I didn’t cry when the train pulled out of my hometown, which surprised everyone—including me. I watched the platform slide away like a movie credit roll, my mother waving small circles in the air, my father pretending not to sniffle, and my doll tucked into my backpack, button-eye peeking out like a co-conspirator. I told myself I was traveling light: two suitcases and a dream so heavy it made new shoes feel like anchors.

The new city met me with a tangle of flyovers and a smell like wet dust and tea. It was loud, impatient, and unashamed of both. I fell in with it the way you fall in step with someone taller than you—eyes up, pretending you’re not short of breath. Classes started. The hostel was a symphony of doors, giggles, pressure cookers, and someone’s late-night K-pop playlist. I learned the quickest stall in the canteen, where the chai tasted like a small forgiveness. I started drawing constellations on my planner: study group on Thursdays, mock interviews on Saturdays, a tiny star sketched beside every day I felt brave.

On one of those brave days, I downloaded a dating app. It felt like fitting a new lock onto an old gate. My thumb hovered over profile pictures—smiley faces and mountain photos and gym mirrors that made me worry about my posture. I matched with people who vanished mid-joke, misread kind as easy, or wanted to argue about music like it was a moral test. Then I matched with him.

His profile said: “I burn toast, but I’m excellent at apologizing.” No gym mirror. A photo of a badly iced cake with a single candle and a caption: “Happy Me-Day.” His answers were warm without being sticky, the kind that didn’t lean on jokes to stay upright. I asked him more questions than a visa form. He didn’t flinch. What do you do when you’re sad? I go on long walks and count blue doors. What did you want to be as a kid? A bus conductor—I liked the way they cut tickets like magic. Biggest fear? Hurting people because I’m late. I stared at that last one for too long and smiled anyway.

We picked a café that looked like a book you could sip. I wore my navy dress, the one I call my “competent cloud.” I reached early, sat by the window, and watched the city twirl past in its afternoon sari. I checked the door every time it chimed. Fifteen minutes. I stirred sugar into coffee I didn’t actually want. Thirty minutes. I replied to my mother: Class is good. Food is edible. Forty-five minutes. The café guy gave me a sympathetic cookie. An hour. I promised myself I wouldn’t cry on principle. Ninety minutes. I texted “Hey?” into the app, the “y” a little braver than it felt.

Almost two hours later, I gathered my bag and my pride and stood up. Then the door chimed again.

He came in looking like the aftermath of a small cyclone—hair wild, shirt misbuttoned by one button, breathless. He saw me and stopped, the way you stop at the edge of a pool you misjudged as shallow. “I’m so, so sorry,” he said, and the words fell out of him like coins from a ripped pocket. “There was an accident on the metro, then my phone died, and I—this sounds like every cliché in a bad movie, but it’s true. I’m late. I know. I know what that means.”

I wanted to be angry. I had rehearsed lines in my head, crisp sentences about respect and time. They melted when he took a slightly shaking breath and added, softer, “I didn’t want to be the guy who makes you doubt your own hope.”

I don’t know which part of me decided to sit back down—the grown woman with the planner full of constellations, or the little girl with the doll and a belief in people who show up even when it’s messy. “One coffee,” I said, because I’m practical. “And you have to try this cookie. The guy gave it to me out of pity, and I am not wasting pity.”

He laughed and it landed light. We restarted. He told me about blue doors and his grandmother who smelled like cardamom and insisted the moon was just a big lamp for the poor. I told him about my city that never stops talking and my city that never stops trying, and how both lived inside me now. He asked about the frayed ribbon tied to my backpack zipper. I told him it belonged to my doll—my favorite thing, my secret anchor. He didn’t tease. He just nodded like it made a kind of quiet sense.

Time, traitor that it is, slipped past. When we finally stepped outside, the sky was a sugar-brittle pink. He said, “I’ll walk you to the auto?” It wasn’t presumption. It was punctuation.

After that, the days learned our names. We texted in the gaps between lectures and laundry, trading tiny lifelines: a photo of a stray cat with half a moustache, a voice note where he mispronounced quinoa with confidence, a message from me that simply said, “Blue door count today: 3.” Sometimes we flirted in the way people do when they’re still a little shy, using emoji like hedge trimmers. Sometimes we dreamed with our eyes open: Would we ever be brave enough to cook for each other? Will your toast make it? Could we travel to a city where the traffic rules are just suggestions and the coffee comes in steel tumblers?

Between us, a garden grew. Small things took root first. He learned I become nonverbal when I’m hungry and carry emergency biscuits like contraband. I learned he puts a book face-down like it might sit up and start a conversation. We went on more dates, simple ones that felt like we were practicing being real: sharing pav bhaji and arguing about the correct ratio of butter to shamelessness, watching a black-and-white film with subtitles that were a bit too fast, taking a bus to nowhere in particular and getting off when the driver started humming.

One evening, rain arrived uninvited and decisive. We were on a footbridge, and the city below us blurred to watercolor. He took off his only presentable jacket and held it over my head, a crooked roof. “What about you?” I asked. “I’ll grow,” he said, hair dripping. I laughed so hard I dropped my umbrella, and he dove to catch it like it was a championship pass. Somewhere between the slip of my hand into his and the umbrella triumph, I realized I had stopped counting minutes and started counting moments.

Of course, we fought. Over late replies, over whether to say yes to a weekend trip when my assignment deadlines sneered at me from my desk. Once, I snapped because he was twelve minutes late and my old fear knocked on the door pretending to be a delivery. He didn’t deflect. He was just there, apology neat and unadorned. “I’m working on it,” he said. “Not because you asked me to, but because I want to be the person who arrives where you are.”

The day we decided to stay together didn’t come with fireworks. It came with grocery lists. We were in a small apartment that wasn’t fully ours yet—borrowed light, borrowed spoons. My doll sat on the shelf in her new city, ribbon freshly washed, button-eye amused. He was unpacking a pan like it was a puzzle. I was scribbling on a sticky note: tomatoes, milk, coriander, courage.

He touched the ribbon tied to the doll’s dress. “Does she have a name?” he asked. I hesitated. I had never told anyone. “Bindi,” I said at last. “Because she makes things feel complete.” He smiled. “I’ll try not to burn her toast,” he said. I rolled my eyes. “She’s more of a poha girl.”

We didn’t make any grand declarations. Instead, we made dinner. We salt-laughed. We spilled. We burned nothing, miraculously. He set the candle from his Me-Day cake on the table, lit it, and said, “For moving days.” I added, “For showing up—even late.” He nodded, eyes reflecting a little circus of flame. Outside, the city kept being itself—impatient, loud, generous when you look right at it. Inside, we turned the candle’s wax into a small geography of our own.

When we finally slept—him on the left, me on the right, Bindi keeping watch—I thought about the first café, the waited-waited-waited, the door chime, the cyclone boy at the threshold. I thought about the girl who chose to sit back down, just once more, just to see.

It turns out some stories are late not because they don’t know where they’re going, but because they’re gathering all the right details on the way.