

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 firht 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.
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.
