

DESTINY

WE MEET FOR A REASON

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“Let yourself be silently drawn
by the strange pull of what
you really love. It will not lead
you astray.”

— Rumi

“Lovers don’t finally meet
somewhere.
They’re in each other all along.”

— Rumi

“We are all a little broken. But
last time I checked, broken
crayons still color the same.”

— Trent Shelton

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Chapter 01: Smoke and Silence

The city had begun to fold itself into the silence of night, though Delhi never truly slept. Neon-lit billboards flickered in the distance like fading memories, while the hum of distant traffic echoed faintly across the sprawling expanse of DLF Mall. It wasn't the blaring kind of noise — it was the emptier kind, where even sound seemed to get lost on its way to nowhere.

He stepped out from the mall's main gate, a lone figure draped in fatigue. His sleeveless black T-shirt clung to a wiry frame — lean, not sculpted, like someone who didn't have time to care about how he looked anymore. A silver chain hung from his neck, its cool glint barely catching the dying orange of a flickering streetlight.

There was something unmistakably weary about him. His skin bore the dull glow of someone who once smiled a lot but hadn't in weeks. He had a faint stubble, not intentionally stylish, just overgrown and untouched, adding to the melancholy carved into his features. His eyes were hollow — the kind that didn't scream pain, but whispered it in tired glances. Yet, despite the exhaustion and the bruised soul written across his posture, there was a gentle innocence in his face. A quiet, boyish softness, not unlike Aditya from *Jab We Met*, that made you believe he once loved the world more than it deserved.

He followed two men who chatted briefly before slipping into a cab. He didn't know them. Didn't want to. They were just bodies that reminded him the world kept moving.

He stopped by the edge of the footpath, beneath a lonely streetlight, and lit a cigarette. The lighter's flame flared up, catching the trembling in his fingers before disappearing. Smoke curled around his silhouette as he sat down on the pavement. The cold concrete pressed into his thighs as he crouched, elbows on knees, staring into the dark like it had answers.

Behind him, the shadows played tricks. A few dogs howled in the alley behind the mall. Somewhere farther, a glass bottle shattered. Every few minutes, the wind would knock something metallic nearby — maybe a shutter, maybe a can — making the night hiss like it had teeth. The mall lights grew dimmer. Every passing headlight threw a slice of brightness across his body before fading, like time momentarily remembering him before forgetting again.

He sat alone, and in the loneliness, the silence grew heavy enough to sting.

Then, a voice — confident, unapologetically sharp — broke through the stillness.

“Yahan baithna safe nahi hai.”

He didn't respond. He exhaled a slow, deliberate puff of smoke, watching it rise and vanish above him.

“Sunaa nahi tumne?” she said again, her tone carrying a mix of concern and sass. “Safe nahi hai. Gaadi lekar chale jao. Jaldi.”

He still didn't move.

“Kal hi do logon ki kidnapping hui hai. Tum bhi chale jao... please,” she said, almost annoyed now.

His reply came like an afterthought. “Aap jao jahan jaana hai. Meri chinta mat karo.”

There was a pause — not long enough for her to have left, just long enough to imply she considered it.

“Gazab insaan ho yaar... bhalai ka zamaana hi nahi hai.”

A hollow chuckle escaped his lips. “Haan, nahi hai. Bhalaai karni hai toh sadak ke bhikhariyon se karo. Mujhse nahi.”

Footsteps — light, expensive — receded into the night.

He took out his phone and navigated to the hidden corner of his gallery. Photos stared back at him. Her smile. His arms around her. A short video of her singing off-key at a birthday. For a second, his eyes welled up — not enough to cry, but enough to blur the screen. He blinked them away.

He called a cab.

“Kahan ho bhaiya? Itni der se wait kar raha hoon... kya matlab, nahi aaoge? Toh accept kyun kiya jab aana hi nahi tha?”

More silence.

He stood again. The loneliness of a man standing alone on a street, under a streetlight, in a city like Delhi, hits differently at night. Cars passed by — none slowed. Eyes glanced, then looked away. No one stopped. The air had begun to feel heavier now, like it was pressing against him. Another distant clang echoed. The breeze pushed a torn paper ad across the pavement, rustling like a whisper.

And then, headlights bathed him.

A white SUV slowed down beside him. Sleek. Expensive. The kind that spoke of old money and good taste.

The window rolled down.

It was her — the voice from earlier. This time, he looked at her properly.

She had the unmistakable energy of someone raised in South Delhi's comfort. Her outfit was casual but curated — a beige trench jacket over a black tank top, paired with high-waisted jeans and ankle boots too clean for Delhi's roads. A fine watch sat on her wrist, not the flashy kind, but the kind that cost more than rent. Her hair was open, wild in a styled way, framing a face that glowed even in the SUV's soft cabin light. She looked like someone who never had to try to be seen.

“Tum? Phir se?” he asked, surprised.

“Kyun? Chali jaaun jaise sab ignore karke gaye abhi tumhe?” she said, her tone teasing but sincere.

He hesitated. “Lift dogi?”

ABHISHEK/DESTINY

She smirked. “Pehle sorry bolo.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Kyun?”

“Badtameezi se baat ki thi. Kisi aur ka gussa mujhpe kyun nikala?”

A beat. Then, with irritation and just a hint of embarrassment, “Accha, sorry.”

She nodded, pleased. “Hop in.”

He opened the door and stepped into the SUV. The leather was warm from the heater, the scent inside sharp and clean — a faint trace of her perfume mixed with mint and upholstery.

The door shut with a soft thud, muffling the city’s noise like a curtain drawing across a stage.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. The road ahead stretched long and dark, lined with shadows and neon ghosts, as the SUV quietly slipped into motion — one stranger at the wheel, the other staring out the window, both equally lost.

She drove with the ease of someone used to moving through life with the windows up and the world at bay. He sat with the posture of a man used to waiting for things to end — conversations, cabs, relationships.

They didn’t know each other. Not their names. Not their pasts. Not yet.

But something had shifted — a quiet agreement forged not in words, but in the silence between them.

A girl who always spoke too much.

A boy who had forgotten how to speak.

Two strangers from opposite worlds, now locked in the same car, unknowingly beginning a journey not just to a destination — but to each other.

Neither of them knew it yet, but this drive — this night — would change everything.

Chapter 02: Drive

The SUV cut through the city like a knife in water — smooth, silent, with a kind of quiet confidence that matched its driver. Inside, the tension was thick. Not angry tension — but a gnawing one. The kind that forms when two people don't know whether to talk or let silence explain things better.

She was the first to speak, her voice effortlessly blunt.

“So... kidnap karne aaye ho mujhe?”

He didn't even flinch. His face was still half-lit by the dashboard glow, expression unreadable.

“Nahi. Murder kar dunga agar continuous chapar-chapar karti rahi toh.”

She rolled her eyes, amused. “Bina address ke drop kaise karungi, Sherlock?”

“Noida. Sector 62.”

“Hmph,” she scoffed. “Yeh saand jaise chehre ke bina bolte toh le jaati.”

He didn't smile. “Driving pe dhyan do.”

“Tum khud pe dhyan do. Aisa kya gham aa gaya jo itne stressed aur sad ho?”

Silence.

His throat tightened.

There it was again — that casual curiosity from a stranger, cutting too close. Her voice was light, but the question landed heavy.

He stared out of the window, eyes glazing. Inside, his thoughts started racing — like they always did when someone asked what happened. A dozen memories rose, uninvited. Fights. Her walking away. The unread messages. That one night he screamed into his pillow like it would change something. His breath caught slightly. The ache that usually sat quietly in his chest started pressing harder.

She was still waiting for an answer.

He blinked, quickly masking the shift in his face.

“Tujhse matlab?”

She didn’t back off. “Nahi. But dukh baatne se kam hota hai.”

Dukh baatne se... He almost laughed. Almost.

“Bullshit,” he said instead, voice sharper than before.

“Try karke dekh lo... phir bolna,” she replied, turning toward him briefly, chin lifted like a challenge.

Try? The thought of even saying things out loud made his chest heavier. Talking about it meant accepting it. Accepting it meant it really happened.

“Dukh baatne se sirf tum kamzor lagte ho.”

ABHISHEK/DESTINY

His voice was flat, but something cracked in it. He didn't notice, but she did.

She turned serious for a second. "Kamzor dikhna bhi sabke bas ki baat nahi hoti."

He didn't answer.

His fingers were trembling slightly near the window controls. He slid it down just a bit — like a reflex, like he needed air suddenly. His gaze stayed fixed outside, pretending to count streetlights while his mind spiraled.

"Stop with your philosophical thing," he mumbled. "Mujhe rest karne do. I'm tired."

He leaned his head back, closing his eyes, hiding.

She looked at him for a beat — then said nothing more.

Music filled the silence.

"Tum hi ho..."

His jaw tensed at the lyrics.

"Can you please turn off the music?"

She didn't.

"Ab tum baat nahi karoge toh koi toh chahiye na meri neend jagane wala," she said, humming along. "Pata chala... aankh bandh hui toh tumhari aakhri drive ban jaaye."

He didn't reply.

“Tumhari bhi,” he muttered after a beat.

She grinned. “What if mujhe maarne ka shauk ho?”

“Psychiatrist ko dikhao phir.”

“Jab tha, tab dikha liya tha.”

He scoffed. “Toh gaana aur apna muh dono band rakho.”

Silence again.

She watched the road, but stole a glance at him. He looked peaceful, but it wasn't rest. It was withdrawal. Escape.

“Uff,” she said softly, “itna kya dard de diya life ne jo itna sad ho gaye?”

His breath hitched.

The question slipped in too easily. Too carelessly. Like it didn't carry the weight of what it touched.

Inside, it hit like a gut punch.

He didn't respond. Just shifted in his seat and said, “Jo bhi diya, tumse matlab? Driving pe dhyan do.”

She paused the song.

He didn't open his eyes.

Then, after a long pause, he whispered, "Sorry agar zyada rude ho gaya toh."

Her lips twitched. "Koi baat nahi. Bade bade deshon mein..."

"...aisi chhoti chhoti baatein hoti rehti hai," he finished, lips curling slightly for the first time.

She smiled.

He opened his eyes.

"Meri pehli movie thi DDLJ. Bachpan mein dekhi thi. Itni pasand thi ki mummy bolti thi jab tak Kajol ki entry nahi hoti gaane pe... main ek bite bhi nahi khaata tha."

She burst into laughter. "Eww. Kya tharki bache the tum."

"I was innocent. Don't ruin that memory."

"Okay okay. I never liked DDLJ. Part by part karke dekha tha. College mein there was this guy I loved... usse pasand thi. We went on a date to watch it. Still didn't like it."

"Accha hua usne chhod diya tumhe."

"Oh hello! Maine chhoda usse. Woh toh desperate kutte ki tarah peeche pada tha even after breakup."

"Kitni heartless hoti ho tum ladkiyaan. Ek raat, ek ladai mein 'I love you so much' se 'nevermind?'"

"Bolo bolo, Devdas."

ABHISHEK/DESTINY

He sat up, irritated. “Pehli baat... mera naam Devdas nahi hai.”

“Toh kya hai?”

“Arjun.”

“Anaath ho?” she smirked.

“Nahi. Kyun?”

“Pura naam nahi diya bhagwan ne, na? Isliye laga.”

“God. Your stupid sense of humour.”

“Arjun Malhotra,” he added, dryly.

She smiled. “Neha. Neha Singhania.”

He blinked. “Wait... tum Shailendra Singhania ki beti ho?”

“Yup.”

“Damn. Isliye yeh mehengi gaadi mein stranger ko lift dene se darr nahi lagta.”

“Haan. Par lift maine ek udaas, bechara insaan ko diya. Karma counts, na?”

“God. Itni ameer hoke itni cringe baatein kaise kar sakti ho?”

“Kyun? Paise se zabaan ka kya lena dena?”

ABHISHEK/DESTINY

“No offense, but ameer log... sophisticated hote hain. Aadab-tehzeeb, etc.”

“Kyun? Ameer log gaali nahi dete?”

“Dete hain. Par ‘behenchod, madarchod’ ki jagah ‘fuck you’ aur middle finger dikhate hain.”

“Kya madarchod insaan ho tum,” she said, cracking up.

“Ouch. I didn’t deserve that.”

“Just like how I don’t deserve your rude behaviour... kyunki koi aur chhod gaya tumhe.”

He looked away. The joke hit too close again. She didn’t realise — or maybe she did.

“Kitne taane maarti hai yaar tu...”

"Toh bata de naa... itna kyun udaas hai?"

The question hit him like a wave crashing into a glass window — sudden, sharp, and shattering.

Arjun didn’t answer.

His jaw locked. He stared straight ahead, but his eyes weren’t seeing the road anymore. They were looking inward — and what he saw wasn’t pretty.

His leg began to bounce, slowly at first, then more erratically. That nervous, restless movement he always did when thoughts got loud — like his body was trying to run from the storm inside his skull.

He pressed his knee down with his hand. It bounced back up within seconds.

The breath in his lungs thinned.

His ears started picking up every sound too loudly — the click of the indicator, the faint hum of the AC, the tap of her nails on the steering wheel. It felt like the car was shrinking, the silence expanding around his ears.

He could feel her eyes on him again — curious, maybe even concerned — but it only made his chest tighter.

He swallowed. His throat was dry like sandpaper.

He could hear her voice again, faint, echoing in his mind now.

Toh bata de naa... itna kyun udaas hai?

Toh kyun nahi bata raha tu?

His foot tapped harder. The shaking wouldn't stop.

He could feel the memories flooding in — the last argument, the messages left on read, the night he broke down alone with no one to call. His chest started to hurt. Not like a sharp pain — but that heavy, slow suffocation of grief you've tried to bury too long. He clenched his fists. Nails dug into his palm.

“Gaadi rok,” he said abruptly.

Neha frowned. “Hua kya?”

ABHISHEK/DESTINY

He didn't look at her. "Gaadi rok. Jaldi."

She pulled over to the curb, confused but quiet.

The moment the SUV stopped, Arjun threw the door open and stepped out into the cold air. It hit him like a slap — sharp, sudden, necessary.

He walked across the road to a dimly lit paan shop. No words. No backward glance.

Behind him, the taillights glowed faintly red. Inside the car, everything was calm.

Outside, the city slept. But inside him? Everything was shaking.

Chapter 03: Chai

The buzz of a lone tubelight flickered above the small paan shop, painting the corner of the street in a pale, tired yellow. The rest of the world around it felt half-asleep — shuttered stalls, dogs curled in silence, distant honking dulled by night.

Arjun stood at the counter, head low, shoulders hunched like he was trying to disappear.

“Bhaiya,” his voice was hoarse, “ek chai... aur ek advance dena.”

The chaiwala didn’t ask questions. People like Arjun were common in this city — broken men asking for tea and time.

Arjun lit another cigarette with shaky fingers. The flame trembled as he brought it to his lips. He took a long drag like it was the only thing keeping him grounded.

Behind him, she watched from the SUV, hands still on the steering wheel, her face half-lit by the glow of the dashboard.

She didn’t understand him — not yet — but she couldn’t look away either.

After a few moments, she stepped out. Boots tapping gently on the concrete, she walked toward him, stopping just beside the bench he sat on.

He didn’t look up.

She sat beside him anyway.

He was still shaking — not violently, but enough. His right leg was bouncing again. His hand trembled slightly as he brought the chai to his lips. His other hand held the cigarette loosely, ash piling at the edge, about to fall but never quite falling — like him.

She noticed.

“Cigarette chhod do... please. Abhi ke liye,” she said, softly.

He didn't reply. Just took another drag.

“Thodi der shanti se baithogi?” he muttered.

She raised her hands in surrender. “Okay.”

He dropped the cigarette. Let it fizzle against the ground.

They sat in silence. The kind of silence that wasn't awkward — just heavy. Real.

The tea cooled in his hands as he stared at the steam like it held answers. His leg still bounced. She gently placed her hand on his thigh, trying to still it.

He looked down at her hand, then up at her — not angry, just tired.

He lifted her hand off and placed it back on her lap.

“Chalna chahiye,” he said, finishing the last sip. “Late ho gaya. Tumhe bhi ghar jaana hai.”

“Main toh Manali jaa rahi hoon,” she said casually, sipping her tea.

He blinked. “Ohh... okay.”

He stood, brushing off his jeans.

“Toh mujhe drop kar do. Kal ex se milne jaana hai.”
She sipped her tea slowly, her eyes still fixed on him,
reading him like an open, dog-eared book.

Arjun didn’t speak. He just kept looking at the ground.

When she asked about his ex, his breath faltered for a second — almost unnoticeably, but it was there.

"Toh... usne bulaya hai?" she had asked.

He shook his head. “Nahi. Just hoping... shayad baat kar le.
Maybe cheeze sort ho jaaye.”

His voice cracked at the edges — not enough to seem vulnerable, just enough to betray the lie.

The truth was, he knew she hadn’t called him.
He knew she didn’t want to see him.
He had texted her, just once. A long, careful message. Not begging. Just... explaining. Hoping.
It had been two days. Left on seen.

But inside Arjun’s head, denial was still standing tall. That false hope he fed daily — that maybe she was just angry. Maybe she was just waiting for him to show up. Maybe the silence meant something other than indifference.

He clung to ‘maybe’ like people cling to a raft in a shipwreck — knowing it’s probably useless, but refusing to let go because drowning seemed worse.

“Seen karke chhod diya.”

His mind spiraled — She saw the message. he started to think the positives inside the message of the universe saying it loud that he has come to the end of the chapter called love. His head isn't ready to accept that the one thing he wanted the most in life has been snatched away by the god, his prayers have been thrown away by the god in the dustbin like he doesn't hold any value for the supreme deity but he is not ready to accept the breakup so he finds solace in fake hope. He says to himself- So she still reads my texts. That means she still cares, right? She didn't block me. She didn't delete me. That has to mean something.

He couldn't even say these thoughts out loud. They sounded pathetic when spoken. He believed on his god, his prayers will be answered and she will comeback because he has been the most loyal servant to god when it came to love, he gave himself an affirmation that she will return and god is just testing him for patience which he lacked all throughout the relationship that he valued so much right from when the college life started. But the fear of abandonment kicked in again and it said him that the reality is far from what he is saying to keep himself from not being shattered.

So he stayed quiet.

“Tumhe sach mein lagta hai agar woh tumse pyaar karti toh... itni beizzati karti?” Neha's voice broke into his head again. “Ek message ka reply dene ka time sabke paas hota hai.”

He wanted to scream — You don't know her. You don't know what we had. You don't know what I lost.

But all he managed was: “Woh bas gussa hai.”

It was weak. It was dishonest. It was the only thing he had left to tell himself.

“Woh gussa hai... ya tum haqeeqat nahi maan rahe?” she asked, gently but firmly.

That line broke something inside him.

He looked at her — not with anger, not even defense. Just that glazed-over blankness people wear when they're trying not to break in public.

He felt it again. That sharp sting under the ribs. The weight on his chest. The need to scream but having no words left that would make sense.

His leg started shaking again.

Why didn't she reply?

Why couldn't she just say one line?

Even a “No, don't come.”

Even a “Leave me alone.” Anything...

But nothing?

Don't get into my personal life,” he muttered finally.

“Chalo, drop karo mujhe.”

Neha didn't push further. Her tone shifted.

“Okay,” she said softly. “Gaadi mein toh baitho.”

They stood up from the bench.

The night was quiet again, but not peaceful.

As they walked back to the car, Arjun trailed half a step behind. His hands were stuffed into his jacket pockets. His face was stone.

But inside?

His heart was a ruined apartment with her name still on the doorbell.

They reached the SUV. She clicked the remote key — it lit up with a blink.

Arjun paused before opening the door, eyes scanning the road ahead.

The city stretched on, unaware of his chaos. The stars didn't care. Neither did the buildings or the breeze or the roads.

But she — this random girl from a night that shouldn't have mattered — she saw it.

She saw through his deflections, through his cold lines, through the smoke and sarcasm.

He hated it. And maybe, deep down, he needed it too.

They got in. The doors shut.

ABHISHEK/DESTINY

The SUV rolled away into the dark again — this time, no music. No jokes. Just the hum of a broken man beside a girl who didn't know why she was still trying to make him speak.

And somewhere, silently, the journey between them had already begun.

CHAPTER 04: WRONG TURN

The city had slowly thinned behind them, its sounds fading into a sleepy hum. The traffic lights grew distant, then disappeared altogether, giving way to the blank rhythm of long stretches of tar. The SUV's headlights cut through the dark, casting shadows that stretched and bent like ghosts trying to keep up.

Inside, the car was quiet.

Not the comforting kind.

Not the hostile kind either.

Just... a silence that hung between two people who knew too little about each other to speak, and too much about themselves to sit easy.

Neha's fingers tapped lightly on the steering wheel. She could feel the weight beside her. Not physical — emotional. He hadn't spoken in miles, except for short, sharp replies. And she could feel it — the way pain sat on him like an oversized coat.

She glanced sideways. “Bahut pyaar karte the usse?”

The question landed like a soft knock on a locked door.

He didn't look at her. His gaze stayed fixed on nothing in particular, just out the window into a world that had stopped making sense.

“Karta hoon,” he said.

ABHISHEK/DESTINY

Not a word wasted. Not a syllable more than necessary.

But she caught it — the choice of tense. He hadn't let go.
Not even close.

She shifted slightly in her seat. "Kitne saal se saath the?"

"Do saal," he said, his voice hollow, like he was reading it
off someone else's file.

No emotion. Just an answer rehearsed too many times.

There was a beat of silence. Then she asked, "Koi tasveer?"

He hesitated for just a second.

Then, slowly, he reached into his wallet and pulled out a
photo. Folded slightly at the corners, soft from wear. He
held it out without looking.

She took it.

It was a candid couple photo — sunlight in their faces, her
hair in the wind, his arm around her like she belonged there.
They weren't posing. They weren't trying. They just were.

Neha smiled faintly. "Cute."

He gave the barest hint of a smile. "Cutest."

She looked at the photo again. Then back at him.

There was a softness in her eyes now — not pity. Empathy. The kind of empathy that comes from having once been there yourself. Having once loved someone too much, and been left holding memories like they were confetti after the party ended.

“You know,” she said quietly, “main bhi aisi hi thi kuch saal pehle.”

He looked at her, but only with his eyes. Not with his guard.

“Desperate. Hopeless. Stupid in love,” she said, half-laughing, half-bleeding.

He stared ahead again. “I’m not desperate.”

There was edge in his voice now. Defensive.

“Desperate hota toh... club mein hota,” he continued.

“Anjaan ladkiyon ke saath muh maar raha hota. Idhar... ex ki yaadon mein nahi baitha hota.”

She didn’t flinch.

“Physically nahi,” she said calmly. “Emotionally... you are desperate.”

That made something inside him flare.

He clenched his jaw. His fingers curled on his lap. The air in the car suddenly felt a little too thick.

“Stop giving me reality checks,” he said under his breath. “And drive.”

ABHISHEK/DESTINY

She didn't push. She knew when to speak, and when to let silence be the mirror.

He leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes, like he was done with the conversation.

But he wasn't sleeping yet.

His breathing was too uneven. His body too stiff.

His mind was screaming quietly — I'm not desperate. She doesn't get it. It's different. I know she still cares. I know she's just angry. It's not over. It can't be over.

But soon, exhaustion took over.

His face softened. Hands unclenched. His head lolled gently to one side.

And for the first time in hours, Arjun let go — not emotionally, not mentally — but just enough to slip into sleep.

Neha glanced at him.

He looked younger with his eyes shut. Sadder. More breakable.

And then, without saying a word, without even telling herself, she didn't take the left turn toward Noida.

She kept going straight.

The wheel shifted softly. The tires whispered over the road as they moved past the exit, past the blinking green signboard that read:

← Noida Sector 62 — 5 km

The city disappeared behind them.

Ahead, the dark grew colder. Wider. The kind of vastness that made you question yourself. And sometimes, if you were lucky — find something that healed you. The road started to rise. Slight curves began to sneak into the highway. Trees grew thicker on both sides. The hum of traffic was gone now, replaced by the occasional rustle of leaves and the deep, quiet throb of tires on mountain bends.

He didn't stir. She drove on.

Maybe she didn't know why she was doing it. Maybe she just didn't want to drop him back into the same grief he was trying to escape. Or maybe — somewhere deep down — she saw a version of herself in him. And she knew what she would've wanted if someone had found her in that state.

The SUV moved like a secret through the dark.

Two strangers inside. One asleep, one watching the road with more questions than answers.

They were headed in the wrong direction. But maybe — just maybe — they were going the right way.

Toward a place that wouldn't fix everything.

But might just change something forever.

Chapter 05: Sunrise

The SUV sliced its way through narrow bends and rising curves of the hillside road. The engine purred low as the car wound upward, a solitary figure against the backdrop of an awakening sky.

It was the kind of silence only mountains could offer — not emptiness, but a hush. As if nature herself was holding her breath for something.

Soft streaks of orange and pink began to bleed into the dark. Mist clung low to the ground, and the pine trees lining the slope swayed gently as if whispering secrets only they knew.

Neha tightened her grip on the steering wheel. The road narrowed and curved sharply, but she drove with quiet confidence, her eyes calm and certain.

Beside her, Arjun stirred.

His head shifted slightly against the window, brows twitching, breath heavier than usual. His eyes opened.

Confused.

Blinking.

He sat up fast.

“Where are we?” he asked, his voice dry and disoriented.

Neha didn’t look away from the road. “Good morning.”

He stared out the windshield — then to his left — then back at her.

“What... the hell?” His voice was rising now. “Why are we in the mountains?”

“We’re going to Manali,” she said casually, like she’d said they were going to grab coffee.

His breath caught.

“What the fuck? Gaadi roko!”

Without a word, she pulled over.

The tires crunched onto the gravel shoulder, just at the edge of a steep slope. The valley below was still covered in a bluish veil of shadow, but the sky above had begun to melt into color.

He opened the door and stepped out.

The air hit him instantly — sharp, cold, too fresh for his tired lungs.

He turned to her, rage mixed with disbelief. “I asked you to drop me at the hotel! And you... you kidnapped me to Manali?”

“I didn’t kidnap you,” she said calmly, stepping out of the car.

“You used my sleep — my vulnerability — and brought me here without asking if I even wanted to go!”

She stepped closer. “Shut up. Just shut up... peeche dekho.”

He froze.

“No,” he said, voice hard. “Nahi dekh sakta.”

“Ky— kyun?” she asked, frowning.

“I have vertigo,” he replied through gritted teeth, backing a little from the edge.

She paused for a moment.

Then, slowly, without force, she reached for his hand.

Her palm was warm.

“Dheere dheere turn around,” she whispered. “Watch the sky.”

His hand trembled in hers. “Tum samajh nahi rahi...”

“I do,” she said. “Trust me. You won’t regret it.”

“What if I fall? What if I die?”

Her fingers tightened around his.

“I won’t let you.”

He looked at her — really looked at her. Her eyes held no jokes now. No sarcasm. Just belief. A belief stronger than the fear tightening his chest.

ABHISHEK/DESTINY

And for some reason, he believed her.

With slow, uneven steps, Arjun turned.

He kept his feet firmly planted. Neha stepped with him — hands still locked — as he shifted his body ever so slightly toward the valley.

And then, he saw it.

The sun broke over the ridge — a fiery orb emerging through the mist. Gold spilled across the sky like it had been held back for years and was finally being let loose. Clouds shimmered pink and orange, and the mountains — grand, ancient, still — caught the light and glowed as if they remembered how to breathe.

Arjun's mouth parted slightly.

For the first time in days, he wasn't thinking. Wasn't replaying. Wasn't analyzing.

He was just there.

Watching.

Feeling.

Existing.

Neha stood beside him, her gaze also on the sun, her shoulder brushing his.

“I’m sorry,” she said softly, “tumhe bina bataye le aayi... but I’m just trying to help you gain yourself back.”

His eyes didn't leave the sunrise.

But his voice softened. "Why do you want to help me?"

She smiled, not looking at him. "Because I see my past in you."

He turned toward her slightly. "It's not your responsibility to fix the world. Or people like me."

"It's not," she nodded. "But why should we stop being kind... just because the world was unkind to us?"

He looked at her then — really looked.

"Pata nahi kyun..." he whispered, "aisa lagta hai jaise... hum pehle kahin mile hain."

She laughed gently, the sound floating in the morning air.

"Just enjoy the view na," she said.

And together, they did.

The SUV stood quietly behind them, the road forgotten for now.

Ahead lay something neither of them could name.

But they were already walking toward it — one sunrise at a time.

Chapter 06: A Name She Never Forgot

The sun had long risen. Morning spilled across the mountain roads, soft and golden, painting the trees with warmth neither of them knew they needed.

Arjun was asleep again — head tilted back slightly, his breath steady for once. The sharpness in his face had softened in rest. In that moment, he didn't look like a man who was falling apart. He looked like someone who had simply paused — between heartbreak and healing.

Neha kept driving. The mountains curved gracefully ahead. She didn't need music or conversation. Her thoughts were loud enough.

And somewhere, between the turns, his name whispered through her mind again.

Arjun.

She was tired of driving such a long distance just by herself, it was a major achievement and her smile said how proud she felt of herself and her driving skills. She was cursing the driving instructor who always demotivated her during the training inside her heart but she needed rest. She stopped the car beside a petrol pump. She closed her eyes and her head while Arjun was dozing off like buffalo with his mouth open. his big motor like snore didn't let her close them off. She was laughing at that funny face of his, she took a photo and went straight back to sleep mode after putting her airpods to cancel the buffalo in her car. But in her head, she couldn't stop to think about the guy.

Not just the man beside her now.

But the boy from Class 4B, D.A.V Public School, Noida. The one she'd never forgotten.

PAST

The walls were painted a chipped pale green, the kind that made you feel sicker the longer you stared. On the far side, cracked windows let in too much sun — it burned against her face at noon. A rusted wall fan hung loose, whirring half-heartedly, as if even it had given up.

She hated being there.

Not because of the lessons.

But because she was never part of the noise.

She sat alone at the last bench, beside the window. Her bag neatly placed, her books arranged in order of subjects — Math, English, EVS. She never opened the lunchbox till everyone else was halfway through theirs. Just so she didn't look eager.

Every time she smiled too much, she was mocked.

Every time she asked a question, there were whispers.

She once brought a Barbie doll to class — tucked gently into her bag, peeking out in a moment of excitement — and a group of boys burst out laughing. "Still playing with babies?" one had said. After that, she stopped bringing dolls. But she never stopped missing them.

The day Arjun sat beside her, the light through the window had softened. Not harsh, not golden — just... still.

He didn't ask her anything. He didn't look at her like the others did — like she was weird or slow or too quiet to matter.

He just sat, unbothered. His hair was messy. Shirt half-untucked. Socks mismatched. His lisp made his words roll funny, but he spoke with a kind of calm that made her forget she was afraid of speaking at all.

They spent recess that day at the school's play area, which no one else used after Class 2.

It was broken — the see-saw squeaked, the slide was rusted halfway down. But to them, it felt like a secret world.

Arjun climbed the slide from the wrong side — feet bare, grinning — and called her the “Queen of Storyland.” She read him bits from her book about a girl who traveled through mirrors to a magical realm. He nodded like it was real.

When she was too scared to swing too high, he held the chains lightly and promised, “If you fall, I’ll fall firtht too.” They built a tent from old mats and sat inside it during the last 10 minutes of lunch every day.

She smiled more in those two months than she had in the rest of her school life combined.

But not everyone liked seeing her happy.

One afternoon during lunch, his group of boys came over — loud and sneering.

“Arjun! What are you doing, man?” Rohit laughed, pointing at the sticker on her tiffin. “My Little Pony? Are you serious?”

“Yeah bro,” another boy added. “Why are you wasting time with her? She doesn’t even know what 7 x 8 is!”

“She’s weird,” someone whispered. “She’s like... from another planet.”

Neha felt her stomach twist. Her mouth had gone dry.

But Arjun stood up.

His fingers trembled — she noticed that first. But his voice was louder than it had ever been.

“S-shut up! She’s better than you. She reads books. She helps me with spellings. She listens. She’s nice. You’re not.”

“Don’t talk to her like that!”

The boys went silent for a second — shocked.

Then, as usual, they laughed.

But Arjun didn’t walk away.

He sat right back beside her, opened his lunch, and offered her the extra paratha like nothing happened.

“Don’t listen to them,” he said with a shrug. “They’re just j-j-jelaus.”

She didn’t correct his word.

She just smiled — wide, real, brave.

That moment stayed with her.

Maybe forever.

Then came the Sunday.

She dressed up carefully — her blue polka-dotted frock ironed the night before. She brushed her hair three times.

She even added a clip with a small star on it. A thank-you card folded neatly in her hand.

She walked into her parents’ bedroom, holding the little paper Arjun had given her with his new address scribbled in blue ink.

“Papa,” she said. “Can I go meet my friend Arjun today? He’s leaving for Dehradun.”

The door creaked open slowly.

What she saw next would burn into her memory — not like fire, but like cold metal.

The room was dark, even though it was morning.

Curtains drawn.

The air smelled thick — bitter and sharp, like something rotten.

Her father sat on the floor, back against the wall. Two empty whiskey bottles lay near his feet. A third was open.

His shirt was unbuttoned. His eyes weren’t blinking.

And on his lap... was a gun.

Not pointed.

Just resting there. In his hand. Like an extension of his thoughts.

Her mother stood to the side — not yelling. Not moving.

Just quietly crying into the edge of her saree.

Neha’s voice caught in her throat.

“P-papa?” she whispered.

ABHISHEK/DESTINY

He looked up at her. His eyes were haunted — not angry, but hollow. Like someone was home, but the windows had all been boarded shut.

He didn't speak.

He didn't smile.

He just looked at her.

Neha felt something inside her shift — an understanding her age wasn't ready for, but her heart couldn't ignore.

She didn't know why her legs were shaking.

She didn't know why her chest hurt.

But for the first time in her life—

She felt like the world was no longer safe.

And the note in her hand — the one with Arjun's address — began to crumple under her trembling fingers.

CHAPTER 07: FULL CIRCLE

a quiet petrol pump, somewhere along the winding mountain highway — the kind of place that didn't show up on GPS, but always knew how to welcome a traveler. It sat on the edge of a slope, wrapped in the calm of early morning.

Behind it, the landscape opened like a secret — green hills rolling into misty valleys, their edges kissed by the soft gold of the rising sun. A few tall deodars stood like silent guards, their branches swaying gently as the wind moved through them.

A small tea stall leaned against the back wall of the pump — an old wooden counter painted half-red, half-forgotten, with a rusted board that read “CHAI-CIGARETTE-CHIPS” in faded white.

The scent of masala chai drifted through the air, mingling with the faint smell of petrol and damp earth. A kettle hissed on the stove. A boy in a monkey cap stirred it, barefoot on the stone floor.

At the pump, two men in oil-stained uniforms filled up a truck with practiced hands, their sleeves rolled up, their laughter light and local.

Every now and then, a bike or a car passed by, its engine roaring briefly before fading back into the silence of the highway. One of them had music playing — something retro and full of echo. A voice lost in time.

And amidst all this movement, life, and noise—
Inside the SUV, everything was still.

Neha stirred awake in the driver's seat.

The light filtered through the front windshield, dappling her cheeks with morning gold. She lifted her head slowly, her neck stiff from the awkward angle she'd slept in. A thin line of condensation ran down the inside of the window beside her.

She blinked.

The smell of chai hit her first — then the hum of the world outside came back in pieces.

The hiss of gas.

The chatter of drivers.

The whistle of wind past passing bikes.

And the fading echo of her own memory.

Her chest still felt tight.

That dream—

No, not a dream.

A memory.

One that had unfolded like a page she'd forgotten she ever wrote — full of blue polka dots and red-eyed fathers and silence that bruised more than hands.

She closed her eyes again.

Tried to breathe.

And then she turned—

And saw him.

Arjun.

Slouched peacefully in the passenger seat, mouth parted slightly, one hand resting over his stomach. His stubble caught the morning light, giving his tired face an unexpected softness.

He looked younger when he slept.

Gentler.

Unaware.

Of the version of her he had once known.

Of the version of him she had never forgotten.

She watched him for a long moment.

ABHISHEK/DESTINY

The world outside was wide and alive — chai boiling, petrol pumping, conversations moving like cars on a highway.

But in this car?

Time had curled into something still.

Something unfinished.

She looked back out at the hills behind the pump.

And for the first time in years, she wondered—

Is it time to tell him?

Neha watched him from the corner of her eye as he sat back inside the SUV, cupping the chai glass with both hands, sipping slowly — like it was more than just a habit.

Like it was something sacred.

He hadn't spoken since he woke up.

No groggy complaint.

No snarky remark.

Just reached out for the chai she'd handed him and started drinking — like his body had known exactly what to do, even if his mind was still catching up.

She watched the steam curl around his face, the rim of the glass pressing into his lips. His eyes remained low, unfocused, lost somewhere in a space between thought and numbness.

What struck her wasn't the silence.

It was that he didn't ask for a cigarette.

Not once.

And she knew — from the way he smoked last night like his lungs were trying to forget something — that he hadn't gone a single morning in three months without one.

But now...

He just sipped the chai.

Quiet. Composed.

And oddly at peace.

Like the warmth of it replaced something he hadn't known was missing.

Neha turned her eyes back to the road.

Her fingers tapped lightly on the steering wheel, knuckles tense. A war was going on inside her — fast and loud.

Should I tell him?

Should I say it now?

That I know him... that I've known him since we were kids. That he saved me once, long before either of us knew what life was going to take from us.

But even the thought of saying it made her chest constrict.

What if he thinks I'm some desperate girl romanticizing coincidence?

What if he thinks I tracked him down on purpose?

What if I ruin everything just by speaking it out loud?

So she said nothing.

She gripped the gear lever, pulled the car back onto the road, and let the wheels carry her away from the truth.

The engine hummed.

The curves began again — winding and narrow, the kind that forced your full attention or punished your distraction with a cliffside view of death.

And maybe that's why she said what she said next.

To break her own silence.

To put space between her thoughts and his calm face.

“Toh... tumhare jaise log ko ‘mard’ kehna bhi gunaah hona chahiye,” she teased, smirking. “Yeh nahi ki ek ladki tabse gaadi chala rahi usse ek baar puch toh lu ki thaq gayi hai main chala lu kya.”

He didn't reply.

Didn't even look at her.

His face didn't shift much.

But the color drained from it.

She stopped mocking and started focusing on the road ahead.

A sudden paleness crept in, soft but jarring — like something she couldn't see had touched him.

ABHISHEK/DESTINY

The tea glass in his hand lowered slightly. His lips pressed together. he threw the chai outside the window as the car ran through the green plushy valleys.

No comeback.

No sarcasm.

Just silence.

It had been a long time since he gave her any response or a word to talk about.

And in that moment, Neha knew—

She had hit something.

Not funny.

Not innocent.

Something deep.

Something raw.

Her smile faded.

She didn't apologize — she didn't know what to apologize for.

But she kept her eyes on the road after that.

And for the next few miles, neither of them spoke.

The mountains turned.

The wind howled through the curves.

And between them sat a silence that was no longer empty — it was full of all the things they hadn't said.

Yet.

Chapter 08: The Hit

The narrow roads of Manali opened up like a secret finally shared. With every curve, the hills seemed to smile wider, the air got lighter, and even Arjun — once wrapped in silence — looked out the window like he was remembering how to feel again.

Neha had her window cracked open. A gentle breeze carried the scent of snow, pine, and burnt diesel — a strange mix that still felt like freedom. Far below, the Beas river curled around the base of the mountains, its silver thread glinting under the morning sun.

Laughter broke between them occasionally now, wrapped around inside jokes and half-teasing smirks. The world seemed happier. Softer. Like they were finally allowed a moment of joy.

And then it shattered.

A man jumped in front of the car.

Neha screamed and slammed the brakes, tires screeching against wet asphalt.

The body rolled onto the hood and dropped to the ground with a dull, terrifying thud.

For two seconds, the world stopped breathing.

Then came the crowd.

People emerged out of nowhere — from behind fruit stalls, from bikes, from the footpaths — drawn in by the noise, the blood, the smell of panic.

“Tumko dikhta nahi hai kya? Itna bada insaan!” someone yelled, already banging on the windshield.

Arjun stumbled out first, arms up, trying to speak.

“Dekhiye, aisi baat nahi hai. Suniye meri baat—”

“Arre ye Dilli wale apne baap ki sadak samajh ke chalte hai!” another man shouted.

A third voice joined in — older, angrier. “Saaf hawa milti nahi toh idhar aa jaate hai drive pe... jaise inka farmhouse ho!”

A man in the crowd pointed to the victim, now sitting up and clutching his leg, blood from a scraped knee smearing down into his sock.

“Pichhle hafte bhi teen logo ki maut ho gayi thi! Daaru peeke chala raha tha Dilli ka hi launda! Thok diya mere dost ko!”

Another voice: “Inhe sabak sikhana padega. Tod do inki gaadi!”

“Suniye!” Neha called out, stepping out of the car, visibly shaken. “Meri gaadi nahi, papa ki gaadi hai. Pehle is aadmi ko hospital le chaliye. Uske baad jo karna hoga kariyega.”

Arjun grabbed her arm. “Neha, ek minute—”

“Chup raho!” she snapped. “Jitna lagega bill, main pay karungi. Par gaadi ko koi haath nahi lagayega, aur na hi ye baat aage failayegi!” She turned to the injured man.

“Bhaisaab, uthiye. Chaliye hospital.”

“Meri baat toh suno, Neha!” Arjun insisted, voice rising. She turned, furious.

But he faced the crowd now, standing firm.

“Aap sab shant rahiye. Aur Neha—ye tumhari galti nahi hai. Sab chup ho ke meri baat suno... please.”

A moment of hesitation.

Then: “Bolo.” A stranger from the front of the crowd crossed his arms.

Arjun took a breath.

“Ye insaan jaan bujh ke gaadi ke saamne aaya hai. Isme Neha ki koi galti nahi hai.”

The bleeding man groaned dramatically. “Kuch bhi! Mujhe kya marne ka shauk hai?”

Neha tugged Arjun’s sleeve. “Please. Don’t make a scene. Jaane do.”

But the crowd pressed harder.

“Ladki ke haath mein steering thama diya! Modern zamaana hai, par pyaar mein itna andhe ho gaye ki galti bhi nahi dikh rahi tumhe?”

“Aaj kal mard mein kaleja hi nahi... chale jaate hai aurat ke peeche kutto ki tarah!”

Arjun snapped. “Isme ladka-ladki, pyaar, kuch nahi hai! Main khud isse 24 ghante se jaanta hunga, sirf! Aur ladka ho ya ladki — koi bhi gaadi chalayega, kya farq padta hai?”

Someone scoffed. “Padta hai! Ladki ko chalana nahi aata.

Brake ki jagah pair ragad ke scooty rokti hai!”

Arjun shook his head. “Mujhe wo sab nahi pata. Mujhe bas itna pata hai — maine Neha se safe aur better driver aaj tak nahi dekha. Mere paas proof hai.”

He pulled out his phone, hands shaking slightly, and opened a video he had casually recorded earlier in the market — just before the incident.

It showed the man — now known to them as Amit — smoking near the edge of the road, eyeing their vehicle, zipping up his jacket, and stepping into traffic at the exact moment the car turned.

The crowd leaned in.

Silence.

“Kyu re Amit? Zyada paise ki kami ho gayi thi?” someone asked.

“Haan re! Tera hotel toh achha chal raha tha. Phir yeh drama kyun?”

Amit’s voice cracked. “Majboori thi.”

“Kya majboori?”

He looked down. “Aap nahi samjhoge. Chhodo. Jaane do.”

“Aise logon ki wajah se naam kharab hota hai!”

Neha finally exploded.

“Pagal hai kya aap log? Har cheez mein sabak sikhana padega? Maarna padega? Itna frustrated ho life se toh khud ko maaro! Dusron pe haath kyun utha rahe ho?”

Arjun stepped forward.

“Exactly. Tum... Amit naam hai na?”

Amit nodded, sheepishly. “Haan sir.”

“Chalo. Baitho. Peeche. Waise bhi ek hotel chahiye tha hume. Lekar chalo. Joh bhi medical bill aayega, bta dena. Madam de dengi.”

The crowd, slowly, began to dissolve.

And just like that, the three of them got back in the car.

The chaos faded into the rearview mirror.

The road felt quieter now — too quiet, after all the shouting. Arjun leaned back in his seat. Neha gripped the wheel again, staring ahead, jaw locked.

Amit sat in the back, rubbing his knee, awkwardly quiet.

The engine hummed.

Finally, Neha spoke.

“Did you really mean that? What you said — about me being the best driver you’ve met?”

Arjun didn’t miss a beat.

“Nope.”

She glanced at him — her smile faded.

Just like that, the soft glow on her face dimmed.

“...Oh,” she mumbled. “Okay.”

He turned to look at her.

“Udaas kyu ho gayi?”

“Nahi. Kuch nahi.”

A beat.

“Am I that bad at jokes?”

Before Neha could respond, Amit chimed in from the back.

“Nahi sir, aapko bas timing nahi aati. Abhi woh emotional ho ke pooch rahi thi, abhi sach bolna tha, mazaak nahi.”

Arjun turned halfway in his seat. “Mr. Amit, dhanyawaad gyaan ke liye. Ab muh bandh rakho aur shanti se baitho.”

Neha chuckled.

“Na, aisa kuch nahi tha. Iski baat mat suno.”

Arjun softened. “Well... I really meant it when I said maine tumse achhi driver aaj tak nahi dekhi. You drive better than anyone I’ve ever met — especially better than me.”

Neha blinked.

Then smiled.

And this time, it reached her eyes.

“Thanks.”

She paused.

“Pata hai... my dad never believed in me.”

Arjun looked at her.

“Well, I do.”

A quiet beat.

“Thanks,” she said again — and this time, her voice was smaller.

“You’re welcome.”

Arjun turned toward the backseat. “Waise, Amit bhaiya — tumhara hotel kahan hai?”

“Bas bhaiya, aage left lo... uske baad seedha.”

Neha glanced at the rearview mirror. “Naam kya hai hotel ka?”

Amit smirked.

“Ghar.”

The car turned left and climbed a slope. As they reached the crest, the view opened.

A snow-covered lodge, nestled between towering pine trees, stood like something out of a postcard. Wooden panels. Lanterns glowing faintly. A signboard faded by years but still warm in its welcome:

GHAR.

Above it all, the sun dipped just enough to cast long shadows on the snow, turning everything gold and white.

The engine turned off. The silence returned.

But this time... it was peaceful.

Not empty.

Just... beginning.

CHAPTER 09 :YOU DON'T REMEMBER ME

The wooden gate of the hotel creaked as the car pulled into the snow-powdered driveway.

GHAR — the name carved gently on a hanging wooden sign — swung slightly in the breeze, as if nodding to their arrival.

Pine trees lined the small property, their needles catching morning frost. Smoke lazily curled out of the chimney above the lodge's sloped roof, and a gentle yellow glow peeked from the curtained windows. It wasn't a hotel. It wasn't a resort.

It felt like a pause in the middle of a too-long journey.

"Chalo," Amit said, stepping out and cracking his back.

"Welcome to Ghar."

Inside, the warm scent of cinnamon, wood polish, and old wool greeted them. A fireplace crackled in the corner of the cozy lobby. The floor creaked gently under their boots as they walked to the desk.

"Kitne rooms, bhaiya?" Amit asked, grinning.

"Two," Arjun replied instantly.

Neha turned to him with a crooked smile. "Arre kyun? Ek mein kya ho jaayega?"

He raised a brow. "Privacy?"

She stepped closer, eyes twinkling. "Or scared you'll lose control? Kya pata... aadhi raat ko tum mujhe dekhte hi pighal jao."

Arjun smirked, not backing down. "More like I'll lose my hearing with all your snoring."

"Excuses," she sing-songed.

He turned to Amit. "One room."

Amit blinked. "Are you sure?"

Neha raised an eyebrow.

Arjun tightened his jaw. “Positive.”

The wooden door creaked open with a long, theatrical groan — and the first thing Arjun noticed wasn’t the view, or the bed, or the heater.

It was the cleanliness.

Spotless floors polished to a warm amber glow. Crisp white bedsheets folded in perfect hospital corners. The room smelled like cinnamon, cedarwood, and freshly laundered linen.

His fingers twitched slightly in his jacket pockets, eyes darting from one clean surface to another.

“Holy... this place is immaculate,” he muttered, walking in like he was inspecting a crime scene for dust. “Look at the carpet alignment. The symmetry. God bless whoever runs this place.”

Neha blinked. “You’re... praising the rug?”

“Not praising. Revering.”

The room was compact but impossibly warm — not just in temperature, but in feeling. A queen-size bed with ivory-white sheets sat beneath a sloped wooden ceiling. On the far wall, a stone fireplace flickered faintly, and above it, a painting of snow-capped mountains framed the room like a window into another world. Quilted armchairs faced each other beside the glass window, which looked out at a ridge full of snow-drenched trees.

Every detail whispered comfort — the kind you don’t find in five-star hotels, but in places built with love.

Neha dropped her bag on the bed with a dramatic flop. “I’m claiming this side. By order of first flopper rights.”

Arjun grimaced. “Did you have to wrinkle the bedsheet like that?”

She grinned, kicked off her shoes, and walked around the room.

“Wow,” she whispered, her breath fogging the cold window. “This feels like a movie scene.”

He was already fluffing the pillows, realigning them against the headboard. “It could be... if someone didn’t treat the place like a tornado zone.”

She spun on one foot and pointed at the speaker on the nightstand. “Only one way to break in a room like this.”

“Please don’t,” he said.

She already had the AUX cable plugged in.

A grainy voice echoed through the wooden walls —

“Gulabi aankhein jo teri dekhi...”

Retro. Loud. Beautifully wrong for the moment.

Neha extended her hand dramatically toward Arjun.

“Dance with me.”

He squinted. “Absolutely not.”

“Then I’ll dance alone. But if I fall and break a limb, you’re paying the hospital bill.”

She started anyway — twirling badly, bumping into the armchair, knocking her bag off the bed.

Arjun winced. “Please stop. The throw pillow! It’s upside down!”

She didn’t.

She kicked the carpet with her foot mid-spin, tripped slightly, and sent the corner flapping up toward the door.

Arjun gasped.

“Neha! The carpet! Do you know how long it must’ve taken to align that edge parallel to the skirting board?!”

She laughed harder and kept dancing.

He watched in agony. Then groaned. Then laughed.

Finally, he gave in.

He stood, walked over, and joined her.

Not gracefully. Not confidently.

Just... genuinely.

They were a disaster.

Out of sync.

Wrong steps.

Wrong beats.

He twirled her and hit the lamp.

She stepped on his foot during a mock dip.

They giggled. Fell over each other. Knocked into the bed.

And when “O Haseena Zulfonwaali” came on, she jumped on the mattress and did an exaggerated hair flip while he fake-dramatically held his chest like she’d cast a spell.

For a moment, they weren’t broken people with secrets and fears.

They were just kids again.

Laughing in the snow.

Dancing offbeat in a warm room.

Alive.

They collapsed on the bed, breathless from the terrible dancing, cheeks flushed with laughter. The room smelled like cinnamon and warmth and bad rhythm. The music had ended, but the energy still lingered between them, vibrating like the echo of something neither of them expected to feel. Neha rolled over onto her side, resting her head on her arm, looking at him.

Arjun lay on his back, eyes fixed on the wooden ceiling, a smile still teasing the corners of his mouth.

Then she said it—softly, like testing the weight of her own courage.

“Do you really not remember me?”

His smile faded slightly. He turned his head toward her.

“...What?”

“From school. DAV Public School, Noida.”

He blinked, frowning.

She waited.

“Wait, like... primary school?” he asked, voice pitched high with confusion. “Class four?”

“Class 4B,” she confirmed, smiling gently.

He sat up, brushing his hair back, now visibly puzzled.

“Hold on... what? You went to DAV? You’re that Neha?”

“The weird one,” she said, nodding. “Big glasses, braces, too many erasers, My Little Pony tiffin. That Neha.”

His mouth opened. Then closed. Then opened again.

“...I had a lisp back then.”

“You used to say ‘fthamosa’ instead of samosa,” she grinned.

He let out a disbelieving laugh, rubbing his forehead. “Oh my god. I think I just unlocked a part of my brain I buried.”

“You didn’t recognize me?” she asked, though she already knew the answer.

“No! I mean... no, not at all,” he admitted. “I’m sorry — your face looks nothing like that Neha. You’re... I mean...”

“Not a weird little bookworm anymore?” she teased.

He nodded sheepishly. “Basically, yeah.”

Neha leaned back on the pillow, arms folded behind her head.

“I remembered you,” she said softly. “Not just recently. Always.”

Arjun looked at her, genuinely curious now, but still awkward, unsure where this was going.

She glanced at him, then away.

“You were the only person who didn’t make me feel like shit back then,” she said. “You stood up for me when no one else did. You shared your lunch, gave me your seat, and shouted at kids twice your size with a lisp. That... stuck with me.”

He was quiet, his throat visibly tightening.

She went on.

“After my breakup in college — my first real one — I spiraled. Felt worthless. And in therapy, I was told to make a list. A dumb little exercise — ‘List all the good guys you’ve ever met.’”

She laughed, almost embarrassed.

“There were only four names. Yours was one of them.”

Arjun’s brows lifted. His voice softened. “...What?”

“I didn’t know where to find you,” she continued. “But one night, I remembered your full name from school and searched on LinkedIn. You popped up. Bangalore, engineering degree, internship at some startup.”

His eyes widened. “You really went digging.”

“Then I found your Instagram. There was a selfie with that godawful ‘Intern Diaries’ filter. You looked tired. And oddly proud.”

He let out an awkward chuckle. “That was such a cringy phase.”

“I never texted,” she said quickly. “Didn’t want to seem... desperate. Or creepy. I thought maybe I’d run into you one day. And then, that night outside DLF Mall... there you were.”

She paused.

“You looked cold. Shut down. Nothing like the boy who once sat next to me in class. And when you didn’t recognize me, I thought... maybe I’m just a footnote in your story. I didn’t want to force a memory on you.”

Silence hung heavy for a moment. The fireplace crackled in the background.

Arjun sat up straighter, processing. His face was unreadable — somewhere between surprise, confusion, and something more fragile.

“That’s...” he finally said, searching for words, “a lot.”

“Yeah.”

“You found me... and never reached out.”

“I wanted to. So many times,” she admitted. “But I was scared you’d forgotten. And if you had — I didn’t want to be just another girl clinging to a childhood fantasy.”

He looked at her, still unsure what to say, but a softness had entered his eyes.

“You weren’t a fantasy,” he said. “You were the best part of that year. I just... I honestly forgot who I was back then too.”

Her lips parted in quiet surprise.

He smiled awkwardly.

“Also... now I feel terrible for not recognizing you.”

“You should,” she smirked.

He nodded. “Deserved.”

She moved to the edge of the bed, folding her legs underneath her.

Arjun was still sitting upright, his jacket half-zipped as if he was mid-thought, trying to process everything she'd said.

Neha extended her hand toward him.

Her expression was part-smirk, part-hopeful.

“Friends?” she asked.

He looked at her hand, then up at her eyes.

A small pause.

Then, without hesitation, he reached out and took it — firm but warm.

“Friends,” he said, nodding.

Their hands lingered for a second too long — not romantically, but with a mutual understanding that something big had just shifted between them.

Then she pulled away, stood up, and grabbed her coat.

“Now let’s go waste money on mall junk we don’t need.”

“Can I judge your fashion choices while we do it?” he asked, grinning.

“You will — but only after I judge yours first.”

They walked out of the room together, like two old souls who had just remembered who they were to each other — and were ready to start again.

The last golden traces of the sun kissed the ridge lines as it dipped behind the towering pine-clad hills of Manali. A soft lavender dusk settled over Mall Road, wrapping the busy street in a dreamy haze of fairy lights, glowing storefronts, and the chatter of travelers wrapped in thick shawls and chunky monkey caps.

The air smelled of roasted corn, burnt pine, wool, and the sweet promise of winter.

Neha and Arjun walked slowly, side by side, their boots crunching lightly against the uneven cobblestones. They weren't in a rush. They didn't need to be.

Between them hung a strange and comforting silence — the kind that didn't beg to be filled.

They passed by a stall selling steaming momos where tourists jostled playfully for space, and a few pashmina stores spilling bright colors across the walkway. Light snowfall had begun again — the kind that melted as soon as it touched your cheeks.

Arjun shoved his hands into his pockets and looked sideways at Neha.

“Main yeh toh nahi kahunga ki mujhe yeh sab tourist-type shopping pasand nahi hai...” he said, trailing off.

Neha raised an eyebrow. “Toh sach kya hai?”

He looked around, then casually gestured toward a stall.

“Main pehle hi us lakdi ke walking stick pe nazar maar chuka hoon.”

She burst out laughing. “Tu toh full-on Manali uncle banne ki tayyari mein hai!”

“Next step socks with sandals,” he grinned.

“Us din main officially dosti tod dungii,” she said, poking his arm.

They stopped at a woolen stall, where intricate shawls and mufflers fluttered lightly in the breeze. Neha ran her fingers over a mustard shawl — soft, thick, and ridiculously overpriced.

“That would look good on you,” Arjun said casually, not even looking directly at her.

She turned. “Tujhe fashion ka kab se idea aaya?”

He shrugged. “Tum curtain bhi pehno toh bhi 90% logon se better dikhogi.”

She blinked, surprised.

“That... was actually a compliment.”

He smirked, watching her try to pretend she wasn't pleased. They moved from stall to stall — poking fun at overpriced local honey, trying on weird Himachali hats, and stopping briefly to eat roasted bhutta with lemon and masala. The heat from the corn stung their fingers but felt delicious in the cold.

Then Neha noticed the tiny photo booth tucked beside a tea stall, hidden beneath a canvas shade.

“Wanna take a photo?” she asked.

Arjun looked at the ancient contraption. “Ye abhi bhi chalte hai?”

“Only one way to find out,” she grinned, pulling him in.

Inside, the cramped booth smelled faintly of mothballs and memories. They took three pictures.

In the first frame, Arjun stared straight ahead — fake serious.

In the second, Neha tried to tickle him and his face contorted mid-laugh.

In the third, they both laughed uncontrollably — their heads tilted toward each other, their eyes squinting.

Neha pocketed the strip silently.

No big gesture.

Just... quietly keeping it.

Later, they sat on a long wooden bench facing the snow-dusted valley. Below them, thousands of warm yellow lights shimmered like a blanket of fireflies — houses stacked on hillsides, cafes flickering awake, smoke curling softly into the night.

They held paper cups of hot chocolate, the warmth seeping into their palms.

Arjun stared straight ahead.

“Ajeeb hota hai na... kabhi-kabhi jab tumhe pata bhi nahi hota ki kuch missing tha, jab tak woh cheez wapas nahi aati,” he said, voice low, thoughtful.

Neha looked over. “Tumhara matlab hot chocolate se hai na?”

He chuckled, but his eyes didn’t move from the view.

“Nahi. I mean... yeh sab. Tumhare saath hona. Jo feel ho raha hai. I didn’t even realize how much I needed it.”

She stayed quiet.

The soft clink of their paper cups broke the stillness, followed only by the distant laughter of a child chasing his shadow and the low hum of local folk music spilling from a nearby café.

Neha rested her head gently on his shoulder — no warning, no hesitation — like it had always belonged there.

And Arjun froze.

It wasn’t flirtation.

It wasn’t comfort.

It was trust.

Not because it made him uncomfortable.

But because it didn’t.

Her head was light. Her presence softer than anything he’d known in months. She smelled faintly of shampoo and street corn and something he couldn’t place but wanted to keep close.

And for the first time in forever, he didn’t feel the need to perform.

He didn't feel the need to pretend he was okay. No one else in his life — not his college friends, not his society teammates, not even the old group chats buzzing with “Where are you, bro?” — had seen this version of him. Because after the breakup, and then the accident, he had stopped answering.

Ghosted everyone.

Every “let's catch up” went unopened. Every phone call ignored. Because no one understood why he was the way he was. No one knew how to sit with his silence without trying to fix it.

But Neha didn't ask him to speak.

She just... stayed.

And that was more than any therapy session or motivational TED Talk had offered.

She didn't fill the silence.

She held it.

And in that moment, sitting above the twinkling hills of Manali with a cup of half-finished hot chocolate, Arjun finally breathed — the kind of breath that doesn't just come from your lungs, but from your chest, your heart, your bones.

He let his head tilt lightly toward hers.

Just a little.

Just enough.

A few minutes passed before Neha stirred and broke the silence — not with some deep thought, but with her trademark mischief.

“Chal na... ek crazy idea hai,” she said, still leaning into him.

Arjun exhaled softly. “Main dar raha hoon already.”

“Local drink try karte hai. Aaj raat.”

He turned slightly, confused. “Local as in...?”

“Apple cider, tharra, rhododendron wine... kuch bhi jo yahan milta hai. Not the fancy bottled stuff. Locally brewed. Risqué. Full Himachali experience.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Tu hamesha aise hi adventurous thi kya?”

“Bas tumhare saath hoon toh aur bhi ho jaati hoon,” she grinned.

He narrowed his eyes. “Tumhe lagta hai main drink kar ke kuch... weird karunga?”

She laughed. “Mujhe lagta hai tujhe thoda weird hona zaroori hai.”

He hesitated.

She poked him in the ribs with her elbow. “Arre chhodo na yeh serious-boy energy. One drink. Crazy trip. Who knows, maybe you’ll even laugh with your eyes for once.”

He smirked despite himself.

Then nodded.

“Thik hai. One drink. But if I end up dancing on rooftops or proposing to a tree, tujhe uthana padega.”

She stood up and held out her hand.

“I’ll record it instead.”

They walked down the cobbled slope, streetlights flickering above, snow still falling like secrets that only the night could keep.

And somewhere deep inside him, Arjun felt it again — a flicker.

The first real spark of warmth in months.

Not from the drink they hadn’t had yet.

Not from the hot chocolate still clinging to his fingertips.

But from her —

The girl who had once been a memory.

And now felt dangerously like home.

CHAPTER 10: Cycles and Closeness

The local drink was a clear, suspiciously sweet-smelling liquid served in a reused Sprite bottle with the label half-peeled. The guy who sold it winked when he handed it over, as if passing on a secret. "Ek sip mein full trip," he said. They had laughed at first. Two hours later, they were still laughing. Inside the room, they were tripping over and singing songs like the Spotify wasn't even a competition. They were enough for each other in this social world where people needed friends and mobile to be happy during a trip. They were going so crazy that they ran out of room teasing each other and playing hide and seek as a reason to roam outside. They put a bet that the guy who catches faster will not have to pay any single amount next day and will get a free gift. Arjun started counting to 30 laying his head over the pillow and feeling like he is going to doze off while she went outside to hide in the streets of the mountains. Amit witnessing all this craziness through the open doors of room and watching her run outside panicked for her safety. He asked Arjun to go and get her back. Arjun being drunk pulled Amit with him and all three of them ran through the city trying to get Neha under control. As she ran through the streets, she came across a dim store which had several cartons outside which contained beer. She stole one of them and ran away. Amit and Arjun like an adult ran behind her asking her to be reasonable and come to senses after being so immature. She stopped for some moments taking out a beer from carton after placing it at the ground. Arjun laughed and mocked fun at how she was drinking and all the beer was spilling on her white kurta she brought in her suitcase. She laughed at the way he was laughing and they both sat down in the middle of the road just laughing at each other and adoring each other's cheeks which turned red like roses from laughing. Amit watching them laugh felt happy and weirdly was simping them together. Suddenly, a man came shouting across the streets

shouting, "who dekho who rahe chor saale".

Arjun said, "mujhe lagta hai who hume maarne aa rahe hai"
Amit, in fear and regret of choosing to come and help them
said, "nahi puja karenge humari, bhaagna padega utho
dono"

Neha stood up and started throwing the beer bottles at the
men approaching them.

Amit, looking at this bravery act pulled her and made her
run in the direction he was heading towards. They escaped
but Amit knew it isn't safe to go back to hotel as the men
would still be there so he thought of taking them to his
Home.

Amit's House – Late Night

He finally dragged the two giggling wrecks into a modest
two-room house tucked between two sloping pine hills —
just fifteen minutes from the hotel.

The house was dimly lit, humble, but had warmth — like it
had been lived in with love, even when money had run thin.
His wife stood near the kitchen, wearing a simple shawl.
Her face broke into a brief smile when she saw Amit, but
faltered instantly when her eyes met Neha and Arjun,
clearly drunk.

"Yeh guest hain?" she asked flatly in a low whisper, eyes
still scanning the ridiculous state of the two.

"Haan," Amit mumbled, looking embarrassed. "Thoda
mood mein hain..."

"Hotel wapas le jao inko. Bachon ke saamne yeh sab theek
nahi lagta," she said under her breath, stern and sharp.

Amit nodded.

Before he could nudge the two out again, Arjun — still
swaying — noticed a tiny figure sitting on the floor with a
blanket wrapped around thin legs, playing with a
dismantled plastic car.

"Yeh... tumhara beta hai?" he asked.

ABHISHEK/DESTINY

Amit's face changed.

He nodded once.

And suddenly, something in the room shifted.

They all sat down for a moment — Arjun sobering slightly, Neha clutching a tumbler of water now.

Amit's wife entered the room, sitting hesitantly on the edge of a wooden chair.

Neha blinked slowly and looked at her. "Aapka beta... naam kya hai uska?"

"Dev," she replied quietly.

A brief silence fell.

Then Neha, still slightly tipsy but sincere, turned to her.

"Aapko pata hai... aapke pati ne kya kiya tha? Yeh mujhe jaan bujh ke takraane aaye the... mere car ke saamne. Accident jaisa natak kiya. Isi liye toh mile hum sab."

Amit's wife froze.

And then, without warning, she stood up and slapped Amit — once, then again. Tears spilled from her eyes.

"Tum pagal ho gaye ho kya?! Kis hadd tak jaaoge? Dev ke saamne kya misaal rakh rahe ho?"

Amit remained silent, head lowered.

"Tumhe pata bhi hai uske haalat ka? Har mahine ke ilaaj ke liye paisa nahi bachta. Tumhare jhoot se agar kuch aur ho jaata toh? Kis din sach mein accident ho gaya toh?"

He finally looked up — not defensive, just broken.

"Main thak gaya hoon. Hotel ke liye jo kuch bacha tha, daal diya. Dev ke medicines, check-ups... sab kuch manage karta hoon. Lekin... usne cycle maangi thi. Chhoti si cycle. Main nahi de paaya."

He wiped his face. “Toh laga, agar thoda paisa mil jaaye... toh shayad Dev ki ek khushi puri ho jaaye. Bas ek baar. Bas ek cycle.”

Neha and Arjun sat silently.

No one laughed anymore.

Arjun, filled with emotions opened up his phone and gave 20000 directly to the account in which he paid the hotel room bill to Amit.

Arjun, in almost breaking down tone said,” itne kaafi honge aachi cycle dilana joh isse chahiye kal hii”.

Amit-iski kya jarurat thii main karleta arrange.

Neha in support of Arjun replies back holding his wife’s hand who broke down in tears while slapping him that this is not a help or charity but an act of love and thankfulness to him for taking care of their drunk self throughout the streets tonight.

Amit still hesitant begged them to take the money back but Arjun denied and returned back the money this account again.

“11 saal ka tha, ek red gear wali cycle maangi thi papa se, 11 saal kuch nahi maanga tha maine but jab maanga toh mila nahi papa corruption ke charges me case ladd rahe the police ki naukri jaane ke baad buisness chalu kardiya usme loss hua joh paise maine tumhe diye who isliye taaki tumhara beta bade hoke tumhe koose nahi ki papa ne ye nahi dilayi regret hota hai jab maine papa ke upar chillaya tha ki aapne mujhe kuch nahi kiya. I don’t want your kid to feel the same about you.”

Neha watching him and his tears falling down his eyes while saying this felt bad for him and consoled him, she hugged him for the first time. Amit felt happy and teary

looking at his customers doing more than his family ever did for him.

Hotel – Back to Room

Amit handled them through the streets again like two mismatched shopping bags, dragging them gently back to the hotel, whispering to himself about karma and drunk people with big hearts.

As they reached the room, he helped them in, gave Neha her bottle of water, tucked the blanket over Arjun's lap, and muttered, "Bachpan ke bhoot hi toh ho tum dono."

He left.

The room was silent.

The fire crackled faintly.

They both lay side by side on the bed.

Not touching.

But closer than they'd ever been.

They didn't speak at first — both aware of the proximity, of the wine lingering between their breaths.

Then, their eyes met. For once, no joke followed. No one tried to fill the space with sarcasm.

Neha's fingers brushed his. He turned toward her slowly, eyes heavy but soft.

She didn't smile.

He didn't speak.

Her hands were on his hair caressing it like it needed love. He was looking at her and in her eyes, he felt the world becoming silent, it felt like he was finally diving into love again. He didn't blink for even a moment, he was looking at her face which was shining from the full moon light. She didn't have a single spot like the moon and he was acknowledging the tension between them. They came closer, not just physically but in that moment, they were the most vulnerable self. She made him feel seen and heard and valued and that is what his soul had been searching since months. Their foreheads touched, his hands went behind her head making her come close to him like distance was never meant to there between them. It was the perfect moment. Maybe they will regret this next morning, the boundaries are meant to be crossed when the state is not nice, they made peace with this fact and communicated that not everything right to do at the moment might be the regret in morning but they still chose to come closer and closer, their nose were touching each other. His eyes were still looking at her pretty glommy face which wasn't having any braces now, her lips felt like strawberry and she smell like dandellions in the field. He couldn't control but make her feel special and appreciated by making his hand go from her face swiftly to her waist. Every touch of his hand were felt by her, her face was very clear that maybe she was ready to make one mistake this night that she might not regret. Their lips came closer and her eyes closed waiting for that perfect moment with him she never planned to have, their closeness was gone, once a stranger last night now cuddling and close to kissing each other. Suddenly before she could go all in and kiss him like the night wanted them to, he says, "RHEA, don't go away".

It was his EX, he still remembers her even when Neha slightly was ready to let go her boundaries and cross every limits. She pulled away as he laid there like a pillow slowly dozing off. But as he dozed off and she chose to move away to another direction, he put his hand on her waist and starts cuddling her. Both of them went off to sleep, maybe the best sleep they ever had in a long time without making the mistake that they might have regretted a day later. But Arjun didn't sleep.

Arjun blinked, registering the slip too late.

A beat passed.

He got up, pulled the spare blanket from the cupboard, and walked to the sofa.

It creaked under his weight as he settled into it quietly.

No apology.

Just respect.

The silence between them wasn't awkward.

It was... aware.

Late Night – 3:17 AM

The bathroom door clicked open softly.

Neha stepped out in oversized pajamas, rubbing her damp hands against her arms.

She glanced at the bed — empty on his side.

ABHISHEK/DESTINY

Then saw him curled on the sofa.

He was snoring.

Gently. Like a child.

She walked over in the dark, crouched beside him, and gently pressed her finger to his lips — closing them slightly to mute the sound.

He shifted.

Didn't wake.

She looked at his face — peaceful, almost unaware of how much he was changing in front of her.

And then, she smiled.

Not the kind that comes from flirting or teasing.

But the kind reserved for someone who surprises you.

Not because of what they are to you...

But because of who they still are, despite everything they've been through.

She stood up.

Walked back to the bed.

And fell asleep without resentment.

ABHISHEK/DESTINY

Just... curiosity. About this boy who once couldn't get a red cycle. And now gave someone else one without blinking.

She could feel that she was starting to have some feelings for him. But she made peace with it stating that she doesn't want to become the second option, afterall he is still stuck on his ex.

CHAPTER 11: The Space Between

The morning broke gently but cold — not the kind that stung, but the kind that made silence feel thicker.

Inside the room, the air hung heavy. The fireplace had long gone out, leaving behind only the faint, smoky breath of burnt wood. The bedsheets were creased with restless sleep. The curtains swayed slightly from the cracks in the window, letting in a pale light that didn't warm anything.

Neha sat at the edge of the bed, tying her laces slowly. Her jacket hung off her shoulder, unzipped, her fingers pausing often, lost in thought. Her eyes flicked toward the sofa only once.

Arjun lay there, curled into the blanket, unmoving except for the occasional twitch in his fingers. When he finally sat up, their eyes met across the stillness.

“Good morning,” she said, too soft to fill the space.

“Hmm,” he replied, not meeting her eyes again.

There were no jokes. No awkward banter. Only the tension of two people trying to pretend nothing had happened.

The silence between them had become a third person in the room — sitting with its legs crossed, arms folded, waiting to see who would speak first and mean it.

They packed their bags in quiet synchrony, like strangers on the same train, bound by a common route but not the same destination.

Outside the Hotel – Farewell

The sky outside was a dull grey, thick with the kind of clouds that never broke into rain but hovered like forgotten grief.

Amit stood at the gate, clutching a steaming cup of chai, a soft shawl wrapped around his shoulders.

“Two-day trek,” he said, handing them a rolled-up map. “Highest peak of Manali. Fresh air might do you both good.”

Neha nodded.

Arjun just zipped his jacket.

“You’re not coming?” she asked.

“Hotel sambhalna hai. Aur tum dono ke chehre bata rahe hain... kuch doori zaroori hai.”

They said nothing.

A jeep arrived. A silent, snow-dusted farewell followed.

The mountains waited ahead.

The Trek – Day One

The trail began with whispers — branches brushing softly against jackets, the crunch of snow under boots, and wind rustling through the pines like an old secret.

The guide, a man named Bhairav, barely spoke. His eyes scanned the trees as if the mountain whispered directions only he could hear.

Arjun kept to the back. Neha stayed in the middle, already caught in a warm laugh with Rohan, a curly-haired traveler from Dehradun with too-white teeth and arms he wasn't shy about showing off.

The path grew steeper.

They passed stone temples hidden behind moss, wild fox tracks frozen in the snow, and trees bent by wind and age. The forest turned dark quickly, and light came only in slivers between branches.

Their breath puffed out in clouds.

The higher they climbed, the more distant their steps became.

Neha laughed louder.

Arjun walked slower.

By noon, the group reached a frozen stream they had to cross using a shaky wooden plank. Beneath, the water gurgled cold and black, barely visible under the thin sheen of ice.

Neha crossed it with Rohan, hand-in-hand, giggling as the wind threatened to push them sideways.

Arjun waited.

When he crossed, he did it alone — not because he had to, but because it felt right.

The silence inside him was growing louder than the forest.

Base Camp – Evening

As dusk fell, the trees thinned out and opened into a clearing. The sky burned with pink and ash-grey streaks, and the last rays of sun hit the snow like gold dust.

Tents were pitched around a small fire.

Soup boiled in a pot, sending the smell of garlic and herbs into the air. Everyone gathered. Stories began. Laughter circled.

Arjun sat on a rock at the edge, farthest from the fire.

“Tum thoda lost lagte ho,” said a voice beside him.

He turned.

A girl in a mustard scarf smiled at him. “Naina. Mumbai se.”

“Arjun. Patna.”

ABHISHEK/DESTINY

She offered him a sip from her steel flask.

They talked — about cities, weather, and how hard it was to find decent tea at high altitudes.

He told her about the time he and his friends in college tried to enter every 5-star hotel in Mumbai just to use and review their bathrooms.

“Ek mein toh nikaal diya gaya tha,” he laughed.

“Toh room le liya hoga?” she guessed.

“Exactly. Ek raat ki booking, sirf ego mein. Aur pura staff ko attitude mein daant diya,” he smiled.

Naina grinned. “I’d do the same.”

Meanwhile, Neha sat cross-legged near the fire, talking to Rohan.

She hadn’t looked back once.

And maybe that was the part that bothered him the most.

Late Night – Outside the Tent

The stars looked brutal — too many, too bright, too far.

Arjun stood with a cigarette, his breath visible in the cold. Every drag felt like something was being held back.

Footsteps. Snow crunching softly.

Neha.

She stood beside him, not speaking at first.

“Phir se cigarette?” she asked.

He didn’t answer.

They both looked up at the sky.

The silence between them wasn’t hostile anymore.

Just... surrendered.

Then:

“Neha?” came a voice from behind.

Rohan, flashlight in hand, that smirk still playing on his lips.

“Wanna check out the ridge? Stars wahan se aur closer dikhte hain.”

She looked at Arjun.

He didn’t move. Didn’t speak.

She turned.

“Chalo,” she said to Rohan.

They disappeared into the trees, their voices fading into soft echoes.

Arjun sat down on a rock, alone.

ABHISHEK/DESTINY

Lit another cigarette.

Pulled out his phone.

Called Rhea.

Switched off.

He didn't try again.

He just stared at the dark.

The only thing moving was the smoke curling from his fingers — vanishing before it could be held.

CHAPTER 12: THE EDGE

Morning broke over the Manali base camp with a golden hue bleeding slowly into the frost. A quiet hush lingered between the trees — broken only by crunches of boots against fresh snow and breath steaming into the thin mountain air.

There was tension in the group today. The guide had declared a race — an optional challenge — to reach the final ascent point before sundown.

Neha was already ahead, pacing with **Rohan**, who kept cracking bad jokes and offering protein bars like they were currency. His jacket was bright red, too clean to have been on a trek. Her laugh still had yesterday's echo, but her eyes — they searched the path ahead as if she were trying to outrun something invisible.

Arjun tied his shoelaces in silence. Naina walked beside him.

"You good?" she asked.

He nodded. "Just... focused."

The Race Begins

They sprinted through slopes glazed with ice, then through loose rock patches where a single misstep could mean a fall of hundreds of feet.

The landscape had changed. No longer forests — now open, exposed ridgelines, raw winds slicing through the skin like

cold blades. Mountains rose like gods, and every breath came shallower.

Neha laughed as she ran uphill with Rohan. Arjun watched from behind, each step a hammer of restraint pounding in his chest.

Halfway through the ridge, they reached a sharp curve with a narrow ledge — just enough for two people to step side-by-side. A river thundered far below, unseen but roaring like a secret being shouted.

Neha's boot slipped.

“Rohan!” she yelled.

He grabbed her hand — too late.

Her body tumbled sideways, snow flying into the air. For a second, she was gone.

But then — another hand grabbed hers.

Arjun.

He had been trailing behind. Alone. Silent.

But he ran faster than he ever had. And he held tighter than Rohan did.

He didn't speak.

He just pulled her up, breath ragged, knees digging into the snow.

ABHISHEK/DESTINY

Their faces inches apart. Her eyes wide. His face pale, cold, unreadable.

“Tu theek hai?” he asked, finally.

Before she could answer, **Rohan** arrived, panic written all over his face.

He knelt, hugged her tight. “Oh my god, thank god you’re okay. I’m so sorry, Neha. Mujhse reh nahi paaya...”

She nodded, shaken, hugging him back — but as her head rested on Rohan’s shoulder, her eyes drifted back...

To Arjun.

Still kneeling. Still breathless.

Watching.

But saying nothing.

He stood up quietly. Turned. And walked away.

The Final Climb

The peak was still hours away, and the climb only got harder.

The slope turned steep, terrain slippery with loose stones and powdered ice. Everyone was quieter now — footsteps became the only music.

Arjun and Naina stuck together. They didn't speak much, but she occasionally passed him a candy or adjusted his backpack strap when it slipped.

"You look tired," she said once.

He smiled weakly. "Just lost in thought."

Around them, the scenery exploded into magic — **a vast open sky**, no trees, just white-topped ridges, frozen lakes in the distance, and shadows dancing along cliff edges.

But none of it could thaw the heavy thing inside him.

By evening, a rumor had already floated through the campfire — that Neha and Rohan had kissed last night.

Arjun didn't ask.

He didn't need to.

The ache in his chest was already answering for him.

He sat with Naina at the final stop before summit, chewing slowly on almonds. She nudged him gently.

"You okay?"

He nodded.

She didn't believe him — but respected the silence.

At the Peak

ABHISHEK/DESTINY

They reached the top just before sunset.

The wind howled like something ancient and alive, but the view — the view was unworldly.

Clouds beneath them. Snow everywhere. The sun dissolving into the ridge, spilling orange, pink, and violet into the horizon.

Everyone took pictures.

Laughing, arms in the air, hugging.

Rohan and Neha posed together.

Someone said, “Pick her up! Couple shot!”

Rohan made a move to lift her.

“No,” Neha said sharply, stepping back.

She forced a half-smile. Took a solo photo. Then turned to Arjun.

He was standing beside Naina, quietly admiring the view.

“Arjun,” she called.

He turned.

“Wanna take a photo with me?”

He paused. Then shook his head softly.

ABHISHEK/DESTINY

“Nahi. Main abhi Naina ke saath hoon. Do din se saath mein trek kiya hai. Picture toh uske saath honi chahiye.”

His tone wasn't cruel. Just distant. Just... tired. Her face dropped slightly.

She looked away. Smiled like it didn't matter.

But it did.

She took a simple photo beside Rohan. Nothing fancy. But her smile didn't reach her eyes.

They began descending. But just before she turned to go down the ledge—

A hand touched her wrist. She turned.

Arjun.

"Ek photo le lete hain..." he said, voice quieter. "Bas ek. Last yaad rahega. Manali ka yaad."

She stared at him. He wasn't smiling. But his eyes had something honest in them. Something that said this mattered — even if it was the last thing they'd share.

She nodded. He pulled her closer gently. They didn't pose. They just stood, side by side.

Looking out at the endless stretch of sky.

The camera clicked. And neither of them said anything.

But the silence between them... Was not the same anymore.

Chapter 13: The Bonfire and the Break

The stars above glinted like distant cracks in the sky, frozen and unmoving. Snow crunched softly under boots as the trekkers circled around a bonfire that crackled like it had a voice of its own — dry wood popping, sparks leaping into the ink-black sky.

The fire burned at the center of a small plateau surrounded by low stone ridges and scattered pine trunks. The flames threw flickers of orange and gold across everyone's faces, illuminating smiles, shadows, and unspoken things.

Laughter echoed off the mountains. Someone passed around a bottle of local fruit liquor. The guide — surprisingly loose tonight — hummed a folk tune while stirring hot salt-sprinkled peanuts in a battered steel bowl.

Neha sat close to Rohan, his arm resting along the back of her shoulders like he'd always been there. Their legs touched. Her laughter came easy around him — too easy for Arjun, who sat across the fire with a drink in his hand and silence in his throat.

He stared at them for a moment — the way her head tilted when she laughed, the comfort in her posture, the way Rohan whispered in her ear like it was private and permanent.

A quiet crack opened inside Arjun.

He stood.

And walked away from the circle.

ABHISHEK/DESTINY

No one stopped him.

Not even Neha.

Beneath the Pines

He walked beyond the edge of the ridge, past a few slanted trees dusted with frost. The moonlight filtered through the branches in broken streaks. He sat down on a flat stone overlooking the abyss — cold wind brushing his face, but he didn't flinch.

It wasn't the cold that hurt.

It was the weight.

The weight of being replaced. Again.

A few minutes later, Naina followed him, crunching quietly through the snow. She didn't ask permission. Just sat beside him on the stone, wrapping her jacket tighter.

"You didn't even take your drink," she said, glancing at his empty hands.

He didn't answer.

Just exhaled.

After a few moments, he said, "Her name was Rhea."

Naina turned toward him, sensing the shift.

"We were perfect," he continued. "The kind of couple everyone rooted for in college. Two years. Birthday videos. College society dramas. Night walks. All of it."

His voice was steady, but his eyes — they flickered.

“But I was... insecure. Possessive. Jealous without meaning to be. I questioned where she went, who she talked to, what she posted. I didn’t yell. I didn’t fight. But I smothered her. And she... she broke.”

He paused.

“She ended it crying. Said she didn’t hate me. She just felt like she was living in a prison made of my fears.”

Naina didn’t interrupt.

“After that, we tried to be friends. But she changed. Started laughing again. Talking to other guys. And I... I couldn’t take it.”

He looked away, breathing hard.

“I asked her once — how can you move on so fast? One month? After two years?”

He laughed bitterly.

“She didn’t answer. Just stayed silent. Like I wasn’t worth the energy.”

He shook his head.

“Then one day, she returned some of my books and hoodies. I saw her eyes. I thought maybe she still felt something. But later I found out from someone else — what I saw wasn’t love. It was sympathy. For my depression.”

That word sat heavy in the night air.

“She stopped checking in. Stopped asking if I was okay. But I couldn’t stop. I kept trying. Texted her. Told her I wanted her back as a friend. I begged for it.”

He laughed, dry and quiet.

“Every time I tried to fix things, she pulled away more.”

Then came the part he hadn’t said out loud before.

“I thought maybe... if I went to Delhi. Met her. Said sorry. Properly. Maybe we could... start fresh.”

Naina slowly looked at him.

“So I went,” he said. “Took a train to Delhi. Just like we had once planned. We were supposed to have a night picnic at India Gate. It was our dream date spot. I thought... if I could take her there, maybe she’d see.”

His voice cracked now.

“I called her. Messaged her. Waited three hours. She didn’t pick up. Didn’t respond.”

His fists clenched.

“I sat on a bench near India Gate. Alone. In the cold. Watching tourists take selfies and laugh. And I realized... she wasn’t coming.”

He swallowed hard.

“That broke me more than the breakup ever did.”

Naina’s voice was quiet now. “Because you didn’t just lose your girlfriend...”

“I lost my best friend,” Arjun whispered. “And I don’t think I’ll ever get that kind of friendship again.”

He looked up at her, eyes glassy.

“I don’t even want her back. I just wanted that one person who understood me. And now I don’t know how to breathe without pretending.”

He finally confessed: “I’ve moved so much growing up... Patna, Ranchi, Noida. Every time I made friends, we shifted. New school. New people. New walls. I never had roots. But college... that society... those people... that was home. And Rhea — she was the center of that home.”

His voice trembled.

“Now it’s like... I don’t exist in her world anymore.”

Naina put her arm around him gently and pulled him into a slow, grounding hug.

She didn’t say “you’ll be okay.”

She didn’t say “it’ll pass.”

She just held him.

Then, quietly, she said, “Arjun... the harder you push to hold on, the faster people slip. That’s not love. That’s fear. And it’s not your fault. But it’s not hers either.”

He didn’t respond.

“I’m saying this because you matter,” she added, “but showing up in Delhi... calling constantly... it was just another version of that prison. You wanted to make things better, but she probably felt like she had to hold your pain again.”

Arjun blinked, stung — but silent.

“She needed to break free. Even from guilt.”

Naina looked at him, kind but firm.

“You can’t force someone to be your friend, Arjun. That’s not how friendships are made. They’re built... not begged for. They happen in small laughter. Not over big apologies.”

He closed his eyes.

Took a breath.

“I just didn’t want to feel replaceable again,” he whispered.

“I know,” she said.

Unbeknownst to them both, a figure had stopped at the edge of the tree line — caught in the shadows, shivering not from cold but from what she’d just heard.

Neha.

She had left Rohan behind. Laughter had faded from her lips sometime mid-sentence. Something had shifted.

She had walked up this path with half-written words in her mouth — a need to say something to Arjun.

But now... she couldn't.

She turned away, slowly.

The fire still flickered down below, but it no longer felt like it warmed her.

Chapter 14: Descent and Distance

The morning mist clung softly to the mountainside like a reluctant farewell. Dewdrops glistened on pine needles as sunlight filtered through the clouds, casting golden streaks across the thinning snow. A crisp breeze wound its way through the camp, carrying with it the faint scent of burnt wood, damp earth, and something deeply nostalgic—like the end of a song you didn’t realize you loved until it faded.

The group stirred slowly after the bonfire night. Blankets were folded, thermos flasks passed around. There was laughter in the air — easy, unburdened — but something subtle had shifted.

Neha noticed it the moment she opened her eyes.

Arjun was already up, zipping his bag, grinning at something Naina had just said. He laughed — genuinely — and for the first time, it wasn’t a laugh meant for Neha.

Her heart didn’t sink exactly. But it paused.

She walked over casually, brushing snow off her sleeves.

Neha (softly): “Sona toh sahi se hua?”

Arjun looked up at her, pleasant but distant.

Arjun: “Haan, kaafi deep neend aayi. You?”

Neha: “Yeah... I guess.”

His eyes lingered just long enough to be polite, then returned to tying a strap on his bag. Naina leaned in and tugged at it.

Naina: “Uff, yeh phir se ulta bandha hai! Tu kabhi seekhega bhi ya main tere saath hamesha rahoon?”

Arjun (grinning): “Mujhe laga tu rehna hi chahti hai.”

They laughed. Neha turned away before they noticed she hadn’t.

As the group began their final descent, the landscape transformed. The jagged cliffs softened into rounded hills. The thick white blanket of snow gave way to muddy trails streaked with patches of melting frost. Streams trickled down rocks, and the scent of pine grew sharper, earthier.

The world felt alive again — birds chirped unseen, wind whispered through trees, and somewhere in the distance, a dog barked from a village nestled below.

Pairs began forming again. Rohan caught up to Neha, flashing his usual smirk.

Rohan: “Ek selfie le lein? Mountain ke backdrop mein, insta-perfect types?”

Neha (smiling politely): “Haan, le lo.”

Click. Pose. Filter. But the charm felt off today. His jokes didn’t quite land. His one-liners about city girls and mountain air — which once made her giggle — now felt... rehearsed.

She found her pace slowing until she was walking almost alone. Almost.

Ahead, Arjun and Naina were deep in conversation. He was saying something animatedly, hands gesturing wide.

Arjun: “Toh main bas ₹50 aur Parle-G ka packet leke nikal gaya tha...”

Naina (laughing): “Wait, tu ghar se bhaag gaya tha? At what age?!”

Arjun (grinning): “Nine. Mujhe laga main dunia ghoom lunga. Pehli train pakadne gaya tha station pe...”

They stopped by a rock, sat for a moment as the others moved ahead. Neha lingered behind, unseen, listening without meaning to.

Arjun: "...Station ke paas gaya, toh ek uncle ne poocha, 'Beta kaha jaa rahe ho?' Maine bola, 'World tour pe.' Usne mujhe samosa khilaya aur bola, 'Chal pehle ghar le chalte hain, fir world tour kar lena.'"

Naina burst into laughter, clutching her stomach.

Naina: "You're joking!"

Arjun: "Nahi yaar. Aur mummy ne jab dekha ghar laut ke aaya hoon toh pehle thappad, phir tight hug. World tour wahi khatam ho gaya."

She reached out playfully, brushing snow off his shoulder.

Naina: "You're such a dramabaaaz."

Arjun: "Mera asli naam bhi Arjun hi hai, heroine ki kami thi bas."

Naina flicked his forehead gently.

Naina: "Heroine tu chhod, tu toh climax ke pehle hi comedy kar deta hai."

He mock-growled and pulled at her braid.

Arjun: "Ye kya hai, Rapunzel jaise baal! Kisi din issi se khinch ke cliff se latka dunga."

Naina (laughing): "Try karna kabhi, you'll fall for me."

They both paused. The flirtation hung there for a moment—light, unspoken, warm.

And Neha... watched.

Not with jealousy. But with a sudden, aching clarity.

She used to be the one who knew Arjun's stories. Who saw that spark behind his brokenness. And now, he had found someone else who saw it too.

And maybe — this hurt more — someone he could actually laugh with, without carrying the weight of love.

Later, during a rest stop beneath a drooping deodar tree, Neha stepped away from the group. She stood on a rocky ledge overlooking the descending valley. A river glimmered far below like a silver thread stitching the hills together.

She wrapped her arms around herself, the chill finding her skin despite the sweater. Her eyes welled up.

She hadn't realized until now — truly — what she had let go of.

Behind her, Arjun passed by. He saw her, hesitated, then kept walking.

No words. No pause. No consolation.

And for the first time, Neha felt what it meant to be left alone not because someone didn't care — but because they'd stopped waiting to be chosen.

By evening, the trail flattened. The base camp came into view — wooden huts with red tin roofs, prayer flags fluttering in the wind, and smoke rising from chimneys.

The mountain now stood behind them — massive, majestic, and silent.

Neha turned to glance at Arjun one last time.

He was walking beside Naina, who playfully bumped his shoulder with hers. They were laughing again.

Neha didn't move. Just watched as he walked into the guesthouse — without looking back.

And in that moment, she understood something she had never let herself believe:

That even the most broken hearts, when loved gently, learn to beat on their own again.

She went inside GHAR. Amit greeted and asked her how was the trek, she said it was her best experience ever and

she is grateful for him helping her. While she went inside the room, she saw him changing and in towel, he wasn't having any abs but his shoulders and chiseled body with huge chest were hot enough for people to simp upon only if he had a good facecut or jawline. Poor Arjun, always remained average in his looks and fitness, he never had anyone who crushed on him but only who loved or liked him just because of his weird personality, but when he was changing his clothes turning his back towards the main door of room, she entered. She wanted to move out of the room and give him space but she didn't, she looked at him changing into a normal t shirt and trousers and getting ready for dinner. He turned around to see her still watching him.

Arjun, confidently and with bit of sarcasm said, "so still a stalker".

Neha, hesitantly but rudely said, "aisa kuch hai nahi tumhare pass tadne ko, dekhne hote toh Rohan ke abs kum the kya".

Arjun, with mix of jealousy and fun replied with gritty smile, "toh jaao uske saath room share karlo".

Neha, who was smiling seeing him jealous backed herself up and wanted to hurt him more in this game of jealousy, "haa kyu nahi taaki phir tum naina ko room mein laa saako".

Arjun: okay stop this, this is childish, jaake change karlo.

Neha: aacha haa, me and Rohan we are going on a date would you like to come with Naina agar woh haa karegi toh.

Arjun, smiles and just nods and says yes trying to suppress his surprised look after listening to something he never

expected, a double date with people he just met only three days ago. She is playing a game with him cause he still remembered every single moment of that night before they seperated and didn't kiss because his stupid mouth. He agreed but now he needed to beg Naina to showup as he never spoke to her after they came back from trek, he didn't even have her number how could he. Suddenly he remembered, She was tagged by Neha in her post of when trek started, Neha was his saviour again from embarassment he quickly followed Neha and texted her tha the needs help as he has made a fucked up reply. He sat on Bed and started explaining her the situation on text and begged to not let him lose this game, she was hesitant at first but she finally agreed. He took a moment of air and went outside in the balcony to look at the view of snow filled mountains.

Inside the washroom, the major concern of Neha was how to ask a guy for a date. She thought she would just go out alone at night for some peace but her jealousy game backfired at her, she thought he will never say yes but what could the world want more than to make a girl beg again for a date. She hated being the one asking a guy on date, she had only asked her first crush on a date right back in class 11th and was rejected badly due to her look. She glowed up and went out with every friend of that guy in class 12th as a revenge but she was an adult now. She could just tell Rohan she wanted to have dinner just like he asked during the descent but Arjun and Naina will also come. As a desperate man, Rohan agreed and Neha who hasn't changed was now taking shower as a relief from headache.

Chapter 15: Dressed for the Game

The night had slipped in quiet, like an old friend. The kind that doesn't knock, just walks in and sits with you in silence.

A thin layer of mist hung in the air as lights from the nearby cottages blinked softly through the pine trees. The sky above was a deep navy, scattered with stars, the kind you only notice when everything else quiets down.

Inside the room, a warm orange light glowed from the bedside lamp. Arjun stood by the window, arms folded, staring outside — not at anything specific, just... staring. His reflection in the glass looked a little older, a little lost.

He wore a simple black hoodie and track pants — the same ones from the trek. His hair was messy from the towel rub, and his fingers tapped restlessly against his arm. He wasn't in the mood to go out. But this wasn't about mood anymore.

Behind him, the bathroom door clicked open.

He turned, and time slowed just a little.

Neha stepped out — not with any deliberate drama, not expecting anything. She just walked out like this was her room too. Her dress was a deep rust-orange — sleeveless, soft fabric, hugging her without trying too hard. Over it, she had thrown a loose grey shawl. Her hair was still a bit damp, curled at the ends. No heavy makeup. Just kajal. And her usual nose ring.

She didn't meet his eyes. She adjusted her shawl at the shoulder and grabbed a lip balm from the table.

Arjun blinked once. Twice.

Arjun (softly, almost involuntarily):

“Tu... ready hai.”

Neha (without looking up):

“Haan. Tu bhi ready hota agar tujhe kapde milte.”

He didn't reply. Just watched her sit on the bed to tie her boots. There was something in the way she moved — careful, maybe a little guarded. Like she had built a wall around her tonight but didn't want anyone to notice.

Arjun (after a pause):

“Waise... tu generally itna effort kab karti hai?”

Neha (glancing at him, neutral):

“Effort nahi hai. Mood tha. Socha... thoda normal feel ho.”

Arjun:

“Trek pe thak gaye sab, tu party karne nikli hai.”

Neha (half-smirking):

“Maybe main thak ke hi party karna chaahti hoon.”

She stood up, brushed invisible dust from her dress, and looked at him properly now. His eyes lingered longer than they should have. She noticed.

Neha (quietly):

“Zyada mat dekh. Lag jaayegi nazar.”

Arjun (half-laughing):

ABHISHEK/DESTINY

“Mere jaise bande ki nazar se bacha ke rakhne layak cheez ban gayi tu toh.”

There was no flirt in his tone. Just... something in his chest loosening. Like noticing something he had forgotten.

Neha didn't smile. But she didn't look away either.

Neha (simply):

“Bas yaad dila rahi hoon khud ko. Ki main sirf uss din ki ladki nahi hoon. Jab ro rahi thi.”

A quiet stretched between them. Neither rushed to fill it.

Then, she reached for her phone.

Neha:

“Chalein? Tu bola tha tujhe kuch lena hai. Tere paas kuch nahi hai pehnne layak.”

Arjun:

“Main bola tha kya? Ya tu decide kar ke aayi thi ki mujhe lena hai?”

Neha (deadpan):

“Main ne bola. Tu manne wala tha kya warna?”

He chuckled under his breath.

She opened the door. The cold air swept in. They stepped out — not like two people going for a casual stroll — but like something just beneath the surface was quietly shifting.

Not quite love.

Not quite friendship.

But something unspoken, heavy... waiting.

Mall Road – The Outfit & The Flower Moment

The streets of Mall Road shimmered under rows of fairy lights strung across balconies and lamp posts. Shops stood like old friends waiting with open arms — woollen mufflers hanging like lazy smiles, pinewood souvenirs stacked in neat pyramids, and glass windows breathing out warm light into the cold.

Neha and Arjun walked side by side, not touching, not speaking much. But their footsteps fell in sync — a silent rhythm only they could hear.

Arjun shoved his hands deep into his hoodie pockets, looking around like he wasn't sure why he agreed to come.

Neha (lightly):

“Dekha? Kitna zyada bheed hai. Aur tujhe lagta hai sirf hum hi bore ho rahe the.”

Arjun (shrugging):

“Main toh bore hi ho raha tha. Tu excite thi. Dress aur boots pehn ke ready thi jaise red carpet pe jaana ho.”

She gave him a glance — flat, unimpressed.

Neha:

“Bohot bol raha hai tu. Chal, yeh shop dekho. Tu andar ja, main yahin rukhti hoon.”

Arjun:

“Tu kyun nahi chal rahi?”

Neha (teasing deadpan):

“Main tere liye shopping karne nahi aayi hoon. Tu dekh le — kuch fitting ka mil jaaye toh le lena.”

He rolled his eyes and walked into the small local shop — jackets, shirts, some rugged denims. He wasn't fussy. Just needed something that didn't scream “I live in a track pant.”

Neha waited outside, arms folded, watching people pass. Occasionally glancing in through the glass. A couple passed by — laughing, holding hands, sharing a cone of hot chocolate. Her eyes lingered a moment too long.

Inside, Arjun tried on a dark green corduroy jacket over a plain black tee. He turned to the side mirror, frowned, then stepped out.

She looked up. He didn't say anything.

Neha (after a pause):

“Haan. Yehi theek hai.”

Arjun (mock offended):

“Bas? Koi taali? Koi ‘waah kya lag rahe ho’?”

Neha (dryly):

“Tera muh dekh. Uspe koi bhi kapda ache nahi lagenge.”

She smiled this time — just slightly. Enough to undo a tight knot in his chest.

He paid the shopkeeper, and they started walking again.

The cold bit a little sharper now, but they didn't hurry.

Street musicians played a soft tune on a flute near the chowk. The wind carried the scent of roasted corn and pine needles.

As they passed a roadside stall, Arjun slowed down. His eyes caught a tiny tin bucket full of wildflowers — clumsily wrapped but fresh. The kind of flowers you don't buy for grand gestures, but for the small ones that matter more.

He stopped. Picked one out — a small, yellow daisy-like bloom.

Neha turned to see him holding it out to her.

No teasing. No dramatic build-up.

Just a flower. And his eyes — soft, serious.

Arjun (gently):

“Leh. Tu ne uss din bola tha... kisi ne kabhi flower nahi diya.”

ABHISHEK/DESTINY

She stared at it. Not because it was beautiful. But because it wasn't. It was ordinary. Real. And that made it feel too personal.

Neha (whisper):

“Arjun...”

Arjun (quietly):

“Bas le le. Aur kuch nahi bolna.”

She took it.

Their fingers brushed.

They didn't look at each other for the next few steps. But the silence between them — it wasn't empty anymore.

It was filled with happiness and flowery pleasant smell that mesmerised and complimented the efforts Neha took to dress up.

CHAPTER 16: DANCE

The club was a kaleidoscope of noise and color — lights flashed in crimson and cobalt, and the air buzzed with music that pulsed through skin and bone. But even in all that chaos, Arjun felt out of place.

He sat near the edge of the bar, a bottle of chilled Himachali craft beer sweating in his hand. His shirt clung a little to his chest from the heat, but his eyes weren't on the crowd. They were locked on Neha.

She was laughing. Freely. Moving with confidence as she matched Rohan's high-energy steps on the dance floor. Her red crop top glinted under the lights, her curls bouncing as she threw her head back in delight. The way Rohan held her by the waist during the beat drops — it wasn't WRONG, but it wasn't easy to watch.

And Arjun?

He sipped the beer slowly, jaw clenched, pretending he wasn't watching.

Naina, who had been silently observing him from the barstool next to his, smirked. Her long earrings swayed with every nod, and her black bodycon dress shimmered when the light hit.

Naina (smirking, leaning toward him):

“Tujhe clubs pasand nahi... par Neha ke moves toh bade dhyaan se dekh raha hai.”

ABHISHEK/DESTINY

Arjun (faking a scoff):

“Main toh bas yeh dekh raha hoon ki Rohan ka stamina kab khatam hota hai.”

Naina (teasing, sipping her drink):

“Haan... ya shayad tu yeh dekh raha hai ki Neha tujhe notice bhi kar rahi hai ya nahi.”

He said nothing. Just looked away.

Naina’s smile widened.

She stood up, placed her drink on the counter, and turned to him — hand outstretched.

Naina (playful tone):

“Chal... jealousy ka ilaaj dance floor pe hota hai. Trust me, main doctor nahi hoon... par toh thik hoon.”

Arjun (hesitating):

“Tu na... drama queen hai.”

Naina:

“Aur tu bas ek **loser lover** hai. Chal, uth!”

Reluctantly, he let her drag him onto the floor. The music shifted — a high-energy Punjabi track filled the space.

Naina didn’t wait. She began dancing close, hands in the air, moving with rhythm and mischief. She didn’t need Arjun to keep up — she just needed him to burn.

And burn he did — not from her touch, but from his gaze wandering again and again... to **Neha**.

Neha had noticed. Her smile flickered. For a second, she didn't laugh at one of Rohan's jokes. Her eyes drifted to the far left of the crowd — where Naina was circling Arjun, leaning in too close.

It stung.

But she didn't flinch. She danced harder — as if spinning faster could quiet the sudden unease blooming in her chest.

Then, like fate orchestrating a slow twist, the music changed.

The DJ transitioned into a Latin-inspired remix of “Senorita” — smooth, sultry, rhythmic. The crowd roared in excitement. Everyone paired off.

Neha turned to find Rohan already moving toward Naina.

And Arjun... had been watching her the whole time.

Their eyes met across the swaying crowd. No words. Just tension.

Naina (grinning as she passed Neha, whispering), “Tum dono ka dramatic slow dance ab start hone wala hai. Please, mujhe disappoint mat karna.”

Before Neha could react, Arjun was standing in front of her — breath heavy, unsure — hand half-raised.

Arjun (softly):
“Dance karein?”

She hesitated for only a moment — then placed her hand in his.

As the first notes of a romantic ballad began, a soft spotlight glided across the crowd... and landed gently on them.

All around them, the music and motion slowed — not literally, but in how they felt it.

They moved into a formal ball-dance hold — Arjun's hand rested respectfully on her waist, hers gently on his shoulder. Their fingers laced together.

The world blurred.

They didn't talk. They didn't need to.

Every step was a conversation. Every glance was a confession.

Arjun's eyes searched hers — vulnerable, tender. Neha looked away — heart thudding, breath shallow.

He twirled her. She spun. Landed back in his arms. Close. Too close.

The lights dimmed around them, making the spotlight seem warmer... like a bubble that held only them.

When their foreheads brushed — just barely — Neha's lips parted in a silent gasp. Arjun closed his eyes for half a second. That was all it took to **feel** what had been simmering for days.

Chemistry.History. Longing that refused to be ignored.

As the song ended, the crowd erupted into applause — clapping, cheering, some even whistling.

Arjun stepped back quickly. Neha did too. Both breathing heavier than they should've been.

And just like that, the spotlight turned off. The moment faded. But it had already lit a fire.

After the dance, the four of them walked back onto Mall Road, the cold night air brushing over their sweaty skin like a reminder to breathe.

Neha walked slightly ahead, arms crossed, pretending not to steal glances at Arjun, who was walking beside Naina, silent.

Rohan, animated as ever, pointed toward a rustic-looking restaurant glowing warmly in the distance.

Rohan:

“Woh corner wala café... thoda pricey hai, but the view from terrace is insane. Sunset toh gaya, lekin lights dekhne ka apna maza hai.”

Naina (smiling):

“Bas khaane mein taste ho... mujhe toh terrace terrace se farak nahi padta.”

They entered the café — all stone walls, vintage bulbs, and old-school Himachali woodwork. On the terrace, they were seated near the railing. Below them, Shimla glittered like a bowl of fireflies.

A waiter brought candles. The glow danced across their faces.

They ordered: Tandoori platter, butter garlic noodles, pahadi chicken, thukpa, and hot chocolate for Neha — because she said she was cold.

Neha (pulling her shawl close, half-smiling):

“Yeh trek ke baad na... thand andar tak ghus gayi hai.”

Arjun (low voice, watching her):

“Ya ho sakta hai koi wahan jungle mein chillane ke liye le gaya ho...”

Neha (looking sharply):

“Kya bola?”

Arjun looked away, shook his head.

Naina (interrupting, trying to lighten):

“Toh trek... successful tha, na? I mean, kisi ka ankle bhi nahi mudha, kisi ka ego bhi bach gaya.”

Rohan (laughing):

“Mujhe toh maza aaya. Neha and I got completely lost though... jungle mein ek stream ke paas baithe rahe. Bhool gaye waqt.”

Arjun's smile tightened. The words hung in the air.

Neha glanced at him — there was something icy in her look.

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Neha (testing tone):

“Haan... waise Arjun... tumhe toh laga hoga we were making out, right?”

Silence.

Arjun (caught, defensive tone):

“Nahi... bas... jungle mein ek ladka-ladki hours tak gayab ho jaayein... obvious hai log assumptions karenge.”

Neha (in disbelief):

“Log assumptions karenge ya tum kar rahe the?”

He didn't answer.

Neha (voice rising):

“You actually thought main usse...?”

Arjun (quiet, still defensive):

“Maine kuch kaha toh nahi. Bas feel hua...”

Neha (snapping):

“Feel hua? Tumhe laga main jungle mein kisi ke saath...? Tumhe seriously lagta hai main itni easy hoon?”

The table went dead silent.

Rohan looked down, awkward.

Naina (stern, sharp):

“Tu realise kar raha hai na, Arjun, ki tune abhi abhi usse slut shame kiya?”

Arjun blinked.

Arjun: “Nahi... I mean... mujhe laga bas...”

Neha (tears forming, angry whisper):

“Bas kya? Ki main kisi ke saath jungle mein gayi toh I must’ve done something? Just because I’m comfortable with someone?”

She stood up, chair scraping loudly.

Arjun (voice breaking):

“Neha... I’m sorry. I never meant to hurt you.”

Neha (tears brimming, standing up):

“Hurt me? You destroyed my trust in front of everyone. I thought hum dost the, dost toh ek dusre ko protect karte hai pith peechhe bhi aur tu mujhe slut shame hone de raha who chor tu khud kar raha”

Before he could speak, she rushed past him, down the spiral stairs, tears soaking her cheeks..

He tried shouting and reasoning within himself saying that he never knew the concept of slut shaming he never meant to say it like that. He is sorry and doesn’t meant it, but it was too late. He tried to focus on the food at platter, Rohan being uncomfortable went for the washroom.

Naina, as calm as she always is asks,” tumhe slut shaming kya hota hai kaise hota hai kuch nahi pata naa”

Arjun, surprised as she read his mind says yes to it as he never was brought with an environment and never knew what is criteria for a joke or comment being a slut shaming comment. She keeps her hand on his soldier and states that she is a psychologist, she can understand this but Neha

won't because she doesn't know about his background, he needs to make her understand his side, or maybe he just needs to listen her and keep his mouth if he feels like anything can hurt her before speaking.

Arjun, dejected in sadness,” pata kaise chalega kya hurt karega I don't think before speaking”

Naina, very patient with him and treating him like another of her patient, states that he needs to think thrice before speaking anything if that is going to hurt anyone.

Naina after a pause as Rohan returns to the table,” jao she needs you, usse jyada you need her tumhe pata hai tumhe kya chahiye, go get her before it's late”.

He runs out of the room as fast as he could realising his mistake.

CHAPTER 17 :CLOSURE

The cold wind whipped through the narrow streets of Manali as Arjun chased after Neha, his voice calling her name over and over again, but she didn't turn back. She just kept walking, her pace quickening with each step, leaving him standing there, feeling a mix of guilt and helplessness churn inside him.

Arjun (shouting, breathless):

“Neha, please! Just listen to me, please! I'm sorry! I didn't mean to hurt you—please don't leave like this!”

But Neha didn't stop. She didn't even look back. It was as if the weight of his words, the truth of his actions, had finally broken her beyond repair.

He watched as she disappeared into the hotel, his heart sinking with the thought of what he had done. His feet felt like lead, but he couldn't give up. He had to fix this, had to make things right.

Arjun (whispering to himself):

“I've messed up, but I won't let her walk away from me like this. Not again. I won't lose her.”

He trudged up the stairs to their hotel room, his mind racing with the regret of the last few hours. The sound of his shoes against the wooden floor felt deafening in the silence of the hotel hallway. He reached the door, his hand trembling as he knocked gently, then louder, his desperation building.

Arjun (banging the door softly):

“Neha, please! Open the door! Please, just let me in. I won't hurt you. Please, don't shut me out.”

He waited, hearing only the muffled sound of her sobs from inside. His throat tightened, and he leaned against the door, his mind a storm of confusion and regret.

After what felt like an eternity, Neha's sobs stopped. The silence stretched out, thick and unbearable.

Arjun (voice breaking):

"I'm sorry, Neha. I never should have said that. I didn't mean it. I've been an idiot... please, let me in. I can't fix this from out here."

But there was no response. He could feel his chest tightening, the weight of the situation pressing down on him.

With a shaky breath, he pulled out his phone, his hands still trembling as he typed out a message to his ex, Rhea.

Arjun's Text Message to Rhea (Ex):

"I am sorry. The decision of breaking up was right. Maine tumhe mazak, gussa aur chidhane ke naam pe bahut kuch bola hai. Slut-shaming kaise hota hai, mujhe pata nahi. Lately, I have realized my mistake. I know tum yeh message dekhe bina chhod dogi, but I am sorry for every word that hurt you, and everything that ruined us. I hope you have the best life possible. I just needed a friend. I realized it late, it can never be forced. I hope all your dreams come true. I will always help you as a friend. Goodbye."

He paused after sending the message, staring at the screen, watching as the message was sent and delivered, but not read. It was his final closure—his way of accepting the past. He thought of deleting her photos, clearing the memories, but before he could go any further, the door creaked open.

Arjun's body jerked forward as the door flung open, and he stumbled, crashing to the floor, his head hitting the cold tile. He winced in pain, but the sharp sting was nothing compared to the sight before him.

Neha stood in the doorway, her eyes red from crying. Her face was a mixture of anger and hurt, but there was something else there—something softer, almost like she was waiting for something, some sign of reassurance.

Arjun scrambled to his feet, his heart hammering in his chest.

Arjun (in a rushed voice, trembling):

“Neha... I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. Please, forgive me.”

Without thinking, he pulled her into his arms, holding her tightly as though to shield her from the world. She stiffened at first, but slowly, her body relaxed against his, and he whispered in her ear.

Arjun (softly, with pain in his voice):

“I swear, Neha. I'll never hurt you again. Please, forgive me. I love you... and I'll do whatever it takes to make this right.”

Neha pulled back slightly, her face still wet from her tears. Her eyes met his, but there was something guarded, as if

the walls she'd built around herself were still too thick to break.

Neha (bitterly, voice shaking):

“Sab yahi karte hain... promise karte hain ki kabhi hurt nahi karenge, kabhi disrespected nahi hone denge, but it always ends up with me being hurt. I've heard all the promises before. My second ex... he hit me. Thrice. Jab hum argue kar rahe the, maine door bandh kar diya tha. He broke it open and hit me, Arjun.”

Her voice cracked as she spoke, and Arjun felt his chest tighten. The realization hit him like a freight train. She wasn't just angry at him—she was terrified. She was scared of the same thing happening again.

Neha (with a broken whisper):

“I got scared that you'd hit me too... I thought you might do the same. That's why I opened the door.”

Arjun's eyes filled with tears, and his voice broke as he spoke.

Arjun (reassuring her firmly, in Hindi):

“Neha, main kabhi tumhe haath nahi uthaoonga. Main mar bhi jaoon, lekin tumhe kabhi unsafe feel nahi karne doonga. Tum mere liye sabse zyada important ho.”

For a moment, she just stood there, taking in his words, her breath shaky, before she finally nodded slightly. And then, something shifted. The tension between them, thick with pain and confusion, began to soften, and slowly, she wrapped her arms around him.

They hugged for what felt like an eternity, the weight of everything between them melting away, even if just for a moment. The silence that followed was comforting, filled only with the sound of their breaths and the faint thrum of their heartbeats.

But before either of them could say anything else, the door opened, and Amit's voice cut through the moment.

Amit (awkwardly):

“Sir, woh 10-minute line nahi rahegi, toh adjust kar lena.”

Arjun and Neha broke apart, a mix of relief and embarrassment flooding through them as they quickly stepped back.

Arjun (with a small, sheepish smile):

“Okay, Amit. Thanks.”

Amit, sensing the tension, left quickly, clearly feeling like he had intruded on something far too personal.

As the door clicked shut behind him, Arjun and Neha both turned to the room, the atmosphere still heavy with everything that had just happened. They knew they needed to change for the night, but the weight of their conversation still hung in the air.

Arjun grabbed his clothes and began to change, but as he did, the lights flickered and went out, plunging the room into darkness. Neha's voice broke the silence, soft and tentative.

Neha (hesitant):

“Arjun... it’s too dark. I can’t change in here. What if I slip?”

Arjun, already changed into a vest, looked at her, then at the darkened room. He smiled slightly, trying to lighten the mood.

Arjun (grinning, in a teasing tone):

“Isn’t this the perfect time? You won’t have to worry about anyone seeing you, right?”

Neha hesitated, then nodded. He had a point. She stepped closer to the bed, still cautious but trying to push past the awkwardness.

Neha (quietly):

“Fine, but if I fall, it’s your fault.”

As she began to change, there was a moment—just a brief, electrifying second—when she couldn’t undo her bra strap. She looked at him, her face slightly flushed.

Neha (embarrassed):

“Arjun... can you help me?”

Arjun froze for a second, his heart racing, but then he walked up to her. The space between them felt charged. As he reached out, he brushed against her skin, unhooking the strap with a delicate touch. The room was so still, the tension thick in the air.

As he unhooked it, he couldn’t help but inhale her scent, the soft, floral perfume she wore. His breath caught in his throat.

Arjun (softly, almost a whisper):
“You smell amazing, Neha.”

His fingers grazed her waist as he pulled the strap gently. For a brief moment, he pulled her closer to him, their bodies just inches apart. There was something almost magnetic between them—something neither of them could deny.

But as the light flickered back on, Neha quickly pulled away, her face turning crimson.

Neha (stammering, quickly):
“Light aa gayi... ab main washroom ja sakti hoon.”

Arjun nodded, stepping back as she rushed past him. He slumped back onto the sofa, exhausted—physically and emotionally—his mind still reeling from everything that had just happened.

When Neha came out of the bathroom, she found him already asleep, his face peaceful in the dim light. She stood there for a moment, just watching him, and then quietly sat on the chair beside him, her thoughts lost in the quiet hum of the room.

Neha sat on the wooden chair beside the sofa, the soft glow of the bedside lamp painting gentle shadows on the walls. Arjun lay asleep on the sofa, his breathing even, the lines of his face relaxed for the first time that night. The hush of the hotel room felt both comforting and heavy, as if every secret emotion between them was suspended in the still air.

The air between them had shifted. Things weren't fixed. But for now, it felt like they had both taken the first step toward healing.

She pulled her shawl tighter around her shoulders, the yellow daisy he'd given her tucked safely inside her dress pocket—a small, secret warmth against the cold. Her boots were off, and her feet tingled on the cool wooden floor. She glanced at Arjun's silhouette, back turned toward her, and felt a familiar flutter in her chest.

WHAT JUST HAPPENED TONIGHT? she thought, as her mind replayed every moment: the dance under the strobe lights, the harsh words at dinner, his desperate chase, and finally the silent apology at the door. She thought of his voice cracking as he promised never to hurt her, the vulnerability in his eyes when he reassured her in Hindi. She remembered the tremor in his hands when he unhooked her bra, the way he'd leaned in to catch her scent—jasmine and something warm.

AM I FALLING FOR HIM? The question rose like a ripple across a still pond.

Her heart answered in a thousand small beats, each one echoing differently.

I'VE BEEN SO GUARDED. She closed her eyes, recalling how easily she had let him hold her in the street, how natural his arms felt around her trembling frame. BUT I'VE BEEN HURT BEFORE. I PROMISED MYSELF I'D NEVER LET ANYONE MAKE ME FEEL THAT SMALL AGAIN.

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She shifted on the chair, the fabric creaking beneath her. The lamp light flickered once, then settled, casting a golden pool across the floor.

HE CHASED ME TONIGHT. That simple fact both thrilled and terrified her. He didn't just yell apologies—he ran after her, breathless in the cold. HE REALLY CARED. And yet... WHAT IF PROMISE MEANS NOTHING? WHAT IF I GET HURT AGAIN?

Memories of past betrayals surfaced: the whispered insults, the nights she lay awake, wondering which friend she could trust. She pressed her fingers to her lips, tasting the faint trace of his scent still on her skin.

BUT TONIGHT FELT DIFFERENT. There was no anger in his apology—only genuine remorse. No petty dismissal—only the raw admission of his mistake. MAYBE THIS—WHATEVER THIS IS—COULD BE REAL.

Neha glanced at the little yellow daisy poking out of her dress. It was ordinary, yet it made her heart flutter. HE PICKED THIS JUST FOR ME. That simple thought sent a warmth through her chest.

A soft sigh escaped her. Every nerve in her body hummed with questions—hope and fear tangled together.

I SHOULD TRY TO SLEEP. She told herself gently, rising and brushing imaginary dust from her dress. TOMORROW... TOMORROW I'LL KNOW WHAT TO DO.

She padded barefoot toward the bed, the lamp's reflection dancing in her tear-blurred eyes. As she settled beneath the

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covers, the mattress soft beneath her, she closed her eyes and let her thoughts drift.

ARJUN... WHAT ARE YOU TO ME? she wondered, just before sleep began to pull her under. AM I FALLING FOR YOU?

And in that quiet half-awake moment, she felt a small, courageous flicker in her heart:

MAYBE I AM.

She fell asleep while overthinking about one of the most complex things humankind face in their lifetime. Both of them, strangers some day ago never thought that the destiny will bring them together again after years and everything will fall in place for both of them this time to align their stars and make them realise what they needed in their life to heal. it was just the beginning for both of them today, a new day awaits both of them, where their actions will define if they will learn the secrets of destiny and time or the practical world will pull them apart due to their differences.

CHAPTER 18: MIST AND UNSPOKEN WORDS

The faint light of dawn began to filter through the sheer cream curtains, painting the wooden ceiling of the hotel room in mellow golds and soft oranges. A calm breeze slipped through the slightly ajar window, carrying the crisp scent of pine and distant smoke — the kind that clung to early morning Maggi stalls.

Neha stirred in bed, her cardigan tangled around her arm and her curls messy from last night's storm of emotions. Her eyes fluttered open slowly, adjusting to the mellow sunlight.

She stretched, still half-asleep, expecting to see Arjun snoring softly on the sofa, maybe curled up awkwardly like he always did. But the room was silent... too silent.

She sat up abruptly, the sheets falling from her shoulder.

"Arjun?" she called out gently, hoping maybe he was in the washroom.

Silence.

She got up, checking the bathroom — empty. The curtain swayed gently near the window, offering no clue. His bag was there. Phone charger still plugged. His half-empty bottle of water by the bedside table. But he was gone.

Something inside her clenched. Her throat tightened, and her heart picked up pace.

She muttered, “What the hell...” pulling her cardigan close and slipping on her sneakers without bothering to tie them. Pushing the room door open, she stepped into the chilly morning air — the sun just a sleepy yellow orb behind the hills.

The gravel path crunched beneath her steps as she hurried down the slope, her eyes scanning the landscape. A small group of boys were playing with a ball, a dog chased a butterfly, and locals were opening up their breakfast stalls. But no Arjun.

Panic brewed louder in her chest.

Then — a flash of red. The cycle.

She squinted and saw him riding the old red bicycle with Dev, laughing like a schoolboy, heading toward the sunrise point.

He looked up just then and spotted her — breathless, cardigan wrapped tight, eyes searching.

He grinned wide, “Good morning, sleeping beauty!”

She stood there, trying to slow her heartbeat, half-annoyed, half-relieved.

“Main laga tu bhaag gaya,” she said, brushing a loose strand from her forehead.

He stopped the cycle and hopped off. “Bhaag gaya? Itna drama mat kar, bas Dev ke saath ek chakkar maarne gaya tha. Tu toh aise react kar rahi hai jaise main tujhe shaadi ke mandap pe chhod gaya hoon.”

“Shut up,” she said, rolling her eyes, but she couldn’t stop the smile that tugged at her lips.

He gestured toward the rear carrier. “Aaja, maggi aur chai chalna hai. Sunrise point ka view miss kar degi warna.”

She hesitated for a second, then nodded and climbed onto the back. She held the edge of the seat, trying not to touch him, but the cold air made her lean forward slightly. He noticed but said nothing.

The hill path was quiet, the hum of the tires against gravel their only soundtrack. The early sunlight washed everything in gold — sleepy pine trees, dew-kissed grass, even the wooden bench by the edge of the valley where they eventually parked.

They sat with two steaming plates of overpriced masala Maggi and two paper cups of chai. The silence wasn’t awkward. Just... restful.

He stirred his noodles slowly, then spoke, “Kal raat... I deleted everything.”

She looked at him, confused.

He clarified, “Uski photos. Har ek. Rhea ki. Shayad ab maine sach mein accept kar liya hai breakup.”

She studied his face — the slight tiredness under his eyes, the calmness that hadn’t been there before. “I’m proud of you,” she said softly.

He smiled faintly. “Itna dramatic toh nahi hona chahiye tha. Par I guess har kisi ka closure alag hota hai.”

They slurped noodles, giggling at how spicy it was. The view was beautiful — snow melting on far peaks, eagles soaring. The world still felt untouched by noise.

“Kaisi Maggi pasand hai tujhe?” he asked.

“Garlic wali. Bahut strong flavour hota hai usmein.”

“Main garlic aur cheese mix karta hoon,” he said, “Best combo.”

“Tu har cheez mein cheese daalta hai kya?”

“Main har cheez mein pyaar daalta hoon.”

She chuckled. “Cheesy.”

He nudged her elbow with his, “Toh tu banegi meri life ki Maggi?”

She turned to him with mock seriousness, “Tumne mujhe propose kiya abhi?”

“Joke nahi tha,” he said simply, his eyes not leaving hers. “I mean it. Kal raat jo hua... ya nahi hua... sab kuch real tha. Mujhe lagta hai hum dono ke beech kuch toh hai. I don’t want to ignore it.”

She suddenly felt the air get heavier. Her laugh had frozen somewhere between her tongue and throat. She stared at the steam rising from her chai.

“Arjun... main teri feelings ki respect karti hoon. Par... main bahut kuch leke chal rahi hoon.”

“I know. Mujhe sab pata hai.”

“Par tu nahi samjhega. I have scars, not just from exes but from how people made me feel unworthy. Unsafe. Mera picthla relationship itna toxic tha ki main ab kisi pe trust karne se darhti hoon. Tere sath... sab kuch bahut fast lag raha hai.”

He nodded slowly. “Main pressure nahi daal raha. Bas... feel hua, toh bol diya. Tujhe agar lagta hai yeh sab galat hai, I’ll back off. We can still be friends.”

Her eyes welled up suddenly, and she stood up. “Arjun... main tujhe hurt nahi karna chahti. Par main bhi hurt nahi hona chahti. Tera sath achha lagta hai. Lekin... main thak chuki hoon. Har rishte mein bas main hi roti hoon. Main bas nahi chahti ki tu bhi kisi din mujhe aise hi... chod de ya judge kare...”

“Main judge nahi karta,” he said softly.

“Tune kal ki raat judge kiya tha...” she whispered.

That one sentence stung. His hand clenched around the paper cup.

She turned and began walking away, her cardigan flapping in the wind like a silent flag of surrender.

He sat there frozen, the sound of Maggi stalls, kids laughing, and the rustling leaves around him — but none of it touched him.

The sun had risen fully now, but for Arjun, everything had suddenly gone dim.

Neha's feet felt heavy with every step she took back toward the hotel, the cold mountain air biting at her skin. Her cardigan, which she had wrapped around her like a fragile shield, no longer felt warm. Instead, it clung to her like a reminder of everything that had just broken inside her.

The sun was now higher, spilling its light generously over the town, but inside her chest, everything felt like it was in the dark. She walked quickly, each step echoing louder in her ears than the last, as if the ground was trying to make her feel the weight of what she had just said—what she had just walked away from.

CHAPTER 19: LETTING IT GO

The hotel loomed ahead, simple and quiet against the backdrop of the valley. As she pushed open the door, she didn't look around, didn't check for anyone. She walked straight into the small lobby, her mind racing, heart pounding. The receptionist greeted her with a polite nod, but Neha couldn't bring herself to return the smile.

She made her way upstairs, every movement automatic. Once inside her room, she shut the door quietly behind her, leaning against it for a long moment. The silence was deafening, pressing in from all sides, and she closed her eyes tightly as if to block out the noise in her mind.

WHAT DID I JUST DO? The question ran on loop, refusing to stop, refusing to let her think about anything else. She sank down on the bed, her body feeling like it belonged to someone else. The fabric of the bed beneath her felt like a strange comfort, but it wasn't enough. Nothing was enough.

She hugged her knees to her chest, forehead resting against her legs as she let the tears flow freely now, no longer trying to hold them back. It wasn't just the moment that had broken her, but the culmination of all the things she had locked away for so long. Her fears. Her trauma. Her inability to trust—let alone give someone the power to break her again.

HOW COULD I TELL HIM? HOW COULD I JUST WALK AWAY FROM HIM LIKE THAT?

The thoughts spun faster. She had wanted to be honest with him, but now that she was alone, all the reasons she had

held back felt like a cruel paradox. I'M SCARED... BUT I SHOULD'VE BEEN BRAVE ENOUGH TO STAY. MAYBE I'M TOO SCARED TO LOVE HIM...

But the fear was too real. The shadows of her past were too long. She had spent so many years building walls—walls that kept her safe from being hurt again. And Arjun, with his gentle smile, his kindness, his understanding... he was too much like everything she had ever longed for. He made her feel like maybe she could let go of those walls. Maybe... maybe he was the one person who could make her feel whole.

But what if she was wrong?

She ran her hands through her hair, tugging at the strands lightly, a nervous habit she'd never been able to shake off. I SHOULDN'T HAVE LET MYSELF GET CLOSE TO HIM. I KNEW THIS WOULD HAPPEN. I KNEW I'D HURT HIM...

Her mind kept spiraling, the guilt growing heavier with each passing minute. What had she expected? For him to just accept the burden of her past and take her as she was? Was she selfish for even thinking he could? He deserved more than that. More than someone who couldn't even trust herself to stay. More than someone who was still afraid of the shadows from long ago.

And yet... when he had looked at her, when he had spoken to her so openly, so honestly—THERE WAS SOMETHING THERE. Something real. Something that made her feel like she wasn't just running away from herself. She wasn't just running away from him. She was running away from the future, from the possibility that she

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might find someone who actually cared enough to stick around.

GOD, I'M SO TIRED OF RUNNING.

The tears came again, hot and relentless. She let them fall freely now, letting the weight of it all wash over her, the relief in crying out her pain mingling with the guilt of what she had done.

But there was no going back now.

HE PROBABLY HATES ME NOW. The thought was a knife in her chest. She didn't even know if he would still be there when she came back to the town, when she returned to face him after all of this.

But maybe that was for the best.

Maybe it was better that he was out of her life before things had the chance to get messy. She had to believe that. She had to hold on to the fact that she had done the right thing, even if it tore her apart.

It was a little past eight, and the day was starting to feel heavier with every passing minute. She could hear the distant hum of the town waking up, the sound of people coming to life outside. But inside, in the quiet of her room, Neha felt utterly and completely alone.

She pulled the covers over her head and closed her eyes, but sleep wouldn't come. Instead, all she could hear were the echoes of her own heartbeat, drowning out everything else. She jumped out of the bed and put on a nice top and jeans, she started packing all her stuff fast and steady so

that she could move out of the hotel as fast as possible. She doesn't want to be a hopeless romantic again like she was before. She couldn't take another risk of getting hurt, it would impact her mental health and career both if she isn't careful in her next relationship. She was making a practical decision, she was sure it wasn't worth taking a risk however hard it was letting it go.

The room was silent, save for the faint sound of Neha's suitcase zipper as it closed with a finality that echoed in the stillness of the room. Her fingers moved mechanically as she folded her clothes, each one more reluctant than the last. She didn't know why she felt this pull in her chest—an ache, a fear, a loss. Every piece of clothing she packed felt like a reminder of everything she was about to leave behind, everything that had been too short, too fast, and yet so meaningful.

Her thoughts were a blur, running in circles, tracing the moments they had shared—the laughter, the conversations, the closeness that felt like it belonged to a different lifetime. But now, all of it was slipping away like sand through her fingers, and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

Just as she zipped the last of her bags, she heard a faint knock on the door. Her heart skipped. No... She wasn't ready for this. Not yet. But before she could even move, the door creaked open, and there stood Arjun.

His presence filled the room, his familiar warmth radiating through the space. He didn't wait for an invitation; he just walked in. The look in his eyes was soft, but there was an underlying tension, something unsaid that hung between them like the weight of an unfinished story.

"Neha," he started, his voice quiet but filled with that raw honesty that she had come to associate with him, "Is this... the last time we're meeting?"

The question hung in the air like a fragile thread, and for a moment, Neha couldn't breathe. She blinked, trying to hold back the tears that were already welling up in her eyes. She could feel the lump in her throat, the tightness in her chest that had been there since she'd made this decision.

Her voice was barely a whisper when she replied. "Yes. If destiny wants it, maybe we'll meet again, sometime later... but I can't do this again. I can't keep hurting you and myself. I'm sorry... but every moment I've spent with you, it's been one of the happiest moments of my life."

Arjun's eyes darkened for a split second, but then his expression softened. He took a step closer to her, his face gentle but firm. "I feel the same," he said, his words steady but laced with emotion. "And I respect your decision. But... destiny? That's bullshit, Neha. It's our choices that shape our lives, not fate. And right now, you're making a choice. And I... I have to respect that."

He took another step forward, closing the distance between them. His hand reached out, lifting her chin gently, his thumb brushing over her cheek as his gaze never left hers. "But you know what?" He continued, his voice low, almost a whisper. "I know we love each other. And you'll always be special to me. If you ever need me—no matter what, no matter where—just call me. Even if it's 2 AM and we're outside a mall somewhere, strangers again... I'll be there."

His words were like a balm to her soul, even as they tore her apart. She wanted to say something, wanted to stop him,

to tell him that she couldn't do this, couldn't walk away. But before she could, Arjun reached out again, his hand finding the side of her face, cupping it with tenderness that sent a shiver down her spine.

He didn't say anything else. The space between them had disappeared completely, and in that moment, the only thing that existed was the raw, undeniable connection between them. As his face inched closer, she felt a tug in her chest. Her lips, trembling, found his.

And then, everything just... let go.

There was no holding back anymore. The kiss deepened, desperate and wanting, as if they were both trying to catch up on all the time they had lost. His hands moved down her back, pulling her closer, feeling the heat of their bodies collide. The world outside faded away, and all that mattered was the feeling of him in her arms.

Neha, breathless, tangled her fingers in his hair, pulling him closer as if she could bury herself in him, in the memory of this moment. She had always told herself that she couldn't let herself fall, but now, in the quiet chaos of their passion, she realized she had already fallen.

But as their hands roamed and they moved further into the depths of each other's embrace, something shifted inside her. She stopped, pulling away slightly. Her chest heaved, her breath shallow as she looked into his eyes, searching for something—anything—that could make this easier.

"I—" She paused, struggling to find the right words. "We can't... I can't... I'm sorry."

Arjun's gaze softened, and he nodded, understanding without her needing to explain. He pulled away gently, though his touch lingered on her skin, a quiet promise in the way his fingers brushed across her arm.

Neha stood up, her legs shaky as she moved to retrieve her clothes from the floor. She quickly pulled them back on, the fabric feeling tight, foreign against her skin as she dressed. Arjun, still lying on the bed, watched her with a resigned silence, his body half-naked, the heat of their moments still hanging in the air. He didn't move. He didn't try to stop her.

When she finished dressing, she walked to him, her heart heavy in her chest. She leaned down, pressing her lips to his forehead in a soft kiss. "Goodbye, Arjun," she whispered, her voice breaking slightly as the tears threatened to spill over once more.

She stood there for a moment, looking at him, at the man who had come into her life and made everything feel different, before she turned and walked out the door.

Arjun watched her leave, his eyes empty and broken, but there was something else there too—a quiet acceptance. He didn't chase after her. He didn't stop her. He lay there, feeling the weight of her absence pressing down on him.

For a long while, he stayed there, the room now eerily silent, save for the quiet hum of the world outside. He closed his eyes, letting the emptiness take him, but deep down, he knew—he knew he would always carry her with him, in the softest corners of his heart.

Chapter 20: The Silent Echoes

The days after Neha's departure felt like they blurred into one long, gray line, stretching endlessly with no beginning or end. Arjun's mornings felt empty, his days bled into nights, and his nights were colder than the mountains he had grown to love. He had returned to the hotel room, but it wasn't the same. The space felt too small now, too quiet. The air, thick with memories of Neha, suffocated him, and he found himself sitting on the edge of the bed, staring at nothing for hours. The weight of the unsaid things, the unshared moments, pressed heavily on his chest.

Even the little things—the way she had laughed, the way her eyes sparkled when she talked about something she loved, the way she had kissed his forehead before walking out—all of it lingered in his mind, a constant echo of what could have been.

He tried to go about his days. He tried to write. He tried to find meaning in the work that had once consumed him. But every word on the page seemed hollow, every sentence empty. He didn't have the energy to put his heart into anything anymore. It was as though the parts of himself that had once been so full of purpose and drive had been hollowed out by her absence.

And yet, in the quiet of his loneliness, he couldn't help but wonder... What if she was right? What if her fears were too big to overcome? What if they weren't meant to be? The thoughts circled in his mind like vultures, but each time he tried to make sense of it, he found no answers.

Meanwhile, Neha's days were no better. The drive back to the city was silent, the roads outside her window blurry as

she stared at the passing scenery, her mind adrift in a sea of memories. Each mile she put between herself and Arjun felt like another piece of herself was being left behind.

The hotel room felt just as cold when she arrived back, even colder than it had when she first left it. She unpacked in a haze, her movements slow and automatic. But even in the quiet of her room, she couldn't escape the thoughts that haunted her. What had she done? Had she made the right decision? Could she have tried harder? Should she have let herself fall in love with him?

The questions rattled in her mind, but there was no answer. And deep down, she knew there was no easy way out of this. No amount of overthinking would change the fact that her past was too much to carry, and even though Arjun had offered her his heart, she couldn't let herself be that person. She couldn't be the one to drag him into her chaos.

A few days passed, and Neha found herself in the park near her apartment. It was the place she often went when she needed to think, when she needed space to breathe. But today, it felt more suffocating than usual. She was walking aimlessly, lost in her own thoughts, when she felt a vibration in her pocket.

Her heart skipped a beat as she pulled out her phone. The name on the screen made her stomach drop.

Arjun.

She stared at it for a moment, unsure what to do. Her fingers hovered over the screen, debating whether to answer or not. But before she could make up her mind, the phone stopped vibrating. A text notification appeared.

Arjun: I just wanted to check in. How are you?

The words were simple, but they hit her like a wave. How are you? It was so casual, yet so deeply caring. Her thumb hovered over the screen for a long time, but she couldn't bring herself to respond. Instead, she slid the phone back into her pocket, her chest tightening with the weight of the decision she had made.

She continued walking, the breeze lightly brushing against her skin, but it felt like a storm was brewing inside her.

Back in the mountains, Arjun sat on a bench near the lake, the morning sun casting long shadows across the water. It had been days since he'd last heard from Neha, and the silence was deafening. He missed her, more than he wanted to admit. He missed the way she made him feel, the way she could lift his spirits with just a smile, the way she challenged him to be better, to be more.

He had sent her that text not expecting anything in return, just hoping she was okay. But now, as he sat there alone, he couldn't help but wonder if that was the last connection they would have. He thought about the moments they shared, the way she had kissed him goodbye, and the way she had walked away.

But was it really goodbye? Was it really the end?

He didn't know. But what he did know was that he couldn't keep waiting around for an answer that might never come.

A week later, Neha found herself standing at the window of her apartment, looking out at the city below. The streets were busy, full of life, but she felt detached from it all.

Everything felt distant, like she was watching the world from behind glass, unable to reach out and touch it.

Her phone buzzed again, and this time, when she looked at the screen, she saw Arjun's name once more. Her heart skipped, but this time, she didn't hesitate. She opened the message.

Arjun: I'm going to be at the coffee shop on the corner in an hour address ka location share kar raha. If you're free, we can meet. No pressure.

A location from maps app came instantly as she completed reading this message.

For a moment, she stood frozen. A thousand thoughts ran through her mind. She hadn't seen him since the night they had said goodbye. She hadn't heard his voice in what felt like forever. And suddenly, she realized how much she missed him.

She missed the sound of his laugh, the way his eyes looked when he was genuinely happy, the warmth of his touch. She missed the simplicity of just being with him.

Neha didn't reply to the text immediately. Instead, she found herself standing there, staring out at the world that seemed so much bigger than the one she had shared with him. But in that moment, she knew something. She knew that maybe, just maybe, she wasn't done with Arjun.

Maybe it wasn't over.

The café was warm, cozy—the kind of place where love stories usually blossomed. Arjun had chosen a table by the

window, facing the door, hoping every time it creaked open. He stirred his coffee absentmindedly, eyes glued to the entrance, heart thumping at every shadow that passed.

But she didn't come.

Minutes melted into an hour. The cup before him turned cold. The hope inside him—colder.

He picked up his phone, almost by instinct, and that's when it buzzed.

Neha: I'm sorry, Arjun. It's better we don't talk again. It hurts less that way. Please take care of yourself. You'll do great things.

He stared at the screen for a long moment. Her words weren't cruel, but they carried the finality of a slammed door. No drama. No further conversation. Just the echo of her decision in a few sentences.

He didn't reply.

Instead, he left a few coins on the table, stood up slowly, and walked out.

The sky outside had turned a dull grey, thick clouds hanging low like they carried the weight of his emotions. And then it happened—without warning, the clouds burst. Heavy, unforgiving rain poured from the sky as if the universe was exhaling all at once.

He hadn't brought a jacket. Not even a hoodie.

Arjun tucked his hands into his pockets and walked, rain soaking through his thin shirt, hair sticking to his forehead. He wasn't rushing. Where would he go? The city was unfamiliar, and the emptiness inside him didn't care about getting drenched.

He found a small tin shed near an old chai stall, long closed for the night. He stood under it, shaking his wet hair off his eyes, the sound of rain hitting the metal roof loud and rhythmic.

He pulled out a crumpled cigarette from his back pocket and lit it with a half-wet matchstick. The flame danced for a second before catching. He took a long drag, the smoke mingling with the misty rain in the air, curling around his face like a sigh.

He was so lost in thought, he didn't notice the footsteps approaching.

A hand reached out, slender and firm, plucking the cigarette from his fingers and tossing it into a puddle.

He turned, startled.

A girl stood beside him, holding a large navy-blue umbrella. Her hair was tied in a low bun, a few strands loose against her cheek. She wore a dark formal coat, the collar turned up against the chill. There was something sharp about her eyes, and yet kind.

"Zyada filmy mat ban," she said softly. "Cigarette se kuch nahi badlega."

He blinked at her, still absorbing her presence.

“Main drop kar sakti hoon,” she continued. “Badi si umbrella hai mere paas. Do log aa jaate hain.”

He gave a soft, surprised smile, shaking his head slightly.

“Thanks...” he muttered, hesitating for a moment. Then added, “Main walk kar raha tha... bas.”

She looked at him for a moment longer, then tilted the umbrella gently toward him. Rain patted softly around them but left their shoulders dry.

He stepped beside her under the umbrella, and they started walking—two strangers in a city of millions, the only sound between them the splash of their feet in shallow puddles and the rhythmic tap of rain on stretched fabric.

He didn’t know her name. She didn’t ask his.

But something about the shared silence felt oddly comforting. Not heavy like before. Not numb like pain. Just... quiet. Clean. New.

Far away, high above the city, Neha stood beside the tall glass windows of her father’s company. Her internship badge hung around her neck, the logo of the conglomerate gleaming gold against her white shirt.

Her eyes drifted downward—miles of glowing city lights, headlights threading down wet streets like stars fallen to Earth. She clutched her phone in one hand, the screen still lit with the message she had sent Arjun.

The words stared back at her.

"I'm sorry, Arjun. It's better we don't talk again..."

She hadn't cried. Not today.

She was done crying.

She told herself this was for the best—for him, for her. Arjun deserved someone whose love didn't come with guilt, with restraint, with fear of breaking. She had her battles to fight, her ambitions to chase.

She turned away from the window, walking back to the conference room where her team was waiting. Her eyes were resolute. There was a presentation in an hour, and her career—her identity—was no longer going to be buried under the ruins of a love story she couldn't hold onto.

Back under the umbrella, Arjun and the girl walked slowly down a narrow lane, dim streetlights flickering above them.

He didn't look back. Not at the café, not at the road they had walked. Some stories weren't meant to be revisited. Some chapters ended not with dramatic conclusions, but with soft, silent closings.

And sometimes, that was enough.

Because even as one love story faded into memory, another had begun—without promises, without expectations.

Just a boy, a girl, and a borrowed umbrella walking through the rain.

CHAPTER 21: Cracks Beneath the Glass

Flashbulbs exploded like restless fireflies outside the Sheraton Grand. Neha stood with practiced calm behind the podium, a striking figure in a tailored ivory pantsuit. Her words cut through the media hum like glass—sharp, clear, assured.

“We’re proud to announce our company’s investment in **Velonex Robotics**, a groundbreaking initiative in clean tech and agricultural automation,” she said. “This isn’t just business. This is about reshaping the future of our country’s farming landscape.”

The press nodded, some impressed, others skeptical. Neha was unfazed.

“With this venture, we don’t just forecast profits—we promise purpose. Scalable employment, green innovation, and domestic leadership in AI-driven sustainability.”

Applause followed her exit. The cameras chased her until she disappeared into the waiting Mercedes, where Rahul, in his signature designer shirt and smug charm, already waited.

“You really love these mic drops, don’t you?” he teased.

Neha gave a half-smile. “They make for good headlines.”

They drove to a high-end bistro near Khan Market, ordered truffle pasta, smoked feta salad, and chilled rosé. The waiter bowed extra low, knowing who they were.

“Ever thought you’d be running half the city by 28?” Rahul asked, twirling spaghetti.

“I don’t run the city,” Neha said. “Just one of the empires in it.”

When the champagne came, she noticed it immediately — a diamond ring, floating in her glass like a misplaced galaxy.

She sighed. “Rahul... really?”

He shrugged, playful but hopeful. “Not an official proposal. Just... a hint. A thought. A wish.”

She stared at it a second longer.

“Don’t do that again,” she said, soft but firm. “When I want to get married, I’ll propose.”

He nodded. “I can wait.”

The rest of the lunch passed in muted tones. They tipped the waiter generously. Rahul tried to salvage the mood, but something had shifted.

When they reached his flat, he looked at her expectantly.

“I’ll pass tonight,” Neha said. “Not feeling... romantic after the ring stunt.”

He nodded slowly. “Sure. Talk later?”

“Yeah.”

The Mercedes pulled away, gliding through the city’s golden haze. Neha leaned back in silence, her phone buzzing with board updates she ignored.

She entered her father's bungalow just past twilight. The corridors smelled of lavender and old wood. Her father was in his study, swirling whiskey.

"So, we buying robotics now?" he said without looking up.

Neha took a breath. "Yes. We closed the Velonex deal. And the ad campaign spiked profits by six percent."

He gave a low grunt of approval. "Good. Just don't forget, you didn't build this empire. I did. I gave you that chair. Always be grateful for your privileges and don't let me and our company down"

She blinked. "I'm aware."

"Are you?" he looked at her finally. "Because sometimes I think you confuse talent with inheritance."

She said nothing. Just turned and walked to her room.

The ice cream was already in her mini-freezer. She pulled it out, flopped on the bed, and started JAB WE MET on Netflix. It always helped.

Until it didn't.

A scream cracked the silence. Her mother.

Neha bolted upright.

She rushed through the corridor, past the prayer room, toward the bedroom her parents shared but seldom visited together. The door was slightly ajar.

Inside, her mother was screaming—hair disheveled, clawing at her own clothes, thrashing on the bed.

Her father was holding her down, one hand fisting sleeping pills, the other trying to pry open her mouth.

“Mummy!” Neha cried out.

“She’s losing it again!” he growled. “She hasn’t taken her meds in days! Mereko takiye se dabba ke maarne wali thi”

“Leave her—just stop!”

He pushed the pills into her mouth with force and slapped her once.

Then again.

And again.

Three, four times—until her head lolled sideways on the pillow, sobs becoming groans, body going limp.

Neha stood frozen.

Numb.

“STOP IT!” she finally screamed, but he wasn’t listening.

“RAMESH!!” her father bellowed, calling for the caretaker.

The old man came running, trembling.

ABHISHEK/DESTINY

“If she misses her meds again,” her father seethed, “you won’t see another fucking sunrise. I’ll bury you in the garden.”

Ramesh nodded furiously, eyes wide with terror.

Neha couldn’t breathe. Her mother lay silently on the bed, eyes half-closed, breathing slow. Her father adjusted the bedsheet over her like it made up for everything.

Then he looked at Neha—his expression unreadable.

She turned and walked back.

Back to her room.

She locked the door and sank to the floor.

The tears came hard this time. Hot. Helpless.

The house was quiet again, like nothing had happened.

But she could still hear the echo of the slaps.

After a while, a soft knock on the door. Her father’s voice.

“Neha beta... I’m sorry. She drove me mad. You know how she is. But this is our home. Our family.”

Neha, emotional and sobbing replied, “I want to go I don’t feel safe here mujhe darr lagta hai aap dono se”.

You don’t have anywhere else to go.tumhara koi ghar nahi hai,khudki gaadi nahi hai bank account mein joh paise woh

ABHISHEK/DESTINY

bhi mere diye hue beta. No other company will let you in without me. You're still my daughter."

No response.

"You can go for a drive. Clear your head. But be back tomorrow. We forget this happened, okay? Like we always do."

The hallway fell silent.

Neha sat on the floor, arms wrapped around her knees.

The screen still played JAB WE MET — a young Geet telling Aditya how to move on.

She blinked.

Then got up.

Went to the bookshelf.

Pulled out a worn copy of MOVEON — the romcom novel Arjun had written. His name, ARJUN MALHOTRA, etched in modest silver print.

She traced her fingers along the spine.

Smiled. A real, sad smile.

Then grabbed her car keys.

She texted Rahul:

"Not feeling great tonight. Won't call. Gonna sleep early. Take care."

ABHISHEK/DESTINY

She stepped out.

Into the stillness of the Delhi night.

And drove.

Not toward anyone.

But away from something.

The Spotlight and the Speedometer

The glass walls of the studio office reflected a smoggy Mumbai skyline. Inside, under clinical white lighting, Arjun Malhotra sat across from a panel of media personnel, his fingers loosely gripping a bottle of water. There was confidence in his posture—straight back, slight tilt of the chin—but his eyes flicked once toward the floor before landing back on the smiling interviewer.

“So, Arjun,” the host began, her tone rehearsed, “from penning quirky romcoms to dabbling in psychological thrillers, now you’re stepping into direction. Tell us—what’s your debut film all about?”

Arjun leaned slightly forward, the camera catching the glint in his eyes.

“It’s a thriller... but not your usual one. It has a sci-fi twist, kuch aisa jo shayad Indian cinema mein pehle nahi hua. It’s about memory manipulation, about how what we remember—ya bhool jaate hain—can be programmed.”

“Ooh,” the host beamed, “sounds gripping!”

“Hopefully,” he chuckled, “audience bhi yahi bole.”

The interview wrapped up quickly after that. As the crew began packing, one of the older male interviewers leaned closer and, off-camera, said in a half-joking tone, “Just don’t copy it this time, okay? Heard that thriller of yours had echoes of that Korean film...”

Arjun smiled awkwardly, rubbing his temple, “Promise. Is baar original hi hoga. No shortcuts.”

The man laughed and patted his shoulder, but Arjun felt the old familiar sting under his skin—the insecurity that had never really left. He nodded politely and stepped out, the lights fading behind him.

Outside, the humid Mumbai air greeted him with its sticky embrace. He pulled out his phone, tapping Ruby’s name.

“Hey,” he said, his voice softening, “bas nikal raha hoon airport ke liye. Flight’s in an hour.”

On the other end, Ruby’s voice sparkled, “Good. Can’t wait to see you!love you baby”

Later, Delhi – Early Evening

The Indira Gandhi Airport gleamed under artificial lights. Arjun walked out with a black duffle slung over his shoulder. Ruby stood by a white Hyundai Tucson, waving

dramatically. She wore a beige crop blazer and jeans, her curls bouncing as she moved.

“Arree finally!” she opened the passenger door for him, “Mister Writer-Man, welcome back.”

“Thank you, thank you,” he gave her a tired smile, placing the bag in the backseat.

As she pulled out from the airport exit, the Delhi traffic greeted them with its usual chaos. Arjun’s hand subtly reached toward the dashboard, his eyes glued to the glowing speedometer.

“Slow na Ruby, itna kya bhaag rahi ho?” he muttered as she hit 70.

Ruby rolled her eyes. “Arjun, this is Delhi. 70 is normal.”

“Normal mere liye anxiety ka trigger hai. Please 60 ke upar mat ja.”

She laughed but dropped the speed a little. “You’re such a dadi sometimes.”

Arjun didn’t reply. He kept glancing sideways, his right hand fidgeting with the seatbelt strap as if bracing for impact.

An Upscale Restaurant – South Delhi

Ruby parked in front of a luxurious, dimly lit restaurant that smelled of imported cheese and overly perfumed

colognes. A valet opened Arjun's door, and he stepped out hesitantly.

"Ye jagah toh bohot hi... fancy hai," he said, looking up at the grand façade.

"Exactly," she smiled, grabbing his hand, "you deserve this. You're a filmmaker now."

He paused. "Filmmaker banna easy laga jab tak bill nahi aata."

She sighed. "Don't do this now."

He chuckled, half serious. "Writer hoon Ruby. Fame milti hai, paisa nahi. Anniversary pe movie chalein kya? Or a cozy café maybe?"

Her brows furrowed. "We're not here to act broke, Arjun. Can't we just celebrate your success?"

He raised both palms. "Theek hai, theek hai. Let's go."

Inside, they sat by a window. Waiters glided like ghosts, and the lighting made everything seem softer. Ruby was glowing as she narrated her plans for the next month.

"I'm going to tell mom and dad about us," she said mid-bite, her fork paused mid-air. "During your announcement event."

Arjun nearly choked on his risotto. "Woh... abhi?"

“Of course now. When else? You’re doing so well. It’s the perfect time. december tak shaadi and then we can start a family.”

He looked at her, unsure, calculating.

“Ruby, ek minute. Tumne yeh socha ki hum kahaan rahenge? You’re in Delhi, I’m in Mumbai. Expenses, careers—”

“You think I haven’t?” she said, voice rising. “You think I’m some impulsive teenager living in fairy tales?”

He lowered his voice, trying to remain calm. “Main bas keh raha hoon ki... shaadi is not just love. It’s planning. Stability. I’m not ready to rush. Thoda time dete hai baad mein sochte hai iss baare mein. Aadhi shaadiya divorce mein jaati cause unki timing aur planning sahi nahi hoti paise nahi hai almony choro reception tak ka nahi pay kar paunga”

Her eyes flared. “You’re not ready for commitment. Just say it.”

“Ruby—”

“Don’t ‘Ruby’ me. I’m not ‘just anyone’, Arjun. I’m your girlfriend. You don’t plan marriage with someone you like—you do it with someone you love. Aur haa ek aur baat, Divorce happens when respect is lost, not money.”

With that, she stood up, flung her napkin on the table, and stormed out. The sound of her heels echoing on the marble floor left him cold.

Arjun sighed and looked at the waiter awkwardly.

“Bhai, bill le aana please.”

Later – In a Cab Alone

Arjun sat in the back of the cab, his head leaned against the glass. The city lights smeared past like fading memories. He pulled out his phone, opened the voice notes, and started sending messages.

“Yaar Ruby... I’m sorry na... main idiot hoon, main jaanta hoon...”

Another note.

“I really do love you. Main sirf... I overthink too much. Tu toh jaanti hai...”

And another.

“Next time, tujhe best jagah le jaunga. No budget talks. No anxiety. Bas tu aur main.”

He stared at the phone screen, waiting for the double ticks to turn blue. They didn’t.

Neha is sitting on her open roof car smoking a cigarette and wearing a jacket over her croptop and shorts from her night tracks. She takes out the flower from his book. The flower that he gave her was still there in her heart. Suddenly, a cab passed by the empty highway near which she stopped. The cab stopped at a distance and came back in reverse. She felt

uncomfortable and scared. She went and brought out a bat kept under the driving seat for her safety. Suddenly she saw someone who made her calm and smile just with his presence, it was Arjun, she threw the bat inside and the book on the seat closed. He came and they felt awkward seeing each other but blushed like they were lovers since ages.

They began talking—slow, easy conversation as they caught up. Her voice, despite the distance, still had that same warmth. There was a strange joy in seeing each other again after all these years.

And then the moment was interrupted. Her phone rang. It was Rahul. She answered it with a sigh.

“I’m fine. I just need some space,” she said, her voice strained.

After hanging up, Neha looked at Arjun, as if he could somehow understand what had just happened.

“I need space,” she murmured. “Can’t you tell?”

Arjun nodded, his heart sinking. He had always wondered if this day would come—if they’d ever meet again like this. They’d both changed, but some things never did.

They continued talking, and when the conversation tapered off, Neha asked, “Where do you need to go?”

Arjun blinked, the question catching him off guard. “Airport,” he replied softly.

Ruby had blocked him. He needed to go back to Mumbai, there was no guarantee she'd be waiting for him maybe, she was done with his excuses this time so he didn't even bother to go to her house and make things right or maybe he was just tired of her and wanted to focus on his dreams.

He took out the suitcase from his cab that he pulled all way from restaurant feeling embarassed in front of millionaires. he paid the cab driver and apologised him for ending the trip sooner.

Neha nodded, starting the car. The drive to the airport was quiet. When they arrived, Arjun grabbed his suitcase, He turned to Neha one last time.

“Goodbye, Neha.”

There was something heavy in her chest as she watched him go. The goodbye felt different this time—final, almost. But it was necessary.

Arjun turned and walked away, disappearing into the airport, leaving Neha with that hollow, aching feeling.

Chapter 22: The Breaking Point

Arjun's Side – Mumbai

After returning to Mumbai, Arjun drowns himself in the chaos of film sets and editing rooms. He's back on the floor, giving instructions to his team, checking lighting setups, and reviewing scenes with the cinematographer. His eyes are focused, but his mind drifts—especially during quiet lunch breaks and those long drives home from the studio.

Ruby calls. Again and again. He answers a few times—short replies, dry tones.

Ruby (on call): "Are you avoiding me, Arjun?"

Arjun: "I'm just... busy. Lot on my plate."

Ruby: "Right. Your plate never had space for us, did it?"

Eventually, he stops picking up. When her name flashes on his screen again, he just stares.

That evening, he types out a long message. Pauses. Deletes it. Types again:

"I'm sorry Ruby. You're amazing and you deserve someone who's not constantly fighting ghosts. I'm not that person. I hope you find someone who loves you louder and clearer than I ever could. I need to focus on my life right now."

He sends it. Then sits still.

He takes a deep breath and opens WhatsApp. He was free of her, maybe yes in a guilt but he was happy he didn't waste anymore of her time and gave her false hope of marriage cause he was still stuck on that one girl whom he never got a chance to even say I love you.

"Hey... Mumbai aana chahegi?"

He sends it to Neha.

Neha's Side – Delhi

At the office, Neha's buried in files, headphones in. Her phone buzzes. A message from Arjun. She doesn't open it yet.

That's when Rahul storms into her cabin, face flushed.

Rahul: "Bas kar yaar! Do you even care about this relationship?"

Neha: "Rahul, not now—"

Rahul: "Why? Because you're too busy ignoring me? You haven't called, messaged... You think I'm a joke?"

Neha stands up slowly, keeping her calm.

Neha: "You feel ignored? I feel suffocated. I started this relationship, main initiate ki thi, and I'm the one who kept trying even when I felt bored... disconnected. And even after all this, I stayed—because I didn't want to hurt you."

Rahul looks stunned.

Neha: "You say I don't open up? Every time I got close to being vulnerable, you started kissing me. You turned every emotional moment into a physical one. You never gave me the space to talk."

He tries to speak, but she cuts him off.

Neha: "You need to leave, Rahul. Now. Or I'll call security."

He leaves, slamming the door behind him.

She finally opens her phone. Reads Arjun's message. A pause. Then:

"Kab bulare ho?"

She didn't feel a guilt but a sense of relief after throwing him out of his life. She wanted peace and happiness at this point of life. She was done with all the drama and corporate life she has been living since her internship. She wanted to breakfree and go on a trip again. Meet that childhood friend again and have fun while watching peaceful sunsets. That's the reason she gave to herself and her consciousness instead of acknowledging the fact she hasn't completely moved on from that maybe mr perfect for her.

The room was dimly lit by the yellow glow of the table lamp. Neha sat cross-legged on the floor, clothes spread around her. She folded her favourite blue kurta—Arjun had once teased her in it, calling her "angry Smurf" during their Manali trip—and tucked it gently into the suitcase.

Her playlist played softly in the background—an old Prateek Kuhad song about falling in love at the wrong time.

She zipped the bag shut with a sigh.

That's when the door creaked open.

Her father stood at the threshold, arms crossed, face stiff.

Father: "tumhare assitant ne bola mumbai jaa rahi. Kiske liye?"

Neha didn't respond. She just turned toward the closet to grab her charger.

Father (voice rising): "Office ka junior kam tha kya? Ab kya peon ko bhi date karogi? tumhare andar thodi sii bhi izzat hai? Ya modern banne ke chakkar mein sab kuch bech do apna?"

She froze.

Her fingers tightened around the charging cable. She blinked twice—rapidly—to push the tears back. He stepped inside now, the volume increasing with every word.

Father: "Tum jaisi ladkiyan na naam bigaadti hain maa baap ka. Purre office mein baat phel gayi woh aur tum har din saath me jaate the gaadi. Did you guys become physical with each other?"

Still, she didn't speak.

He waited for a reaction—maybe a scream, maybe guilt. But she just stood up, wiped her cheeks quietly, and lifted her bag.

No goodbye. No fight. No words.

ABHISHEK/DESTINY

Just a long, hollow stare that said everything without a single syllable.

She walked past him.

Her heels echoed through the hallway. Her mother peeked out from the kitchen, eyes filled with helplessness. But Neha didn't stop. She opened the main door, stepped out into the dark verandah, and slammed it shut behind her.

The silence that followed in the house was deafening.

Outside, the night air was cold and dry. She walked to the gate, where the cab was waiting.

The driver helped with her luggage.

She slid into the back seat, leaned her head against the window, and closed her eyes. But the tears came anyway—silently, in soft trembles.

She didn't look back even once.

The cab turns toward the highway. The city blurs past.

Her phone buzzes. A message from Arjun.

“Flight ka time bhej dena. I'll come pick you up.”

She stares at the screen for a moment... then types:

“Already boarded. Land karte hi milti hoon. landing time:12:30 am”

ABHISHEK/DESTINY

And she lets her head fall back.

For the first time in weeks, her breath feels a little lighter.

CHAPTER 23: MUMBAI

12:30 AM – Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport

The airport was quieter than usual, but Neha still felt the strange chaos of her emotions tightening around her. Her phone buzzed.

"Cab is at Gate B. I'm wearing a black hoodie. Don't worry, I didn't drive." – Arjun.

As she stepped outside with her duffle, she saw him getting out of the backseat of an Uber. He wasn't smiling wide or waving—just standing there, looking at her like he'd been waiting for this moment for a long time.

Arjun: "Hey."

Neha: "Hi."

No dramatic hugs. No awkward stares. Just a weirdly comforting silence between them as he took her bag and nodded toward the cab.

1:15 AM – Arjun's Flat, Andheri West

The cab dropped them off at a cozy 1BHK tucked inside a quiet lane. The flat smelled like books and instant coffee. The bookshelf was overflowing, and sticky notes were scattered all over the walls like a madman's storyboard.

Arjun (fumbling): “It’s not fancy... just enough for one struggling storyteller.”

Neha (softly): “It’s... very you.”

He placed her bag in the corner. She sat on the bed, clearly exhausted.

Arjun: “Tu bed le le. Main sofa pe so jaunga.”

Neha (smirking): “Still afraid of sharing a bed with me?”

Arjun (half-smile): “Still afraid of dreaming too much.”

He watched from the bedroom door as she lay down and drifted into sleep, wrapped in his faded blue blanket. She looked peaceful, maybe the most peaceful he'd seen her in years. He leaned against the doorframe, whispering to himself:

“pata nahi ye movie kabhi complete kar paunga ya nahi par tum meri life ki favourite kahani rahogi”

8:30 AM – The Next Morning

A horn from the street jolted them both awake. Mumbai was already bustling.

Neha: “Yeh sheher sota kab hai?”

Arjun: “Tu aa gayi hai, ab yeh bhi nahi soyega.”

They grabbed breakfast downstairs—cutting chai and vada pav—and then set out for a day he hadn’t planned minute by minute, but had visualized many times.

11:00 AM – National Museum of Indian Cinema

Their first stop. Arjun's eyes lit up more than hers. He took her from floor to floor like a child guiding his parent through a science fair.

He showed her vintage cameras, old film posters, handwritten scripts, and editing tables from the black-and-white era. They even stood still at the Satyajit Ray section for longer than expected.

Neha: "I can see why you fell for this world."

Arjun: "It didn't give me much back... but I still want to marry it someday."

Neha (smiling): "And I thought I was the dramatic one."

2:00 PM – St. Mary's Church, Bandra

They walked around the peaceful compound, soaking in the calm. Neha lit a candle, not saying what for.

Arjun didn't ask. Maybe he didn't need to.

3:00 PM – Mannat & Bandstand

They passed Mannat, peering through the gate like tourists. Neha clicked a photo of Arjun with Shah Rukh's nameplate in the background.

Neha: "bachpan mein meri mannat thi ki main srk ke bday pe idhar aake photo khchwau uske saath. Toh papa ne

ABHISHEK/DESTINY

siddhe ghar ke andar dinner karwa diya dining table pe
saath mei photo hai meri aur iski bachpan ki”

Arjun (laughing): “Mannat toh meri bhi hai... bas andar
nahi, uske baahar photo khinchwa raha hoon.”

They walked across Bandstand, wind in their hair, the sea
beside them roaring with the secrets of countless lovers.

4:30 PM – Bandra Fort

Up on the hill, overlooking the sea and the Bandra-Worli
Sea Link, they sat on a broken ledge.

The city stretched in front of them like a film set—busy,
surreal, shimmering.

Neha: “Yeh sheher tujhe thoda akela nahi karta?”

Arjun: “Karta hai... lekin tu jab saath ho toh shor kam lagta
hai.”

6:00 PM – Marine Drive

They didn’t talk much now. It wasn’t necessary.

They sat quietly, side by side, unwrapping their Cassata ice
creams. Watching the sunset melt into the Arabian Sea,
they let the moment breathe without poking it.

Neha slowly leaned in and rested her head on his shoulder.

He didn’t move. He didn’t speak. He just sat there—eyes
closed, Cassata ice cream in each other’s hand forgotten—

listening to the waves and the heartbeat of the girl beside him.

7:15 PM – Marine Drive, Mumbai

The sun had dipped below the sea, leaving behind streaks of orange and violet across the horizon. The city lights had started flickering one by one, like stars waking up in a different sky. Neha still had her head resting on Arjun's shoulder. Neither of them had spoken in the last twenty minutes.

Neha (softly): “Yahan baithke lagta hai jaise sab thoda thoda theek ho raha hai.”

Arjun (looking at her): “Kabhi kabhi kuch jagah logon se zyada samajhdaar hoti hai.”

They didn't need more words. The city was speaking for them — the honking cars in the distance, the crashing waves, the laughter of strangers sitting a few steps away. It was the kind of silence that heals, not the one that weighs heavy.

8:00 PM – Small Local Diner, Versova

They stopped for a quiet dinner at a no-frills Goan-Portuguese diner Arjun swore by. The waiter recognised him.

Waiter: “Sahab, aaj kisi khaas ko laye ho?”

Arjun smiled. “Haan. Duniya se khaas.”

They ordered prawn curry rice and bebinca for dessert. Neha looked around the place — mismatched tablecloths, yellowed movie posters, an old jukebox playing Lag Ja Gale.

Neha: “Is this your secret date place?”

Arjun: “Nahi. Pehli baar kisi ko yahan laya hoon.”

She looked at him for a second longer than she should have. He didn’t flinch.

10:30 PM – Back at Arjun’s Flat

They came home tired but happy. The kind of tired that settles deep in your bones but leaves your heart feeling strangely light.

As Arjun was making tea, Neha stood at the door of the kitchen, watching him.

Neha: “Tu itna badal gaya hai... aur fir bhi waise ka waisa hai.”

He handed her the cup silently, the steam curling like memories in the air.

Arjun: “Bas dikhne mein hi badla hoon. Andar ka same broken draft hoon.”

They sat on the floor, sipping tea. The lights were dim. A soft song played from Arjun’s speaker.

A few seconds passed.

Neha (looking into her cup): “Kal jaana hai kya shoot pe?”

Arjun (without looking at her): “Nahi. Kal sirf tere liye chhutti li hai.”

Neha: “Aur parso?”

He stayed quiet for a beat. Then:

Arjun: “Agar tu keh de toh har din chhutti le sakta hoon.”

She didn't respond. But she didn't need to. Her eyes softened as she looked at him — not with the passion of romance, but the tenderness of a story you never want to finish.

CHAPTER 24: ACCIDENT

The night air is thick with the rush of Mumbai traffic. The city seems loud, but in this moment, everything feels muted around them. They've left the producer's house and are in the back of a cab, the hum of the engine almost drowned by the noise in Arjun's head. He watches the passing cars blur past, his body rigid as the cab drives on. His chest tightens watching so many cars moving so fast. Neha watches his restlessness while calling for cabs, casually trying to lighten the air:

“Arjun, relax yaar, auto le lete hain. It's fine.”

“Nahi, cab hi lete hain. Zyada comfortable hai.”

They sit at the back seat of the cab that stopped just in front of them to earn some money before he goes off duty. As the cab moves, it slowly starts accelerating. With every distance covered at high speed, Arjun is getting more anxious. He starts sweating from his head. He is totally putting his eyes on the speedometer. The moment it got to 80, he shouts at the driver for over-speeding. The driver explained to them that this is a flyover; here, anything below 80 will risk an accident. He didn't reply to this. His eyes were looking all around like a big threat was looming over them.

“Arjun, tum theek ho?”

“Haa, I am fine.”

But his head was sweating, he was slowly losing his mind and wanted to get out of the car as fast as possible.

Finally, the car reached the destination: Vamika Apartments, Lokhandwala. As they reached his flat and opened the door, she could clearly see that Arjun was upset about something and wasn't looking like the same glittering, smiley guy she was friends with. During this whole trip, she didn't think of the breakup or what was happening in her house; there were no sad feelings or overthinking about her past or actions during these last few days. She felt peaceful, but his stressed face made her think that there was something inside him which was haunting him. She could see it clearly, just like she saw years ago when she met a stranger on the pavement smoking a cigarette.

He slowly went outside to the small balcony in his home and stood there silently looking at the streets. He slowly took out his wallet and looked over the photos of his small family. His father and mom were standing, putting their hands over his head, while he was quirkily smiling and putting a thumbs up for the world to see that he was happy with his family and there was nothing in the world more important to him than his parents. Slowly, tears started running from his eyes, and he fell down on his knees, breaking down like a small child sobbing for chocolates. Neha watched him breaking down from a distance. He closed the sliding door so that she couldn't enter the small balcony. She stood at the other side, watching him cry and sob. He was down on the floor, beating his hands on it like a mad man. She couldn't control herself anymore; she started beating the mirror of the sliding door and asking him to open the door. She wanted to be there for him, just like before, but she couldn't until he opened the door. He was lying on the floor, facing the dark skies, out of breath and still crying but slowly noticed her panicking inside and knocking on the door. He opened it by raising himself, and he tightly hugged her like she was the only thing that could

make him not jump from the thing called hope in life. Her dress was filled with tears, and it felt like she wanted to hold him and tell him that everything would be good, but she didn't because she didn't know the reason for the sobbing. She just stood there to support him and make him feel like he is not alone. He fell to his knees again, but she, just like a mother, took him onto her thighs and caressed him into ease. He slowly started to slow down and stop his anxious body from being like a child. She was patting him and caressing him by running her fingers through his hair. She didn't complain or say a word; she just wanted to be there. Arjun stayed curled up in Neha's lap, the tremors in his body slowly fading as her soothing touch grounded him. Outside, the city's chaotic noise seeped through the glass, but inside this small balcony, time seemed to slow down. The tension in his shoulders eased little by little, but the haunted look in his eyes didn't fully vanish.

After a long silence, his voice cracked as he finally whispered, "I killed my dad and mom, Neha. I can't keep living like this. I feel the biggest guilt, and it's eating me up every day."

Neha is in shock. How can such a good soul kill his own parents? She removed her hands from his face. She felt scared by listening to this, but she kept it back when he continued what happened.

"After the breakup with Rhea, main ghar gaya tha taaki better feel ho. Udhar jaake I felt ki there is something missing after she left. We texted for a while; woh normal thi. Uske baad one morning, mom and dad asked me if main unhe mandir lekar jaa sakta hu yaa nahi. I said yes. Gaadi mein baithne se pehle I saw a snap jisme there was this another guy and a good cafe. Mereko jalan hui but

more than that, main udaas ho gaya. Mera chehra papa mummy dono ko dikh raha tha par maine unki baatein ignore ki. Main gaadi chalata raha, 70, 80 phir kab speed 140 chala gaya NH pata nahi chala. The only thing on my mind was her face and our memories. Main saamne kaun aa raha tha, kaun piche se horn maar raha tha, kuch nahi sun raha tha na dekh raha tha. I zoned out. Saamne turning, papa ne steering turn ki kyuki main soch mein dubba tha. Papa ne thapad maarke bola gaadi rokne side mein. I started arguing with him to let me drive. 'Main karlunga papa, aap chill karo,' I said to him. My mother at the back seat was looking at us fighting because of me being irresponsible. She tried to reason with me and asked me to stop as I looked out of place today. I turned behind and I shouted at her to just keep quiet and drive. Purre time iss behes mein maine speed slow nahi ki. Suddenly a truck came and struck us from the left. Papa mummy died on the spot while I was left alive. Khoon bahut nikla, dard bhi hua mujhse par uske baad se jab bhi gaadi mein baith tha hu ya aaspaas rehta hu, unka chehra dikhta hai, how I failed them and killed them due to my irresponsibility. I wanted someone to calm me down. I started feeling suicidal after that. Maine aapni ex ko call kiya, usne call nahi uthaya. Property, paise sab mil gaye. Socha college jaunga, I will recover with friends, nahi hua. I still felt guilt and shame for my mistakes. Summer internship to keep myself busy but nothing helped me. I thought Rhea se Delhi jaake milke if I make things right, atleast ek insaan toh rahega who will understand, make me feel like I didn't kill them, but usne kabhi call nahi uthaya na text ka reply diya even after she knew I was suffering from depression. Then I met you, and you left me again. Everyone leaves me. Why does everybody abandon me? Why am I not worthy of love that lies with me for a long time?" he started crying again due to his abandonment issues.

She saw him crying. He blamed her for something that she did. She felt his hurt because she was abandoned by everyone during her childhood. This new friend circle, the guys who started trying on her, were all due to her changed looks and sense of humour; otherwise, she was someone who never experienced love and care from anyone, let alone a friendship in childhood. He was the only one who gave her that respect for a while; she shouldn't have at least cut him off. She couldn't reply to him anything. She sat there trying to shush him and ask him to release everything.

She touched her forehead to his, "Arjun, look at me, tumne kuch galat nahi kiya hai. Your mom and dad loved you a lot. Tumne ek galti kardi doesn't mean tumne murder kiya hai unka. Sab theek hai. They are proud of you. They don't want you to cry. Idhar dekho, let it go. Tumhari galti nahi thi unki maut, truck wale ne maara tha. Just let it go. I won't abandon you now. I am here. Come here, hug me."

Arjun, like a teenager, asked for reassurance, "Pakka nahi jayegi chorke?"

Neha, with a smile and the tightest hug possible, whispered in his ears, "Kabhi nahi. I will always be your best friend. When you need me, main aaungi humesha."

He feels happy while crying. The tears turned sweet now. She kissed him on his forehead to calm him down and let the world be normal for him again. She is happy to see him slowly become normal. She kissed him on his cheeks as a friendly gesture and asked him if he would like to have margherita pizza or tandoori pizza for dinner. They stood there on the balcony, discussing what they would order and what to put as a topping on their pizza.

He was looking at her with admiration. Maybe after so many years, he felt someone who really would not leave him alone, whom he can trust easily, someone who won't leave him midway and move on from him, someone who does value his time and care. He wanted to confess again, but he won't make the same mistakes twice, so he kept quiet and listened to her talking all about what kind of pizza they were going to eat.

He finally could take the lid off and release the guilt he has been holding only in front of her. In his heart, he decided that he could feel complete with her and there is no one else who made the world for him. Destiny brought them together again so that they live together forever. He just wanted to wait for the right moment when she realizes the same again.

Chapter 25: Lag Ja Gale

The morning sun crawled lazily across the Mumbai skyline when Arjun unlocked the gates of his rented apartment, he was knocking his bedroom door locked from inside by sleeping Neha. When the door is opened, he is shocked to find her all dressed up, wearing a cute crop top with a denim jeans, her hair all curled up and makeup perfect just like her.

"Get ready. Tumhe Lonavala le jaa rahi hoon," she declared like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Arjun blinked, disheveled in his slept-in T-shirt. "Tu pagal hai kya? Abhi 9 baje hain. Aur kaun Lonavala leke jaata hai bina bataye? Sunday hai aaram karte hai soone ka mann hai"

"Main," she grinned. "Aur tu jaa raha hai. No questions."

Within an hour, a suitcase was hastily packed, jackets and chargers stuffed alongside instant coffee sachets and Neha's emergency wine bottle. The city slowly thinned behind them, replaced by winding roads framed by lush green hills, mist weaving through tall trees like forgotten dreams. They were driving and enjoying Neha's playlist throughout the journey inside the rented Honda city Neha ordered online for 2 days.

Neha rested her legs on the dashboard, oversized sunglasses hiding tired eyes that hadn't slept well in days. Arjun glanced at her while driving, his fingers lightly tapping to the beat of an old Lucky Ali track playing on the radio.

They reached the hills by noon. Their resort stood quietly at the edge of a cliff, the valley stretching into infinity. Neha walked ahead, swiping her credit card at the reception before Arjun could protest. They dumped their suitcase in the wooden cottage-style room. Two large glass windows let in golden light and the sound of birdsong. On the table rested two complimentary juice bottles and a note that said: "A getaway to remember."

The afternoon bled into adventures — zip-lining over the forest canopy, their screams echoing across the valley. Neha, windblown and laughing, looked freer than he had seen her in years. Arjun clicked candid pictures of her chasing fireflies on a sunset trail, the sky ablaze in amber and orange. As darkness crept over the hills, they returned to their room, both dusted with mud and joy.

Dinner was in a garden café lit by fairy lights and candles. They sat across from each other, sharing a plate of pasta, clinking their wine glasses after every sarcastic toast.

"To tumhari bekaar writing skills," Neha said with mock formality.

"To tumhari non-existent singing talent," Arjun retorted.

She narrowed her eyes. "Bet lagayein? Jo zyada pee kar sambhal gaya, jeet gaya."

He smirked. "Game on."

Glasses refilled. Laughter turned to giggles. The candle between them flickered like a hesitant heartbeat. She leaned forward, cheeks flushed.

"Tumhare saath... sab easy lagta hai, Arjun. Like... duniya thodi kam toxic ho gayi ho," she whispered.

His smile softened. "Toh rukh ja. Yeh trip sirf yaadon ke liye mat bana. I swear I will be better than all your exes I promise"

She didn't respond.

Instead, back in their room, she connected her phone to the Bluetooth speaker. A familiar tune filled the silence.

"Lag ja gale ke phir yeh haseen raat ho na ho..."

He turned. She was standing near the window, arms outstretched, looking straight at him. The song swelled, heavy with longing.

"Dance karein?" she asked.

He walked up. Hands slid onto waists, fingers interlocked. Their bodies moved slowly, rhythmlessly. Eyes met. No words. Only breath, song, and memories.

She leaned in and kissed him. Not drunk, not rushed — but aching. He kissed back, lips tasting of wine and unspoken fears. They stumbled onto the bed between kisses and clothes, but somewhere between her laughter and his warmth, she passed out — mid-kiss, mid-confession. He looked at her sleeping form — lips parted, cheeks pink, hair

messy on his pillow. He smiled and pulled the blanket over them both.

The morning was gentler. Sunlight poured through the curtains like a quiet blessing. Neha stirred first, blinking at the ceiling before turning to find him sleeping, his arm lazily wrapped around her waist. She leaned in and kissed his forehead.

He opened his eyes. "Good morning, Mrs. Secretive."

She chuckled. "Good morning, Mr. Emotional."

They are cuddling like there is no tomorrow, tight and warm. It felt like time stopped for both of them at that instance, there was no world except those arms of Arjun pressing her belly and those soft touch of lips over her neck and ear. She giggled and found him to be the most cutest creature ever. Suddenly a voice in Arjun's head speaks out a right question to her, "aisa kya hai joh tumhe daarata hai maine dekha hai tumne kabhi aapne bachpan ke baare mein baat nahi ki hai, kya chupa rahii aisa kya dard hai joh ab tak bhula nahi paayi?" she stops him and gets up on bed, sits down with her back supported from behind by a pillow.

"tum janna chahte ho toh suno".

Her father sat on the floor, back against the wall. Two empty whiskey bottles lay near his feet. A third was open. His shirt was unbuttoned. His eyes weren't blinking. And on his lap... was a gun. Not pointed. Just resting there. In his hand. Like an extension of his thoughts.

Her mother stood to the side — not yelling. Not moving.
Just quietly crying into the edge of her saree.

Neha's voice caught in her throat.

“P-papa?” she whispered.

He looked up at her. His eyes were haunted — not angry,
but hollow. Like someone was home, but the windows had
all been boarded shut.

He didn't speak.

He didn't smile.

He just looked at her.

Neha felt something inside her shift — an understanding
her age wasn't ready for, but her heart couldn't ignore.

She didn't know why her legs were shaking.

She didn't know why her chest hurt.

But for the first time in her life—

She felt like the world was no longer safe.

And the note in her hand — the one with Arjun's address
— began to crumple under her trembling fingers.

It slipped down from her hand as she saw her mother
trembling with fear and sobbing on ground after she begged
by pleading on his feet for apology and was thrown with
disrespect.

"Mumma, kya hua? Aap ro kyun rahi ho?" Neha had asked
innocently.

Her father didn't look at her. “Neha, jao... Raj ko bulao.”

She ran outside and called Raj, the driver.

He entered, saw her mother sobbing, and immediately went
to console her. Her father looked broken, hollowed out
from the inside.

He ordered Neha to leave and shut the door. But she stayed.
Listening.

Screams followed.

Affair. Ten years. Doubts if Neha was even his daughter.

Raj offering to leave with his family. Her father demanding
what family.

Raj: "Neha aur uski maa mere saath reh lenge. Tum toh paise wale ho, ek aur biwi mil jaayegi."

Then — a gunshot.

Neha burst into the room to find her mother on top of Raj's body, crying like her soul had been ripped out.

She fainted.

Later, her father covered up the murder. Her mother was institutionalized. And Neha? She was never allowed out of his sight again.

"uske baad bahut baar mummy ne papa ko maarne ki koshish ki, she was suffering from many things mentally, she could never let that out, maine dheere dheere bhulana start kiya par mummy papa ke constant ladaai ne kabhi bhulane nahi diya, uske baad toxic relationships, kisine thapar mara kisine gaali dii kisine slut shame kiya inn sab cheezon ne kabhi mere andar se woh darr nahi nikalne diya joh papa ne daala tha."

"chor kyu nahi deti ghar agar itna dard chupa hai unn kamro mein." he replied while consoling her.

"chorna chaha bahut baar, par har baar lachar thi, mere pass paise nahi the to survive on my own, job bhi papa ne apni company mein lagwayi and never let me have a house outside, agar main bahar jaane ka baat karti toh emotional blackmail ya dhamki deke rol lete the, I have always been a shadow of his, unke bina main kuch bhi nahi hu, har trip joh main jaati thi who ghar se durr bhaagne ke liye jaati thi who bhi papa ko batake unn dono ki ladaai khatam hii hui thi, main roone wali thi jab papa ne mujhe dekha, sambhala aur samjhaya kaise mummy ne dawai nahi lii aur unhe maarne lagi toh uske badle me he had to slap her"

She breaks down a little bit on his arms.

“ I asked him papa bahar ghumke aau mai manali jaungi agar aapko problem na hoo mujhe bhulana abhi joh kuch hua. Unhone haa ki gaale lagake par ye bhi bola ki 1 hafte ke andar aa jaane warna agar unko dhundne aana pade toh bahut burra hoga“

He couldn't make things in right in her past but he could hold her now, Arjun rubbed her back and head, he did everything in his control to calm the person he loved down and be happy again.

“ chor do,ek nayi life start karo, mera ek dost hai mumbai mein, rahul,marketing mein hai, he is looking for someone, main bolta hu usse for you, cut your dad off”

“itna aasan nahi hai, tumhe samajhte nahi hoo, koi nahi samajhta meri baaton ko”.

These words hurt him, the person he loved, the only one he cares about just said that he doesn't understand her. He kept quiet trying to keep her in his arms. Suddenly doorbell ringed,both of them got alarmed.

Neha's brows furrowed. She sat up, listening.

“Koi aaya,” she whispered.

Arjun threw on his T-shirt and walked towards the door, still rubbing sleep from his eyes.

A sharp knock.

He paused. Looked back at her.

“Tum yahin raho,” he said quietly.

He opened the door.

And there he was — towering, dressed in a crisp white shirt, anger pulsing behind bloodshot eyes. Neha’s father.

His presence filled the doorway like a stormcloud. Behind him were none of his boydguard. He came all the way alone so that no one knows whom was he going to meet.

His gaze swept the room — unmade bed, Neha in an oversized shirt, Arjun standing protectively near the entrance.

Then his eyes locked onto hers.

“Yeh kaun hai?” His voice was low, restrained, like a match about to strike.

Neha froze. Her expression changed — not to fear, but to something colder. Older.

She stood like a stone on the bed sitting with nightsuit that arjun forcefully made her wear after passing out drunk last night, he walked up behind Arjun and revoled around him with suspicion like he was a murderer, she replied in a flat voice, “Sirf ek friend hai.”

Her father stepped in. Shut the door behind him.

"Ek friend?" His voice cracked louder. “Hotel room mein raat guzarna dosti ke definition mein aata hai ab?”

Arjun flinched, but Neha didn't.

He took a step forward. "Uncle, please—"

"Tum beech mein mat bolo," her father snapped. "Tumhare jaise logo se main muh nahi lagta"

Neha's voice trembled, but she stood her ground. "Aapko pata kaise chala main yahan hoon?"

He sneered. "Tum samajhti ho tum smart ho? Credit card ka bill dekha. Dikh gaya kis hotel mein payment hua. Dimag use karo kabhi."

His eyes burned into her. "Tumhari maa ke jaise hi ho tum. Naak mein dum kar diya. Dumb and spoilt!"

Arjun stepped between them. "Enough. Please leave. Neha kisi ki zarurat nahi hai jeene ke liye. Na aapke paision ki. Na aapke ghar ki."

Her father glared at him.

"Agar aapne isse emotionally manipulate karne ki koshish ki," Arjun said, voice calm but firm, "toh mujhse burra koi nahi hoga. Yeh spoilt nahi hai. Yeh broken hai, aapki wajah se. Aur yeh sambhal sakti hai khud ko. Aap hoo badtameez bachalan aur duniya ke sabse kharab pita, kabhi pyaar rakha hota bina daara ke isse toh samajh aata ki ye har pal ghar chorke trip pe kyu jaati hai aap fail kiye ho mr singhania as a father she never failed u as a daughter usne aapka buisness expand kiya usne kabhi aapke parivar ke naam pe ek aanch nahi aane di na kabhi aapke bartav aur ghar me hoti ladai ko duniya ke saamne aane diya u failed as a father mr singhania"

Silence.

Then — a slap. Sharp and sudden. Arjun's head jerked to the side.

Before anyone could react, a second slap landed.

Neha screamed, grabbing her father's raised hand just before it landed on her.

"Mat kijiye!" she hissed. "Nahi toh main sab bata dungī. Sab kuch. Driver ke saath kya kiya tha us din. Uski laash ko kaise chupaya tha. Sab."

Her father froze.

For the first time in years — he looked shaken.

His hand dropped. His mouth opened, but no words came out.

"Nikal jaayiye," she said, her voice cold, final. "Aur kabhi wapas mat aaiyega."

He looked at her. Then at Arjun.

Then, quietly, he turned and left.

The door clicked shut.

Neha turned to Arjun, who was holding his cheek, blood running from his nose. She rushed to him, gently wiping his face with the end of her sleeve.

ABHISHEK/DESTINY

“Tum pagal ho?” she whispered, voice shaking. “Tumne... mere liye—”

He smiled faintly, despite the pain. “Tum mere liye ho.”

Her breath caught.

And this time — she didn’t hold back.

She kissed him hard, tears on her face, hands on his jaw like she could fix the pain with just her touch. He kissed her back, his arms wrapping around her like home.

And in that moment — there were no ghosts.

Just the two of them. Real. Fierce. Free

CHAPTER 26: ONE MORE GOODBYE

The morning light in Arjun's apartment felt warmer than usual — like a soft hand on the shoulder. But inside me, there was a strange ache, one that I knew wasn't sadness exactly... it was clarity. The kind that knocks gently at first, then slowly fills your chest. It had been weeks since that incidence at hotel in Lonavala, I was finally free, happy and there was no pressure of anything. I felt like my best version of myself, I was getting a job that I always wanted to do.

Arjun was still asleep, lying on his side, his arm stretched where I used to be.

I stood near the kitchen counter, backpack ready, hair still wet from the shower, heart heavier than it had been in a long while.

I poured him his usual coffee. Two spoons of sugar. Just the way he likes it.

As the smell filled the house, he stirred awake. His eyes found mine immediately when he walked towards the kitchen half naked, soft and sleepy, yawning like a monster and hugging me from behind. I teased of smelling like a rotten banana from mouth and asked him to brush his teeth. He finally saw my packed bags near the shoe stand kept just near main door. He came and asked me if I was leaving for something.

“ woh pune mein ek job mili hai, marketing head ki, salary aachi hai 1 lakh 50 hazar every month, Dia, mere college mein dost thi uske saath rehne wali hu”.

“aur ye sab tum mujhe kab batane wali thi”.

“bata toh diya abhi, abhi mujhe jaane do time hoo raha hai late ho jaungi”

He hugs me like he knows this might be the last time we meet, he starts kissing on my neck. I wanted to let it happen but it was time, my cab would have been waiting for me in next 5 minutes, I needed to move and take my bags with me down. I stopped him, I needed to give him reassurance because we both knew he was the best thing that I couldn't even wish in life but it was important for me to leave and grow alone,

“I'm not running away,” I said gently. “Main bas... khud ke liye jeena chahti hoon. Pehli baar.”

His brows furrowed. “Par yeh ghar tumhara tha. Tum comfortable thi. Toh kyun—”

“Because agar main yahiin rahi... toh kabhi grow nahi kar paungi. I'll stay dependent on your comfort. Aur mujhe chhodna hoga woh version jo sirf survive karti thi. I want to live, Arjun. Build something for myself. Stand on my own.”

Silence.

I looked at him — really looked. His messy hair, his cracked lips, the bruise from that day still faintly visible on his cheek.

I touched it lightly with my thumb. “Tumne mere liye itna kuch kiya, Arjun.”

He looked up.

“Manali mein, jab accident hua tha.. . purri duniya ke khilaaf jaake you took stand for me,no one belived in me jis dad ne gaadi chalana sikhaya he never said but you said I was the best driver ever, uss din tum papa se ladd gaye mera stand liye you love me I love you too abhi jaane do main wapis aaungi”

He knew my decision was final so he pulled back.

“Arjun... main waapas aaungi. Pakka. Jab sab thoda settle ho jaaye. Jab mere life mein chaos kam ho... tab.”

He was silent. Breathing shallow. Looking down at our intertwined fingers.

I smiled through the sting in my eyes.

“And jab main lautungi...” I leaned in, cupping his face, “...toh sirf tumse milne nahi, tumhara saath nibhaane aaungi.” he opened the main door, lifted my bags on his shoulders and took the trolley to the lift indicating the acceptance stage he has taken that I will never reside with him. We stood in silence as I pressed the ground floor while checking up if my driver has arrived or not.

Then I said it. The three words I’d been carrying inside me like fire.

“I love you.”

His eyes welled up. Mine too. But he didn’t reply back.He wanted to take revenge or hurt me in his childish manner by not saying I love you too again.

I kissed him softly — not with desperation, not with fear, but with peace. Like an old song finding its final note.

When we broke apart, I pressed my forehead to his.

“Tumhari film jab release hogi... main pehli row mein baithi houngi,” I whispered. “Promise.”

He nodded, too choked to reply.

The door lift open and we walked out with luggage. The car was waiting right outside for me. He placed all the luggage inside the car trunk.

“Take care of yourself, Arjun.”

“Main... wait karunga,” he said, barely audible.

“Hamesha.”

I smiled. “I love you,always.”

And then I left.

For the first time, not broken, not running, not scared — but ready. To start again.

CHAPTER 27 MAJOR MISSING

The birds were chirping with joy on this breezy warm morning that is falling over the film city. The set was active and every part of crew was getting ready for the next shot. Clapperboard snaps.

“Scene 14, take 2.”

Arjun watches from behind the monitor, eyes focused, jaw tight.

The camera rolls. The actor delivers his line perfectly.

“Cut! That’s good!” the assistant director yells.

The team claps. Arjun nods in quiet approval. For a moment, there’s a lightness in his chest — the kind that comes from doing what you love. He is at peace and Isn’t desperate for her love now. Atleast for now.

The first few weeks are smooth. He is keeping himself busy with work. Long shoot days. Fast edits. Crew laughter. Neon-lit sets.

People call him "SIR". He doesn't mind. Keeps him occupied.

In those days, he doesn't think much. Not about her. Not about the silence.

He posts Instagram stories of shots, angles, silhouettes of his lead actor standing under golden-hour skies. Neha watches all of them.

She types:

"Proud of you. Missing you."

Then deletes it.

Types again:

"When's the premiere?"

Deletes again.

The blinking cursor haunts her like his absence.

As weeks move on and there is no contact between them for weeks, he is stalking her social where she has been updating about her daily job life and how hectic it has been since last few weeks. It feels good to see her smile but he is missing her a lot. He wanted to talk to her everyday but he couldn't because it will make him look weak plus it will disturb her schedule and he might intrude her personal space. This doesn't create anxiety inside him but it is slowly transforming him. He is on set at night for a shoot.

Something shifts.

A light is off by an inch.

"Yeh kya hai?" Arjun snaps at the light boy. "Main shot pehle se brief karta hoon. Phir bhi galti?"

The boy lowers his eyes, stammers an apology.

An assistant whispers, "Sir thoda zyada ho gaya..."

Arjun throws the script binder on the floor.

Another week passes by, he is sitting under umbrella with other people but he was sweating, the sun was going down, he was looking frustrated. The assistant comes and whispers in his ears. He runs towards a vanity van and knocks on door. The actor opens the door and asks him to wait till the time his makeup is completed. He waits patiently as his make up takes 20 30 minutes. He is furious now looking at his punctuality, the actor comes and sits beside him on couch.

"You done fixing your fucking hair?" he says sharply.

"Chill, bro. Just ten minutes—"

“Those ten minutes cost me the sunset. Shut up and act. Thoda pehle aa jaate just coz tumhare papa ke dost hai producer hai won’t mean you will have successful career, start respecting the profession and be punctual warna samay chalta rahega aur tumhe koi replace kardega”.

He goes out saying all this. He calls up his producer to state what happened inside and asks him to talk about it to actor’s dad and not make this a big deal. He is warned by producer to never repeat this again or he might receive anymore movies to direct. He agrees and says sorry.

The actor goes quiet inside and maybe something came inside him, a fire to prove himself right. He comes on the set and gives his best performance.

Arjun, amazed claps.

The set goes quieter.

At night, he lies on his bed with a ashtray on bedside. The ashtray is full. Half-burnt cigarette butts like little tombstones.

His fingers are stained. His lips dry. The whiskey bottle’s neck is warm.

He watches the ceiling, listening to their old voice notes. Again.

“You’re my comfort zone, Arjun... but I need to outgrow it.”

“Main waapas aaungi... pakka.”

“I love you.”

Pause. Rewind. Play again.

“I love you.”

He smiles. Then gulps the whiskey straight from the bottle. But he doesn’t call her.

NEHA'S OFFICE – NIGHT SHIFT

Her eyes are on the screen, but her thoughts on her phone.

She sees his story — camera angle with caption: “DOP KILLED IT.”

She types:

“Missing you. How’s shoot?”

Deletes.

Types:

“When’s the premiere?”

Sends it this time.

He stares at the message.

Thumb hovers.

Finally, he replies:

“22nd May. Inox, Nariman Point. 6:30 PM
red carpet.”

A few minutes later:

“I’ll be there. I’m so excited. Can’t wait.”

He smiles for the first time in days. Brushes his hair. Looks at the calendar. Circles the date.

In evening outside the famous eros cinemas in coloba, The red carpet gleams.actors and director Arjun makes their way for premiere wearing some of their best expensive outfits, every press member is clicking their pictures for social outreach and new controversy.

Camera flashes.

Media: “Arjun sir, one picture here!”

He gives them a nod, but his eyes keep searching the crowd.

ABHISHEK/DESTINY

She isn't there.

He walks into the theatre. Saves a seat beside him. Keeps looking at the entrance even as lights dim.

INTERVAL

She still isn't there.

He steps outside, heart pounding.

Looks around. The streetlights buzz. Cars zoom by. No sign of her.

He sits down on the pavement, takes out a cigarette.

Lights it with trembling hands.

The lighter drops. His phone slips too. Cracks against the edge. The screen spiderwebs.

He sighs.

Then — BUZZ.

A message. Through the cracked glass, a name flashes: NEHA.

Voice note.

He puts the speaker to his ear.

Her voice.

“Arjun... I'm so sorry. Aaj night shift laga diya. Mujhe aana tha, sach mein. I'll make it up to you tomorrow, pakka. Please don't hate me for this. I love you.”

His breath stops for a moment.

Then a chuckle.

Then a wider grin.

He rewinds the audio, again.

“I love you.”

ABHISHEK/DESTINY

Again.

“I love you.”

Again.

“I love you.”

His grin grows unhinged. His laughter echoes on the pavement.

Then silence.

He looks at the cracked screen again, at her name.

Suddenly, his smile fades.

“Bas karo yeh promises, Neha,” he mutters.

He throws the phone under a passing cab. It shatters further, disappearing in the darkness.

Inside the theatre goes the director of the movie again but with sadness lingering over his face.

Standing ovation.

“Masterpiece!”

“Blockbuster!”

The lead actor hugs him.

“You brought out the best in me, man. Thank you.”

Arjun just nods. The compliments pass over him like wind.

He looks at the empty seat next to him.

No applause can fill it.

No trophy matters tonight.

Just one thing he wanted — HER.

And she didn't show up.

Again.

He walks out into the night.

ABHISHEK/DESTINY

Not as a celebrated director.

But as a man haunted by broken promises and three words that now sound like a lie.

He went back home and poured his favourite whiskey single malt to drink neat. He was feeling like being abandoned in a fair by parents and lost. He wanted to cry but something inside him holded him from breaking down and urged him to drink more. He completed the bottle and slept off on the couch itself.

Chapter 28: need help

The sun crawled lazily over the skyline, filtering through the dusty curtains of Arjun's living room. Empty coffee mugs stood like tired sentinels on the table, scripts and shot lists piled haphazardly beside them. The room was still—the kind of silence that comes not from peace, but from the weight of expectations unmet. The whiskey bottle was lying on the floor empty and the glass was lying beside the open-mouthed monster on the couch. The yes flashed upon his eyes. He opened them and rubbed them to gain some consciousness again, his head was still spinning from all the alcohol he consumed last night. Alcohol wasn't his thing, he never could handle it a lot.

Arjun stirred from the couch, his eyes half-open, crusted with sleep and something more—disappointment. For a second, there was clarity.

"She must be on her way," he muttered, glancing at the door like a hopeful dog waiting for its owner.

He stretched and got up, shuffling to the mirror to fix his hair, just in case she walked in any minute now. He made two cups of chai. One for her, just the way she liked—adrak wali, thodi si extra chai patti. He sat by the door, waiting. Ten minutes. Twenty. An hour.

Nothing.

His eyes darted across the room, scanning for his phone, only to remember...

"Fuck," he whispered, "phone toh toot gaya tha... premiere wali raat."

He rushed out, took the first auto to the market, bought a new phone, logged into Instagram and Snapchat. Notifications poured in—congratulatory messages, tags, reposts. Not hers. Not a single like, view, or text.

ABHISHEK/DESTINY

He dialed her number. It rang once... twice... no answer.

He texted, "Are you okay? Missed you yesterday. Thought you'd come."

He waited. Checked the clock. It had been an hour since he texted her. He returned back to his house now but still there was no response from her side. 3:08 PM.

Still nothing.

The silence was beginning to scream now.

Just then, his phone buzzed. A long message from Neha.

"I'm so sorry, Arjun. Kal night shift mein ek bada issue ho gaya tha. I'm being questioned by seniors, things are serious. Mujhe aana tha, but I just couldn't. Please try to understand. I'll make up for it, promise."

He read it once. Then again. Then again.

His eyes hovered over the word: "Promise."

He sat on the sofa, still, his expression frozen. The clock ticked. Tick. Tick. Tick.

The phone slipped from his hand and landed on the floor. He didn't bother picking it up.

He stood up, went to the wardrobe, and pulled out the bottle. The one she had gifted him months ago, wrapped in brown paper with a sticky note that said, "Open this when you finally make it big."

He popped the cork.

The first sip burned, but it was warm. Soothing.

He poured himself a glass. Sat back.

A laugh echoed across the room.

"Tutt gaya na firse?" came a voice—his voice. But darker, slower. Twisted.

Arjun turned. A version of himself stood near the bookshelf—unkempt hair, bloodshot eyes, cigarette dangling between fingers, smirking.

“Woh nahi aayi na. Fir se reh gaya tu akela.”

“Bas karo kaun hoo tum...” Arjun whispered.

“main teri sachai hu jisse tum bhaagta rehta hai saale tu aasli duniya mein rehke bhi sapno ki duniya me rehta hai, Neha is not mae for you kab samjhega tu ye”

“ nahi we both love each other she will come tomorrow or at night but aayegi you’re just a bad dream”, he slaps himself hard thinking he will wake up but he doesn’t. he is shocked, he pinches himself to check and the pinck hurts.

“ouch mujhe hurt mat kar, aise hii teri wajah se mentally bahut saha hu, itna delusion mein kaise reh sakta hai yaar tu” replied his alter ego.

“ kyuki darr lagta hai ki log chorke chale jayenge isliye I think the best out of people”

“Ruby toh kabhi chod ke nahi jaati. She loved you. She wanted to stay. But Arjun toh chutiya hai. Usko chutiya katwane ka shauk hai.”

Arjun grabbed the bottle and hurled it. It shattered against the wall—wine staining the cream paint like blood. The photo frame of Manali, of them laughing under snowfall, fell with it.

He rushed to the shattered glass, picking up the photo.

“No no no...” he muttered, trying to clean it, ignoring the blood seeping from his palm as a shard dug into his skin.

As he wrapped a cloth around his hand, the other version laughed again.

“Yeh dekh. Khud hi kat raha hai. Emotional banda. Sensitive type. Emotional blackmail ka shikaar. She used you, bhai. Jitna tha, le gayi.”

“Shut up! She cared! She held me when I cried. Took me to Manali, helped me stand up again.”

“Haan, sab plan tha. Usko theek hona tha. Tum ek project the, Arjun. Repair and discard. Ab toh samajh jaa yaar come out of your delulu world sab khatam woh nahi aane wali jab tak usse wapis teri jarurat na hoo”

He stared at his bleeding hand.

“No. She wouldn’t... she’s not like that.”

“Then where is she?” Psycho Arjun leaned closer, whispering, “Tumhara sabse bada din tha. Aur woh thi kahaan?”

Arjun looked away.

“Block kar usko. Delete her number. Finish it; you need to get a new life man move on from her she isn’t worth holding and wasting on your time.”

He hesitated... then opened his phone. Clicked on her contact. His thumb hovered. He finally was ready to accept that his best friend wasn’t the one and he needed to leave her behind for something better. He took a last glimpse of her whatsapp dp where he and her were standing at marine drive in an awkward pose where she was hitting him and he was acting like she was some action movie star.

Then—

Blocked.

Deleted.

Silence.

Night fell like a curtain. He passed out on the couch, fingers sticky with blood and whiskey. he gave up on

himself, his energy was drained after this conversation and he felt tired and out of blood from heavy blood loss.

Next Morning

The bell rang.

He jolted up. Rushed to the door. Looked through the peephole.

Neha.

She was there. Smiling, holding her bag.

He swung open the door.

Before he could say a word—Psycho Arjun appeared beside him, knife in hand. In a flash, he drove it through her chest.

She gasped, eyes wide with betrayal, and collapsed.

Arjun screamed, falling to the floor, cradling her lifeless body.

“WHY?! WHAT THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH YOU! STOP IT!!”

He turned the blade toward Psycho Arjun, and with trembling hands, stabbed him straight through the stomach.

Blood. Laughter. More laughter.

Psycho Arjun grinned, even while dying.

“Tu pagal ho gaya hai, Arjun.”

Suddenly, everything disappeared.

He woke up, sweating, heart racing. It was morning. A pigeon fluttered by the window.

It had been a dream. Or had it?

He dragged himself to the kitchen. Poured himself a bowl of cornflakes. Sat down. Ate in silence.

ABHISHEK/DESTINY

Later, he dressed, and walked to the nearest park. There were kids playing, couples jogging.

“I need help,” he muttered.

He booked his first therapy session.

Two weeks later, he bought a ring.

“Next girl I date, I’ll marry,” he said to his therapist.

“Don’t you think that’s too fast, Arjun?”

“Maybe. But I’m done being broken. I just want to move forward.”

He started dating again. Visiting old cafés with new faces. He smiled when he had to. Laughed when it was expected.

But deep down, every time he looked at a girl across the table, her face dissolved into Neha’s.

And Psycho Arjun? He still whispered in his ear, especially when the nights got too quiet.

CHAPTER 29 SUNSET

The sky was painted in shades of saffron and gold, the sun slowly melting into the Arabian Sea. Arjun sat on the curved ledge of Marine Drive, legs stretched out, watching the waves curl into the rocks below. His fingers nervously fidgeted with the silver ring on his left hand—the symbol of something new, something finally his.

He checked the time again. Ruby was running a little late from the office. Typical.

The breeze tousled his hair as he leaned back, closing his eyes, letting the salt-kissed air graze his face. It had been months since the premiere. Months since he had decided to put the past in its place. Since therapy, since long walks alone, since quietly healing. He had changed. Or at least, he liked to believe so. He ordered a stall guy nearby to bring him a vada pav with extra hari cutney. He paid him in cash and sat on ledge with a peaceful head and posture.

And then, like a strange twist of fate, he heard a familiar voice behind him.

“Kaafi sundar lag raha hai aaj ka sunset.”

He turned around slowly.

Neha. still young, pretty, beautiful and her smile looked way better than the sun ever did to him but he didn't feel the urge now to jump and hug her and never leave her again, he sat on the ledge calmly.

Wearing a simple kurta, her hair tied loosely back, she stood there, smiling—hesitant but gentle, almost like a breeze that didn't want to disrupt the calm but couldn't resist visiting.

“Tum?” he said, . “Yahaan?” he keeps the vada pav and now stands up as a gesture.

She nodded and came forward, her hands clutching a small sling bag, her eyes searching his face.

“Bas... har hafte office ke baad yahan aati hoon kabhi kabhi weekends pe. Mujhe nahi pata tha tum bhi—”

“I was waiting for someone,” he said quickly, not unkindly, just truthfully.

Her smile faltered a little.

They sat down, a respectful distance between them.

She glanced at the sea. “I saw your film. Twice. First with colleagues, then alone. You really did it, Arjun.”

He smiled faintly. “Haan. Kafi emotional journey thi. Par ho gaya.”

“And now?”

“Now,” he said, pausing to take a breath, “I’m working on my next script.”

“Oh wow. What genre?”

“Psychological thriller... with a romantic angle,” he said, the corners of his mouth lifting. “Protagonist has schizophrenia. He starts hallucinating a love interest—someone who helps him cope with his trauma. But slowly, he realises the relationship isn’t real. The calls, the messages... they’re all from himself, just from another device he used. A coping trick. And in the climax, to move on, he imagines killing her—to end the illusion.”

She blinked, startled. “Dark... but intriguing. Tum itne detail mein soch kaise lete ho?”

“Bas... experience bol lo,” he said with a wry chuckle.

She looked down at her lap. “I’m sorry. About the premiere night.”

He didn’t respond immediately.

“A huge mishap happened during the night shift,” she continued. “Fire broke out in one of the wards. I was in-charge that night. There was an inquiry, then suspension lifted after two weeks. I... I wanted to explain, Arjun. Par tumne block kar diya tha.”

“I thought you broke another promise,” he said quietly. “Wahi wali feeling aayi... again that tumne baaki logo jaise mujhe chordiya hai.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt you,” she whispered.

He looked at her—really looked at her.

“I’m proud of you, Neha. Tumne khud ko sambhala. Independent bani. Apna career liya seriously. I always wanted this for you.”

Tears welled up in her eyes. “Main hamesha chahti thi ki tu success ho. Jab teri movie release hui thi, main ek corner mein chupke se ro rahi thi. Khushi ke aansu the.”

He smiled, softening.

“we’re not friends anymore,” he added gently, he finally gathered all the courage up, all the guts to say it to her after getting hurt so many times. “At least... not best friends. Woh jagah... woh cheezein, ab nahi rahi.”

A long pause followed. The waves kept crashing, like time gently reminding them that it never stops for anyone.

She looked at him again. “Main kabhi kabhi yahan aati hoon... jab teri yaad aati hai.”

He didn’t say anything, just extended his hand toward the vada pav stall nearby and said, “Ek aur le aana. Do hona chahiye.”

She smiled, stood up, fetched a vada pav, and sat beside him again. Together, they shared one like old times—quietly, with crumbs falling into the sea breeze.

As the sun dipped further, a voice called from behind.

They sat there in silence, they had nothing to talk about. They both knew it might be an end to their journey together. They just wanted to embrace this beautiful scene, the destiny made them come together to give them closure they both needed.

“Arjun!”

He turned.

Ruby stood there, still in her office formals, holding her handbag, smiling tiredly.

He stood up and waved. “Coming!”

He turned to Neha and extended his hand.

“Take care of yourself, Neha.”

She stood up too and hugged him. Tight. Long. Silent.

“Tu hamesha special rahega,” she whispered.

“Tu bhi,” he replied. “Aur haan... call karna kabhi bhi. I’ll always pick up. Bas best friends wali jagah ke liye mat bolna phir.”

She laughed through her tears. “Nahi bolungi.”

As he walked away, he slid his hand into Ruby’s. She looked at him lovingly.

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Just... finished an old chapter.”

Ruby looked at the gold band on his finger and smiled.

“Chalo phir.”

He smiled back, held her close, and walked along the curve of Marine Drive—past the crashing waves, past the memories, into something beautifully uncertain... and finally, his own.

She stood there just enjoying the ending of their journey and day looking at the beautiful tides. She was hopeful and positive now, she was happy, satisfied and at peace with her profound life she made all by herself and her identity. A big part of her left today but she might carry him around for rest of her life but she knew they both outgrew each other. Both of them didn't need each other again, ever again.

As the darkness began and night came, the atmosphere became foggy, she stood up and walked up away in the crowd of hustling mumbai only to disappear like she was a ghost.

Epilogue

Two Years Later

The auditorium was packed.

A low murmur of excitement buzzed through the air as the title appeared on screen:

“Unwritten: A Love Inside the Mind”

Written & Directed by Arjun Sharma

Somewhere in the middle row, a girl sat alone. Hair tied back in a loose bun, hoodie sleeves stretched over her palms. Her eyes didn’t blink much — not even when the romantic hallucination of the protagonist kissed the girl he had only imagined all along.

The screen dimmed. The credits rolled. Applause erupted.

Outside the theatre, Arjun stood with Ruby, both holding champagne glasses. A gold ring glinted on his finger under the soft yellow lights.

The interviewer beside him smiled, “This film left people wondering... Did the girl ever exist?”

Arjun smirked. “Maybe she did. Maybe she didn’t. That’s the thing about memories... sometimes, they’re just stories we tell ourselves to survive.”

The crowd laughed.

But as the applause died down and flashes from cameras faded into the night, Arjun turned around slowly. His smile faded.

Across the street, under a flickering streetlight, a silhouette stood. Long hair, a soft blue dupatta fluttering in the breeze. She stared at him for a moment. No smile. No wave.

And then — she disappeared behind the crowd.

“Everything alright?” Ruby asked.

Arjun blinked. “Yeah... must’ve been nothing.