ira.

I needed something — anything — to anchor me.



When I reached *Moonlit Brews*, the familiar teal walls and the low hum of acoustic music made my heart settle, just a little.

It was a slice of heaven tucked between the chaos of life.

The moment I walked in, Ira spotted me and came running, almost crashing into me with her arms flung wide.

"My Dilliwali is here!" she cried out, pulling me into a bone-crushing hug.

Her energy was too pure, too wild to resist.

I found myself smiling — properly smiling — for the first time in what felt like forever.

"Come, come," she chirped, dragging me inside, "You look like you need some serious caffeine therapy. And wait till you taste the fresh bread. Straight out of the oven, sunshine!"

The inside of *Moonlit Brews* was alive — rugs in jewel tones sprawled across the floor, sunlight dancing on old record players and dreamcatchers.

The Ganga sparkled in the distance, whispering her ancient lullabies.

I found a spot near the balcony, took the steaming mug Ira brought me, and just... breathed.

For a while, the world was okay.

Until I heard it.

That laughter.

It wrapped around the room like smoke — thick, golden, and impossible to ignore.

I turned my head, heart tripping over itself.

And there he was.

Sitting near the window, laughing with two friends, his head thrown back carelessly.

The same guy from the ghat last night.

The guy with the camera, not a guitar.

The guy whose eyes had haunted my dreams.

This morning, he looked even more dangerously beautiful — dressed in black joggers, a black jacket, and a cap that sat lazily over his messy hair.

Completely unbothered. Effortlessly magnetic.

I stared, rooted to the spot, as if he had pressed a pause button on my universe.

He must have felt my gaze, because slowly, lazily, he turned.

And he smiled.

God, that smile could destroy cities.

Before I could look away, he was already moving — weaving through the tables, leaving his friends behind.

Every step he took towards me felt like the tightening of some invisible rope around my lungs.

He stopped a breath away.

Leaning in just slightly, enough that his voice was for me and me alone, he said:

**"So... when are you planning to run away again?"**

I stared up at him, stunned, my mouth parting in shock.

The world around us – the chatter, the clinking of cups, even the river's hum – dissolved into silence.

Only his eyes remained.

Those deep, knowing, unsettling eyes.

I tried to respond – witty, sarcastic, something – but no words came out.

Only my heartbeat, loud and embarrassingly frantic.

He straightened up, that infuriating smirk still on his lips.

"I guess you're not much of a talker this morning," he teased, tilting his head.

Ira's voice broke the spell:

"Dilliwali! Your bread's ready! Get your pretty self over here!"

The nickname – Dilliwali – caught his attention.

He chuckled lowly, his voice like velvet against my nerves.

"Guess you have a name already," he said, stepping back, hands casually tucked into his pockets.

"And you?" I asked before I could stop myself, surprising us both.

The question hung between us — open, bold.

He paused, studied me for a moment with a look that felt like a thousand silent conversations.

Then he just shrugged, a wicked glint in his eye.

"Maybe you'll have to earn it," he said.

And before I could say anything else, he turned and walked back to his table — leaving me standing there, coffee forgotten, heart thudding like a drum.

I watched him laugh with his friends again, a little more subdued now, but that spark — the one that had leapt between us — still crackled in the air.

And in that moment, I knew two things with terrifying certainty:

I wasn't ready for whatever this was.

And I couldn't stop it even if I tried.

## Chapter 15:

### Reflections in the Riverlight

After that unexpected interaction with the café guy, I was stunned. Not because he said something extraordinary. But because for the first time in a long time, something—or someone—made my heart shift, just a little. Like a wind chime catching the softest breeze.

I wasn't supposed to feel this again. Not after Siddharth. Not after that fatal illusion of a beginning that had collapsed before it could become anything real. But this... this guy wasn't like Siddharth. He didn't carry that artificial charm, that smug assurance. His laughter wasn't calculated—it was warm, full-bodied, and contagious. And those eyes... those impossibly deep, kind eyes. They didn't flirt—they listened.

I wasn't expecting to see him again.

Until Ira, in all her buzzing excitement, tugged at my wrist later that afternoon. "I'm DJ-ing tonight near the riverside café—my biggest gig this month. You *have* to come!"

"I don't know, Ira. Crowds..."

"Oh, please," she groaned. "I'll get you home before midnight like a fairy godmother. Plus, the reflection on Ganga during the set is heavenly. Bring your camera.

You might finally capture that ‘soul in motion’ shot you’re always hunting.”

I gave in. Her weirdly amazing charm had a way of making “no” feel like a betrayal.

So I dressed slow, thoughtfully. A plain white maxi dress that fluttered around my ankles like mist, silver bangles I had bought from the local market clinking at my wrist, and a simple bun to keep the wind from claiming my hair. No lipstick, just hope.

We rode her scooter to the venue—a dreamy open-air café nestled beside the river. Fairy lights laced the trees like shy constellations. Paper lanterns floated midair, trembling gently in the mountain breeze. It was mostly tourists, dancing barefoot, swaying like they had found the music inside them.

The sound of the Ganga wasn’t drowned by the music. It hummed beneath it, a bassline only the quiet-hearted could hear.

Ira was swept onto the stage, headphones on, her energy morphing into rhythm. I gave her a thumbs up, mouthing a “you go!” before quietly disappearing from the crowd.

I wandered to the edge of the café, where a single wooden bench faced the moonlit river. I sat, curled up with my diary, and let the world blur into the water.

Then I wrote, the wind flipping the pages with gentle impatience:

**“Main likh rahi hoon apne sawalon ki kitaab, aur yeh nadi hai ki jawabon ko bahati hi le ja rahi hai.”**

“I am writing a book of questions, and this river... she carries all the answers away.”

I had barely finished the line when a voice broke my solitude.

“It’s not very good to sit with your back to people when you really need them.”

I turned, startled.

It was him. The café guy.

He stood there in a white oversized shirt, sleeves rolled to his forearms, off-white linen trousers and the cleanest white sliders I’d ever seen. The moonlight clung to his face like it had chosen him over the rest of us. Calm, sculpted, and disarmingly magnetic.

“You?” I managed, eyes wide.

He smiled, boyishly smug. “I guess Ira didn’t tell you. I’m the host tonight. Which means... you’re technically my guest.”

I stood up awkwardly. “I didn’t know.”

“Relax,” he said, taking a step back to ease the tension. “You’re most welcome here. But why are you sitting all alone? Didn’t you come to enjoy the night?”

“I needed some time alone,” I said, not sure why I was being so honest.

He tilted his head, studying me like I was both a poem and a puzzle.

“Well,” he said gently, “I’ll leave you to it. But the music ends soon, and once it does, this place becomes a little more yours. You’ll have your quiet time in peace.”

And then he left. Just like that. No unnecessary questions. No lingering flirtation.

But he didn’t really leave, did he?

He stayed—his voice, his silhouette, his presence.

After the set ended, I went to find Ira. “Let’s head back?”

“Why don’t we eat here? Look at this place! The lights, the stars, the air—feels like a movie set.”

We sat down at a large wooden table under a tree twinkling with fairy lights. And of course, he was there. With his same two friends. The ones from the café.

Ira dragged me into their circle like I had always belonged. We shared hot lentil soup, cheesy baked bread, and a massive bowl of pasta the boys insisted was “the house favorite.” The conversation was light, teasing, easy—so opposite of what I had become used to.

Then one of the guys said, “Let’s play UNO!”



Ira's eyes lit up. "Oh, you're in trouble. She's the UNO queen!"

And I was. But not tonight.

He—*the host*—played like a quiet villain. Not mean. Just mischievous. Power card after power card, he blocked every win I reached for.

"Are you doing this on purpose?" I whispered.

His only reply was a devilish smirk.

I was furious.

And amused.

And more alive than I'd felt in weeks.

I wanted to win. I also wanted to walk away. But more than anything... I wanted to stay.

And then, without warning, the clouds parted and it started to rain.

Just like that—soft mountain rain, sudden and shy.

We all ran inside, laughter echoing. Wet hair. Wet sleeves. Wet cards.

Inside, as I stood drying my hair near the counter, he leaned against the frame and said, "You owe me a rematch."

I raised an eyebrow. "You'll lose."

His reply came easy. Confident, with just the right shade of softness.

“I’d love to.”

And something about that—about him wanting to lose, not to win—felt deeper than a joke.

It felt like something worth unraveling.

## Chapter 16:

### The Rematch and the Rain

The next morning arrived quietly, like a secret it didn't want to tell too loudly. The mountains wore a soft mist, and the Ganga shimmered under a sleepy sun. I woke up with rain still in my hair. Or maybe it was the echo of last night—the laughter, the game, and *him*.

There was something about that guy. No name. No details. Just moments.

He hadn't touched me. Not even once. And yet, I felt as though he had reached the very core of something I'd kept buried for too long.

Was it his calm? His quiet sense of humor? Or those impossibly knowing eyes that looked right *through* me—not in a way that left me bare, but in a way that made me feel seen?

Ira had texted early:

**“Breakfast at my place. I’ve got blueberry pancakes and drama to share. Bring your camera. And your heart.”**

I chuckled. How could someone be so outrageously herself at 8 a.m.?

I got dressed—loose linen pants, an olive-green kurta, my hair left open. No makeup, just the tired honesty of

a woman who had cried enough in her past to know that healing comes slowly and without warning.

When I reached her café, Ira greeted me with two plates of pancakes, three types of coffee (“because moods change”), and a grin that could start wars or end them.

“You were glowing last night,” she said as she took a bite.

“I was winning,” I replied.

“You were *losing*,” she corrected.

We both laughed.

“Hey, listen,” she said, leaning closer. “I know you’re cautious. You’re always watching, always measuring. But not everyone’s Siddharth, Dilliwali. Some people don’t want to hurt you. Some people just want to sit beside you, share cards and rain and silence.”

“I don’t even know his name,” I muttered.

“Exactly. That’s what makes it better,” she said with a wink. “It’s not about the name. It’s about how you feel around them.”

I stayed silent. Ira always made sense in her own mad, mystical way.

Later that afternoon, I decided to walk through the town alone. I carried my old vintage camera, letting it dangle from my neck like a compass. The streets buzzed softly—local children playing with spinning tops, an old

baba blessing people outside a small temple, the smell of incense mixing with the fresh scent of river wind.

I walked past little bookshops and chai stalls, down to the quieter ghats where the water whispered instead of roared.

I took photos. Shadows, textures, reflections in puddles. But I was waiting—for what, I couldn't say.

Until I saw him again.

He was sitting on the stone edge of the ghat, camera in hand, looking through the lens like he was capturing something the rest of the world would miss. He wore a charcoal grey shirt this time, sleeves rolled, hair a little messy, skin kissed by sun and wind.

He didn't see me at first.

I hesitated. Then I raised my camera. And took a shot.

The click made him turn.

He smiled when he saw me. Not surprised. Not startled. Just... glad.

"Spying on me now?" he asked, standing.

"I'm just collecting evidence for the UNO rematch," I said, tucking the camera back.

He walked over, hands in pockets. "So, you *are* a sore loser."

"I'm an *artist*," I corrected.

His smile deepened, but his eyes searched me quietly.

"I'm going to a hidden spot this evening," he said. "Off the tourist map. You'll get the best photos of the river's bend at sunset. Want to come?"

I paused. "With you?"

He nodded, easy and sure. "With me. No pressure."

I studied him. There was no push in his presence. No urgency. Just the offer of a new moment.

"Okay," I said.

And I meant it.

That evening, we walked along a stone path I didn't know existed. It curved around the base of a hill, slightly steep, surrounded by wild grass and orange marigolds growing out of cracks.

He helped me cross a small stream, steadying my hand without making a thing out of it. Like he knew I'd pull away if he held too long.

We reached a ledge that overlooked the great bend of the Ganga. The sun spilled molten gold across the sky, painting the mountains in layers of orange and lavender. The water sparkled like it had secrets to keep.

I took photos. He didn't interrupt.

He took some, too.

Then, we sat in silence, our cameras beside us, as if they had spoken enough for the day.

“Why don’t you ask me my name?” he asked suddenly.

I turned to him. “Because I think I’ll know when I’m supposed to.”

He looked at me for a long time. His gaze didn’t move like it was scanning me. It *rested*. Like it belonged.

“You make me nervous,” he whispered.

That caught me off guard. “Why?”

“Because I feel like I know your sadness... and I don’t want to hurt it.”

A gust of wind passed, catching my breath with it.

I couldn’t answer. Not yet.

So I smiled, just a little.

And the sun dipped lower.

Maybe some people arrive in your life not to stay forever. But to remind you of who you were before the world quieted your laughter.

And in that moment, with no names and no promises, I felt it—

A beginning.

## Chapter 17:

### Chai, Chaos, and a Little Bit of Magic

We sat there for what felt like hours, but was probably just thirty minutes—just me, him, and a silence that didn't feel heavy, but itched at the corners of my curiosity. The quiet between us was the kind that stretched, like warm dough before it turns into something delicious. Finally, I spoke, because if I didn't, I might explode into stardust.

"I've always wanted to write something real," I said, my voice barely above the breeze. "But now, I can't. It's like I've forgotten how to feel... or maybe who I am. Everything's just so... confusing. Like I'm chasing smoke."

He didn't say anything immediately, which made me regret saying anything. But then he turned to me, his eyes full of something honest. "Just be you. Don't pretend. Everything's an inspiration—this river, this city, these roads, this air... this moment. You. Me. Just be true."

And there it was—the click. Like something inside me unlocked with those words. I realized I hadn't just lost my inspiration. I'd been pretending. Performing. Trying to meet this impossible expectation of who I thought I should be. In the process, I forgot who I really was.



In this strange, poetic twist, this stranger—this guy who still hadn't even told me his name—was slowly helping me find the pieces of myself I had lost. It was in the way he looked at things, in his calmness, in his maddeningly wise one-liners that sounded like they came from a Himalayan monk but somehow didn't feel preachy. They felt... comforting.

Then, as if the universe wanted to reward my emotional breakthrough, he asked, "Chai?"

"Yes," I said too quickly, like a kid agreeing to candy. "Yes, please."

We walked towards the roadside tea stall, and just as we reached it, the heavens opened up. Rain. Sweet, sudden, mountain rain.

He stretched his arms and tilted his head back, letting the rain soak his face. His smile—pure, childish, ridiculous—lit up something in me.

"You're gonna catch a cold," I laughed.

He turned towards me, drenched and grinning like a five-year-old who just jumped in a puddle. "I love rain. Especially in the mountains. Everything looks better in the rain—the plants, the sky, the silence, even you."

"Smooth," I said, sipping the steaming chai the vendor handed me. But I smiled. I couldn't help it.

We found a little tin-roofed shelter nearby and sat there, rain drumming the roof, steam rising from our cups, and a quiet that didn't need filling. He told me about his life. That he had a family back in Delhi. That he came to Rishikesh four years ago with a half-broken soul and a full heart. That he left a high-profile corporate job, pulled every rupee from his savings, and dumped it all into building a small resort near the river.

"For a whole year, I made nothing," he said, staring into his cup like it held memories. "But I gave myself three months. I thought if there's no hope, I'll sell. But then... solo travellers started coming in. Then yoga groups. Backpackers. And now?"

He shrugged. "Now it's a full retreat. Spa, pottery classes, painting workshops. Annual music gigs. Everything. And I earn more now than I ever did in Delhi."

I blinked. "That's... incredible. But that first year must've been brutal."

"It was." He looked up. "But worth it. I didn't run. I waited. Sometimes, baache—" he caught himself, "—I mean, Dilliwali, maybe you don't need to figure everything out. Maybe you just need to let life take its turns."

"You're a walking Pinterest quote, you know that?" I teased.

He smirked. "Guilty."

At that moment, the rain poured harder, and just behind the stall, we saw a family of monkeys suddenly scampering around. One of them grabbed a packet of biscuits from the tea vendor's cart.

The vendor chased them with a stick, shouting, and we couldn't stop laughing. Especially when the monkey turned around mid-run, gave the vendor a smug look, and threw a biscuit at him before climbing onto the roof.

"I swear, that monkey just insulted him!" I laughed, nearly choking on my chai.

"I told you Rishikesh was wild," he grinned.

We stood there, soaked and laughing, with biscuit-throwing monkeys and mountain rain as our background music.

And the moment? It was perfect. It wasn't love. It wasn't magic. But it was something in between.

Later, as the rain eased, we walked back towards the main road. He didn't offer to walk me home. He just said, "Tomorrow, same time?"

"For what?" I asked, arching a brow.

"Chai. Monkeys. Philosophy. You know, the usual."

I rolled my eyes, smiling despite myself. "We'll see."

But I already knew. I was going to show up.

Not because of the chai.

Not even because of the monkeys.

But because, in a strange, quiet way—this nameless, rain-drenched, tea-loving guy was starting to feel like the beginning of something.

And maybe, just maybe, I was ready for it.

## Chapter 18:

### Noor & Zaroon—The Names We Borrowed

I don't know when exactly it began—this odd, magnetic pull towards him—but I knew it was getting harder to ignore. We weren't talking every day. We weren't texting. In fact, I still didn't know his name. But something about our silences had started speaking to me louder than words.

After the chai moment and the laughter-filled monkey chaos, something shifted. A quiet curiosity now danced between us. Not the kind you feel when you're trying to impress someone. No. This was more like... I wanted to *understand* him. He seemed to understand me even when I didn't make sense to myself.

So that day, when I walked into the café, pretending to be casual, pretending not to look for him—I found him already seated across the corner, sipping his black coffee with a crooked smile that made me forget every single plan I had for the day.

He didn't wave. Didn't call out.

He just watched me with that maddening calmness, and I played along, choosing a table across the room, hiding my smile behind my book. But oh, I could feel his eyes.

Every glance like a fingerprint tracing invisible lines on my skin.

When Ira brought over my coffee and gave me a wink that said she knew more than I'd like her to, I decided I'd had enough pretending.

I slipped out of the back of the café—childish maybe, but I just wanted a moment away from the eyes and the noise. To breathe.

The little alley behind the café led to the quieter part of the street, where the river hummed softly in the distance. I sat on the old stone bench, soaking in the peace.

“You know,” his voice came from behind me, “you’re terrible at being subtle.”

I turned, not surprised, but still caught off guard. “And you’re really good at sneaking up on people.”

“I followed your perfume,” he said with a smirk, sitting beside me. “It smells like something mysterious. And maybe a bit dramatic.”

“Much like my life,” I said with a sigh.

He tilted his head, examining me with those eyes that felt like they were searching for stories I hadn't told yet.

“You know,” I said, crossing my arms, “since you’re such a mystery man, I’m going to give you a name.”

He grinned. “Oh really?”

“Yep. From now on, you're Zaroon.”

He raised a brow. “Sounds dramatic. What does it mean?”

“It means... someone who makes chaos look beautiful.”

He laughed. “Fair. Then you need a name too.”

“Oh, please, enlighten me.”

“Noor,” he said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“Noor?”

“Yeah. Light. You have this... strange glow. Like you're searching for something but don't realize you've already become it.”

I looked away, because I didn't want him to see how that line hit me like a thousand fireflies. He had this habit of saying things that felt too real, too soon.

So we became Noor and Zaroon.

And we played it like a game.

We pretended to be a couple for free gelato at the quirky Italian corner shop. “It's our anniversary,” I said dramatically while he pulled me into a half hug, winking at the shopkeeper.

The guy gave us two extra scoops and a heart-shaped cookie.

We strolled down the market lanes like we owned the streets, pointing at the ugliest trinkets and pretending they were lost family heirlooms. Once, at a roadside momo stall, the auntie serving food said, “You two look like you’re made for each other.”

Zaroon—no, *he*—looked at me and said, “Maybe we are.”

And I choked on my momo.

We laughed till my sides hurt.

But there were quieter moments too.

Like when he taught me how to skim stones over the river. Or when I told him about my childhood—about my dream of writing a book that mattered. About the heartbreak I wasn’t ready to name yet.

And he told me about solitude. About how loneliness sometimes walks beside you even in a crowd. About how he found fragments of himself in the mountains.

That night, after we slipped out of the café unnoticed again, we ended up sitting on the roof of his resort under the stars. No one knew. No questions asked. Just us.

He looked at me, really looked.

“Do you believe in signs?” he asked.

“I think... I want to.”

“Maybe this—us—whatever *this* is, maybe it’s a sign.”



“A sign of what?”

“That sometimes, even if you don’t know where you’re going, the right people still find you.”

And in that moment, I wanted to believe it.

The sky above us wasn’t just dark—it was a velvet blanket filled with secrets and wishes.

He reached out, tucked a stray strand of hair behind my ear.

I didn’t move. Didn’t breathe.

He whispered, “You have no idea how hard it is not to kiss you right now.”

My heart stopped, then sprinted.

“Then don’t,” I said, voice barely audible.

But he didn’t.

Instead, he took my hand. Intertwined his fingers with mine.

And somehow, that touch was more intimate than any kiss.

Zaroon and Noor. Me and him. Two strangers playing a game that was slowly becoming something else.

And maybe, just maybe... we weren’t pretending anymore.

## Chapter 19:

### Lost and Found

I woke up with a kind of weightless heart, like the world had decided to wrap me in sunshine. The mountains looked warmer, the wind gentler, even the birdsong sounded like a love song. I had forgotten all the worry I had dragged into this trip. My mind felt clear. My soul? Almost light.

A soft knock came at the door.

"Beta," Ammaji's voice was muffled but kind. "Here's your coffee. And someone dropped this package for you. No name, just asked me to give it to you."

She handed me a steaming mug and a neatly wrapped brown paper package, tied with a thin red string. There was a calm excitement fluttering in my chest as I sat down on the edge of the bed and unwrapped it. Inside, there was a book—*Letters to a Young Poet*.

A small note fluttered to the ground. It read:

*"It's not too late to start. It's not too early to give a chance."*

No name. No clue. But I didn't need one. I knew exactly who it was from. I pressed the note to my chest and smiled, cheeks warm, heart doing somersaults like a teenager crushing hard.

I danced around the room like I had just been kissed by the universe. Every love song made sense. Every word in that book suddenly felt personal. I was still twirling when my phone rang.

"Hi Maa," I said, trying not to sound like I'd just been gifted a portal to my dreams.

"Hi beta! How's your trip going?"

"It's going... really good."

She paused. "You're sounding sane and happy and excited. Should I be worried someone drugged my child?"

I laughed. "Oh, come on Maa. Don't talk like me. I'm just... happy here. The mountains, the river, new people, lovely cafés, long walks, and some much-needed time with my thoughts."

"That's nice, beta. Just remember, next month is Yukti's wedding. Don't forget."

"Oh yeah, right! I do remember."

"So when are you planning to come back?"

I bit my lip. "Maa, I'm really liking it here. I've started writing again too. But don't worry, I'll be back soon. I still have to shop for the wedding. Otherwise, Maasi will wage war."

"Yes, and you know how dramatic she can be. Okay, come soon. Love you."

"Love you too, Maa."

The call ended, and I sighed. I took a long, hot shower and decided to wear the prettiest brown midi dress I had brought with me. It buttoned top to bottom and made me feel like I belonged in an old romantic film. My hair was tied in a loose bun with a few strands falling around my face. Everything felt... cinematic.

I was almost at the gate of the café, excited, my heart doing tiny jigs, when my phone buzzed again. The screen read: **Siddharth**.

My heart stopped dancing.

The breath that had felt light suddenly grew heavy. I stared at the name as if it were some ghost resurrected from a part of me I thought was long buried. My thumb hovered over the screen. What was I supposed to say? How was I supposed to feel?

Do I act angry? Indifferent? Casual?

He was the guy who vanished. No goodbye. No explanation. Just silence. And yet here I was... shaken.

I didn't pick up. I couldn't.

And just like that, my mood cracked. My thoughts spiraled. What *was* I doing? At one point, I was this woman who claimed she didn't need a man to keep her happy. I wrote off cheesy love stories. And yet... here I was. Fallen for not one, but two completely different men.

One ghosted me. One didn't even tell me his real name.  
One left me with wounds. The other—smiles and mystery.

Fake name. Real feelings?

We held hands because we were playing a game.  
Pretending to be a couple. Living a make-believe life  
with heart-shaped cookies and shared laughter. But  
maybe... just maybe... I wasn't pretending anymore.

And that thought? It terrified me.

Instead of entering the café where he might've been  
waiting, I took a slower, quieter turn and walked  
towards the ghat. The buzz of the morning slowly  
softened as I neared the water. The Ganga sparkled  
under the sun, flowing with the kind of patience I  
envied.

I sat on the steps, letting the calm settle over me. The  
wind whispered through my hair, and my heart slowed  
just enough to start making sense.

I pulled out my diary and scribbled without thinking:

*"What does it mean when make-believe starts feeling more real  
than anything else you've known?"*

A voice behind me answered softly, "It means you've  
stopped pretending."

I turned.

There he was.

In his usual kurta, a satchel across his shoulder, and that maddeningly quiet smile that always made my breath hitch.

"You followed me," I said.

"Maybe I'm just good at guessing where you go when your mind needs space."

He sat beside me. Not too close. Not too far. Just enough.

"So, Siddharth called," I said.

He looked at the river. "Did you answer?"

I shook my head.

"Good," he said simply. No judgment. No expectation.

We sat there for a while, just watching the current carry people's prayers away.

"I feel lost and found at the same time," I whispered.

He reached into his bag and handed me a note.

*"Sometimes the best things in life don't need permanence—they just need presence."*

And then, gently, with the kind of care only someone who truly sees you can offer—he kissed my forehead.

It wasn't dramatic. It wasn't loud. But it said everything.

And in that moment, no names were needed.

Just presence. Just here. Just now.

## **Chapter 20:**

# **Rain, Reckonings, and Bougainvillea Kisses**

I stopped by Ira's cafe on my way back. The smell of wet wood, chai, and paint hung in the air like a quiet lullaby. She was bent over, painting one of the outdoor chairs—a faded green being reborn into a bright sunshine yellow.

"You missed lunch," she said without looking up.

I sat down beside her, tucking my dress beneath me. "I was...somewhere."

She finally looked at me, her gaze playful. "Somewhere with someone who buys you old poetry books, perhaps?"

I laughed, caught. "Don't start."

"You're glowing. Either you found enlightenment or a man who doesn't annoy you. Rare species, both."

Ira dipped her brush again, then paused. "You know, once, I had someone like that. The kind who makes silence feel like a symphony."

I turned to her. "What happened?"

She sighed, setting the brush down. "I was too proud to admit I loved him, and too scared to stay when things got real. I thought real love was supposed to be easy."

When it got hard, I left. I made my mistakes, and when I turned around, he had already walked too far."

There was a pause. Heavy but kind.

"We all make our messes," she added. "The trick is knowing which ones are still worth cleaning up."

We sat there as the golden light dipped behind the hills. I stood, brushing off my dress. "Thanks for always knowing when to be poetic and when to be sarcastic."

She grinned. "That's my talent. That, and convincing lonely tourists to repaint my furniture."

I laughed and waved as I walked away, my heart full and strange.

It was late by the time I reached the main gate of the homestay, the sky a hazy lavender. I was fumbling with my keys when I saw him.

Leaning against the old brick wall.

White shirt. Washed blue jeans. Hands in pockets. Smile soft.

He looked like every quiet daydream I had dared not dream.

He stepped forward as I did, both unsure and certain, the distance between us shrinking with each breath. Just as we were about to speak, the first raindrop fell. Then another. And another.

I looked up. The sky had cracked open with rain.



He laughed, tipping his head back. Rain slid down his face and into the open collar of his shirt. He looked utterly, achingly beautiful.

I said, breathless, "I guess you want to stay?"

He stepped closer. "Right here. Right now. Yes."

And without another word, I kissed him.

Me—the self-declared non-romantic, the one who mocked love songs and fairy tales—I kissed him in the middle of the road under the blooming bougainvillea, with the rain pouring like music around us.

His hands found my waist like they always belonged there. My fingers tangled in the soft, wet fabric of his shirt. We kissed like the moment might slip away, like names didn't matter and the world had paused for us.

No past. No future. Just this.

The rain, the road, the man who never needed to be named—and the girl who finally let herself feel.

And when we finally pulled apart, breathless and soaking, I saw it in his eyes.

That he had been waiting for this too.

Under the shade of bougainvillea and the music of falling rain, something quietly beautiful began.

Something true.

Something finally real.

## **Chapter 21:**

### **The Morning He Stayed**

The first thing I noticed was the weight of the curls in my hair—still damp from last night’s rain, slightly stiff, yet holding the memory of something tender. My dress was flung across the chair, the fabric cold with leftover moisture. The whole room smelled of petrichor and jasmine... and something else I couldn’t place. Something soft. Something that lingered like a kiss.

The kiss.

The soaking, all-consuming, cinematic kiss beneath the bougainvillea, right in the middle of an empty street. It hadn't just touched my lips—it had seeped into my soul. I could still feel it. On my skin. In the curve of my spine. On the tips of my fingers. And somewhere deep inside, like a slow-burning warmth I hadn’t known I needed.

I slipped out of bed, wrapping a shawl around my shoulders. I padded softly to the balcony, my bare feet cool against the floor. I pulled the curtains aside, blinking into the early light.

And there he was.

Leaning against the railing, barefoot, wearing the same jeans from last night, camera in hand, looking like he’d

stepped out of a dream and into the daylight. He was taking pictures—of the misty hills, the lazy river, the rooftops still wet with dew. His hair was a mess of waves, and his eyes... oh, his eyes. That kind of soft that only came with peace. That kind of stillness people write poems about.

“Good morning,” he said quietly, as if louder would break the magic.

“You stayed?” I asked, voice still laced with sleep and disbelief.

He turned his face slightly, that lazy grin forming. “Didn’t feel like leaving.”

There it was again. That simple, unfussy honesty. It made my stomach flip.

I stood beside him, arms folded against the morning chill. There was no awkwardness. Just quiet. Just ease.

It didn’t feel like love. Not the kind I’d read about. Not the fireworks and tragedies and dramatic longing. But maybe I’d misunderstood love all this time. Maybe it wasn’t chaos. Maybe it was this—

The sound of silence when it’s shared.

The weight of someone’s presence when they don’t ask for anything.

The way his shoulder gently brushed mine and everything inside me stilled.

If this feeling was even a fraction of what those sappy novels tried to explain, then I was wrong. Maybe those stories weren't cheesy. Maybe I just never gave them the chance to breathe in my chest. Maybe love is gentle. Maybe love is quiet. Maybe love is a warm mug of chai on a cold morning.

"Do you want to talk about last night?" he asked, eyes still on the view, but voice careful.

I turned to look at him. "It's not that I don't want to. I just... don't have the language for it. I've never felt so... safe. With someone else's touch. It wasn't confusing. It wasn't overwhelming. It was—like home. Like I belonged there. And I don't know how to talk about that yet."

He turned to me then. "Then don't. You don't owe language to feeling. Let it just... be."

And I smiled.

Last night had been soft and clumsy and achingly perfect. The way his lips had found mine again and again. The soaked fabric clinging to our skin. His fingertips brushing against my back. The way he had kissed my shoulder with a reverence I didn't expect. We'd laughed between kisses. Whispered things we wouldn't remember but would feel forever. Every second of that night had been stitched with rain and breath and the trembling joy of being found.

“Coffee?” he asked with a grin.

“Only if you promise to be theatrical,” I teased.

“I’m incapable of anything else,” he said, heading inside.

We got dressed like children playing dress-up. I slipped into a cherry red kurta, my curls now wild and untamed, dancing with each movement. He found an oversized denim shirt in my closet and threw it on over his jeans. The sleeves hung a little loose, but he made it look effortlessly cool.

Before we left, he held up his phone.

“Dance break,” he declared.

“Now?” I laughed.

“Now,” he said, hitting play.

“Intehaan ho gayi intezaar ki...”

And just like that, we were dancing around the tiny living space. Dramatic, over-the-top moves. Me lip-syncing into a hairbrush. Him twirling with exaggerated gestures, bumping into the table. I clutched my sides laughing as he did the classic ‘arms-wide-open’ pose. He mimed heartbreak. I spun like a tragic heroine. It was pure, unfiltered joy.

By the time we reached Ira’s café, we were breathless and smiling.

She was painting a chair again when we walked in. She looked up, one eyebrow raised, and that smirk—oh that smirk—spread across her face.

“Well, well, well,” she said slowly, eyes bouncing between us.

We froze.

“Morning,” I said casually, trying to act unaffected.

“Someone’s cheeks are glowing,” she said, tapping her brush.

“I had a good dream,” I lied.

She didn’t believe a word. “Was it the kind with a white shirt and rain?”

He chuckled beside me. I elbowed him gently.

We sat in our usual corner. Legs touching under the table. Silent exchanges. Smiles held longer than necessary.

“I was thinking,” he said after finishing his coffee, “Would you like to come to the Ganga Aarti with me this evening?”

I looked up, surprised. “You want me to come?”

“I want to share it with you,” he said. “It’s one of those things that feels like it should be seen with someone who gets it.”

My heart fluttered. “I’d love to.”

“I’ll pick you up at 6:30 then,” he said, standing.

He leaned in. Pressed a soft kiss on my forehead.

“Goodbye,” he whispered.

And just like that, he left.

And everything in me stayed.

## Chapter 22:

### Between River and City

As soon as he left, Ira appeared from the café kitchen like she'd been waiting for the coast to clear. She leaned against the table, a teasing smirk plastered on her face and a rag thrown over one shoulder.

"So?" she asked, not even pretending to be subtle.

I rolled my eyes, but couldn't wipe the smile from my face.

"What 'so'?"

"Oh, come on. I can spot a woman kissed senseless from a mile away. And you, my dear, are practically glowing."

I laughed, looking down at my half-empty coffee mug.

"It was... nice."

"Nice? That's all you're giving me?" she said, plopping down across from me. "Listen, I'm happy for you. Really. You're letting yourself feel, and that matters. But just a small warning from someone alike, who let herself fall too fast and too freely —don't lose yourself in someone else's arms unless they know how to hold you gently."



Her words sank somewhere deep, wrapping around the part of me that still carried shadows. I nodded slowly.

"Thanks, Ira."

She reached across and squeezed my hand. "You're welcome. Now go get dressed for your dreamy Ganga Aarti date, Juliet."

I laughed, but the moment I stepped outside the café, I felt the tug in my chest.

Poorva.

That familiar ache returned, uninvited and yet not entirely unwelcome. I missed her. Missed our shared playlists, our debates over whether chai or coffee deserved supremacy, her terrible puns, and how she'd always make me change outfits five times before letting me leave the house.

Walking back to my little place, I kept thinking about what to wear. Something simple. Something soft. My hands ran over hangers and fabric until they stopped at a white kurta with delicate black embroidery. It felt just right. I paired it with silver jhumkis, a tiny nose ring, and tied my hair up into a loose bun. A few curls escaped to frame my face. Looking at myself in the mirror, I blushed. Not because of how I looked, but because I was excited. For the first time in ages, I was truly looking forward to an evening.

At exactly 6:30, I heard the familiar hum of a bike. I rushed downstairs, heart racing, and there he was—leaning against the bike, hands in his pockets, the setting sun casting golden streaks on his face. He looked like a dream carved out of light and dusk.

We locked eyes, and for a moment, the world hushed.

"You look... ethereal," he whispered.

I bit my lower lip, cheeks flaming. "You clean up okay yourself."

I hopped onto the bike behind him, wrapping my arms around his waist. The wind danced around us, the road unfolding like a ribbon, and I thought to myself—so this is what it feels like to be alive. To ride pillion with someone who makes your heart beat not out of fear, but anticipation. To feel the mountains watching over you. To know you're not running anymore, you're finally arriving.

We reached Parmarth Niketan Ghat just as the golden hour settled in. The sky was ablaze with hues of orange and pink, and the river shimmered like melted jewels. People had already started gathering, their voices hushed, their hearts tuned to the same reverent rhythm.

We took our place near the edge. He stood beside me, close enough for our shoulders to brush. The aarti began—soft chanting, the fragrance of incense, marigolds floating in the water like tiny suns.

And then came the crescendo. Drums. Bells. Voices rising together in surrender. That's when he reached for my hand.

Not looking. Not asking. Just... finding.

His fingers curled around mine, steady and warm. I closed my eyes.

It wasn't love. Not yet. But it was something. Something blooming, fragile and real.

As the aarti ended, the crowd slowly dispersed. We walked hand in hand through the nearby street lined with shops. Every stall glowed under fairy lights, selling trinkets and postcards, colourful scarves and incense sticks. I stopped in front of a small cart selling anklets. Silver ones with little bells.

"Should I buy them?" I asked, turning to him.

He looked at them, then at me, and shook his head with a soft smile. "No."

I frowned. "Why not?"

He just shrugged and walked on.

I let it go.

Back at his resort, he led me to an open garden space with fairy lights strung overhead and an open kitchen that smelled like heaven.

"Tonight, I cook," he announced.

"Really? Are you trying to impress me now?"

"That's the plan," he grinned.

He moved with such ease—slicing, tossing, sautéing. He made aglio olio pasta with grilled veggies, and the moment I took my first bite, I nearly wept.

"This is illegal. You're not allowed to be this good at kissing and cooking."

He laughed. "Had to learn. My father loves to cook—weekend feasts were a tradition. Then came all those diet fads I tried in college. And finally, this resort. I had too many reasons to know my way around a kitchen."

I smiled. "I remember sneaking into the kitchen late one night. I was maybe one. Craving something sweet. I dropped a glass—it echoed like a bomb through the whole house. My mother came storming in, and oh, the scolding I got. I never moved like a ninja again."

He chuckled. "Worth it though?"

"Absolutely. It was Mangoshake. Totally worth the wrath."

~

We sat together on a single wooden bench afterward. One side opened to the river, the other to the lights of the resort and distant city hum. I noticed the contrast. He faced the city, I faced the river.

"Isn't it funny?" I said.

He turned. "What is?"

"That I'm always looking at what flows, what moves. And you, you're always looking at what stays, what grounds."

He pondered that. "Maybe that's why this works. We're somewhere in between. Not holding too tightly. Not drifting too far."

We turned to face each other, and that tiny wooden bench felt like a universe in itself. The night wrapped around us like a secret.

Then, he looked down at my feet and asked gently, "May I?"

I blinked. "May you what?"

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a pair of silver anklets. My breath caught.

"When you stopped at that shop earlier and asked about the anklets, I said no... because I'd already bought these. I saw them this afternoon and thought of you. But when I saw you in this white kurti tonight, I forgot everything."

Tears welled up before I could stop them.

He knelt, took my foot, and placed it gently on his knee. The moment he clasped the anklet around my ankle, something shifted. Something inside me melted.

The anklets were simple. Elegant. Just like him.

Just like me.

I couldn't speak. Could barely breathe. I bent down and hugged him tight, tears spilling freely.

There, between the city and the river, on a rickety wooden bench, I was held like I mattered.

And maybe—just maybe—I did.

## Chapter 23:

### The In-Between of Us

The night didn't end on that bench. Between the river and the city—between flow and stability—we lingered like a pause in poetry. The aarti's echo still hummed in the air, but what hummed louder was the stillness we shared. I was facing the river, the eternal movement; he, the city, the emblem of staying. We were in the in-between. And for the first time in a long time, that space felt safe.

He reached out, gently brushing a strand of hair away from my face, the back of his fingers grazing my cheek. His touch was feather-light, but it held the weight of unspoken things.

“Whatever has hurt you before,” he said, his voice softer than the river, “I will never trigger it. I'll protect you—from people, from me, and even from yourself.”

Those words weren't consolation lines picked from a movie scene. They weren't said to impress. They came from a depth, from an ache I felt he understood. His eyes didn't flicker. They stayed on mine, unwavering. And his hand found mine, gently, like a vow being made in silence.

That walk back to my place was quiet. No words. Just his hand holding mine a little tighter than usual. A grip

that wasn't possessive but reassuring. A promise in motion. He was giving me something I didn't know I was seeking—hope that I would meet myself again. The girl I used to be. The girl I missed. The girl I wanted to become.

I reached my room and pulled out my journal. For the first time in weeks, the pages didn't feel like a stranger. They felt like a confidant.

I wrote: *"Main darti hoon khud ko khud se milane ko... kahin naadoniyon mein apna hi nuksaan na kar baithoon."*

*"I fear meeting myself again... afraid I might unknowingly hurt my own self in childish innocence."*

Sleep came slow but sweet that night.

~

Morning sunlight kissed my face, and the distant ringing of temple bells filled the silence. I stretched lazily and felt a soft tinkling around my ankles. I looked down.

The payals.

I blushed, smiling into the pillow. They were real. Last night was real.

My phone buzzed. A message from Poorva:

*"I'm glad you're in your search mission... I hope you find me—the best friend I miss the most. Visited uncle and aunty*



*yesterday. Aunty showed me your photo. You looked radiant. I miss you. I miss us. Come home soon."*

My heart ached a little. The joy of being remembered was quickly followed by the weight of reality—I was leaving in two days.

~

I made my way to Ira's café in a loose brown shirt and dark brown linen pants. She spotted me the moment I walked in and raised an eyebrow.

"What's with this monsoon cloud expression?"

I shrugged, settling into my usual spot.

"I'm leaving in two days."

She smirked. "And this makes you sad because you'll miss this place... or me... or him?"

I tried to roll my eyes, but failed. She laughed. "I'll bring your coffee. Cheer up, Juliet."

Sipping my coffee in the café balcony, I was lost in thought. That's when I felt his breath against my ear.

"Good morning, beautiful," he whispered.

I turned, startled—and the distance between our lips was no more than twelve centimeters. Exactly. I counted. We stayed like that, frozen in that sweet tension, for what felt like twenty seconds. His gaze dropped to my lips. My breath hitched.

Then Ira's voice pierced the air.

A loud crash.

"Looks like she broke the glass," I mumbled, and we laughed, heading inside to help her clean up.

As we straightened up, I looked at him. "I'll meet you in the evening. I... I need some time today."

He nodded, as if he already knew. "You know where to find me when you need me."

And just like that, I vanished.

~~~~~

I walked through the city like it was my first time again. The noon sun kissed my shoulders, the local vendors smiled, and I found myself by the ghat once more.

I sat by the Ganga and made a promise: I would make every moment count. I'd start writing again—not just journaling, but really feeling and translating that into words.

Right there, I wrote my first entry:

*"There's a kind of truth only silence knows. Today, I let it speak through me."*

~~~~~

Pacing back to Ira's café, I found it closed. A small handwritten note fluttered in the breeze stuck on the door:

*“Gig at the riverside. We’re waiting for you. Look alive, please.”*

*“Look alive?” I laughed. I am alive.*

I added a dash of cherry red gloss, untied my hair, and headed to the riverside.

But there was no gig.

It was a dinner party. For me.

Fairy lights twinkled above. Ira hugged me tight, his friends clapped and cheered, and then my eyes found his. He stood near the makeshift open kitchen, again in that white T-shirt and light jeans, smiling like he knew every version of me.

He walked towards me and said, “Movement is part of life. Even water, when kept still in one place, begins to spoil.”

His voice caught in his throat before he added, “I’ll be by your side—wherever you want me, when you need me, for as long as you need me. Don’t be sad.”

I placed my palm on his cheek, gently. His stubble brushed against my skin. His eyes softened, and I knew then—my hands would remember this face, the way a song remembers its melody.

It wasn’t like I was never going to meet him again. But the fear of losing this, this feeling, gnawed at me.

Because he gave me something I hadn't felt in years—safety, comfort, and a strange new beginning.

~~~~

Dinner was served under the open sky. He cooked again, of course.

This time it was wood-fired pizza with all our favorite toppings.

"You know," he said while serving me, "I once tried to impress a girl in college by baking banana bread. Turned out so hard we used it as a door stopper."

I burst out laughing. "You're joking!"

"Nope. True story. She dumped me. But the door stopper stayed with me all four years."

"And I once tried to make Maggi in a pressure cooker," I admitted.

He paused. "Why?"

"I was ten. I thought it would cook faster."

We laughed till our stomachs hurt. It wasn't the jokes. It was the comfort of being completely ourselves.

~~~~

Later that night, as the guests faded away, it was just us near the riverside again. The lights were dimmer now, the sounds quieter. He sat beside me, this time closer. Our thighs touched, knees gently pressed.

“I don’t want tonight to end,” I whispered.

“It doesn’t have to,” he said, his fingers brushing mine.

He leaned in slowly. No sudden moves. Just a gaze that asked for permission. My eyes answered.

His lips touched mine—soft, careful, and slow. Like poetry written in candlelight.

The kiss deepened, his hand moving gently to my waist, pulling me just a little closer. My fingers found his hair, anchoring there.

It wasn’t wild or desperate. It was like holding a truth you don’t want to lose.

When we pulled away, foreheads still touching, he said, “You taste like hope.”

I smiled. “You feel like home.”

And in that soft embrace, somewhere between the sound of the river and the lights of the city, we didn’t need to say anything more.

Because some nights aren’t meant to end.

They’re meant to become a part of you.

Forever.

## Chapter 24:

### The Night That Held Us

There are some nights that don't just pass—they carve themselves into you.

This was one of them.

We lay on the patio sofa tucked into the quiet corner of his private lawn, where the wild jasmine grew untamed and the stars could be seen without asking. A soft blanket draped over us, but it was barely needed. The night was cool, yes—but not the biting kind. It was the kind of cool that wrapped itself around you like a whisper. And him? He was the warmth that made it feel like home.

The Ganga flowed in the distance—eternal, endless, murmuring ancient stories. That sound had been with me through my entire time here, but tonight, it sounded different. Maybe because I had finally stilled enough to listen. Maybe because his arms were around me, and that alone changed the way the world moved.

My head rested on his shoulder, my body nestled into his side. I had turned slightly towards him, my forehead close to his neck, breathing in the quiet and him. His arm was firm around me, protective and possessive without a word. The pad of his thumb brushed my cheek in lazy, tender circles. It didn't stop. Even when

we grew silent. Even when the sky deepened its indigo hues and the air grew thinner with sleep. That gentle motion remained—a silent vow, a rhythm of care.

Whenever I took a deeper breath, one that trembled with unnamed feelings, his grip tightened. As if he was trying to hold all my pieces together. And somehow, he did.

We didn't speak.

We didn't need to.

There's a rare kind of comfort that exists between two people who choose to share silence. A comfort that doesn't demand or expect. It just *is*. And in that stillness, with only the Ganga whispering nearby and the stars blinking down like watchful eyes, I felt more seen than I ever had in my life.

No confessions. No declarations. Just presence.

And that presence said: *You're not alone. Not tonight.*

As the blackness of night began to soften into pre-dawn silver, he shifted slightly, his lips brushing against my temple.

"You want coffee?" he murmured, voice hoarse and deliciously low.

I didn't answer with words. I buried my face into his chest, breathed him in like I was memorizing him—woodsmoke and sandalwood and something I couldn't

name but knew I'd never forget. His hand lifted to cradle the back of my head.

He chuckled. "I make the world's best coffee. And today... I'd like to give you the honor of tasting it."

I looked up and met his gaze, the first sliver of sunlight lighting the edges of his features. I smiled—maybe the softest smile I'd ever worn. "That's a bold claim," I whispered.

He stood and pulled me up with him, fingers laced with mine like it was the most natural thing in the world. We walked slowly across the dewy grass into the private section of the resort. The part tourists never saw. The part that felt utterly, unapologetically *him*.

Inside, everything had a story. Wooden floors, framed polaroids, open books left mid-read. A vinyl player sat beside a messy stack of records. And it smelled like coffee and him and memories.

I sat on a chair near the counter, still barefoot, still wrapped in that soft drowsy warmth from the night. He moved around the kitchen like he belonged in every space, and somehow, like I did too.

The coffee aroma filled the air, rich and dark and full-bodied.

When he handed me the cup, I took a tentative sip—and moaned. "Okay," I said. "This might actually not be done. You didn't make coffee. You made art."



He grinned, that lazy, smug grin I had grown to secretly adore. “Told you.”

He walked over to the speaker and scrolled through his playlist. The opening chords of *Tum Ho* from Rockstar began to play. My breath caught.

Tum ho, paas mere... saath mere ho tum yun...

I didn’t expect it. Not this song. Not now.

I stared at him, stunned. Words danced at the tip of my tongue. I wanted to tell him about that day—about the random guy who quoted Rockstar to me like it was the Bible of love. But something in me hesitated.

He caught the shift in my expression. “You okay?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said softly. “Just... music does strange things.”

His eyes searched mine. “So do moments.”

He came closer. So close I could feel the heat from his skin.

“I wanted to tell you something,” he said, voice dropping an octave. “But I’ve been scared. Not of you. Just... your reaction.”

I laughed nervously. “Are you finally going to tell me your name? Have I earned it?”

He didn’t laugh. He stepped closer, took my cup from my hands, and placed it gently on the table.

Then he touched my lips with his fingers.

“Shh,” he said.

And then, he kissed me.

But this wasn’t just a kiss.

It wasn’t soft, or slow, or cautious. It was... *everything*.

His lips told me the story of all the nights he stayed awake thinking about this. His hands on my waist, my back, my jaw—every touch was a plea. A promise. A fear. It was the kind of kiss that holds you when words fail. That begs you not to leave, even when no one’s said they’re going.

I melted into him. Gave in. Because how could I not?

When we finally broke apart, both breathless and trembling, there was something new in his eyes. Something raw.

I searched his face. “What is it?”

He opened his mouth, hesitated. “I...”

But my phone rang.

*Ma.*

I sighed, frustrated, and declined the call.

It rang again.

He touched my arm gently. "Take it. Might be important. We'll talk later. And you should get some sleep too"

I nodded, kissed him lightly on the cheek, and whispered, "Thank you. For the night. For everything."

He watched me go. There was something in his eyes again. That ache. That thing he hadn't said yet.

I nodded, still dazed, and stepped away to answer.

"Ma?"

She sounded frantic. "beta. Yukti's wedding... it's been preponed."

I blinked. "What?"

"Ten days from now. Not twenty. Her fiancé's company in Australia has called him back early. They've got a government partnership launching—some international-level initiative—and he's the project lead. His boss requested he come back urgently."

"Oh."

My stomach turned, but I smiled through it. "Okay. Okay. That's fine. We'll manage. You've already got things planned, right?"

"Yes, but now everything needs to be rushed. The outfits, the gifts, the invites—"

"I'll be home soon. We'll figure it out."

When I hung up, I stood in the hallway, suddenly aware that a part of this story—the one written in stars and kisses and rivers—was on a clock.

I returned to my room, his scent still on my skin, the echo of *Tum Ho* still playing in my head.

I lay down, eyes open to the ceiling. Thinking about the silent night that held me, the kiss that unraveled something I hadn't even realized I'd knotted, and the man who almost told me something.

Almost.

Sleep took me like a slow tide.

But even in my dreams, I could still feel his thumb tracing my cheek, the softness of his breath against my hair, and the weight of a moment that was trying to become forever.

## Chapter 25:

### One More Day

I woke up to the noon sun pouring through the window like liquid gold. My body felt heavy, my soul even more so — like something was halfway between floating and falling.

I took a long, slow shower, letting the water erase the night's echoes from my skin but not from my heart. I stood for a few extra moments, watching the mist dance over the mirror. Then I pulled on an oversized off-white shirt — his kind of aesthetic, relaxed and effortless — and paired it with soft linen white pants. I didn't know what I was dressing up for, but my heart had already decided.

I reached Ira's café, where warmth and aroma welcomed me like an old friend. My eyes scanned the space instinctively, my heartbeat keeping pace with the door — half hope, half hesitation. Ira caught me looking around and raised an eyebrow, a slow smirk curling at the corner of her lips.

"You know, it's getting easier to tell when you're not just here for the coffee," she teased, pouring me a glass of water. "That searching look... screams rom-com protagonist."

I chuckled, but didn't deny it.

She slid into the chair across from me. “So, day after tomorrow, huh? Heading home?”

The words dropped like a pebble in still water, causing ripples across my chest.

“Yeah... but plans changed,” I said, fidgeting with my glass. “Yukti’s wedding got preponed. Ten days from now. Her fiancé got called back to Australia for an urgent project — some international merger his company is handling. So now, everything’s happening in a rush.”

Ira sighed. “Weddings, deadlines, continents — all conspiring against love stories.”

I laughed at her theatrics. “I have to head back soon. Ma’s already losing her mind. Outfit fittings, gift lists, dance practices... the usual chaos.”

“Sounds like a full-fledged Bollywood saga,” she grinned, then added softly, “And him? What happens to that?”

Before I could respond, the café door creaked.

He walked in — wearing a pale yellow shirt, sleeves rolled up, paired with khaki trousers. The sunlight from the windows hugged him gently, as if it, too, couldn’t help falling for him. For a fleeting second, he looked like a delicious *rasmalai* — soft, warm, impossible to resist.

“Hey,” he said, stopping right beside me. “Want to go on a ride?”

“A quick yes,” I replied without thinking. My heart was already out the door.

The wind met us like an old friend. As I sat behind him on the bike and wrapped my arms tightly around his waist, a strange comfort enveloped me. The song *Tum Ho* started playing in my head like it had waited for this very moment. And somewhere deep within, I felt like *Heer* from Rockstar — lost in a world of confusion, yet held by something unexplainably beautiful.

We didn’t talk much as we rode around the sleepy corners of Rishikesh. The city felt different with him, or maybe I was seeing it for the first time — really seeing it. After some time, we stopped near a quiet spot close to the ghat. A humble tea stall stood there like a pause button in time. He ordered two chais and we sat on a stone bench overlooking the river.

The Ganga flowed with the same relentless rhythm, like a song that never needed an ending. I looked at it and whispered softly, half to him, half to myself, “*Kahan se aati hai yeh nadi...*?”

He turned towards me slowly.

“I wanted to share something with you,” he said.

I nodded, already remembering the moment he said the same thing earlier that morning.

He looked at the ground, then at the river, then finally at me. “This... isn't the first time we've met.”

I blinked. “What?”

“Four years ago, you came here with your friends. I was here too — lost, jobless, angry at everything. I didn't know what I was doing with my life or what I was even searching for. And then I saw you... at a corner tea stall, just like this. You were talking about love and life — how love should ache, but that ache should be beautiful. You weren't speaking to me, but I heard every word.”

I was stunned. My breath hitched.

“And then, that evening, near the ghat steps — a bunch of college kids were singing *Tum Ho*, and you... you jumped in mid-song like you belonged to it. You didn't care who was watching. You laughed with your heart, sang like the wind was yours. I didn't click your photo. I couldn't. But your face, your eyes, your fire — it stayed with me. I didn't know someone could make pain look so poetic. That night, you said something that changed me... you talked about how you longed for the mountains the way *Heer* longed for her escape. You even quoted Qais from *Laila Majnu*... ‘Kahan se aati hai yeh nadi’ — your words, your longing, it matched mine.”

I couldn't breathe. The memory he described was mine — but I never imagined someone had stored it so delicately.



“You made me realise that if I didn’t fight for the things I loved, I might never get another chance. That longing you spoke of – you awakened it in me. I got scared. I tried to find you the next day but... you were gone.”

“I left early...” I murmured, remembering our abrupt departure.

“I searched every social media handle, every hostel, resort, café. I even tried dating apps – and one day, I saw your photo. I thought it couldn’t be you. You didn’t seem like someone who’d look for love through a screen. But just in case... I messaged you that line. Something only you might recognise. But then... your profile vanished.”

I looked down, guilty. “I deleted the app. I didn’t know profiles just... disappear.”

He smiled faintly. “I didn’t know either. I thought maybe you saw it and didn’t want to respond.”

Silence hung between us like a sigh.

“And then I saw you again – a few days ago, at a live music night here in Rishikesh. You were with Ira. But you seemed different – quieter. Like someone who had tucked her soul away for safekeeping.”

I swallowed hard.

“I didn’t want to scare you. I thought I’d spend some time with you, maybe get to know the real you. And in doing that... if I could bring back even a glimpse of the girl I saw four years ago – the one who gave me hope – that would be enough. I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want it to feel like I was chasing a memory. I wanted it to be real.”

My throat burned. “But now, it doesn’t feel real. It feels pre-planned. I thought... we were building something new, something ours. Not something rooted in the past.”

He leaned in, his voice low. “It was real. Every moment. I didn’t do this to relive something. I did this because you make me feel more alive than the mountains ever could.”

I looked away. “So what am I? Some girl who gave you hope and now you’re just trying to repay the favour? Is this charity?”

He flinched. “It’s not charity. It’s not pity. I just... I wanted to be around you. I wanted to know you. But I got scared that if I said too much too soon, I’d lose you before I even had the chance.”

My heart ached. “I don’t know anymore. I thought this was something special. Something without names and labels... but now it just feels like a performance, like I was cast into your story without knowing it.”

He looked devastated.

“Do you still want to run?” he asked softly.

I met his gaze. “I don’t know where to go. I never thought the mountains would hide and make me feel betrayed.”

He touched my cheek gently, guilt swimming in his eyes. Then, without warning, he pulled me into an embrace that felt like an apology, a confession, a prayer.

“I never expected anything from this... this nameless connection,” I whispered into his chest. “But all I wanted was one more day with you. One day to live my wishes... and to have you by my side while I do.”

He pulled back just enough to look into my eyes.

“Then I’ll be there. For one more day. I promise.”

But I didn’t respond. My heart wanted to believe him, but my mind kept whispering that maybe this feeling — this fragile thing between us — was just mine all along. Maybe what felt like love to me was only nostalgia to him.

I stepped away, turning towards the bridge.

He stayed behind, unmoving, watching me cross over.

As I walked across Laxman Jhula, I could see him standing on the other side of the river — the past, the hope, the almost.

And I was on this side — in the now, in the ache, in the truth.

I was back in the same confused state... except this time, I knew that even the mountains could betray.

And sometimes, one more day is all you wish for — even if you know it will break your heart.

## **Chapter 26:**

### **The Illusion of Being Known**

The moment his truth slipped into the night air, I felt something inside me fracture—not shatter dramatically, but quietly, like hairline cracks forming in porcelain. You can't always hear the breaking, but you know it's there. You feel it every time you try to hold yourself together.

He had seen me four years ago.

He had come looking.

And suddenly, everything—his kindness, his timing, his silences that felt like safety—began to feel rehearsed. Like he was performing for a memory instead of meeting me as I am. And that memory? It wasn't even me.

Not anymore.

I didn't cry in front of him. Didn't let my voice shake or my eyes give me away. I just smiled, nodded—played the part of someone understanding something gentle, not devastating—and walked away. If he saw the storm in my back as I left, he didn't stop me.

But inside, everything was turning to ash.

I walked slowly towards my room, each step heavier than the last, as if the earth itself was asking me to reconsider. But I couldn't. I needed space. I needed air. I needed to be away from the weight of someone else's version of me.

What's the big deal, someone might ask. What harm in being noticed?

But it wasn't *me* he saw. It was someone I'm still searching for—someone I've mourned, someone I'm trying to resurrect on my own terms. And now, knowing he had been holding on to that ghost all along made me feel hollow. Tricked. Betrayed.

I thought he was helping me rediscover myself. I genuinely believed that. But now it felt like a rescue mission I never asked for. Like I was a cause. A broken thing he wanted to mend. Out of pity? Out of gratitude?

That's not love. That's penance.

And suddenly, all those Imtiaz Ali movies—once sacred, once gospel—felt like glossy, cruel fiction. No, not fiction. Fraud.

Those serendipitous meetings? The soulful stares across crowded rooms? The cosmic timing of two lost people finding each other?

Lies. Beautiful, dangerous lies.

I felt exposed, like I'd been emotionally undressed without consent. It wasn't that he'd seen me—we all want to be seen. It was that he'd seen a version of me that didn't exist anymore and had convinced himself I was still her. And the worst part? I'd started to believe it too.

What must he think now? That I'm unstable? Weak? Some tragic story girl who romanticizes her grief and calls it poetry?

I've spent years building walls so high even I can't always see over them. And yet, there I was—torn open, raw. A mess I didn't recognize.

I rushed into my room. My heart was racing, not from fear, but from the kind of heartbreak that feels undeserved. That makes you question your own sanity.

I packed.

Fast. Furiously. Without thinking. Clothes. Journal. Toothbrush. Phone charger. My breath.

Every zip of the suitcase felt like sealing away a part of the illusion. The fairy tale. The idea that something real was happening.

There was a knock on my door.

"Beta?" Amma ji's voice was soft, full of concern.

I opened the door just enough for her to see my face.

"Kya hua?"

“I have to leave,” I said, forcing calm.

“Abhi? Itni raat ko?”

I nodded, eyes brimming.

She stepped forward and took my hand. “Dil dukha hai?”

I nodded again, lips quivering.

She pulled me into her arms. No questions, no advice—just warmth. Just that comforting scent of sandalwood and old wisdom.

“I don’t know when I’ll be back,” I whispered.

She placed her hand on my head like a blessing. “Koi baat nahi. Par vapas zarur aana.”

“I’ll try.”

“Apna khayal rakhna. Aur yaad rakhna— Kabhi kabhi khud ko dhoondhne ke liye kho jana padta hai or jo dil todta hai, wohi kabhi kabhi sabse gehra sabak deta hai.”

I hugged her tighter than I’d hugged anyone in years. Then I walked away, suitcase in hand, barefoot in the corridor for a moment—wanting to feel the ground one last time.

I didn’t tell Ira. I didn’t message him. I didn’t look back.

The bus station felt like limbo—neither here nor there. I sat in a plastic chair that wobbled with every shift and



watched as street dogs played under flickering tube lights. Even they looked more at peace than I felt.

I boarded the first bus to Noida, buried my face in my jacket, and let the motion blur my thoughts.

Somewhere between hills and highways, I allowed myself to miss him. Not the man who remembered me, but the one I had imagined. The one who didn't know my past, who met me on the terrace with warm chai and broken stories. The one who made me feel like I was enough—without context, without history.

The one who said *Tum Ho* and meant it.

By the time I reached Noida, the city was waking up. But I felt like I was shutting down.

I unlocked my apartment, dropped my bag at the door, and began to clean. Wiped countertops that didn't need wiping. Rearranged books alphabetically. Scrubbed the sink until my hands ached.

I didn't text my mother. Didn't call Poorva. They expected smiles, closure. I had none.

I needed time. To construct a version of myself they could believe. The cheerful traveler. The healed soul.

But I was grieving.

This heartbreak wasn't a distraction like Siddharth. It was a reality check. A mirror with no filter.

And the silence? It was loud. Deafening.

I kept wondering where he was. Whether he was pacing the riverbank, replaying everything. Or whether he'd moved on, already writing a new story in his head.

And as I sat at my window that evening, watching Noida blink in tired neon and premature dusk, I imagined him on the other side of the Laxman Jhula—just a metaphor now. A symbol of something I thought I wanted.

I had crossed that bridge. Left behind the boy. The illusion. The hope.

But not the ache.

The ache had crossed with me.

## **Chapter 27:**

### **The Echo of Everything Unsaid**

Waking up felt like pulling my soul out of wet cement. The familiar chaos of Noida murmured outside my window, but all I heard were the rivers of Rishikesh, his voice, and the strange silence that followed his truth. The mountains were gone, and in their place stood concrete, sirens, and my old life waiting to be reinhabited.

The alarm buzzed for the third time. I didn't move.

My body lay still while my mind roamed back to the stone steps of the Ganga, to the way he looked at me like I was music he once knew by heart. It all felt like a dream someone else had lived in my skin. I closed my eyes and imagined the quiet flow of water, the wind weaving through trees, the scent of chai and him.

Finally, I forced myself up. My body felt too heavy for a Monday. I reached into the wardrobe without thinking and pulled out the same black flared pants and red kurti I had worn that day. I don't know why. Maybe part of me wanted to see if putting them on would bring back the girl I was before his confession unraveled something inside me.

At work, my desk was a monument to abandonment — piles of drafts, unopened envelopes, a dying cactus. I sat

down and powered up the system. The screen flickered to life like an old friend reluctantly waking from a coma. Everything looked the same. But I wasn't.

Colleagues came and went. Some stopped to check in.

"Hey! You're back! How was the break?"

"You okay? You seem... different."

"Long time, We missed you."

I nodded, smiled like a rehearsed scene. "Good. Just catching up."

But I wasn't catching up. I was trying not to fall apart in a place that didn't know how much I had changed.

My phone buzzed. A message from Poorva lit up the screen:

**Poorva:** "Who is going to tell me you're back? You texted aunty such a dull 'reached safe' kind of message. We have to start shopping. Gather your lazy ass and meet me after office — Lajpat, outfit trials!"

Her message pulsed with the kind of brightness I didn't feel but desperately needed. I stared at it for a minute, then replied:

**Me:** "Bring me coffee please, I might run a bit late sowweyyyy in advance :\* "

Fake cuteness. A small plea for normalcy. But this time, I meant it. I wanted to try. Maybe it wasn't their fault.

Maybe the distance was my making — born from fear, expectations, an inability to trust that people could stay without trying to fix me.

I opened my voicemail. Ira's voice filled the air — soft, concerned, insistent. One message. Two. Five. I stopped counting. She had been trying to reach me every day since I left. But I couldn't call back. Not yet.

Because I didn't know what to say. That she was right? That I fell too fast and too hard? That despite all the poetry and the peace, what he offered was laced with a version of me I no longer lived inside?

He didn't fall for me. He fell for a memory. A ghost. And I was tired of being haunted.

I worked. Mechanically. Edited articles, replied to emails, proofread pages. My hands moved. My mind didn't.

After work, I met Poorva outside the metro station. She was already there, sipping cold coffee, her smile bright and unapologetically warm.

"There she is!" she said, pulling me into a tight hug. "You look different. Don't know if it's good or bad. But at least you're talking."

I managed a real smile. "Talking's all I've got."

We headed into Lajpat, that bustling chaos of fabric, jewellery, colour, and noise. We tried on lehengas, posed like movie stars, and argued over bangles.

She made me try a bright yellow outfit that looked like I was dressed for Holi in advance.

“You hate me,” I said, laughing.

“You look like sunshine’s cousin,” she teased.

For a little while, I laughed. I wasn’t pretending. I wasn’t whole. But I was here. And she was here.

We shared golgappas on the footpath and browsed for jhumkas. She told me about work gossip and her cousin’s destination wedding. I listened, adding my own sarcasm and laughter where needed. But under the jokes and colours, something in me still hurt.

I called Maa while Poorva was finalizing her outfit. Told her we were mostly done. Only gifts and jewellery left.

Then I returned to my apartment. Empty. Familiar. Cold.

I didn’t turn on the lights. I dropped my bag and walked to the balcony. The city blinked below me like a tired confession.

I sat in the dark and let the ache return.

I missed him. But not the man who remembered me. The one I met in real time – the one who watched the rain fall, who sipped chai like it was a ritual, who said

“Tum ho” like it meant everything. I missed *him*. The now-him.

But he wasn’t in love with me. He was in love with a girl by the Ganga who didn’t know her heartbreak yet. And I felt betrayed. Because I had let myself believe that I could be seen for who I was today. But he looked through me, searching for someone else.

And he didn’t tell me. Not when we laughed. Not when we walked. Not when he made me believe we were beginning something new.

That’s why I was angry.

Because he should’ve told me when I mattered — not when he feared losing me. It felt like a plot twist, not a truth. Like I was written into a story that wasn’t mine.

I went inside, opened my laptop, and stared at the blank screen. Then I began.

“Chapter One – Silence Between the Alarms”

Words flowed. Honest. Unfiltered. Painful. Beautiful. I wrote everything — the river, the chai, the moments, the ache, the truth. It wasn’t for him. It wasn’t even for me. It was just... real.

I closed the laptop. Breathed.

Then, I played his playlist. Old Hindi songs. The kind that linger like perfume long after the person has left the room.

I started cooking.

Dal. Chawal.

Simple. Like Amma used to make. Like home. Like the things we forget we love.

I ate at the kitchen counter, in the yellow light, barefoot and wrapped in silence. No drama. Just dinner and heartache.

I checked my phone.

No messages. No calls.

And I realized something.

Maybe he wasn't coming back.

But maybe — just maybe — I was.

To myself.

And that was a start.



## **Chapter 28:**

# **Coffee, Chaos, and a Chapter Called Closure**

The morning wasn't cruel anymore.

It still held weight, sure—like a book you're halfway through but suddenly not sure you want to finish—but it wasn't unkind. The alarm went off, and for once, I didn't curse its existence. I rolled over, blinked at the ceiling, and sat up with deliberate calm.

There were no Ganga waves today, no mountains calling me, and certainly no footsteps of someone walking beside me. Just the dull hum of city life filtering in through the windows, a car horn in the distance, and the slight wheeze of the electric kettle coming to life in the kitchen.

I sat up slowly, as if waking up a different person would require patience. I didn't feel completely myself, but there was something—a soft shift.

Today I felt... human.

After brushing my hair and braiding it loosely, I chose my white shirt, the crisp one I had ironed the night before, and wore it over my faded blue jeans. A small spritz of body mist, some kajal, a nude lipstick that still

had traces of a broken cap, and I looked... fine. Just fine. Maybe that was enough.

“Not bad,” I muttered.

Not a tragic mess. Not glowing either. But balanced. Like a page just before it’s filled.

I left early, stopped at Poorva’s favorite coffee point before heading to work. The guy behind the counter remembered the order before I said anything — caramel coffee with extra cream for her, and iced Americano for me, some love languages are caffeinated. Clearly, I was about to dive into a mountain of pending work that needed caffeine and divine intervention.

She met me outside her office, eyes widening like I was a ghost wrapped in nostalgia.

“OH MY GOD!” she squealed, grabbing the coffee like it was liquid gold. “You wore lipstick. Actual lipstick. Are you possessed?”

I smiled. “Possessed by deadlines and coffee. Close enough.”

“You look like my best friend who once threatened to burn her editor’s plant if he didn’t give her a real weekend.”

We sat on the bench outside her building, sipping in silence for a few seconds.

“You okay now?” she asked softly.

“Getting there,” I replied. “One bitter sip at a time.”

She poked my arm. “You’re so back. Did the Himalayas whisper secrets to you? Did you do yoga with a monk?”

I rolled my eyes. “No monks. But a lot of silence.”

We sipped, sitting side by side on a concrete bench under the gulmohar tree. She filled the air with office gossip, lipstick recommendations, and her theory on why Siddharth was “a charming idiot and not worth a breakup-induced haircut.”

I laughed—really laughed. Her presence was grounding. Familiar. Home in a person.

“See? And soon you’ll be dating again. Maybe even download Bumble. Just promise me you won’t swipe right on guys who quote Rumi with gym selfies.”

I laughed. “One trauma at a time, please.”

But she didn’t know about *him*. She thought I was still healing from Siddharth, even after knowing that he was a mere distraction. So naturally, she brought him up.

“You know, Siddharth still keeps asking Raghav about you. What an idiot.”

“Don’t remind me,” I said with a sigh.

We didn’t talk about the real things. Not yet. She didn’t know about him. In her version of my story, Siddharth was still the most recent heartbreak. The universe hadn’t updated her chapter yet.

Back at work, My desk at work looked like a battleground of neglected drafts, forgotten coffee mugs, and post-its yelling at me to meet deadlines I'd already failed to meet. As I walked through the glass doors of the office, I was greeted by the smell of recycled air, strong perfumes, and fresh stress. Familiar faces turned towards me with half-smiles and surprise as I was looking more like a human.

Each greeting was a polite stab to my emotional coma. I nodded and replied in a Peaceful but equally wrecking way.

I placed my bag down, opened my laptop, and stared at the screen. For a few minutes, I just stared. Then, slowly, the fingers began to move. I started replying to mails like a robot, flagging the urgent ones, and deleting the ones that had no energy left in them—kind of like me.

I sank into my chair and opened my laptop. Drafts. Mails. Headlines that made no sense. I started. Slowly. Sentence by sentence.

And somewhere around 2 PM, I realized—I hadn't thought about him for a whole hour.

Progress.

By 7 PM, with sore shoulders and a satisfied mind, I packed up. I walked out alone, down the quiet evening streets, the air thick with the smell of momos and monsoon.

And then on my way I saw him.

Siddharth.

In all his awkward glory, standing near a book cart, pretending to browse but clearly waiting. I panicked and—don't judge me—ducked behind a paani puri stall. The vendor looked at me, bewildered.

“Madam, you okay?”

“I'm blending in.”

“With what? The chutney?”

He chuckled, probably assuming I was a lunatic, and I almost bolted when Siddharth spotted me.

“Hey?” he called out, confused.

Too late.

I stood up, brushed imaginary dust from my shirt, and turned around with the dignity of someone who definitely wasn't just hiding behind fried snacks.

“Oh. Hey,” I said coolly.

“You were hiding?”

“No. Inspecting spices.”

He laughed. “You're terrible at lying.”

“Still better than your dating skills.”

“Ouch. Fair.”

He walked beside me as I tried to escape. “Just five minutes. I’m heading to Ninth Café anyway.”

I gave in with a sigh. “Fine. But I’m not drinking anything with you.”

We walked awkwardly to Ninth. He started rambling immediately.

“So... Poorva practically threatened to poison Raghav. Did you know that? Said she’d shred his gaming headset.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’d expect nothing less.”

“And Raghav—man, he was pissed. Said I blew it. That I was immature and didn’t deserve you. I didn’t argue.”

“Rare moment of wisdom,” I replied.

He looked at me, sheepish. “Look, I messed up. But it wasn’t all fake. I liked you. A lot. I was just... insecure. My friends egged me on to play cool, and I followed them. That was stupid. You were intimidating.”

“I was sad and wore sweatpants,” I replied.

He shrugged. “Still intimidating.”

At the café door, I stopped. “This is where I exit. No coffee.”

He continued. “I owe you an apology. And maybe dinner. Let me fix things.”

“No.”

“Coffee?”

“Still no.”

“You’re not as forgiving as you used to be.”

“And you’re not as attractive as I remembered,” I shot back, with a smirk.

His face fell. “Ouch.”

“I’m kidding. But really, Siddharth... this isn’t about coffee. I’ve moved on. We weren’t meant to be.”

He looked almost disappointed. “You look different now.”

“I *am* different.”

He paused, nodded slowly. “Fair enough. But I still owe you one coffee. Even if it’s just for closure.”

I smiled. “Send it over as a delivery. I’ll accept that.”

We laughed. It wasn’t angry or bitter. Just two people acknowledging a closed chapter. I walked away without looking back. For the first time, I didn’t have to.

That night, I opened my laptop again. The hum of the fan above was the only sound in my apartment. I curled my legs under me, sipped tea, and began to write again.

## **“Chapter Two: A Friend Who Still Waves”**

It was Poorva I wrote about. How she shouted at people for me. How she dragged me through heartbreak. How

her existence was a thunderclap of protection. How she reminded me of who I was before I broke.

As the words poured out, I felt lighter.

And then, as always, my thoughts wandered.

Would *he* be happy to know I was writing again?

Would he smile, that crooked, unreadable smile of his, if he saw my manuscript?

I missed him—not the man who recognized me from years ago, but the stranger who sat with me by the riverbank in silence. Who didn't ask too many questions. Who let me just *be*.

Had I overreacted?

Did I just want him to see this version of me—the messy, lipstick-wearing, editing-all-night, chai-burning version—and not the girl he had put on a pedestal from some random Rishikesh encounter four years ago?

I didn't know.

All I knew was I missed him. Quietly. Fiercely.

I put on his favorite music. Cooked dal chawal. Ate it sitting on the counter, bare feet dangling. My phone was silent. No messages. No missed calls.

But I wasn't waiting.

Not exactly.

I was moving. Not on. But forward.



## **Chapter 29:**

# **Bougainvillea Blooms and Closure**

## **Whispers**

There's something oddly liberating about closure. It doesn't necessarily stop the hurting, but it lessens the weight. Makes it manageable. Bearable. Like a soft ache instead of a piercing one. That's where I was now. Somewhere in between moving forward and staying put.

The morning light filtered through my window, lazy and warm, brushing against my skin like a memory I wasn't ready to let go of. The first thought in my head was him. Then Rishikesh. Then that night beneath the stars, where silence had more meaning than words ever could.

I hadn't replied to Ira yet. Her voice notes were still sitting in my inbox, her concern echoing through them. But I couldn't. Not yet. She had done nothing wrong—but maybe I wasn't avoiding her as much as I was avoiding the version of myself I was with her. That girl who fell too fast, too hard, too foolishly. That girl who didn't see it coming. That girl who smiled at bougainvillea and believed in magic.

But I was listening. To him. For once. He had told me to stop pretending. And so I was. I wasn't forcing joy. I was trying to be more present. Living for my people.

The ones who stayed. The ones who didn't need explanations to stand by me.

Today was Yukti's haldi and mehndi. I had taken the day off, but not without mailing all my pending drafts. Maybe my boss would appreciate it, though I wasn't doing it for praise. I just wanted to keep the promises I made to myself. Small wins.

Poorva had texted, "I'm coming to yours. We'll get ready together. Bring the vibes." She ended the message with two dancing emojis and a sunshine gif. Classic Poorva.

We had agreed that our parents would head to the venue directly. Our job was sweets and gifts. I glanced at the paper bag sitting by the door, neatly packed and ready. I had chosen the gift wraps myself. Peach and gold, minimal yet elegant.

The venue was a picturesque farmhouse tucked in a greener patch of Greater Noida, almost like it didn't belong to the city at all. As we drove in, the colours hit me first—marigolds strung across the gate, dupattas in pink, yellow, and green flowing from the trees like kites, fairy lights wrapped around mango trees that hadn't even begun to fruit yet. There were vintage bicycles decorated with flowers, wooden carts carrying sweets, and a photo booth that screamed *Pinterest had a child with Indian weddings*.

I wore an orange-and-yellow ombré skirt with a soft corset top that felt like it had been stitched with sunlight. My polki earrings clinked every time I moved, and I had bangles stacked all the way up one arm. Poorva wore a lemon yellow sharara, her hair tied up with jasmine flowers. We looked like warm sherbets on a summer day.

As the function began, laughter floated in the air like dandelions in spring. People danced, kids ran around, elders exchanged sweets, and the bride-to-be sat under a floral canopy, blushing and glowing. Everything felt alive.

Except the little corner of my heart that was still waiting. Still craving.

I tried. I danced. I posed for pictures. I hugged relatives I didn't even know I was related to. But the truth was—I was scanning faces for someone who wouldn't show up. I was in a sea of people and still searching for one face.

A girl who once mocked Bollywood love stories was now aching like she lived in one. I used to roll my eyes at melodrama. And here I was, wondering if he thought about me the same way I thought about him. If his nights felt as incomplete as mine.

Later, when the music softened and the food took over the celebration, I sat for my mehndi. The artist asked with a kind smile, “Kuch likhwaana hai, madam? Naam ya design?”

I didn't think twice. "Bougainvillea," I said softly.

He looked confused.

"The flower," I added. "Shame flower. Just...something that looks like it."

He smiled, and I closed my eyes. The strokes of henna felt like poetry being written on my skin. That flower was everything—the soft pink memory of a kiss, a night full of unsaid promises, the silence that had spoken volumes. The part of me that would always belong to Rishikesh.

Poorva plopped down next to me, her mehndi drying.

"You didn't tell me you met Siddharth yesterday!" she gasped, mock-slapping my shoulder. "How dare you hide the drama!"

I laughed, finally. "It wasn't dramatic. Just...pathetic."

She raised an eyebrow.

"He saw me, asked for coffee. I declined. Went to Ninth Street Cafe instead."

"The one with dim lighting and terrible WiFi?"

"Yup. Still better than awkward coffee with Siddharth."

She snorted.

"He kept justifying his actions—blamed his friends, said Raghav fought with him because of you. Apparently,

you scared the hell out of Raghav, so now Siddharth feels like a victim.”

“Damn right I did. You don’t mess with my girl and expect a wedding invite,” Poorva said, puffing her chest.

I grinned.

“He still thinks he owes me one dinner and an apology coffee,” I added.

“And you said...?”

“No, again. And this time, I didn’t even feel guilty.”

She nudged me. “That’s my girl.”

I leaned into her shoulder. “I started writing again.”

Her eyes sparkled. “You what?”

“My book. The one I parked years ago. I finished Chapter Two last night.”

She squealed and hugged me, careful of the mehndi.

“This deserves a toast! Or at least a guilt-free jalebi binge!”

We giggled like teenagers.

“He gave me closure, Poorva. And I’m glad. So, you can stop scaring Raghav now.”

She laughed. “Too late. He still flinches when I say your name.”

As the evening deepened into twilight and the orange sky kissed the earth goodbye, I found myself standing alone near the bougainvillea trellis. The petals swayed gently in the breeze, as if waving back to my memories. I missed him. That didn't change. But the pain didn't feel sharp anymore. It was soft. Familiar. Like an old friend sitting beside you in silence.

I reached home, exhausted but strangely content. The kind of tired you feel when your soul's been hugged.

I changed into my comfy pajamas, pulled out my laptop, and opened the document again.

### **“Chapter Three: Swipe Right and Spiral Harder.”**

And just before typing the first line, I looked at my phone.

No message. No missed call.

And yet, I smiled.

He would've been so happy to see me writing again. And a little jealous I didn't send him a draft.

Maybe I did overreact. Or maybe I just wanted him to see *me*. The *now* me. The girl who wears lipstick and shows up for her friends. The one who doesn't hide in silence anymore.

But for now, I was here. With my people. In my peace. In my stories.

And maybe, just maybe, that was enough.

## **Chapter 30:**

### **The Promise, the Payal, and the Pathani.**

1:20 AM.

The ceiling fan hummed its monotonous lullaby, but sleep remained elusive. My mind was a whirlwind of thoughts—resentment, confusion, longing. I had run away from him, and in doing so, perhaps from myself. Tomorrow was Yukti's wedding, and I was supposed to be excited, but instead, I was battling an internal storm.

Should I confide in Poorva? I didn't want to burden her with my turmoil. She had enough on her plate. Yet, the weight of my thoughts was unbearable.

He had lied to me. But then, he had searched for me for four years. Four years! That had to mean something, right? Maybe he messed up, but who doesn't? If he had told me earlier, perhaps I would have understood. Or maybe I would have run away sooner. Who knows?

I had gone to Rishikesh seeking peace. I found it, only to lose it again. Classic me.

Despite everything, the subtle lessons he imparted lingered. Being present, not pretending—it was helping. I couldn't revert to my old self, but maybe I could become a better version.

I missed him. His presence, his comfort. I just wanted to rest my head on his shoulder.

In a bid to silence my thoughts, I played an audiobook and drifted off on the couch.

---

The morning sun pierced through the curtains, and I awoke to a barrage of missed calls—five from Maa, ten from Poorva. Panic set in.

I called Maa first. She needed her golden bangles for her outfit. My mother, ever the epitome of grace, even in her early Fifties, radiated beauty. Her laughter, which turned her cheeks a rosy hue, was contagious.

Next, I called Poorva.

"It's not just a weekend, madam. It's your cousin's wedding!" she chided.

"Sorry, I slept late. My whole body aches," I groaned.

"I will bring coffee on my way there. We need to caffeinate before we start getting ready," she suggested.

By 11:30 AM, we were half dead slouching on my sofa, sipping our lattes.

Afterwards, I wore a multicoloured lehenga, predominantly pink, exuding sophistication with white pearl design. Poorva looked stunning in her lavender ensemble.



As we helped each other with our makeup, she asked, "How was Rishikesh?"

"I told you, it was good," I replied.

"Made any friends?"

"I met Ira. She reminds me of you."

She smiled. "I'm glad you're trying to be a good friend, daughter, and employee. But remember, you're precious. We all love you. Even if you stop trying so hard, we won't complain. We just want you to realize your worth."

Tears welled up in our eyes. I hugged her tightly. "I'm trying, and I promise I'll never lose hope."

She lightened the mood with a joke, and we continued getting ready.

As I adorned myself, memories of him flooded my mind. I wanted to share with Poorva, but I hesitated. He was still a happy memory, and I didn't want her to be angry with him.

I retrieved the pouch from my travel bag and held the anklets close to my heart. "I wish you were here," I whispered. "I miss you. I'm trying to be a new person. I hope you like this version better."

I wore the anklets, feeling his presence with me.

With big jhumkas, a bindi, and my hair in waves, I completed my look. Comfortable heels on, we headed

to the beautiful open garden venue in Noida, illuminated by countless diyas.

I handed Maa her bangles. Her eyes sparkled as she said, "You look beautiful and full of life."

I hugged her and proceeded to welcome the baaraat.

After the rituals, Poorva nudged me. "Major task done. How about a glass of wine?"

"Yes!" I exclaimed.

She led me to her car. "I have a bottle. Let's get a bit drunk for fun."

Poorva handed me a small glass of wine, her eyes sparkling with that mischief only best friends can manage during sacred weddings. "Here," she said, clinking her glass against mine, "To love, to madness, and to not giving a damn — just for tonight."

I smiled and took a sip. The wine was cold, smooth, and bold—like the kind of love I had run from. The kind that still made my heart ache like a bruise under a silk sleeve.

She leaned against the hood of her car and looked at me, her expression suddenly soft. "You know, I'm not sorry this time," she said quietly.

"Sorry for what?" I turned to her, confused.

"For letting something happen. For maybe orchestrating a little miracle," she said, eyes gleaming.

And then, before I could make sense of her words, my gaze followed her soft nod towards the far end of the parking lot.

And there he was.

Stepping out from behind the cars like he belonged in this moment. Like he had been written into it by fate's own ink. An off-white pathani kurta clung gently to him, the warm fairy lights filtering through the trees tracing golden edges along his silhouette. His eyes searched through the dimness until they found mine—and stayed there, like they always had, even when I wasn't looking.

Time stopped.

My heart forgot its rhythm. The world fell silent, as if holding its breath just for us.

He walked towards me slowly, cautiously, like he feared the dream might shatter with one wrong step. With every inch he covered, he grew blurrier—not because he was far, but because my eyes were drowning in tears that refused to stay hidden anymore.

I turned to Poorva in disbelief. She smiled through glassy eyes, leaned forward, and gently kissed my cheek.

"I approve," she whispered. "Go live the moment... not the memory."

Her words hit me like thunder in a rainstorm—loud, cleansing, soul-stirring. I looked back at him, and

suddenly I wasn't afraid. Not of pain, not of truth, not even of hope.

He stopped just in front of me.

His eyes—God, those eyes—looked like they had traveled galaxies just to rest here.

Neither of us spoke.

But everything was said.

His eyes told me he missed me.

Mine told him I was still angry... but not enough to let go.

His silence asked for forgiveness.

My silence offered it.

I could feel my skin react to his nearness, a familiar ache blooming in my chest like a forgotten melody finding its chorus.

Then he reached out—slowly, reverently—and tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. His touch was warm, trembling, like he was afraid I'd vanish. But I didn't.

I stood still.

Because I didn't want to run anymore.

Not from him. Not from what this was.

Not from who I had become.

And then, just as the first tear rolled down my cheek, he whispered my name—so softly, it felt like prayer.

I broke.

I fell forward into him, wrapping my arms around him like he was the anchor I had been searching for all this time. His arms closed around me like he had been rehearsing this moment for years. We stayed like that—two people who had been broken and buried and bloomed—clinging to each other in the middle of a parking lot, dressed in wedding finery and emotions we could no longer hide.

His chin rested on my head. “I thought I lost you,” he whispered.

I nodded into his chest. “I thought I lost myself.”

The anklets on my feet jingled faintly with each breath, a quiet music to our reunion. They were his gift. His memory. His invisible presence through every moment of pain and healing. And now they were here—just like him.

This wasn’t just a romantic reunion.

It was resurrection.

Of love, of courage, of the girl I once was and the woman I had become.

**NOT THE END.**

Dear readers,

I know. I know I once rolled my eyes at endings like this.

I used to say love stories were for dreamers — the kind of people who believed in fate, fairy lights, and perfect timing.

But here I am...

Standing beneath a sky scattered with stars and soft music, the scent of marigolds in the air, my anklets gently echoing against the stone floor, my heart trembling... and finally, at peace.

And no — I wasn't searching for *him*.

I didn't go looking for a familiar shoulder to lean on.

But somehow, in the chaos of everything I thought I was escaping...

**I found him.**

And in that moment, I found quiet — not in the world, but within myself.

A soft place to land.

But this isn't *the end*.

Because the real search — the deeper one — is still on.

**The search for *me*.**

Not the broken, tired version who was trying too hard to be fine.

Not the girl constantly running from herself.

But the woman I am still learning to become.  
One who believes — even now — in love.  
In sudden rainfalls and late-night chai.  
In dancing in lehengas and crying in parking lots.  
In people who see you for who you really are... and stay.  
This story doesn't end when you find someone.  
It begins when you begin to find *yourself*.  
So stay with me.  
Because the after-part — the one where I start living, not  
just surviving...  
That part is still coming.  
And I promise you — it's going to be even more  
beautiful.