

AaRa

Where

the Heart Finds Home

A R P I T A



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Dedication

*To the heart that stops searching
the moment it finds its home.*

Acknowledgment

There are stories that are written with ink, and then there are stories that are written with the quiet, persistent rhythm of the heart. This one belongs to the latter.

Everything here—every word, every breath, and every sunset described—is a gift of guidance. I am grateful to the universe for orchestrating the coincidences and for whispering the right thoughts at the exact right moments, allowing these chapters to breathe.

I am deeply grateful for the inspiration that surrounds me—the people, the silent moments, and the everyday connections that have shaped my perspective. Every person who has unknowingly inspired these pages is held within this gratitude. To the one whose presence—even from a distance—serves as the resonance for these words: thank you. You have taught me the beauty of devotion and the strength of the unspoken. This narrative is a reflection of the grace I have received and the love I have found in the simplest of things.

To the reader, thank you for welcoming this piece of my heart into yours. It is my absolute honor to share this journey with you. May you find as much peace in these pages as I found in writing them.

Preface

Some stories are born from imagination, and others are simply echoes of things already felt.

This narrative falls into the latter. It began not with an intention to write a book, but with a series of moments that demanded to be held. It started with a specific atmosphere—the quiet hum of a college hallway, the rhythm of rain against stone, and the realization that some connections exist entirely in the spaces between words.

I have often wondered if we truly choose our paths, or if the universe simply steers us toward the people who are meant to be our reflection. This book is a tribute to that steering. I have guarded the origins of this narrative closely, for I believe that once a story is fully explained, it loses a bit of its magic.

A writer may not live forever, but a story that carries a piece of the truth is worth living through every second of a decade. I offer these pages to you as a collection of whispers, memories, and the quiet resonance of a journey that was never meant to be spoken aloud.

Step in, slow down, and listen. You might find that these chapters sound a little like your own silent, unspoken truths.

About the Author

Arpita writes for the hearts that love deeply and the memories that refuse to fade. She believes that the most profound stories are those that remain felt, even when they are never spoken aloud. She weaves narratives that explore the quiet intensity of love, the weight of memory, and the enduring strength of the human heart. With a deep commitment to capturing the nuances of devotion, her writing invites readers into intimate worlds where every emotion is treated with reverence. Her work proves that some connections are not merely experienced—they are lived, held, and eternal.

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Chapter 1: The Heart Decides



“Logic builds a future, but the heart chooses a home. Sometimes, a single glimpse is enough to rewrite your entire destiny, proving that the universe doesn’t make mistakes—it just takes its time.

They say love needs a reason, a conversation, a shared story. But the heart obeys its own laws. It can live on a single memory for years, refusing everyone else, just to say: 'If not you, then no one.' And when the universe finally brings that memory to life, the only choice left is to stay.”

The admission office of the degree college was a chaotic mess of loud voices, shuffling feet, and the sharp smell of fresh ink. It was the very first day of graduation admissions, and the room was packed with students clutching their marksheets, nervously stepping into a new chapter of their lives.

RAAJ stood in the middle of the crowd, his mind miles away. He wasn't there to join the college; his excellent marks had already secured him a seat in a much better institution in a bigger city. He was simply waiting in line to collect his College Leaving Certificate (CLC) so he could leave this town behind.

Then, a sudden, strange stillness pulled at him. Amidst all the noise, he felt a quiet whisper in his soul—an inner voice, soft but clear, calling out to him, urging him to look up. It wasn't a choice; it was as if his heart already knew what his eyes hadn't yet seen. Following that unexplainable pull, he turned towards the counter.

A girl was leaning over the wooden desk, completely focused on filling out her admission form.

Time didn't just slow down—it stopped entirely. The shouting of the clerks, the buzzing of the old ceiling fans, and the chatter of the crowd vanished into absolute silence.

It was her.

A massive, overwhelming wave of nostalgia hit Raaj straight in the chest, leaving him breathless. His eyes locked onto her face, tracking the soft curve of her jaw and the way her hair fell slightly forward as she wrote. Two years ago, he had caught a fleeting glimpse of this exact face in a crowded street market. He hadn't known her name, her voice, or a single thing about her, but in that brief second, he had been unwantingly, deeply attracted to her. He had literally stopped in his tracks back then, questioning his own heart: Why does this one face draw me in so much? Why do I feel like I could watch this face for my whole life?

He had fallen for her right then and there. But high school happened, they went to entirely different colleges for the 11th and 12th standard, and they never crossed paths again. For two long

years, she had been a beautiful ghost in his mind. And now, she was standing twenty feet away from him, real and breathtaking.

Looking at her now, you could see exactly who she was. Aahana was bold, beautiful, and effortlessly perfect, possessing a quiet cuteness that she guarded closely. She moved with an innate, magnetic grace that turned every hallway into a runway, her presence lingering in a room long after she had passed through it. She was the kind of girl the entire college couldn't help but admire from a distance—the unspoken, universal crush whose smile could halt a conversation and whose simple elegance made heads turn in every lecture hall. There was an ethereal, effortless quality to her beauty, a blend of poise and mystery that made her the dream everyone held, yet no one quite dared to approach.

She was excellent at her studies, but on a personal level, she chose peace over people. She was not easily accessible. In a world where everyone was rushing into temporary, meaningless relationships, Aahana wanted love, but she wanted something permanent. If it wasn't going to last forever, she preferred her own solitude.

Raaj was her complete opposite, yet strangely similar. He carried a strong, slightly rowdy, and tough personality that made people respect his space. He was effortlessly handsome, instantly recognizable by a specific, signature hairstyle he had been rocking proudly since the seventh grade. Yet, despite his tough exterior, he was incredibly shy when it came to talking to girls.

Girls were always chasing him, trying to break through his silence. Throughout the 11th and 12th standard, while other guys were jumping into relationships, Raaj refused every single girl who proposed to him.

"Why are you being so stubborn?" his friends used to ask him, completely baffled. "You don't even know her. What if you never see her again? What if she doesn't love you back?"

Raaj would always give a small, knowing smile. "And if she doesn't love me back? I would love to be hers in my own imaginary universe." he would reply, his voice steady.

"Raaj Aryan! Come collect your CLC," the clerk's voice suddenly barked, breaking him out of his thoughts.

Raaj looked at the counter, then looked back at Aahana.

His future was waiting in that bigger city. Success, a better degree, and a grand life were sitting right there on that certificate. But taking it meant walking out of this room. It meant letting her slip away into a memory for the second time in his life, likely forever.

But if he stayed... he would get a chance. Even if she never noticed him, even if she never loved him back, he would get to breathe the same air, walk the same corridors, and see the only face that had ever mattered to him every single day.

For a guy who never let anyone close, his heart didn't even hesitate. The big city and the better college didn't mean a thing anymore.

He walked past the line, looked the clerk straight in the eye, and spoke with a quiet, unyielding certainty. "Cancel the CLC, sir. Give me an admission form instead."

He took the paper, turned around, and walked toward the desk where Aahana was standing.

And He Stayed.....

"Duniya ki sabse behtareen jagah shayad wo hoti hai,
Jahan dil rukne ka faisla kar le,
Na koi shart, na koi sawaal...
Bas ek chehra, aur baaki sab fizool."

Chapter 2: The Geometry of Coincidence



"Bina pukaare hi aksar mudkar dekh leti hai wo,
Lagta hai mere dil ki sadaayein us tak seedhe raasta bana leti
hain."

The initial chaos of starting college had finally settled into a predictable, everyday rhythm. The hallways, once filled with confused freshmen searching for their lecture halls, were now bustling with familiar faces. Yet, for Raaj, the entire campus had shrunk to just one specific presence: Ahana.

They belonged to completely different worlds within the campus. Ahana was an Information Technology and Management (ITM) student, always organized and focused, while Raaj belonged to the Chemistry department. For the first few weeks, their paths Generally ran parallel, never crossing, save for those fleeting, accidental moments when Raaj would catch a glimpse of her

walking across the courtyard. Just a single glimpse was enough to keep him distracted for the rest of the day.

Then, fortune decided to play its hand in the form of the Environmental Studies (EVS) class. Since it was a common foundational subject, the college decided to collaborate and combine two or three departments into a single large lecture hall. As luck would have it, Chemistry and ITM were paired together.

The lecture hall was divided into three long rows of wooden desks. Ahana, diligent as always, chose a spot right in the center row, completely focused on the front board. Raaj, on the other hand, strategically chose his territory. He sat in the left row, about two or three desks behind her line of sight. It was the perfect vantage point—he could look at her without being completely obvious, yet close enough to catch the subtle way she tucked her hair behind her ear.

It didn't take long for Raaj's tight-knit group of friends to notice where his eyes were anchored. They decided to turn the mundane lecture into a classic Bollywood romance.

"Look, she's settling in. Now's your chance," his friend whispered, nudging his shoulder.

They initiated the legendary 'Palat' theme. In whispers that barely carried past their row, they would mentally chant, Palat... Palat... Palat... counting down the seconds, holding onto the old movie superstition that if she turned around within that window, it meant something special.

And beautifully, unknowingly, Ahana would turn. Sometimes she was just glancing at the clock, sometimes looking for a classmate, but every time her gaze swept past the left row, Raaj's heart would skip a beat. She didn't know his name, nor his feelings,

but whenever her eyes momentarily collided with his, a strange, unexplainable tug pulled at her chest. An unspoken attraction, faint but persistent, began to take root in her mind. On the other side, Raaj and his boys would silently erupt into absolute celebration, muffled fist-bumps and triumphant grins shared under the desks.

The Unsaved Number

The unspoken connection found a new medium when the EVS professor announced the need for a class WhatsApp group to share study materials. Being the dedicated student she was, Ahana wanted the professor's contact number to coordinate the group. Instead of making it awkward by asking directly, she confidently raised her hand when the teacher asked for a volunteer to manage it.

Soon, the responsibility was hers. During the breaks, students crowded around her desk, writing their numbers on scraps of paper or calling them out for her to save.

This became Raaj's favorite time of the day. He began a new routine, dragging four or five different classmates to her desk every single day under the pretense of getting their numbers added. While Ahana kept her head down, carefully typing the digits into her phone, Raaj stood just a foot away, completely lost.

In those quiet seconds, the noise of the crowded classroom seemed to fade into a soft hum. He silently adored the sharp symmetry of her profile, the gentle focus in her eyes, and the melodic, calm tone of her voice as she repeated the numbers back to double-check them. His heart felt an ache that was incredibly sweet—a feeling of being so close to someone, yet keeping a world of emotions hidden behind a casual stance.

That evening, as Ahana was organizing the newly created group, a message from an unknown number popped up on her screen:

"Can you add this number? 7606**66"

Ahana, typing quickly, sent a short reply:

"Yupp."

Because of the sheer volume of messages she was handling that night, she simply added the number to the group link without saving it to her personal contacts. It remained just a string of ten digits on her screen—completely unaware that those numbers belonged to the boy who sat three desks away on the left, the one who watched her with a heart full of unspoken words. Raaj didn't have the courage to strike up a real conversation; he didn't want to risk breaking the fragile, beautiful illusion he was living in. He was a charming, good-looking guy—the kind of boy other girls in the hallway whispered about as their crush—but around Ahana, he felt entirely vulnerable. And Ahana was so breathtakingly striking that Raaj simply assumed a girl like her could never be single. So, the silence between them continued to stretch, comfortable yet heavy with unsaid things.

An Unexpected Guest

A week later, Ahana missed a day of college. The lecture hall felt entirely empty to Raaj without her presence in the middle row. Unable to handle the sudden distance, Raaj did something completely wild and uncharacteristic. Knowing she attended a specific tuition class nearby later that afternoon, he decided to show up there.

It wasn't his subject, nor his batch, but he walked right into the classroom and took a seat among the IT students. When Ahana arrived and took her usual spot, she eventually turned around to look at the room—and her breath caught. There he was. Sitting right inside her tuition class, looking completely out of place yet entirely calm. Their eyes locked across the desks, a silent, lingering gaze that sent a wave of confusion and curiosity straight to Ahana's heart. He didn't say a word, just sat through the class, and after that day, he never came back there again. The mystery of his sudden presence inside her classroom lingered in her mind for days.

The breakthrough finally came on a bright morning at the college entrance.

The main gate opened up to a beautiful, two-way divided road, split down the center by a neat row of tall, manicured showcase trees. Ahana was walking down the left side of the path, chatting with a close girlfriend, when she spotted Raaj standing on the opposite side of the road, surrounded by his usual group of friends.

Suddenly, Ahana's friend paused. "Oh, wait, I know him. Let me just say hi," she said, stepping across the divider toward Raaj's group.

Ahana stood there for a split second, her heart doing a sudden flutter. The memory of him sitting inside her tuition class flashed vividly in her mind. This was her chance to clear her confusion. Gathering her courage, she walked across the road, stepping into his space for the very first time.

She looked at her friend first, gesturing slightly toward Raaj. "Is he your friend?"

Her friend smiled, turning to him. "Yes, Raaj, he's my friend."

Raaj. Finally, the boy had a name.

Ahana turned her eyes directly to him, her curiosity taking over. "Which department do you actually belong to?"

Raaj, caught completely off guard but maintaining his effortless charm, looked directly into her eyes and replied softly, "Chemistry."

Ahana narrowed her eyes slightly, a playful yet genuinely confused expression crossing her face. "Then why were you in our IT classes that day?"

Raaj's smile widened, a hint of mischief dancing in his eyes as he gave the only answer he could think of to hide his true motive. "To grab some knowledge."

Ahana blinked, her face freezing into a wonderfully perplexed look. She had never heard anyone use that excuse for crashing a completely different department's private tuition. "Okay..." she murmured, a little baffled, but a small smile tugged at the corner of her lips as she turned around to walk away with her friend.

The moment her back was turned and she was a safe distance away, the quiet restraint on Raaj's side of the road completely shattered.

His friends erupted. They rushed him, grabbing his shoulders, pulling him into a chaotic, joyous group hug right there on the pavement.

"Brother! She came over! She actually talked to you!" one cheered, shaking him.

"Look at that! The fortress has breached!" another laughed, throwing an arm around his neck.

They were cheering out loud, completely ecstatic for him, but Raaj's mind was entirely quiet. He stood in the center of the huddle, his eyes still fixed on the path where she had just walked away. A warmth flooded his chest, so intense and pure that it felt completely overwhelming. The first conversation had finally happened. His smile stretched so wide his cheeks and mouth physically ached, a bright, hopeless, deeply romantic grin that he couldn't have wiped off his face even if he tried. She knew his name now, and the world suddenly felt a whole lot brighter.

"Sirf naam hi toh poocha tha usne muskuraakar,
Aur hum poori kaayanat uske naam karne ki duaa maang baithe."

Chapter 3: The Whispering Rain and the Cherry Red Jacket



Khushboo ki tarah aaye wo meri zindagi mein,
Ki dil ko unke aane ki bhanak tak na lagi.
Kuch is tarah se badla kismat ka panna,
Ki na chahte hue bhi, unki har ada dil ko chhu gayi."

The calendar on Raaj's desk was marked with a red circle around November 7th. For weeks, that date had lingered in his mind like a beautiful melody he couldn't stop humming. It was Ahana's birthday.

He walked into the college gates early that morning, his heart beating a little faster than usual, his eyes instantly scanning the crowded corridors, the stairs, and the courtyard. But the familiar, graceful silhouette was nowhere to be seen. The campus felt

unusually empty, devoid of the one presence that made it come alive for him.

Trying to look completely casual, Raaj wandered over to the IT department, pretending he was looking for a friend or an old notebook. He struck up a conversation with a few students, casually talking about assignments and college gossip, until he finally gathered the courage to ask the question that was heavy on his chest.

"Hey, by the way... that tall, beautiful girl from your department, the one who is usually here... she didn't come today?"

"Ah, Ahana?" one of them replied. "No, man. She never comes on her birthday. She always goes back home to celebrate with her family. Plus, there's a huge local carnival in her hometown right now, so she's missing classes for a few days."

Raaj's heart sank slightly. He walked away with a heavy, confused mind. He stood by the college railing, staring blankly at his phone. Should he message her? Would it be too much? Would she find it weird?

As he hesitated, his mind drifted back to a golden afternoon a week ago. He had been standing outside his friend's place, which happened to be near Ahana's hostel. He had been wearing his favorite cherry-red leather jacket. Out of nowhere, Ahana had walked past on her way to a nearby shop. She had stopped, her eyes locked onto his, and with a soft, teasing smile that completely caught him off guard, she had said, "Oo Chemistry boy, your jacket is really amazing. This cherry red leather suits you well."

The memory of her voice made him smile right there in the empty corridor. It was unexpected, pure, and it gave him all the

courage he needed. “Even if she doesn't know it's my number, I should wish my favorite person on her special day,” he thought.

With a deep breath and fingers slightly trembling, he typed out a warm, pure, and heartfelt birthday wish, sending it out into the universe.

Back in her hometown, amidst the bright lights and laughter of the local carnival, Ahana's phone buzzed. Usually, she strictly blocked unknown numbers without a second thought. But destiny plays its own quiet games. As she opened the chat, she noticed a previous message from weeks ago—a simple request from someone asking to add numbers to the college group. Recognizing him as her classmate, her thumb hovered over the block button, but she stopped. She read the warm, beautiful birthday wish. A soft smile touched her lips. She didn't reply—leaving it on 'seen'—but she didn't delete it either. She just let the text sit there, like a little secret.

A few days later, Ahana returned.

The day she stepped back onto the campus, the sky grew heavy with dark, swirling clouds. A gentle, cool breeze began to blow, carrying the earthy scent of fresh rain. Drops started to fall softly, painting the gray concrete of the college a deep, romantic slate.

The architecture of the main building featured a grand central staircase—a five-step stair rising from the left, and another five-step stair rising from the right, meeting perfectly in the middle at a wide, open landing.

Raaj, who had been gloomy and upset all week because of her absence, was walking down from one side. And then, he saw her. Ahana was climbing up from the opposite side, step by step, her hair slightly damp from the drizzle.

The world around them seemed to slow to a complete blur. The sound of the falling rain faded into a quiet hum. Mesmerized by the sheer beauty of the moment, Raaj kept walking toward the center, holding his breath as if a single loud exhale would break the spell.

They both paused at the middle landing.

Raaj looked at Ahana with an intensity that made the air between them feel thick. It was a gaze so deep, so full of longing, that it felt as though Ahana's heart had been quietly starving for this exact moment to arrive. She frozen under his gaze, her breath catching in her throat.

Gathering every ounce of courage in his soul, Raaj took a slow step closer. He leaned in, his lips brushing so close to her ear that she could feel the warmth of his breath against the cold, rainy air.

"Don't you feel like saying thank you to the person who wished you on your birthday?" he whispered, his voice a low, velvety murmur that sent a sudden rush of butterflies exploding through her entire body.

Ahana's heart raced. Shaking off the intoxicating spell of his nearness, she stepped back slightly, trying to regain her composure. "Oh... you wished me happy birthday? I... I didn't know," she stammered, her cheeks turning a soft shade of pink.

She quickly pulled out her phone, unlocking it and opening the chat. She turned the screen toward him. "Which one is your number?"

Raaj smiled, a quiet, victorious curve of his lips, and tapped the screen. "This one."

Ahana looked from the screen back to his eyes. "Then... thank you for such a warm wish. I'm saving your number right now."

Raaj took a half-step back, his eyes still locked onto hers, holding that heavy, beautiful tension for one last second. "Still, the birthday treat is pending," he said softly.

Without waiting for an answer, he stepped aside and walked past her, leaving her standing there in the rain with a fast-beating heart. For Raaj, it was the most beautiful, unexpected romantic accident.

As soon as he rounded the corner and reached the ground floor where his boys were waiting, the silence broke. His friends, who had been watching the entire staircase drama unfold from a distance, erupted into cheers. They threw their arms around his shoulders, shoving him around playfully and shouting in excitement.

"You are so close, bro!" they laughed, celebrating the moment as the rain continued to wash over the campus.

"Barish ki boondein toh sirf bahana thin,
Asal mein toh unki nazron ki barsaat thi.
Dhadkanein rukin, saansein thamin us seedhi par,
Jahan pehli baar hamari khamoshiyon mein baat hui."

Chapter 4: The Ripple Effect



"Nazrein milin toh sadiyon ka safar tay ho gaya,
Khamosh zubaan se bhi dil ka haal bayaan ho gaya.
Use paana toh abhi mehaz ek khwab hai,
Magar uski ek muskurahat se mera jahaan mukammal ho gaya."

The screen of Ahana's phone went black, but the warmth of the device seemed to linger in her palm. She stood on the wide landing for a long moment, watching Raaj's retreating back until he disappeared into the crowd of his cheering friends. A small, involuntary smile tugged at the corner of her lips, which she quickly hid as a group of girls from her department walked past.

"Ahana! Come on, it's pouring!" one of them called out.

Shaking herself out of the daze, she hurried up the remaining steps, but her mind remained firmly planted on that middle landing. "Don't you feel like saying thank you...?" His voice kept echoing in her ears, low and deliberate, entirely replacing the sound of the rain. She had always known Raaj as the quiet, sharp student who kept to his circle. Today, he was someone completely different. He was confident. Bold. And dangerous for her peace of mind.

Meanwhile, downstairs, Raaj was practically being lifted off his feet.

"Brother, that was smooth! I thought you were just going to stare at her like you always do!" Kabir laughed, throwing a heavy arm around Raaj's shoulder, which was still slightly damp from the drizzle.

"Did she actually save the number? Tell me you didn't hallucinate that part," another friend chimed in, nudging his elbow.

Raaj just laughed, shaking them off, though his heart was still hammering against his ribs like a drum. He reached into his pockets, his fingers brushing against the fabric of his cherry-red leather jacket, which he had deliberately worn today despite the gloomy weather. It was his lucky charm now.

"She saved it," Raaj said, his voice calmer than he actually felt. "But the treat is still pending. I need to figure out how to make that happen."

"Oh, so the boy is already planning the first date?" Kabir teased. "Take it easy, Romeo. Let the text simmer first."

By evening, the rain had cleared, leaving behind a crisp, cool autumn breeze and puddles that reflected the amber glow of the campus streetlights.

Back in her hostel room, Ahana sat at her study desk, an open textbook in front of her. For the past hour, she hadn't read a single line. Instead, her eyes kept drifting to her phone.

She opened her contacts, clicking on his profile. She edited the name, saving it properly under Raaj Chemistry Hons.

She opened the chat thread. The beautiful, poetic birthday wish he had sent looked different now that she knew the face behind it. It wasn't just a polite gesture; it felt personal. Her fingers hovered over the keyboard. She wanted to send a casual follow-up, something to show she wasn't completely rattled by his staircase stunt, but every draft felt too eager.

With a sigh, she tossed the phone onto her bed and walked over to the window, looking out at the damp campus.

Buzz.

The sudden vibration against the mattress made her jump. She rushed back and picked it up. A new notification lit up the screen.

Raaj Chemistry Hons.: I hope your hair dried up. Wouldn't want my pending birthday treat delayed because you caught a cold.

Ahana's breath caught. She bit her lip, a genuine, radiant smile breaking across her face. The shy department topper was officially typing back.

Ahana: Is that a genuine concern, or are you just strictly monitoring your reward?

A few seconds later, the reply came through, making her heart skip a beat.

Raaj Chemistry Hons.: A bit of both. But mostly, I just wanted to see if you'd reply.

Ahana felt her cheeks heat up again, just like they had on the stairs. She leaned back against her pillows, typing with a playful smirk.

Ahana: Well, you got your reply. Does the great Chemistry Hons. student always get what he wants so easily?

Raaj Chemistry Hons.: Not always. Usually, I have to work hard for the right reaction. But today, the elements were just in my favor. 😊

Ahana: Elements? You mean the rain? Or the fact that you cornered me on the stairs?

Raaj Chemistry Hons.: Let's call it 'perfect timing.' Though I have to admit, you look even more beautiful when you're caught off guard.

Ahana stared at the screen, her heart doing a little flip. She placed a hand over her chest, wondering how a guy who barely spoke in class could be this effortless over text.

Ahana: You are very bold over text, Chemistry boy. Where was this confidence all semester?

Raaj Chemistry Hons.: Waiting for November 7th to pass. I needed a good excuse to finally talk to you.

Ahana smiled softly, looking at the clock. It was getting late, and the quiet hum of the hostel night was settling in. She didn't want the conversation to end, but she also wanted to leave him wanting more.

Ahana: Smooth. But you still have to earn that treat. I'm going to sleep now. Good night, Raaj.

Across campus, in his own room, Raaj stared at his phone, his thumb tracing her name on the screen. He let out a breath he didn't know he was holding, a triumphant, incredibly happy smile lighting up his face.

Raaj Chemistry Hons.: Challenge accepted. Good night, Ahana. Dream of cherry-red jackets.

Ahana read the last text, hugged her phone to her chest, and closed her eyes with a smile that lasted long into the night.

"Kaagaz par toh sirf alfaaz likhe the,
Magar hawaon mein ek naya paigaam tha.
Faasle jo kal tak deewar bane baithe the,
Aaj unke beech simatta hua ek naam tha."

Chapter 5: The Unspoken Resonance



"Hazaar chehre hain is jahaan mein magar,
Nigaahein sirf use dhoondhti hain jo dil mein chupa ho.
Baatein toh roz hoti hain sabse mehfil mein,
Par sukoon sirf usi se milta hai jo rooh mein basa ho."

The digital world has a curious way of dissolving physical distance into something beautifully fragile. In the days following their rain-washed encounter on the steps, the gap between Ahana and Raaj narrowed down to the glowing interface of their screens. Late-night conversations drifted into effortless afternoon check-ins, creating a private, quiet sanctuary that belonged strictly to them.

On a quiet Thursday evening, while watching the sky darken from her hostel windowsill, a profound thought lingered in

Ahana's mind. Yielding to a sudden whim, she uploaded a brief, elegant line to her WhatsApp status:

"True affection is a solitary lightning strike; it happens once, and the rest of life is just chasing the storm."

She didn't anticipate a rapid response, but a notification flashed almost instantly.

Raaj Chemistry Hons.: I completely disagree. If it's with you, someone could fall all over again, day after day, without ever stopping.

Ahana's pulse faltered. She stared at the words, a sudden wave of warmth coloring her thoughts. She bit her lip, trying to steady her fingers so her reply wouldn't betray how deeply those words had pierced her usual composure.

Ahana: And who would waste that kind of devotion on me?

Raaj Chemistry Hons.: Who wouldn't?

Before she could form a coherent thought, another message slipped onto the screen, shifting the weight of the conversation.

Raaj Chemistry Hons.: Tell me something... is there someone occupying your thoughts? You know, in a meaningful way?

Ahana leaned back against her pillows, looking out at the starry horizon. A sudden, invisible current seemed to crackle through the air, despite the cold distance of the text.

Ahana: No. My life is entirely vacant in that department right now.

Raaj Chemistry Hons.: So, what you're saying is... there isn't a rival I need to worry about?

A soft, breathless laugh escaped her lips at his directness.

Ahana: Not at all.

Ahana: Anyway, turn the spotlight off me. What about you? Is there someone who holds your attention?

She waited. The three pulsing dots surfaced, vanished, and reappeared. For once, the boy who had stepped into her path so boldly on the staircase seemed to hesitate. When the reply finally arrived, it carried an emotional gravity that altered the entire mood of her room.

Raaj Chemistry Hons.: Yeah. Ever since the 11th standard. I caught sight of her just once, and it was like my heart anchored itself right there. I've never been able to look at anyone else since.

Ahana felt a sudden, inexplicable tightness in her chest—a faint, unfamiliar sting of disappointment.

Across the campus, Raaj sat at his desk, staring at the glowing screen, his chest tightening with anticipation. He hadn't spelled out her name because he truly believed she already knew. He had openly confessed his long-standing, quiet infatuation with the beautiful girl from his intermediate college to a few classmates. On a campus where news traveled fast, he figured the revelation had surely reached her ears by now. He was offering a clue, waiting for the pieces to click in her mind so she would realize she was the one who had held his world still for years.

But the university whispers had never reached Ahana.

Staring at his words, Ahana's mind took the information and wove a completely different story. High school. A past life. She instantly assumed he was harboring an unrequited, tragic love for

an old classmate from his hometown—someone he couldn't let go of.

A quiet, guarded politeness masked her actual emotions as she typed her retreat.

Ahana: Oh... that's incredibly rare. She is remarkably fortunate to be loved like that.

Ahana: Anyway, I should sign off. Good night, Raaj.

She closed the application swiftly, an unfamiliar, heavy silence settling over her.

Despite the silent misunderstanding, their digital connection didn't falter. Their exchanges continued through the week, lighter on the surface but weighted with an unspoken depth.

Then came the weekend.

Ahana's department friends had planned a little birthday surprise for her, sneaking a cake into the college canteen during the quiet afternoon break. As the birthday girl, it was a given that she was going to sponsor the whole thing.

The afternoon sun was soft and warm, casting a beautiful golden light over the campus. Walking toward the canteen with her best friend, Ahana looked absolutely stunning. She had left her hair open, letting it fall freely over her shoulders. She was laughing and talking, but there was a different kind of glow on her face today—the kind that comes when you've spent the whole week waiting for a text notification from one specific person. She looked completely happy, her laughter ringing out in the open air.

And there, standing right in front of the library, was Raaj.

The moment she stepped onto the path, his whole world seemed to stop. He didn't even try to hide it; he just stood there, completely spellbound, watching her walk toward him with her hair catching the breeze. She looked so beautiful it almost made his chest ache.

Ahana caught him staring, and her heart did a sudden, violent flip. Her eyes lit up, and without even thinking about it, she left her friend's side and walked straight up to him.

"Hey," Ahana said, her voice softer than usual, a nervous but happy smile on her lips. "We're heading to the canteen to cut a cake. Come join us, I'm giving a treat."

Raaj looked down at her. His eyes were deep, warm, and so incredibly focused on her that she forgot the rest of the campus existed. A slow, breathtaking smile spread across his face, but he didn't move an inch. He took a tiny step closer, his voice dropping to a low, quiet whisper meant only for her.

"Not like this," Raaj said, his voice steady but full of true feeling. "I want something different. I want us... I mean, just the two of us, for our own treat."

Ahana froze. A sudden rush of confusion, surprise, and absolute excitement flooded her entire body. It was like his voice had completely taken over her senses. Her heart hammered wildly against her ribs, completely overwhelmed by how effortlessly charming he was.

Looking into his eyes, a shy, wholehearted smile broke across her face. "Okay," she whispered.

She stepped past him to rejoin her friend, but after just a few steps, the pull was too strong. She stopped and turned back to look

at him. As she turned, her open hair lifted and waved in the air, a perfect, soft cascade that seemed to move in slow motion. Through the strands of her hair, she locked eyes with him one more time and gave him a final, lingering smile—silently answering the depth in his eyes that spoke a thousand unspoken words.

Turning back around, she walked toward her friends with a radiant blush, her heart racing in the happiest way possible, leaving Raaj standing by the library arches, completely lost in her.

"Bheed se alag hokar jab usne hamein pukara tha,
Laga jaise kaaynat ne chupke se koi ishara tha.
Uski udti zulfon ke beech jo wo muskurakar mudi,
Bas wahin par dil hamara zindagi ka har daanv haara tha."

Chapter 6: The 7th Barricade



"Hazon ki is bheed mein bas ek tum hi khaas ho,
Door hokar bhi tum jaise mere paas ho.
Yoon toh masroof the hum apni hi duniya mein,
Par tumhari ek pukaar se thami dil ki har aas ho. "

December had arrived on campus, wrapping the old stone buildings in a soft, dreamy mist. The morning breeze carried that specific, crisp winter chill that made everyone pull their sweaters a little tighter and seek out the warm, golden patches of sunlight on the grass. It was the kind of romantic weather that made the world feel cozy, slowing down time just enough for hearts to notice each other.

But this December, the university was anything but slow.

The campus was buzzing with an electric, chaotic energy as the college celebrated its milestone Diamond Jubilee ceremony. It was a massive, three-day grand event. The entire place had been transformed with bright decorations, temporary stages, and rows of white tents. The schedule was packed: the first day was dedicated to the Alumni, the second day was reserved for Teachers' Day honors, and the final day belonged entirely to the students. High-profile political leaders, famous celebrities, and nostalgic old batches of students were flooding the gates. The professors were busy rehearsing their speeches, students were running around for cultural performances, and the sound of music and loudspeakers echoed from every corner.

Amidst all this madness, Ahana and Raaj were caught up in their own separate whirlwinds.

As an NCC cadet, Ahana was dressed in her crisp uniform, assigned to the demanding ground duties of managing the crowds. Raaj, on the other hand, had been elected as the Secretary of the Cultural Department. Between running the event backstage and practicing with his dance group, he was barely getting a moment to breathe.

The first day kicked off with a massive turnout of alumni. Ahana was stationed at the expansive NCC ground, where an open-sky buffet had been set up for the guests. Her specific duty was Crowd Control and Queue Management right at the VIP Enclosure entrance.

By the time the afternoon rolled around, the heavy rush had finally started to thin out. Most of the college students and guests had already finished their lunch, but Ahana's eyes kept drifting toward the main walkway. Her mind wasn't on the crowd at all; it was entirely fixed on a certain Chemistry student.

She checked her watch. It was already 2:30 PM.

A quiet worry settled in her chest. Has he even eaten anything? she wondered, her eyes scanning the lingering groups of people. She pulled out her phone, her thumb hovering over his contact name. Her heart did a little nervous flutter. She had never actually initiated a phone call to him before; their bond had lived entirely within text messages and brief corridor glances. She hesitated, feeling a sudden wave of shyness.

Just then, she looked up and noticed that the path near her barricade was completely empty. There was no one in line. Taking a deep breath to steady the sudden butterflies in her stomach, she pressed the call button and put the phone to her ear, her heart beating in time with the ringtone.

A few blocks away from the campus, the winter wind was rushing past Raaj's face. He was sitting on the back of his friend's motorcycle, having dashed out of the college to take care of some urgent, last-minute work for the cultural fest.

Above the roar of the engine, his pocket vibrated. Raaj pulled his phone out, squinting against the bright winter sun.

The moment his eyes hit the screen, his entire world came to a sudden, absolute halt. The rushing wind, the sound of the traffic, the stress of the event—everything just evaporated. Right there, flashing on the screen, was the incoming call from:

Ahana 💍 😊 💍

He stared at the small screen as if he were looking at the greatest achievement of his life. A brilliant, helpless smile broke across his face. For a long second, he just gazed at her name, his heart swelling with a feeling so pure it almost made him dizzy.

Realizing the phone might cut off, he instantly swiped to answer, bringing the device to his ear with an eager, conscious rush.

"Heyy!" Raaj said, his voice instantly lighting up, thick with genuine happiness.

On the other end, hearing his breathless voice, Ahana felt her cheeks grow warm. "Hii," she said softly. "Won't you have your lunch? It's already so late. Come quick, I'm stationed right at the 7th barricade."

Raaj's heart did a spectacular flip. She was looking for him. She was worried about him.

"Yupp, coming right now," Raaj replied, unable to stop the joy from pouring into his words. "I was just a little tied up with some work. By the way... thanks for calling. You seriously just made my day."

Ahana bit her lip, a deep blush spreading across her face under the winter sun. "Bye... see you soon," she whispered quickly, completely charmed.

"Umm... Ta ta 🤞," Raaj said, using his trademark sign-off.

As soon as the call disconnected, Raaj let out a loud, triumphant laugh, slapping his friend's shoulder hard. "Yoo hoo! I am too happy today, yaar! I can't even explain it. I feel like I've just won a massive war of my feelings! Drive faster, bro! We have to reach college fast!"

His friend groaned, revving the engine, while Raaj sat behind him, his smile wider than the December sky.

When the bike pulled up to the campus gates, Raaj jumped off and practically sprinted toward the NCC grounds. His eyes were

focused on just one thing—getting a single glimpse of her. A few of his classmates spotted him and called out his name to ask about the cultural schedules, but at that moment, Raaj was completely deaf to the world. He ignored everyone and headed straight for the 7th barricade.

And there she was, standing tall and dedicated in her uniform at the entrance.

Raaj walked right up to her, a playful, easy stride in his step. Resting one hand casually on the wooden barricade, he leaned in slightly and smiled. "Hii, what's up?"

Ahana looked at him, trying her best to maintain her strict cadet posture despite her heart racing. "You should go and have your meal first," she said, giving him a look that was trying to be firm but was entirely soft around the edges.

Raaj nodded obediently, went over to the buffet, and fixed himself a plate of food. But instead of sitting down with the others, he walked right back over to her barricade. He stood near her, deliberately stepping into her space. Wanting to break her serious guard and hear her laugh, he leaned down and whispered in a low, teasing voice, "Your makeup is melted, I guess? Isn't it supposed to be sweat-proof?"

Ahana's eyes widened, and a wave of absolute embarrassment washed over her. She instantly panicked, wondering if she looked completely a mess. Because of the strict NCC rules, they weren't even allowed to wear a single bit of makeup on duty. Standing out in the open since the early morning hours, she genuinely thought she must be looking dull, exhausted, and completely unattractive.

Seeing the sudden worry on her face, Raaj's expression softened completely. He smiled gently, his eyes locking onto hers with a warmth that could melt the winter chill.

"Just joking, yaar," Raaj said softly, his voice dropping to a deeply genuine, tender tone. "You are beautiful. And you will always be beautiful in my eyes. At least you can smile now."

Ahana felt her heart melt a little at his honesty. She looked away, hiding a shy, helpless smile. "I'll deal with you, but only after I finish my duty," she murmured.

Raaj chuckled, then noticed something. "Have you eaten anything yet?"

Ahana just nodded her head slightly, signing a quiet no.

"Come, let's eat together," Raaj offered immediately, holding out his plate.

"No, I can't," Ahana said, looking around. "I'll eat soon after my shift is officially finished."

Raaj looked at her disciplined stance and understood that she wouldn't break her duty rules. Not wanting to argue or make things difficult for her, he gave a soft nod. "Okay then."

He walked over to his friend, handed him his plate to hold, and quickly ran to the refreshment counter. A moment later, he came back holding a cold water bottle. He carefully placed it right beside her hand on the barricade. "Drink this when you need it," he said gently.

He stepped back, raising his hand with a warm smile. "Ta ta 🤝," he said, turning to leave. But after a few steps, he couldn't resist looking back at her one more time. Ahana met his gaze,

passing a sweet, wholehearted smile to his little efforts, feeling incredibly cared for.

By the time Ahana finally relieved herself from duty and had her food, it was already 4:00 PM. Exhausted from standing all day, she trudged back to her hostel room. The moment she washed up and hit the bed, she fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

When she finally stirred and opened her eyes, the room was dark, and the clock read 7:00 PM. Her phone was buzzing with a call from her mother. Ahana picked it up, chatting softly about how busy her day had been, her voice still thick with sleep. After hanging up, she walked to the washroom, splashed some cold water on her face, and walked back to her bed.

She unlocked her phone, and a smile instantly touched her lips. There was a message waiting for her.

Raaj Chemistry Hons: Heyy, all good? Feeling okay after standing on your feet all day?

Ahana smiled, her fingers still feeling a bit heavy from sleep.

Ahana: Too tired to type. Call?

Across the campus, Raaj saw the message. He instantly opened the keyboard, his fingers typing out the raw truth: I'm always dying to listen to your voice.

He stared at the sentence for a second, his heart thumping. Realizing it might be a bit too intense too soon, he quickly hit backspace, undoing the words with a smile, and typed a simpler reply.

Raaj Chemistry Hons: Yes, of course.

A second later, his name flashed on her screen as the phone began to ring. Ahana answered, bringing it to her ear as she leaned back against her pillows.

"You can call me anytime you want, Ahana," Raaj said the moment she picked up, his voice incredibly steady and warm. "You should never hesitate with me. Though... there is just one small thing. If you call me late at night, I might get a solid scolding from my mother."

Ahana let out a bright, musical laugh that echoed through her quiet hostel room. "Ha ha! No, no, I definitely won't get you into any trouble."

"Good," Raaj chuckled. "Now tell me, are you feeling fine?"

Ahana sighed dramatically, though she was smiling. "Let me tell you first... don't you know we are absolutely not allowed to apply any makeup in NCC? It is literally God's grace that they let us at least wear sunscreen! Otherwise, I would have become so incredibly tan today that you wouldn't even have recognized me. It was so embarrassing when you said that earlier!"

Raaj burst into a warm, genuine laugh on the other end. "I'm so sorry! I swear I was just trying to find an excuse to talk to you."

"Well, you can start a normal conversation as usual, you know," Ahana teased, her voice soft. "But... I have to admit, it was pretty entertaining."

"I just want you to always be happy and laughing like this," Raaj said, his tone turning quiet and sweet.

"Yupp, I am pretty happy right now," Ahana admitted softly.

"I like it," Raaj murmured, his voice laced with a gentle truth.
"I love seeing you smile."

Ahana's heart did a soft, happy flutter. To hide her shyness, she quickly changed the subject. "Oh, and thanks for the water bottle, by the way. It really helped."

"Anytime, Ahana."

The conversation drifted effortlessly into the night, their voices low and comfortable as the December chill settled outside their windows. They talked about the crowds, the upcoming performances for the next day, and the quiet spaces in between, completely forgetting the exhaustion of the day.

Finally, as sleep began to pull at her eyes again, Ahana spoke softly. "I should sleep now. Bye, Raaj."

"Ta ta 🤝," Raaj replied with that same familiar warmth, leaving them both with smiles that lasted long after the screens went dark.

"Sardiyon ki is raat mein ek ajeeb si garmi thi,
Tumhari baaton mein chhipi wo thodi si beparwahi thi.

Ab har din khoobsurat sa lagne laga hai,
Jab se is dil ko tumhari aadat hone lagi hai."

Chapter 7: When the Lights Dim Down



"Shor bahut tha mehfil mein magar,
Tumhari khamoshi ko hum sunte rahe.
Tum apni dhun mein masroof the wahaan,
Aur hum door baithe bas tum hi ko takte rahe."

The second day of the Diamond Jubilee was dedicated entirely to the teachers. The campus had a deeply dignified vibe today. Professors walked around in their finest traditional sarees and kurtas, looking incredibly proud, while the cultural department scrambled backstage to ensure the felicitation ceremony and the heavy line-up of evening performances went off without a single hitch.

Ahana was back in her crisp NCC uniform, stationed near the main VIP seating area of the open-air auditorium. Her feet were aching from the consecutive days of standing, but her eyes remained sharp, focused on her duty.

And, occasionally, focused on the stage.

Because Raaj was everywhere. As the Cultural Secretary, he was running back and forth, managing the audio cues, directing the student volunteers, and helping the elderly professors to their seats with a respectful smile. Later in the evening, when his dance group finally took the stage, Ahana watched him from her post near the side aisle. Watching him move with such effortless, confident charm made her heart do that familiar, stubborn little skip. Surrounded by hundreds of cheering students, her eyes simply refused to look anywhere else.

By 9:00 PM, the formal event finally drew to a close. The crowd began to disperse, the heavy rush of teachers and guests heading toward the dining halls, and Ahana was officially relieved from her post.

Exhausted but feeling a quiet sense of freedom, she walked back to the hostel, changed out of her heavy uniform, and slipped into a comfortable, casual outfit. She let her hair down, took a deep breath of the crisp December night air, and walked back out onto the campus.

The main walkways were slowly emptying, the cold night wind rustling the decorated trees. Drawn by a strange, quiet pull, Ahana found her steps guiding her back toward the open-air auditorium.

The chaotic crowd was gone. The bright, colorful stage lights had been turned off, replaced by the dim, warm amber glow of a few overhead security lamps. The silence of the empty auditorium was a beautiful contrast to the roaring music from an hour ago.

She walked down the center aisle, her soft footsteps echoing slightly.

And there, right at the edge of the darkened stage, sat Raaj.

He was sitting with his legs dangling over the side, a half-empty water bottle next to him. He had changed into a simple black hoodie, his hair slightly messy from the day's sweat, looking entirely drained but quietly satisfied. Hearing the sound of footsteps, he casually turned his head.

When his eyes found Ahana standing in the aisle, the exhaustion completely vanished from his face. A brilliant, sudden smile broke across his lips.

"Hey," Raaj said, his voice dropping into a low, warm tone that perfectly matched the quiet night. "Look who's back. And completely off-duty this time."

Ahana walked closer, stopping right where he sat, looking up at him. "Hii. I changed and thought I'd take a walk. You look completely exhausted, Chemistry Honors."

"I am," Raaj chuckled softly, rubbing the back of his neck. "My legs feel like lead. But it was a good day. Did you... happen to catch any of the performances?" He tilted his head, a teasing, hopeful glint in his eyes.

Ahana felt her cheeks warm up under the dim amber light. She stepped closer, resting her hands lightly on the edge of the stage beside his knee. "Maybe I caught a little bit of it. You didn't do too bad."

"Just 'not too bad'?" Raaj gasped dramatically, leaning down slightly so his face was closer to hers. The subtle scent of the winter chill and his familiar presence wrapped around her. "I'll have you know I put my heart and soul into those steps, Cadet Ahana."

Ahana let out a soft, musical laugh that echoed beautifully in the empty space. "Okay, okay. You were amazing, Raaj. Happy?"

Raaj's dramatic expression softened instantly. He looked down at her, his eyes locking onto hers with a warmth that completely bypassed the December cold. "Very happy," he murmured softly.

A sudden, charged silence settled between them—the kind of comfortable, heavy silence where words aren't really needed.

"Sit with me?" Raaj asked gently, patting the empty space on the stage next to him.

Ahana hesitated for a fraction of a second, looking around the quiet, dimly lit auditorium, before she smiled and hopped up, swinging her legs over the edge right beside him. Their shoulders brushed lightly, a sudden jolt of warmth bleeding through their clothes.

"The campus looks so beautiful when it's quiet like this," Ahana whispered, looking out at the empty rows of seats.

"It does," Raaj replied. But he wasn't looking at the campus. His eyes were fixed entirely on her side profile, watching the faint amber light trace the slope of her nose and the soft smile on her lips.

They sat there for a long time, their conversation drifting effortlessly like a gentle breeze. They talked about the funniest mishaps backstage, how strict her NCC seniors were, and how fast the three-day festival was flying by. There were no grand declarations, no heavy promises—just the simple, unhurried charm of two people completely lost in each other's company while the rest of the world slept.

Finally, a particularly sharp gust of winter wind blew past, making Ahana shudder slightly and pull her jacket closer.

Raaj noticed immediately. He stood up on the stage, jumping down into the aisle gracefully, and turned back to face her. "Come

on, it's getting really cold. I should walk you back to your hostel before you freeze."

Ahana smiled, hopping down from the stage to stand in front of him. "I'm not that fragile, you know."

"I know you're tough," Raaj said, his voice incredibly gentle as he looked down at her. "But still."

They walked back toward the hostel side-by-side, their steps synchronized, occasionally bumping shoulders in the dark. When they reached the bright lights of the hostel gate, they stopped.

"Tomorrow is the final day," Ahana said, turning to him. "Student's Day."

"And you are officially off-duty all day," Raaj reminded her, a soft, meaningful smile playing on his lips. "Which means tomorrow belongs to us."

Ahana's heart did a violent, happy flutter at his words. She bit her lip to hide her blush and backed toward the gate. "Goodnight, Raaj."

Raaj raised his hand, his eyes lingering on hers for a heartbeat longer. "Goodnight, Ahana. Ta ta 🤝."

Ahana watched him turn and walk back into the December mist, a lingering warmth in her chest that told her Day 3 was going to change everything.

"Mulaqaat chhoti thi magar baat gehri ho gai,
Tumhari ek muskaan meri shaam ki raunak ho gai.
Waade-iraade toh abhi kuch bhi nahi hain darmiyaan,
Par bin kahe hi dil ki daastaan shuru ho gai."

Chapter 8: The Touch of a Touch



"Mehfil ki is bheed mein, bas uski ek jhalak hi chhaayi hai,
Saj-dhaj ke aaj wo, na jaane kya jaadoo laayi hai.
Main toh bas dekhta raha, us maasoomiyat ke noor ko,
Lagta hai khud kismat hi, mujhe uske qareeb le aayi hai."

It was the third and final day of the Diamond Jubilee—the much-awaited Student's Day.

Up in her hostel room, Ahana was finally getting ready as a regular college student, completely free from her strict NCC duties. She had just stepped out of a warm bath and was changing into a beautiful outfit. For the first time in three days, she slipped her feet into elegant high heels instead of those brutally heavy DMS boots. The moment her feet left the ground, she felt like she had literally shed half her body weight. She took a few experimental steps, giggling quietly to herself, feeling light enough to float.

Standing in front of the mirror, Ahana decided to apply some slight makeup. She told herself she wasn't doing it to impress anyone; it was just that she had been far away from taking care of herself for the past two days and wanted to satisfy her own heart. But deep down, a quiet, glowing truth remained—she knew how wholeheartedly Raaj looked at her, and her own feelings were softly, steadily developing toward him. She wanted to give just a little effort to make him feel special today.

However, the universe seemed to have a problem with her eyeliner.

Ahana stared in frustration as the wing went completely crooked. She wiped it out and tried again. And again. By the fifth time she was wiping it off with a tissue, the room was a mess, and the quietness of the corridor told her that almost everyone in the hostel had already left for the venue.

Just as she was about to give up in despair, the door clicked open. Her front-room neighbor, who also happened to be her childhood schoolmate and bestie, stepped in.

"What the hell are you doing, Aana?" Ishu exclaimed, shaking her head at the sight of the tissues. "It's way too late! You should have gone by now. Come here, move your hands, let me apply the liner."

With practiced, swift strokes, Ishu fixed the eyeliner, patted a bit of powder, and stepped back to view her masterpiece. A genuine smile broke across her face. "Wow... you are looking absolutely gorgeous, Aana. Seriously, just go now before the grand entries finish!"

Ahana looked in the mirror, her heart doing a happy dance. "Thanks, Ishu! Bye, take care, see ya!" she called out, grabbing her purse and rushing down the hostel stairs.

The walk from the college main gate to the grand function hall was magnificent. To honor the final day, a sweeping red carpet had been rolled out across the main driveway. As Ahana walked along it, her hair left completely open and catching the gentle December breeze, her makeup flawless and her confidence high, she looked absolutely stunning. Passing students couldn't help but look her way.

But the universe, it seemed, was determined to keep her humble.

She had only walked a little distance down the red carpet when a sharp crack echoed beneath her foot. Ahana stumbled slightly, her heart dropping into her stomach. The sole of one of her heels had completely snapped off.

A wave of absolute embarrassment washed over her. Clutching her purse, she limped forward awkwardly, trying to hide the uneven thumping of her steps. Realizing she couldn't possibly walk into the crowded hall like this, she stopped midway, seeking refuge right in front of the library card distribution office.

She stood there nervously, waiting and praying for a known face to appear. The rush of students passing by on the red carpet looked at her with confused expressions, wondering why a gorgeous girl in open hair was standing frozen by the office wall. She tried calling a few friends, but with the booming sound of the sound checks and the distant music from the function hall, no one answered her calls.

Just when she was beginning to panic, a common guy friend from her batch spotted her. Ahana practically waved him down, swallowed her pride, and explained the crisis. "Could you please do me a huge favor? Can you run to the nearby store and buy two tubes of Feviquick for me?"

The guy looked at the heavy crowd, hesitating slightly because he didn't want to miss the event opening, but seeing her distressed face, he agreed. "Okay, okay, wait here." A few long minutes later, he jogged back, handing her the small yellow tubes of glue.

Ahana breathed a sigh of relief. She found a low step, bent down, and began attempting to joint the broken heel back to the sole.

Right at that exact moment, the doors of the main hall opened, and Raaj walked out.

To say he looked heroic would be an understatement. He was dressed elegantly for his Secretary duties, carrying a confident, magnetic aura that instantly commanded the space. As his eyes scanned the driveway, they locked right onto Ahana—and then onto the guy friend who was leaning over, trying to help her with the shoe.

In a split second, the easygoing, smiling Secretary vanished. Raaj walked down the steps with a sharp, heavy stride, his gaze turning dark and intensely possessive. He walked straight up to the scene, completely ignoring the guy's helpful expression.

With an angry, firm gaze directed right at the common friend, Raaj spoke in a low, authoritative voice: "What are you doing here? I'll manage her problem myself. You just go inside."

The guy didn't need to be told twice. Sensing the protective, territory-marking tone in Raaj's voice, he mumbled a quick goodbye and bolted toward the hall.

Ahana sat there, her cheeks completely burning. The situation was so absurd, so sudden, and so intensely protective that she didn't know whether to hide or laugh. Looking up at Raaj, who was still breathing a bit heavily from his sudden surge of jealousy, she let out a nervous, beautiful laugh, trying to break the tension. "You didn't have to scare him off! My heel just broke..."

Raaj looked at her—really looked at her—noticing the open hair, the slight makeup, and how breathtakingly beautiful she looked today. The anger in his eyes dissolved into pure tenderness. Without a single care for his clean clothes or his status as the Cultural Secretary, he knelt right down on the ground in front of her.

He took the broken heel and the tube of glue straight out of her hands.

Holding the shoe firmly with one hand, he carefully punctured the glue tube. "You could have called me, Ahana," he said softly, his voice full of a gentle, scolding affection. "I was right inside the hall."

Ahana looked down at his bent head, her breath catching in her throat. She felt a profound wave of admiration wash over her. He has absolutely zero male ego, she thought, her heart swelling. He didn't hesitate for a single second to sit at her feet, holding her broken shoe and applying glue, even though they were right at the main entrance and dozens of people were walking past, whispering and watching them. He wasn't even her boyfriend yet to do this kind of stuff, but he did it as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"Are you listening to me, Ahana?" Raaj asked, looking up suddenly, his dark eyes catching hers.

Ahana snapped out of her trance, realizing she had been openly staring at him. Blushing deeply, she hurriedly bent down to get to work. "Ah! Yes, yes. Let me help."

She reached out, her fingers catching the upper part of the broken sole to align it while he applied the pressure. But in their uncoordinated rush, a generous drop of the quick-drying glue smeared between their fingers. Before they could pull away, Ahana's finger became completely attached to Raaj's.

Their skin fused together, trapping the warmth of their touch.

Ahana froze, her heart hammering against her ribs at the sudden physical contact. She looked up at him, her eyes wide.

Raaj didn't pull away. Instead, a slow, deeply mischievous, and heart-melting smile spread across his lips. Looking directly into her eyes, his voice dropped to a soft, thrilling whisper: "I wish this remains like this forever."

Ahana's heart did a violent, spectacular somersault. She couldn't say a single word. She just smiled, her lips trembling slightly as she looked down at their joined fingers, completely drowning in the sheer beauty of the moment. The noise of the campus, the people passing by—everything just blurred into background noise.

After a few breathless seconds of letting the moment linger, Raaj gently nudged the bond apart with his thumb, ensuring her skin didn't tear. "And... it's done," he announced, testing the strength of the heel. "You can wear it for now. Come on, let's go wash our hands and head inside."

They walked over to the nearby hand-washing area. Standing side-by-side under the winter sun, Raaj didn't let her struggle. He took her small hand in his, using the friction of water and soap to gently rub the sticky residue of the glue off her skin. His touch was incredibly careful, his fingers massaging hers until her hand was completely clean.

When they walked back toward the bustling hall entrance, Ahana looked at him, her eyes soft with gratitude. "Thanks, Raaj. It was too much help for me."

Raaj stopped, turning to face her fully. He gave her a long, meaningful look that made her knees feel weaker than her broken heel ever could. "Let's enjoy the evening, Ahana. I will do that a thousand times over if it's ever needed. No need to thank me." He stepped back, a brilliant smile lighting up his face as he raised his hand. "Ta ta 🤝."

With that, he dashed back into the backstage chaos, leaving Ahana standing there with a heart full of butterflies before she finally turned to join her group of friends.

Throughout the evening, the student performances were spectacular, but for Raaj, the real show was in the crowd. Even though he was drowning in coordination work, running around with cue sheets, he never missed a single chance to turn his head and catch a brief, lingering glance at her sitting among her friends. And every time he did, he found her looking right back at him.

By the time the grand event drew to an emotional close, the night had grown dark and chilly. The campus was a sea of moving crowds as hostellers began heading back before curfew.

Ahana stood near the exit with her hostel mates. She scanned the moving faces but couldn't find a single glimpse of Raaj. A quiet

pang of disappointment hit her. I can't just leave like this, she thought firmly. I should say bye to him.

This time, there was no hesitation, no doubt. She pulled out her phone and dialed his number with complete certainty.

Inside the noisy hall, Raaj picked up on the very first ring. "Ahana?"

"I'm going back to the hostel now," Ahana said, her voice soft against the outdoor chill.

"Where are you? I'm coming, wait!" Raaj said instantly, his voice urgent over the phone.

"I'm standing just outside the main hall," she instructed, looking around.

"Okay, I'm near the side exit... I can't see you through the crowd, wait a bit."

The structure of the grand function hall had an outdoor extension covered entirely by a sturdy PVC wire net fence, separating the inner corridor from the outer garden pathway. Raaj rushed toward the inner side of the net, his eyes scanning the darkness, while Ahana stood right on the outer side.

Through the small square gaps of the wire net, their eyes suddenly met.

Raaj slowly brought his phone down, cutting the call, a breathless smile breaking across his handsome face.

Hearing his soft, real-life "Heyy," Ahana turned around completely. Looking at him standing behind the wire net, an overwhelming rush of emotion flooded her eyes. She stepped closer, her heart aching with a sudden, beautiful fondness. Slowly,

she raised her right hand and placed her palm flat against the cool PVC wire net.

She looked into his eyes and asked softly, "Will you come over a cup of tea with me? It's a treat from my side."

Raaj's breath hitched. He knew Ahana. He knew she had loved tea since her childhood, and he knew she never invited anyone over tea unless they were profoundly special to her. This wasn't just a casual invitation; it was her opening the door to her heart.

A look of pure honor passed over his face. "I'd be honored to share moments like that with you," he whispered, before noticing a shadow behind her. "But... is there someone else coming along?"

"Just another hosteller is with me," Ahana murmured, gesturing faintly to her friend waiting a few steps away.

Raaj looked deeply into her eyes, his expression turning incredibly intense and full of a quiet promise. He slowly raised his own large hand, placing his palm flat against the exact opposite side of the PVC wire net, his fingers aligning perfectly with hers, touching her skin through the small wire gaps.

"I said it before, Ahana... not like this," Raaj murmured, his voice thick with a romantic gravity that made her heart stop. "I want us. Don't bother about tonight... we will have our special treat very soon."

Ahana felt a shiver run down her spine that had nothing to do with the winter wind. The feeling of his warm skin pressing against hers through the cold wire net, his intense gaze locking her in place, and the sheer romantic depth of his words left her completely breathless. Her heart pounded so loudly she was sure he could hear

it. She just stared at him through the fence, her eyes reflecting the absolute magic of the night.

Realizing the time, Raaj broke the trance with a soft, reluctant smile. "Okay, it's getting late, you should go. She's also standing there waiting for you. I wish I could steal some more moments like this... but practically, you have to go, Ms. Cadet."

Ahana, completely fallen under the spell of his charm, let out a soft, lingering laugh. She didn't pull her hand away immediately. "I must say... there is a very romantic boy hiding inside you, Mr. Secretary."

Passing him a deep, beautiful, and lingering smile, she finally let her hand slide down the wire. "Bye, Mr. Secretary. Good night."

"Good night, Ahana," Raaj replied, his voice a gentle caress.

Ahana turned and walked away into the dark December night. Raaj stood frozen behind the wire net, his eyes fixed on her retreating figure, refusing to move until she became completely invisible in the winter mist.

Once she was gone, he leaned his head against the net, letting out a joyful, breathless laugh. He looked down at his right palm, still feeling the electric, lingering sensation of her touch. He felt incredibly, profoundly blessed. Within a single day, he had held her hand in the water, and he had pressed his palm against hers through the wire. His heart felt completely full.

Back in her hostel room, the chaos of the Diamond Jubilee had finally faded into a beautiful silence. Ahana changed out of her clothes and slipped into bed.

As she curled up under her warm blanket, she didn't fall asleep immediately. She gently pressed her cheek into the exact same palm

that had touched his through the wire net, breathing in the faint, sweet memory of his presence.

Her phone chimed softly, breaking the stillness of the room. She reached out, her fingers still holding the lingering warmth of the evening, and saw a message from Raaj glowing on the screen:

Raaj Chemistry Hons: 'That treat is still pending, Aana. And I don't think I can wait much longer.'

She didn't reply. She didn't have to. She simply held the phone to her chest, a soft, helpless smile on her lips as she thought of his promise.

And there, standing quietly by the foot of her bed, were her broken but beautifully healed heels. She looked at them one last time under the dim moonlight, a soft, helpless smile on her lips as she drifted off to sleep, knowing her heart had been beautifully healed right along with them.

"Jaali ke us paar ek jahaan thahar gaya,
Tumhari chhuan ka asar mere dil mein utar gaya.
Tooti hui us raah ko tumne yoon sanwaara,
Ki mushkilon ka wo raasta bhi ab nikhar gaya."

Chapter 9: See you, Aana



"Faasle jo tay na ho sake wo baaton se kam huye,
Tum zara sa jo sharmaaye, toh hum bhi kuch nam huye.
Ab ke chhoo kar jo tumne ye dhadkan jagaayi hai,
Sochta hoon ki kya ye sach mein sirf parchhaayi hai?"

The grand, exhausting storm of the Diamond Jubilee had finally passed, leaving the campus wrapped in a heavy, peaceful winter silence. December was drawing to its close, and today was the twenty-fifth—Christmas Day. Outside, a thick morning mist hung low over the empty parade grounds, but inside the hostel room, the world was shrunk to the cozy boundaries of a single bed.

Ahana was completely tucked under her heavy blanket, plugged into her earphones. A slow, melodic song was playing, perfectly matching the gray, chilly winter weather pressing against

her windowpane. For the first time in months, there were no early morning roll calls, no heavy boots to lace up, and no chaotic schedules to manage. It was just pure, uninterrupted rest.

Across town, wrapped in the familiar comfort of his bedroom at home, Raaj was staring at his own ceiling, hands tucked behind his head. He was supposed to be sleeping in, but his mind was stubbornly uncooperative. Every time he closed his eyes, the chaotic noise of the past three days faded away, replaced by vivid, high-definition memories of Ahana.

He remembered the exact weight of her hand as he washed the quick-drying glue off her fingers. He remembered the sharp, electric sensation of her soft palm pressing against his through the cold PVC wire mesh under the moonlight. The memory was so visceral he could almost feel the phantom outline of her fingers right now. Smiling helplessly at his own ridiculousness, he rolled over, grabbed his phone, and opened their chat.

Raaj Chemistry Hons: Can I call miss Ahana?

Ahana's phone buzzed against her mattress. Seeing his name pop up on the lock screen sent a sudden, warm flutter straight to her chest. She unlocked the phone and typed back instantly.

Ahana: Anytime Raaj, you also don't need to think twice before calling.

Within three seconds, a reply popped up that made her breath hitch.

Raaj Chemistry Hons: Good, because thinking about you is already taking up twenty-four hours of my day. Calling you shouldn't require extra processing time.

Before she could even process the sudden warmth in her cheeks, the screen changed to an incoming call. Ahana pressed the phone to her ear, her voice automatically dropping into a soft, private murmur.

"Hii," she said, a quiet smile tracing her lips.

"Heyy," Raaj replied. His voice was lower than usual, carrying that thick, gravelly warmth of a quiet winter morning. "What's up?"

"Just relaxing under the blanket," Ahana murmured, rolling onto her side and pulling the quilt up to her chin. "What about you, Mr. Secretary? How are you feeling, finally?"

Raaj let out a long, dramatic exhale into the receiver, though his tone was laced with deep contentment. "Oh, don't even ask how relaxed I am today. I think my spine has finally returned to its natural shape. No microphone testing, no guest protocols, no emergency announcements... it's wild."

Ahana laughed softly, the sound clear and musical over the line. "That's good. You earned every bit of it, Raaj."

"Finally, we are free now," Raaj said, his voice shifting, turning a little more focused, a little more deliberate. "So... what are your plans for the New Year? What is your opinion about finally having our treat that day?"

Ahana felt a sudden, sharp pang of genuine regret. She bit her lower lip, staring at the wall. "I would love to, Raaj... but I'm actually going home the day after tomorrow. Please don't mind. I usually celebrate all major occasions and festivals with my family."

"No, no, absolutely not," Raaj intercepted quickly, his voice entirely understanding. "That's great, Ahana. Family comes first." He paused for a heartbeat, a quiet rustle of bedsheets indicating he

was sitting up. "But wait... won't your family members come to pick you up and take you home?"

Ahana let out a soft, small laugh, a trace of pride in her voice. "Nope. They never ever do that. They've always wanted me to handle things on my own and be independent, right from the start."

On the other end of the line, Raaj's smile widened. That fierce, quiet independence was exactly what he admired most about her—the cadet who could hold her own anywhere. "That's wonderful," he said softly, his voice dropping into a warmer, protective register. "In that case... how will you go?"

"I'll just get a taxi till the bus stop," she explained. "Then I'll catch my regular bus for home."

"O okay," Raaj said smoothly, his mind working fast. "Will it be fine if I drop you at the bus stop? And... maybe we can have our lunch outside before you leave?"

Ahana's heart did a distinct, erratic little skip against her ribs. The idea of spending those final few hours of the year with him sounded incredibly tempting. "Sounds great," she whispered, a bright, undeniable smile spreading across her face. "Done."

"Thanks, Ahana," Raaj said, the relief evident in his voice.

Wanting to break the sudden emotional weight of the moment, Ahana let out a teasing, playful giggle. "So... you are finally getting my birthday treat after a whole month! Talk about a delayed celebration."

Raaj chuckled, a deep, resonant sound that vibrated right through the speaker. "Hey, the treat might be a month late, but the charm hasn't decreased even 0.00001 percent. If anything, the anticipation has just added compounding interest."

The twenty-sixth of December passed in a blur of quiet, delicious anticipation. They didn't spam each other with text messages or drag out long phone calls, but an unspoken excitement hung heavy in the chilly winter air. The impending date felt like a beautiful, shared countdown.

At home, Raaj found himself meticulously washing and polishing his motorcycle until the black metallic frame caught the pale winter sunlight like a mirror. Meanwhile, in her hostel room, Ahana caught herself opening her wardrobe three separate times, quietly analyzing her clothes, trying to find an outfit that looked effortlessly beautiful without looking like she had spent hours agonizing over it. It was a sweet, restless day of waiting—the kind where the clock moves entirely too slowly.

When the morning of the twenty-seventh finally arrived, Ahana woke up before her alarm, an instant smile breaking across her face the moment her eyes opened. Today is the lunch.

She quickly got ready and went to the college administrative block. A special magazine had been published for the Diamond Jubilee, and Ahana had written a beautiful chapter for the book about the college. She went to collect it so that she could read it herself, show it proudly to her family, and to Raaj too.

Back in her hostel room with the magazine, a small storm of chaos broke out. She changed her clothes and began organizing her travel bag, her mind completely overwhelmed. She was trying to pack her things, look at the wall clock every two minutes, and apply her makeup all at the same time. Her hands were slightly unsteady as she brushed a light tint over her lips. A strange, beautiful confusion was taking over—an intense nervousness she hadn't even felt during her toughest NCC parade inspections. Why was a simple lunch with him making her hands shake?

Right on cue, her phone rang. It was him.

"Heyy," Raaj said, sounding incredibly fresh over the line. "I'm right at the starting of your hostel lane."

Ahana blinked at her reflection in the mirror. "You've come too early, I guess!"

"Nope," Raaj replied playfully. "You're just too late."

"Just give me some time, I'm coming down!"

"I would love to say that you should take your sweet time and get ready," Raaj chuckled, his voice turning warm and protective. "But we're already running a bit tight on the schedule. So come soon, I'm waiting. Otherwise, you're going to miss your bus."

"Just a minute, I'm coming!"

Ahana shoved the magazine into her bag, zipped it up, and took one final look in the mirror. She adjusted a stray lock of her open hair, took a deep breath, and whispered, "You're ready to go."

She hurried down the concrete stairs, her heart thudding louder with every step. After quickly finishing the formal entry in the warden's register, she stepped through the heavy hostel gates and into the winter sunlight.

There he was.

Raaj was leaning casually against his gleaming motorcycle, his eyes idly wandering over the tall trees lining the lane. But the exact moment the hostel gate creaked, his head snapped toward her.

He completely froze. His gaze locked onto her, tracing the graceful, sweeping way she walked, the casual elegance of her outfit, and the radiant, fresh glow of her face. For a few seconds, he

completely forgot what he was about to say, silently thanking God for this beautiful grace standing right in front of him.

Ahana, on the other hand, was having her own moment of breathlessness. Seeing him standing there so patiently, the immediate, bright smile that broke across his face the moment he saw her—it was overwhelming. She could clearly see the effort he had put into himself today; his hair was perfectly styled, his clothes were sharp, and he looked undeniably handsome and charming.

When Ahana reached the side of the bike, Raaj didn't say a word. Instead, with a smooth, incredibly chivalrous motion, he extended his foot and gently pushed down the passenger footrest for her.

Ahana looked down at the footrest, then up into his dark eyes. A whole language passed between them in that single second. Thanks, her eyes said. At this moment, words felt entirely unnecessary, almost intrusive. Putting one hand lightly on his shoulder for balance, she stepped up and sat on the back seat, maintaining a careful, needed distance between them. The engine roared to life, a steady, rhythmic thrum vibrating through the frame as they swept out of the hostel lane and into the crisp winter air.

They reached the restaurant a short while later and were shown to a quiet table in the corner. It was a spacious four-seater. Instead of sitting directly across from her like a traditional, formal setup, Raaj gently took her travel bag and placed it on the opposite side of the table.

Then, he pulled out the chair right next to her. He chose to sit on the same side, side-by-side.

Ahana turned her head to look at him, a nervous but beautiful smile playing on her lips. Sitting this close in a quiet indoor space,

away from the familiar college crowd, felt entirely different. It was intensely intimate.

They placed their order with the waiter, and then the heavy, loaded waiting period began.

The restaurant was quiet, the ambient background music soft. Because they were sitting side-by-side, the silence between them became thick, almost electric. Ahana could literally hear the steady, slightly heavy rhythm of Raaj's breathing. She noticed he was staring straight ahead at the table, his fingers lightly tapping the polished wood.

She leaned in slightly, a teasing spark in her eyes. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," Raaj said, his voice a little tight.

"Then why are you not looking at me?" Ahana asked softly, her voice a gentle dare.

Raaj finally turned his head, his dark eyes locking onto hers from just inches away. The playful guard he usually held was completely gone. "Can't handle your beauty from so close," he replied genuinely, his voice dropping an octave.

Ahana let out a sudden, delighted laugh, her cheeks flushing a deep pink. Raaj broke into a handsome, relieved smile too, the thick ice of nervousness instantly shattering between them.

To break the intense spell, Ahana unzipped her bag and pulled out the crisp, newly printed magazine. She slid it onto the table in front of him. "Here. I collected it this morning."

Raaj's eyes lit up. He opened the pages carefully, turning them until he found the chapter with her name boldly printed at the top. The page opened with a beautifully centered introductory quote:

"Every college is beautiful, but ours is my favorite."

Raaj stopped. He looked at the line, then turned his head to look at her, his eyes incredibly soft. "Wow..." he whispered, the word carrying a weight of true admiration. He continued reading her words silently, his eyes moving across the lines with absolute dedication. Ahana watched his face, her heart swelling with a strange, warm pride.

As he reached the bottom of the page, it was time to turn it over. Ahana reached out at the exact same time to help him flip the heavy paper. But in the small, close space, her hand slipped. Unknowingly, her palm came down to rest completely on Raaj's thigh.

The world seemed to stop spinning.

The solid warmth of his muscle beneath her palm sent a literal shockwave through her body. Ahana gasped softly, her eyes widening in sheer panic. "Oops, sorry!" she stammered, instantly trying to pull her hand back as if she had touched fire.

But Raaj was quicker.

Gently but firmly, his large, warm hand came down over hers. He pressed her hand down to its actual position on his leg, locking his fingers over hers to keep it there. He didn't even look up from the magazine, but a deeply satisfied, soft smile played on his lips.

"Let it be there," Raaj murmured softly, his thumb lightly stroking the back of her hand. "It's not making any problem."

Ahana's breath caught in her throat. She didn't pull away this time. She let her hand stay, trapped beneath his, resting against the solid warmth of his leg. Within seconds, the initial shock melted into an overwhelming wave of comfort. The sheer energy passing between their joined hands felt grounding, erasing every ounce of residual nervousness. They continued reading the rest of her chapter like that—their hands bound together in a quiet, reassuring warmth.

When he finished, Raaj closed the book and looked at her with pure pride. "You have a gift, Ahana. Seriously, your writing skills are incredible."

Before she could thank him, the food arrived. Over the next hour, they ate, laughed, and talked about a thousand little things—completely lost in each other's presence, the distance between them shrinking with every shared smile.

Finally, the motorcycle pulled up at the bustling bus terminal. The loud honking of buses and the shouting of conductors signaled that reality had returned.

Raaj helped her carry her bag to her scheduled bus. As she climbed up the steps, he stood by the large open window of her selected seat.

Ahana sat down, sliding the glass window open completely. She looked down at him, a sudden wave of quiet sadness hitting her now that it was time to part ways for the holidays.

Raaj stepped closer to the bus body, looking up at her with a gentle, lingering gaze. "Enjoy your days at home, Ahana," he said softly. "And call me after you reach, okay?"

"I will," she promised, her fingers gripping the window sill.

They took a few long, quiet moments just to look at each other, trying to memorize each other's faces for the upcoming days apart. Suddenly, the driver gave a loud, vibrating horn, signaling that the bus was about to leave.

Raaj took a half-step back. Looking directly into her eyes, his voice dropped into an incredibly low, breathtaking whisper that was almost swallowed by the engine roar:

"See you... Aana."

Ahana froze. Her heart did a violent, spectacular flip. It was the absolute first time he had ever dropped her formal name and called her by her deeply personal nickname. A rush of pure happiness and beautiful confusion flooded her brain.

"What... what did you just call me?" she asked loudly over the noise, leaning out of the window slightly.

Raaj didn't answer with words. A brilliantly mischievous, breathtaking smile broke across his face. He began taking small, slow steps backward into the crowd, keeping his eyes locked onto hers.

Raising his hand high, he waved at her, his voice rising clearly above the chaotic din of the bus station:

"Ta ta 🤝, Aana! Take care!"

Ahana leaned back against her seat as the bus slowly began to roll forward. She watched his figure grow smaller through the window, her hand automatically coming up to touch her burning cheek. She let out a soft, helpless laugh, a beautiful blend of happiness humming in her veins as the winter landscape began to blur outside.

"Wo pukaar kar mujhe 'Aana' kuch is kadar guzar gaye,
Ki mehfil ki is bheed mein hum tanha hi sanwar gaye.
Ab ke chhoo kar jo unhone ye dhadkan thamayi hai,
Sardiyon ki is dhoop mein jaise koi shafa aayi hai."

Chapter 10: *A Shared Sky*



Dhundhli si is thandi mein dhoop ki ek aas ho tum,
Door hokar bhi jo dhadkan mein rahe, wo ehsaas ho tum.

Naye saal ki dehleej par khada sochta hoon aksar,
Ki sirf mera ek khwaab ho, ya sach mein behad khaas ho tum?"

The rhythmic, monotonous rattling of the bus had eventually lulled Ahana to sleep, but the lingering echo of a low, breathtaking voice—See you, Aana—kept playing on a loop in her dreams. When the bus finally pulled into her hometown terminal, the sharp, familiar evening air welcomed her back. Yet, as she stepped down, her eyes automatically scanned the crowded platform, subconsciously searching for a sleek black motorcycle and a pair of intense dark eyes that weren't there.

She was home. Surrounded by the comforting chaos of her family, the delicious aroma of home-cooked food, and the familiar

warmth of her own room, everything should have felt normal. But a strange, beautiful restlessness had taken root in her chest.

After changing into her coziest pajamas, she curled up on her bed and stared at her phone. She didn't want to seem overly eager, but a promise was a promise.

Ahana: Reached home safely, Raaj.

She set the phone face-down on her pillow, expecting him to reply in an hour or two. It didn't even take two minutes. The screen illuminated, throwing a soft glow against her dark room.

Raaj Chemistry Hons: Good to know, Aana. I was waiting for this text. Go freshen up, eat well, and rest. You've had a long day.

Ahana's breath caught slightly. There it was again. He hadn't just said it to be playful at the bus station; he was writing it now. Aana. It felt so light, so protective, so uniquely theirs. She fell asleep that night with the phone held loosely in her hand, a small, permanent smile etched on her face.

The next three days passed in a slow, gentle blur. Being away from the strict, structured world of the college and the hostel meant they suddenly had an abundance of time—and yet, an abundance of distance.

They didn't crowd each other with constant, suffocating messages. Instead, their conversation developed a soft, rhythmic frequency. It was in the quiet spaces of the day that the growth happened.

On the afternoon of the twenty-ninth, Ahana was sitting on her terrace, soaking in the mild winter sunlight while reading a book. Her phone chimed. It was a photograph from Raaj. It was a

simple picture of the quiet street outside his house, the pale winter sun casting long, lazy shadows through the trees.

Raaj Chemistry Hons: Missing the chaotic rush of our college campus. Home is great, but the company here is terribly boring.

Ahana felt a sudden rush of warmth sweep through her veins. She quickly snapped a picture of the open pages of her book against her lap, the winter sun filtering through the balcony railing.

Ahana: At least your street looks peaceful. I'm stuck reading this heavy chapter, and honestly, the company here is just as quiet.

Raaj Chemistry Hons: What are you reading?

Ahana: Just a classic fiction. What are you doing?

Raaj Chemistry Hons: Thinking that a classic fiction writer could never invent a plot twist as beautiful as the way you accidentally turned the page of that magazine.

Ahana instantly buried her face in her hands, her cheeks burning so intensely she was glad nobody was on the terrace to see her. She didn't reply for a whole hour, her heart hammering against her ribs as she replayed the memory of her hand locked beneath his large, steady palm on his thigh.

When she finally replied with a simple, teasing emoji, Raaj didn't push further. He knew exactly how much space to give her to breathe, and exactly when to make her heart skip a beat.

Then came the thirty-first of December—New Year's Eve.

As night fell, the air grew increasingly chilly, and the distant sound of music and celebration began to echo through her neighborhood. Ahana's family was gathered in the living room,

talking and laughing, but her mind was entirely elsewhere. Her eyes kept darting to the digital clock on the wall. 11:45 PM. 11:50 PM.

At exactly 11:58 PM, her phone began to vibrate. It wasn't a text message. It was a voice call.

Ahana quietly slipped away from the living room, walking out onto the secluded, misty balcony. The cold air hit her skin, making her shiver slightly as she pressed the phone to her ear.

"Hello?" she whispered, her breath forming a faint cloud in the night air.

"Hey," Raaj's voice came through, incredibly clear, carrying that deep, comforting gravity that always grounded her. "Am I interrupting family time?"

"No," Ahana smiled, leaning against the cold railing, looking up at the starry winter sky. "I just stepped out. It's freezing out here."

"Then why did you come out, crazy?" Raaj chided softly, a distinct tone of protective concern slipping into his voice. "Go back inside."

"I wanted to hear your voice clearly," she murmured honestly, the darkness giving her a sudden burst of courage.

There was a profound, loaded silence on the other end of the line. Ahana could hear the quiet rustle of the wind from his side too. He was standing outside on his terrace, looking at the exact same sky.

"Ahana," he said softly, his voice dropping into a register so tender it made her knees feel weak. "Look at the time."

She glanced down at the top corner of her phone screen. The numbers shifted. 00:00.

"Happy New Year, Aana," Raaj whispered. He didn't say it with loud excitement; he said it like a sacred, quiet promise meant only for her ears. "May this year bring you all the success, all the happiness, and... may it keep you just as independent and beautiful as you are."

Ahana squeezed her eyes shut, a wave of pure, overwhelming emotion washing over her. The distance of the kilometers between their towns seemed to vanish entirely. "Happy New Year, Raaj," she replied softly, her voice trembling just a fraction. "Thank you for calling me."

"I wouldn't start my year any other way," he said genuinely. "Now, go inside before the winter cold catches you. I don't want a sick cadet returning to college."

Ahana giggled, the romantic tension dissolving into their familiar, cozy comfort. "Yes, Mr. Secretary. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Aana. Sleep well."

The next two days were filled with a different kind of anticipation. The holiday was wrapping up, and the countdown wasn't for the New Year anymore—it was for the day of her return.

Their small talks became sweeter, shorter, and laced with an unspoken eagerness. They talked about the packing, the bus timings, and the weather. But beneath every mundane sentence, the underlying frequency was vibrating loud and clear: I can't wait to see you.

On the evening before her return, Raaj sent a final text that settled the plan, leaving her with a stomach full of fluttering butterflies for the journey ahead.

Raaj Chemistry Hons: Get a good night's sleep, Aana. Tomorrow, the motorcycle is clean, the footrest is waiting, and remember... you promised me a special coffee date the moment you step off that bus.

Ahana closed eyes, clutching the phone to her chest, ready for the morning sun to bring her back to where her heart truly belonged.

"Naya saal toh bas ek tareekh hai, asli shuruat toh tab hogi,
Jab phir se tum saamne hogi, aur ye adhuri baat mukammal hogi.

Bas kal ka suraj gawah bane is beqaraar nigaah ka,
Jab muskura kar tum milogi, toh dil ki har dua mukammal hogi."

Chapter II: The Frost and the First Frequency



"Subah ki dhund mein lipta wo tumhara intezaar karna,
Kam shabdon mein dil ka haal behisaab bayaan karna.
Is thithurti hui subah mein jo tum paas aayi ho,
Chai ki pehli chuski sa sukoon is dil mein layi ho."

The alarm had gone off while the world was still completely asleep. Leaving her room at five in the morning felt like stepping into a silent, frozen vacuum, the familiar streets of her hometown wrapped tight in a heavy blanket of pitch-black winter fog. By five-thirty, Ahana was sitting by the window of the morning's very first local bus.

The sixty-kilometer journey was slow, quiet, and deeply restless. For the first hour, there was nothing to see outside but the dark, ghostly silhouettes of mist-covered trees rushing past the glass pane. Ahana rested her forehead against the cool window, her fingers tightly interlaced around the strap of her bag, her mind

completely detached from the sleeping passengers around her. As the miles slowly clicked away, the sky outside began a painful, beautiful transition—the deep black melting into a bruised purple, then a pale, icy gray, until a soft winter dawn finally tried to break through the thick horizon.

When the bus finally groaned and screeched to a heavy halt at the main terminal, the clock on her phone read exactly seven-thirty.

Ahana stepped down onto the concrete platform, shivering instantly as the sharp, biting morning air hit her face. Her breath turned into small, pale clouds of vapor the moment it left her lips. Pulling her denim jacket tightly around her shoulders to shield herself from the frost, she stood amidst the early morning commuters, her eyes automatically searching through the drifting haze.

She didn't even have to look for long.

Standing near the exit gates where the morning fog was just beginning to lift, leaning casually against his polished black motorcycle, was Raaj. He was wearing a heavy dark jacket, and his hair looked slightly damp from the morning dew. He had been looking down, but the exact moment her boots hit the concrete platform, his head snapped up.

His eyes locked onto her through the mist.

The immediate, intense relief that washed over Raaj's face was so transparent, so completely raw, that Ahana felt her pulse instantly quicken. He didn't hesitate. Stepping away from the bike, he walked over smoothly, his boots clicking softly against the pavement as he easily navigated through the scattered early morning passengers. Without a single word, his large hand naturally reached down and took the heavy travel bag from her grip.

"Welcome back, Aana," he said softly. His voice was lower than usual, carrying that thick, gravelly morning warmth she had desperately missed over the phone lines.

Ahana looked up into his dark eyes, a shy, radiant smile breaking through the exhaustion of her early journey. "Hi, Raaj. Did you wait long?"

"Just about ten minutes," he said, his lips curving into a handsome, honest smile as his gaze lingered on her face, tracing the soft, cold flush on her cheeks. "The roads were completely empty because of the fog, so I cruised right through. Tired?"

"A little," she murmured, her heart doing a slow, spectacular flip at his presence. "But the morning air woke me up."

Raaj's smile widened, soft and knowing. He led her to the motorcycle, and with that silent, deeply chivalrous habit of his, his boot pushed down the passenger footrest for her. Ahana balanced herself with a brief hand on his shoulder, stepping up onto the seat. As the engine roared to life, a steady, comforting warmth vibrated beneath them. Instead of turning toward the bustling, awakening streets leading to the college hostels, Raaj steered the bike down a quiet, fog-shrouded side road, heading toward the older, historical side of the town.

The waking noise of the town completely faded away, replaced by the quiet, crisp hum of the motorcycle traversing a peaceful, tree-lined avenue where the morning mist still clung heavily to the branches.

Raaj slowed the bike down as they approached a massive, weathered archway made of old red brick, damp with morning dew. Beyond it lay a vast, green campus with majestic, colonial-style buildings and wide, silent corridors.

"My old high school," Raaj said over his shoulder, his voice dropping into a nostalgic tone as he brought the motorcycle to a gentle stop near a low stone wall overlooking the foggy sports ground.

Ahana stepped down, looking at the grand old structures melting into the morning mist. "This is where you grew up?"

"Well, just for the final stretch," Raaj murmured, switching off the engine and leaning back against the bike, his hands jammed deep into his jacket pockets. A small, amused grin tugged at the corner of his mouth. "I've actually been to more schools than I can count on one hand. This was only my high school, and... that's a pretty funny story. I'll tell you the whole drama later."

Ahana walked a few steps closer to the wall, a soft, fascinated smile playing on her lips as she looked back at him. "A funny story? The college Secretary has a hidden, rebellious past?"

"Let's just say I kept my parents on their toes," Raaj confessed, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "But honestly, looking at those steps right now... it feels strange. I only spent my final school years here, and yet, standing here with you this morning makes the whole place feel entirely new."

Ahana looked at him, her cheeks instantly catching a flush that had nothing to do with the winter frost. To hide her beautiful confusion, she turned her gaze back to the misty fields. "Why did you bring me here so early, Raaj?"

Raaj took a slow, deliberate step away from the bike, closing the distance between them until he was standing just a foot away. The crisp morning air between them suddenly grew thick with that familiar, magnetic gravity.

"Because over the holidays, when we were talking at midnight, I realized something," he said softly, his dark eyes locked onto hers with absolute sincerity. "Every time I think of a memory that matters to me, I find myself wishing you were there to see it. Showing you this place... it feels like giving you a piece of my past, because I already know you're going to hold a very large piece of my future."

Ahana caught her breath, completely overwhelmed by the unvarnished, raw honesty in his voice. He was laying his heart perfectly open to her under the pale morning sky.

Before the intensity of the moment could completely overpower her, Raaj smiled softly, his expression turning incredibly tender. He turned toward a tiny, rustic tea stall set up just outside the old school gates—a simple wooden table where an elderly man was just lighting a small gas stove, the blue flame warming a large pot of milk.

Raaj caught the man's eye and raised two fingers, ordering two portions of their strongest roadside coffee in simple glass tumblers.

They took their warm glasses and walked back to the low stone wall, sitting side by side. The hot liquid sent up thick, fragrant curls of steam into the chilly morning air. Ahana wrapped both of her hands around the warm glass, letting the heat bleed into her frozen fingers.

"You never did answer my question on the phone, you know," Ahana murmured softly, taking a slow sip and finding the courage to look at him through the rising steam. "About why you called exactly at midnight on New Year's."

Raaj wrapped his large hands around his own glass, his eyes steady and unblinking.

"I told you," he said softly, his voice dropping into a register so low and intimate it made her pulse skip. "I wanted to be selfish, Aana. I wanted to ensure that the very first frequency to enter your new year belonged to me. I wanted my voice to be the last thing you thought about before you went to sleep, and the first thing you remembered when you woke up. I wanted to hear your voice at 00:00 so that for the rest of the year, whenever the college politics or the crowds get too chaotic, I can close my eyes and remember exactly how peaceful that first morning second felt."

Ahana looked down at her glass, her thumb tracing the warm, rough rim of the tumbler. The sheer depth of his words settled deep into her chest, filling her with a profound, aching warmth that completely erased the winter chill.

They spent the next hour just lingering there by his old school wall as the town slowly woke up around them. They talked about the strict teachers he used to avoid, her peaceful holiday afternoons on her terrace, and how the college magazine was already a massive hit. But the words were just a background score. The real conversation was happening in the lingering glances, the way his boots casually rested inches from hers, and the comforting quiet of just sharing the cold morning air.

By the time they got back on the motorcycle, the morning sun had finally broken through the mist, casting a pale, golden glow across the school grounds. The wind filtering through the avenue trees was still biting sharp.

Raaj kicked the stand up but didn't start the engine immediately. He turned back slightly, his eyes dropping to her hands, which were tucked tightly into her sleeves to escape the biting cold.

"Still freezing?" he asked softly, his voice laced with a gentle, protective concern.

"A little," Ahana admitted, her teeth chattering slightly as a stray gust of wind swept across the open road. "The highway is going to be brutal."

Raaj looked at her for a quiet, deliberate second. Then, without a word, he unzipped the outer layer of his heavy jacket just an inch or two, widening the deep, fleece-lined pockets on either side. He turned his torso toward her as much as the bike allowed, his dark eyes holding hers with a steady, soft intensity.

"Put your hands inside my pockets," he murmured, his voice incredibly low.

Ahana froze, her heart instantly hammering violently against her ribs. She looked from his face down to the wide pockets of his jacket, her breath catching in her throat. "Raaj... your hands will get cold while driving."

"I have gloves, Aana. You don't," he countered gently, a handsome, completely unyielding smile touching his lips. "Go on. Put them in."

A beautiful, breathless nervousness washed over her. Slowly, deliberately, Ahana let her guard drop. She leaned forward, closing the small distance between them, and slid her cold, bare hands directly into the deep pockets of his jacket.

The transition was instant. The interior of his pockets was incredibly warm, thick with his body heat and the faint, clean scent of his cologne. But the real warmth came from the proximity. Because of the angle, her hands were resting right against the sides

of his waist, her wrists lightly brushing against the solid, comforting contours of his ribs.

Ahana stayed perfectly still, her cheeks burning a soft, furious pink under the golden morning light. She looked up, her eyes wide and vulnerable, finding his gaze. Raaj didn't pull away; he just looked down at her, his expression incredibly soft, a profound satisfaction settling into his eyes as he watched the blush creep up her neck.

"Better?" he asked softly.

Ahana could only nod, her voice entirely trapped by the sheer, unfiltered intimacy of the moment.

Raaj smiled, turned back around, and revved the engine. As the motorcycle swept out onto the open highway, the biting winter wind roughness past them, but Ahana didn't feel it at all. She leaned completely forward, resting her cheek securely against the solid fabric of his back, her hands burrowed deep inside his pockets, holding onto his warmth as they rode together into the new morning.

"Dhundhli si is subah ka safar suhaana ho gaya,
Tumhari ungliyon ka mere coat ki jebon se waasta purana ho gaya.
Hawaayein laakh raasta rokein ab is sard highway par,
Tumhari dhadkan ko chhookar, dil ka mausam mastaana ho gaya."

Chapter 12: No Other Universe



"Khwabon ki dehleez par chalte-chalte ab thakne lage hain kadam,
Saamne tum khadi ho, toh kyun sambhalne lage hain kadam?

Ab ke agar faasle mite, toh kuch is kadar mitenge,
Ki dhadkan tumhari hogi, aur thamne lagenge hamare dam."

The golden morning sun that had welcomed Ahana back to the city gradually gave way to a week of brilliant, crisp January afternoons. The campus was slowly returning to its academic grind, but for Raaj and Ahana, the rhythm had permanently shifted. The cautious, distant glances from the left row of the EVS lecture hall felt like a lifetime ago. They were no longer two parallel lines waiting for a coincidence; they were overlapping, their daily routines seamlessly weaving into one another.

On a quiet Friday afternoon, the Chemistry department let out early. Raaj walked out of the laboratory, his sleeves rolled up to

his elbows, casually running a hand through his signature hairstyle. His friends were already heading toward the main gate, shouting about a plan at the local food joint, but Raaj's eyes were already navigating the familiar pathway toward the ITM block.

"Oye, Secretary saheb!" Kabir called out with a knowing smirk, grabbing Raaj by the shoulder. "The boys are heading out. Are you coming, or are we officially lost to the Chemistry of love?"

Raaj let out a soft, effortless chuckle, gently shaking Kabir's hand off. "You guys go ahead. I have some... pending notes to return."

"Notes? Right, because the Chemistry topper suddenly needs ITM notes," Kabir laughed, throwing his hands up. "Go on, Romeo. Don't keep her waiting."

Raaj smiled, his stride lengthening as he walked away from the group. His heart felt remarkably light, yet the anticipation in his chest was a familiar, heavy thrum. Ever since that misty morning on the highway, a quiet understanding had settled between them. They hadn't spoken about the intimacy of his jacket pockets, but the warmth of her hands against his waist seemed to have left a permanent mark on his skin.

When he reached the central courtyard, he spotted her. Ahana was sitting on one of the circular stone benches beneath the massive banyan tree, her laptop resting on her lap. The pale winter sunlight filtered through the leaves, creating a beautiful pattern of light and shadow across her face. She had her hair open, falling softly over her shoulders, and she was staring intensely at her screen, a frustrated pout touching her lips.

Raaj stopped a few feet away, simply adoring her existence. How does she do it? he thought silently. How does she make a

chaotic college courtyard feel like the quietest, most peaceful place in the world?

As if feeling the intense weight of his gaze, Ahana slowly raised her head. The moment her eyes locked onto his, that brilliant, guarded cadet persona instantly softened into a beautiful, genuine smile.

"You're early, Mr. Secretary," she said softly, though her eyes instantly betrayed a hint of relief at his arrival.

"The lab professor was in a good mood," Raaj murmured, his dark eyes instantly locking onto hers, refusing to break the contact. "Or maybe the universe just knew I was running out of patience today."

Ahana's cheeks caught a faint, familiar flush. She looked down at the notebook in her lap, her fingers tracing the edge of the leather cover. "Patience for what, Raaj?"

Raaj leaned in slightly, his voice dropping into that low, velvety register that always made her pulse falter. "For this. Just sitting next to you without a hundred people asking me for event schedules or crowd clearances."

A comfortable, loaded silence settled between them, the gentle rustle of the banyan leaves providing a soft background score. Ahana felt her heart hammering against her ribs, the sheer proximity of him erasing the outdoor chill entirely.

Wanting to break the intoxicating spell before it completely overwhelmed her, she gestured slightly toward her screen, which was filled with complex lines of code and a broken user interface layout. "Look at this. It's a web application layout for our minor ITM project. The backend logic is fine, but the CSS layout and pixel padding keep shifting every time I compile the code. The grid

columns are completely breaking, and I've been trying to debug this frontend alignment for the past two hours."

Raaj looked down at the complex, messy terminal screen. A slow, deeply mischievous smile crept onto his lips. Without a word, he reached out. His large, warm hand came down smoothly, his fingers sliding over the back of her hand, his palm covering hers as he gently guided her hand away from the trackpad.

Ahana froze, her breath catching in her throat as the intense warmth of his skin fused with hers.

Before she could process the physical contact, Raaj pulled the laptop onto his own knees. His long, elegant fingers suddenly hovered over the keyboard. The easygoing, sweet boy she knew vanished for a split second, replaced by a sharp, laser-focused intensity.

Then, his fingers began to fly across the keys.

He didn't just look for a missing semi-colon; he opened the core terminal, bypassed her standard IDE, and began executing commands through a raw Linux shell script with a speed that left Ahana completely spellbound. He was cleanly overriding the broken repository, rewriting the layout constraints, and executing terminal commands with a clinical, flawless rhythm.

Ahana's eyes widened in absolute shock. She was an ITM student, and she knew exactly what she was looking at. This wasn't standard classroom coding. This was advanced, high-level script execution.

"Raaj..." she whispered, her voice breathless with awe. "You... how do you know how to navigate a root terminal like that? You're a Chemistry student!"

Raaj didn't look up immediately, his fingers executing one final command before hitting enter. The screen blinked, compiled cleanly in milliseconds, and the broken UI grid perfectly snapped into a flawless, symmetrical alignment.

He closed the terminal, turned his head, and looked directly into her eyes from just inches away, a handsome, devastatingly confident smirk playing on his lips.

"Chemistry is just what I study for college, Aana," he murmured, his voice dropping into a low, thrilling whisper. "Ethical hacking and network architecture happen to be what I actually do in my free time. Back in high school, I spent more time breaking into local servers than opening textbooks. If you ever have a bug in your system... you don't need to look for an IT professor. You just have to ask me."

Ahana stared at him, her heart doing a violent, spectacular somersault. The sheer magnetism of this revelation—realizing that the quiet, effortlessly handsome guy who stood by her barricade was secretly a brilliant hacker—completely blew through her remaining defenses. He was an absolute mystery, a boy with endless hidden depths, and every single layer of him belonged entirely to her.

The playful guard he usually held suddenly dissolved into pure, unvarnished tenderness. He set the laptop aside on the bench, his dark eyes locking onto hers, refusing to let her look away.

"Sometimes," Raaj whispered, his voice laced with a romantic gravity that made her knees feel weak, "you don't need to stress over the hard coding. You just have to let the elements follow their natural pull. They always find their perfect alignment in the end."

Ahana looked from his steady hands up to his face. He was so close she could feel the warmth of his breath in the chilly January air. The digital misunderstanding from the holidays—the ghost of

an old high school crush she thought he was harboring—suddenly felt completely absurd. Looking into his eyes right now, she knew with absolute certainty that there was no one else. There had never been anyone else.

"Raaj..." she murmured, her voice trembling just a fraction. "The girl... the one you told me about over text. The one from the 11th standard."

Raaj reached out, his large, warm hand gently coming down over hers, locking his fingers over hers to keep it there against his leg, exactly like he had done in the restaurant.

"There is no other girl, Aana," he whispered, using her personal nickname with a reverence that made her shiver. "It was always you. I caught a single glimpse of you in that crowded street market two years ago, and my heart anchored itself right there. I didn't join that better college in the big city. I canceled my CLC, took an admission form, and stayed in this town... just for the chance to breathe the same air as you."

The entire world went absolutely mute. The courtyard, the distant chatter of students, the rustle of the wind—everything dissolved into nothingness. Ahana stared at him, her eyes wide, a sudden wave of profound, overwhelming emotion rushing straight to her chest. The final pieces of the puzzle instantly clicked into place—his sudden presence inside her tuition class, his effortless confidence on the stairs, the way he sat at her feet to fix her broken shoe without a single care for the world. It wasn't a tragic, unrequited love for a stranger. He had sacrificed his entire future just to step into her universe.

A tear of pure happiness gathered at the corner of her eye, but before it could fall, Raaj raised his left hand. His long fingers gently

passed over her jawline, his knuckles barely brushing her skin as his thumb caught the moisture at her eyelid with an aching tenderness.

"Don't cry, Aana," he murmured, his voice a low, soothing caress. "I would live in my imaginary universe for the rest of my life just to see you smile. Hearing my name in your voice is more than enough for me."

Ahana didn't pull away. Instead, she leaned her face slightly into the warmth of his palm, a radiant, beautiful smile breaking through her shyness.

"You are incredibly foolish, Chemistry boy," she whispered, her voice thick with a deep, undeniable affection. "You gave up a grand life for a girl who didn't even know your name?"

Raaj's lips curved into a brilliant, deeply satisfied grin, his thumb lingering near her temple for a fraction of a second, sending a quiet thrill straight through her entire system.

"And I would do it a thousand times over," he replied with absolute certainty.

He smoothly moved his hand down, his fingers interlocking perfectly with hers, trapping the warmth of their touch between them on the stone bench. They sat there under the January sun, their fingers bound together, looking out at the campus that had brought them together, knowing that the threshold had finally been crossed, and their story was officially turning its most beautiful page.

"Sadiyon ka wo intezaar aaj mukammal ho gaya,
Jo kal tak mehaz ek khwab tha, wo aaj sach ka pal ho gaya.
Tumhari hatheli mein jo thama hai haath mera ab,
Laga jaise zindagi ki har mushkil ka hal ho gaya."

Chapter 13: Beyond Syllables



"Lafzon ki zaroorat hi kahan thi usool-e-ishq mein,
Tumhari khamoshi ne toh poora diwaan likh diya.
Aaj chand bhi hairan hai us pahadi ki dhalan par,
Ki zameen ke do musafiron ne milkar naya aasman likh diya."

Sometimes, the universe doesn't require the standard, exhausted syllables of an "I love you" to seal a destiny. Words are fleeting; they are easily whispered, easily written, and easily forgotten. True devotion chooses to breathe in the heavy, unvarnished weight of action. It lives in a two-year sacrifice, in a canceled college transfer, in a root terminal cleanly compiled under a banyan tree, and in the protective, unyielding stance of a boy who had anchored his entire world to a single baseline frequency.

When Ahana finally walked out of the central courtyard that afternoon, the crisp January breeze felt dizzyingly warm against her

face. She practically floated away from the banyan tree, her steps light, her mind a beautiful, chaotic storm of sheer disbelief and intoxicating happiness. The fierce, disciplined NCC cadet was completely gone, replaced by a girl drowning in the sweetest, most overwhelming shyness she had ever known.

The moment she reached the absolute safety of her hostel room, she shut the door behind her, kicked off her shoes, and collapsed straight onto her bed. The silence of the room wrapped around her like a protective shield. With her heart still hammering a frantic, erratic rhythm against her ribs, she plugged in her earphones, letting a slow, deep acoustic melody flood her senses to ground her racing thoughts.

Lying flat on her back, she pulled out her phone and opened her chat history with Raaj. She scrolled all the way back to those cold December holiday nights—back to the texts where they had talked about that mysterious, unnamed girl from the 11th standard whom he had loved from afar.

Reading those exact same lines now, with the golden truth of the banyan tree echoing in her mind, a profound, breathless blush crept up her neck and stained her cheeks a deep, furious pink. It was me, her mind whispered, the realization hitting her with a fresh wave of awe. It was always me.

A soft, helpless laugh escaped her lips. She slowly switched off the screen, bringing the phone up to press it flat against her chest, right over her thudding heart. She closed her eyes and let yourself sink into the mattress, simply riding the beautiful, lingering echo of his gravelly voice as it replayed on a loop in her soul: "I stayed in this town... just for the chance to breathe the same air as you."

By the time the afternoon sun began to dip, painting the horizon in bruised shades of amber and lavender, the sweet restlessness in her chest became too heavy to contain. She couldn't

wait until the next morning. She needed to see him. She needed the grounding reality of his presence.

Taking a deep breath, she unlocked her phone and dialed his number. When he picked up, her voice automatically dropped into a soft, private murmur. "Raaj... let's meet this evening. I want to talk."

On the other end, there was a tiny, sharp intake of breath before his steady voice answered, "Tell me where, Aana. I'll be there."

An hour later, Ahana stood in front of her hostel mirror, getting ready with an unhurried, delicious deliberation. She chose a beautiful, elegant black kurti paired with classic blue jeans—a combination that felt effortlessly striking. She let her hair fall completely open, brushing it until it caught the soft evening light. Then, reaching into her drawer, she picked out a tiny, delicate black bindi and pressed it perfectly into the center of her forehead. After a subtle spray of her signature, familiar body fragrance, she took a final look at her reflection. Her eyes looked brighter, her face flushed with a nervous, radiant glow. She was ready.

When she stepped through the heavy hostel gates, the roar of a familiar engine welcomed her.

Raaj was leaning against his gleaming black motorcycle. But as his eyes swept over her, he froze. Ahana's breath caught in her throat as she noticed his attire. In a spectacular piece of unspoken synchronicity, he was wearing a sharp, black full-sleeve turtleneck t-shirt that closely hugged the broad, powerful contours of his chest and shoulders. And over it, he had thrown her absolute favorite piece of his wardrobe—his rich, cherry-red leather jacket.

They stood there for a long, loaded heartbeat, two figures clad in matching black and striking red, completely commanding the quiet twilight of the lane.

Despite his confident stance, Ahana's sharp eyes caught the subtle, uncharacteristic tension in his posture. As he handed her the spare helmet, his fingers brushed hers, and she felt a slight, nervous tremor in his touch. Raaj—the fearless, charismatic Cultural Secretary who could handle a crowd of thousands without blinking—was visibly tensed. Even though her actions over the past week had clearly signaled her growing affection, the sheer gravity of her calling him out specifically "to talk" had his mind running into a hyper-focused overdrive, wondering what final verdict awaited him.

"Hi," she said softly, stepping closer.

"Heyy," Raaj replied, his voice a bit tighter than usual, though a warm, incredibly handsome smile instantly broke through his nervousness as he looked down at her bindi. He smoothly extended his boot, pushing down the passenger footrest for her with that deep, engrained chivalry.

Ahana placed her hand lightly on his shoulder, stepping onto the bike. This time, as the motorcycle glided forward, the distance between them felt thinner, the air charged with an unspoken countdown.

Raaj steered the bike away from the familiar campus routes, heading toward the rugged, isolated outskirts of the city. The urban noise dissolved, replaced by the deep, rhythmic hum of the engine as they began to ascend a steep, winding road leading up a majestic, bare mountain. The hill was striking—completely devoid of trees, its raw, weathered rocky terrain standing stark against the darkening sky. At the very summit of this silent peak sat an ancient, serene temple, and spreading out beside it was a massive, sprawling

under-construction park, its unfinished stone pathways and grand structures looking poetic under the rising moon.

He parked the motorcycle near the base of the final incline. Ahead of them stretched a long, steep flight of weathered stone stairs leading up to the temple courtyard.

The winter wind up here was sharp, whistling softly across the bare rock. As Ahana took her first step, her heels caught slightly on the uneven stone. Sensing it instantly without even looking back, Raaj stopped. He turned around, extending his large, bare palm toward her.

"Here," he murmured, his dark eyes locking onto hers through the twilight. "Hold on."

Ahana didn't hesitate. She placed her smaller hand completely into his. His fingers instantly closed around hers, his grip firm, solid, and incredibly warm against the mountain chill. He didn't just guide her; he literally anchored her steps, carrying her weight effortlessly as they climbed the steep stairs together, side by side, their hands bound in a reassuring, protective lock.

They reached the summit, stepped into the quiet, bell-chime serenity of the temple, and bowed their heads, receiving the silent blessings of the divine.

When they walked out into the open courtyard, the world below them was a sea of distant, twinkling city lights. Moving toward the edge of the cliff, they found a smooth, wide plateau of rock overlooking the vast, dark expanse of the under-construction park.

Slowly, deliberately, Ahana unbuckled her heels, placing them neatly on the flat stone. Raaj unlaced his heavy boots, setting them down right beside hers—side by side, perfectly parallel, just like their owners.

They sat down on the cold rock, the brilliant, silver moonlight pouring down from a cloudless sky, illuminating them in a breathtaking, ethereal glow. A slow, gentle winter breeze swept across the bare peak, rustling her open hair and carrying the faint, sweet scent of her body spray directly into his space.

The silence between them stretched, thick and loaded with a beautiful, trembling tension. Raaj sat with his forearms resting on his knees, his eyes staring straight ahead at the valley, his breathing steady but heavy with anticipation.

Ahana slowly turned her head, her gaze tracing the sharp, handsome profile of his jawline under the moonlight.

"Raaj," she spoke softly, her voice carrying a clear, disciplined weight that cut through the whistling wind. "What you told me this afternoon at the college... under the banyan tree. It's fine. It's beautiful. But you need to know something about me. I am not a girl who is ready for any kind of timepass. I never want that, and I never will."

"I don't have any interest in timepass, Aana," Raaj said, his voice dropping into that low, velvety register. "Neither with you, nor with anyone else in this world. Since the very first day I saw you two years ago, I wanted to be yours. I never focused on making you mine; I just wanted to belong to you. And I've never confessed anything to you directly before this because I was terrified of losing even the smallest things—your brief text messages, your formal gestures, or that cute, heartwarming smile that keeps me alive all day. And if I ever let my mind wander into the future... if I ever thought about us being together... I could only ever think of you as my wife, Aana. You are my wife material, Aana. Even if you were to ask me to be your boyfriend right now, I wouldn't accept it if I wasn't entirely into being your husband down the line. That's the

only destination I see. Right? You are special, and your presence makes my world special."

"See... saying things is very easy, Raaj," Ahana murmured, looking at him through the rising wind. "Doing it is the hard part."

"I kept loving you for two whole years without even knowing if I would ever see your face again in this lifetime, Aana. If fate hadn't brought us to the same campus, I would have continued loving you my entire life without ever seeing you again. You can't see through my eyes right now, so you don't know how incredibly precious, how sacred you are to me. I love you, Aana. I really, truly do. And I am going to keep loving you forever. So, Miss Aana... Will you be Mrs. Raaj forever... or do I have to live and die with just your memories?"

Ahana looked at his intense, waiting face—the boy who had rewritten his entire life just to stand on this mountain peak with her. She let out a soft, lingering laugh, her eyes reflecting the brilliant moonlight as a wholehearted smile broke across her lips.

"I'm not letting you do anything alone, Mr. Secretary," she whispered. "Just ensure you have the courage to handle my extreme mood swings, my sudden anger... and my love too."

Raaj froze for a fraction of a second, letting her words sink into his soul. Then, a massive, unvarnished gasp of pure relief left his lungs.

"Yeah... I won," Raaj whispered, his voice trembling with a raw, breathless joy. "I actually won in life. Thanks, Aana... I'm so happy I can't even express it."

Without waiting for another second, he leaned forward, his large arms smoothly coming around her shoulders, pulling her flush against his chest into a sweet, fiercely protective hug. Ahana let out a soft, contented sigh, wrapping her arms around his waist,

burying her face into the warm, rich fabric of his cherry-red leather jacket.

Raaj held her tightly, his chin resting against the crown of her head. "I just can't let this moment go," he murmured into her hair, his chest vibrating against hers. "This is the absolute best feeling of my entire life."

They stayed locked in that warm, quiet embrace for a long time under the watchful eye of the moon, the bare mountain witnessing the anchoring of two souls.

When they finally climbed down the stairs, their hands stayed tightly interlocked until they reached the bike. As the motorcycle roared to life and swept onto the open, dark highway, the dynamic had permanently shifted.

This time, there was no careful, formal distance between them. Ahana leaned completely forward, sitting closer to him than she ever had before. She wrapped her left arm securely around his waist, resting her cheek flat against the solid, comforting expanse of his back.

Sensing her closeness, a brilliant, proud smile broke across Raaj's face under the helmet. Reaching down with his left hand, he took her bare, cold hand from his waist and gently guided it forward, sliding it directly into the deep, warm pocket of his cherry-red leather jacket, locking his own hand over hers inside the pocket to keep her warm.

The ride back to the campus was pure, uninterrupted magic—the cold winter wind rushing past them on the highway while they rode enveloped in a private, unbreakable world of shared body heat and racing heartbeats.

When the motorcycle finally idled to a smooth stop under the bright, glowing lights of the hostel gate, reality returned, but it felt

entirely new. Ahana stepped down from the footrest, taking off her helmet and handing it to him, her open hair catching the golden gate light.

Raaj looked up at her from the bike, his dark eyes sparkling with pure, unadulterated happiness. A brilliant, boyish grin touched his lips as he raised his right hand.

"Ta ta 🤝, Aana," he said, his voice light and full of a joyful, breathless excitement. "This night... I'm going to sleep like crazy. I'm just so happy. It feels absolutely great."

Ahana looked down at him, her heart doing a violent, happy flutter. She leaned in slightly, a beautiful, lingering smile warming her eyes as she mirrored his gesture.

"Ta ta 🤝 instead of bye, Raaj," she replied softly. "Me too. Good night."

She turned and walked through the hostel gates, her steps rhythmic and secure. Raaj stayed frozen on his bike, watching her retreat until she safely crossed the inner corridor, a triumphant, beautiful laugh escaping his lips into the January night air as he finally revved the engine, knowing his universe was finally, completely whole.

"Bina waadon ke hi aaj ek umr ka iqraar ho gaya,
Is sooni pahadi par hamari mohabbat ka iftikhaar ho gaya.
Vida kiya hai muskura kar aaj 'ta-ta' kehte hue,
Ki do saal ka wo tanha safar ab mukammal yaar ho gaya."

Chapter 14: The Shared Plate



"Kal tak jo mehaz ek khwaab tha, aaj wo roz ka savera ho gaya,
Tumhari hatheli mein thama jo haath mera, mukammal mera
basera ho gaya.

Log dhoondhte hain sukoon jannat ki galiyon mein aksar,
Hamein toh buzurgon ki duaon mein, mohabbat ka savera mil gaya."

In the days that followed the quiet evening on the mountain peak, a beautiful, vibrant energy took over their lives. The cautious hesitation that had defined their initial months on campus completely evaporated, replaced by an unbreakable, unspoken certainty. They didn't need to change who they were; they simply allowed their worlds to fuse. In the corridors of the college, they effortlessly stepped into the rhythm of being together—not because they sought attention, but because the sheer, magnetic harmony between them was impossible for anyone to ignore.

Their daily routine transformed into a series of beautiful, shared rituals. After their afternoon classes let out, they would head straight to the cycle and bike stand, sitting on the iron frames for hours under the warm winter sun. The era of brief, calculated text messages and small, polite phone calls was officially gone, replaced by late-night calls that stretched into the early hours of the morning. Raaj no longer had to wait for a reason to hear her voice; he could dial her number without a single shred of hesitation, satisfied just listening to her breathe on the other end of the line.

Sometimes, Raaj would unexpectedly show up in the crisp morning hours right outside her tuition class, leaning against his bike with two hot cups of tea. They would head out for a quiet breakfast together, laughing over small things, before walking toward the college gates and exchanging a sweet, lingering "Ta ta" as they reluctantly parted ways for their respective classrooms.

And every single evening, as if drawn by a natural law of gravity, they would ascend the same bare mountain. They sat on the flat rocks, placing their boots and heels side-by-side, taking pictures of the panoramic view and of each other. They spent hours listing each other's qualities and small flaws, talking with a level of absolute transparency that made them completely happy. During those sunset hours, they would place their phones side-by-side on the rock, completely ignored. It was the perfect realization of a modern blessing: the kind of love that makes you feel like you don't even own a phone.

As they were beautifully settling into this new life, a crisp morning arrived in late January. Raaj pulled his bike up beside her near the courtyard, a rare, thoughtful look in his eyes.

"Aana," he said softly, running a hand through his hair. "I want to take you to my village today. It's only about 25 kilometers from here."

Ahana looked up, surprised. "Your village? But I thought your family lived here in the college town."

"They do, since my childhood," Raaj explained, his voice dropping into a respectful murmur. "Only my grandparents live at the village house now. I'm incredibly close to them, Aana. Before I introduce you to my mother, I want to take you to them. I want us to seek the blessings of the elders first."

Ahana felt a profound warmth flood her chest at his words. The sheer respect and seriousness with which he viewed their relationship left no room for doubt.

"Okay," she smiled, her eyes softening. "Let's go."

As they began planning the ride, Raaj casually leaned back against his bike, a mischievous glint returning to his eyes. "Just so you know, you're about to visit the territory of a master chef. I happen to be a very good cook."

Ahana raised an eyebrow, a playful challenge instantly flashing on her face. "Oh, really? Let me stop you right there, Raaj. Nobody in this world can make a better chicken curry than my father. I don't care how good you think you are—his recipe is unbeatable."

Raaj let out a confident, handsome laugh. "Is that a challenge? Fine. Consider the stakes raised. Today, I am cooking lunch for all of us at the village, and you can judge for yourself."

The 25-kilometer ride flew past like a cinematic dream. Ahana leaned into his back, completely enjoying the refreshing rush of the winter breeze as the motorcycle glided over the massive overbridge

that led into his ancestral hometown. Looking out at the changing landscape—the wide-open green fields, the clean rustic air, and the peaceful rhythm of the countryside—everything felt uniquely special because she was witnessing the landscape that had shaped him.

To avoid unnecessary attention from nearby relatives who might complicate their private visit with endless questions, Raaj expertly maneuvered the motorcycle through a quiet lane, steering them toward the back gate of the ancestral house. He idled the engine, and almost instantly, the wooden door creaked open.

A tall, elderly man with kind eyes and a striking resemblance to Raaj stepped out, a welcoming, deeply affectionate smile breaking across his face.

"Grandfather," Raaj murmured warmly, stepping off the bike.

Ahana immediately stepped forward. Bowing her head with grace and deep respect, she touched the elder's feet. The grandfather's eyes crinkled with pure joy as he placed a reassuring hand on her head, whispering heartfelt blessings. Raaj smoothly wheeled his motorcycle inside the courtyard, securing the gate behind them.

Stepping into the cool, spacious interiors of the traditional house, they were met by his grandmother, a gentle woman with a serene countenance. Ahana once again bowed to take her blessings.

The grandparents couldn't take their eyes off Ahana, openly praising her radiant beauty and elegant posture. They sat down in the main living area, and the grandmother instantly struck up a conversation, asking Ahana about her parents, their professions, her siblings, and her background with a genuine, maternal warmth that made all of Ahana's residual nervousness vanish into thin air.

Meanwhile, Raaj gave Ahana a knowing wink and vanished into the kitchen. He began preparing the ingredients with an efficient, practiced ease. A little while later, after placing the marinated chicken over the traditional fire to simmer, he walked back into the living room, wiping his hands on a towel.

The moment he stepped into the room, he froze for a split second, a look of pure, unadulterated disbelief and profound happiness washing over his handsome face. Seeing Ahana—the girl he had silently loved from a distance for two years—sitting perfectly at home, laughing and conversing with his grandparents under his own ancestral roof, was a sight that felt too beautiful to be real.

He quietly joined them, sitting on the adjacent couch. For the next hour, the house was filled with the sound of hearty laughter and shared stories as the four of them connected effortlessly.

"Raaj," the grandfather finally spoke, a knowing smile touching his lips. "Why don't you show her around the house while the food cooks?"

The grandmother gave a gentle, approving nod toward Ahana. "Go, beta. Look around."

Ahana rose from her seat, following Raaj toward the staircase leading to the upper floors. As they began to ascend the concrete steps, a sudden, playful shyness overcame her. Instead of walking beside him, she stepped a pace behind, her fingers reaching out to gently pinch the fabric of his red turtleneck t-shirt, using it to anchor herself as he guided her up. Raaj smiled secretly, slowing down his stride to match her completely.

He showed her the spacious rooms of the first floor, the high ceilings, and finally led her out to the sweeping, open terrace that

overlooked the entire peaceful village layout. The vast blue sky stretched above them, the afternoon sun warming the concrete.

After showing her the view, Raaj turned around to close the heavy wooden door leading back inside from the terrace.

Ahana stood in the quiet transition space of the upper landing. With no one else around, she looked up at him, her eyes carrying a soft, teasing glint. "You haven't hugged me yet, Raaj... even though we are completely alone up here."

Raaj stopped, his hand resting on the door handle. A handsome, deeply amused smirk played on his lips as he looked down at her. "Umm... honestly? I was a little tensed and scared that you'd say I did wrong while bringing you to my home."

Ahana let out a soft, musical laugh at his classic defensive excuse.

They turned and walked back into the main hallway of the first floor. Raaj walked into his childhood bedroom and, with a sigh of content relief, let himself fall back onto the bed, his lower legs hanging off the edge of the mattress. He looked up at her, his expression softening completely. Slowly, deliberately, he opened his left arm wide, inviting her into his space.

"Come here," he murmured.

Ahana smiled, stepping toward the bed. She laid down beside him, placing her head gently over the solid, comforting expanse of his extended arm. The sheer familiarity of his scent and the rhythmic thud of his heart instantly washed away the fatigue of the journey, making her feel incredibly relaxed.

"Your grandparents are so loving and caring, Raaj," she whispered, staring up at the ceiling. "I felt so safe with them."

"Yes, they really are," Raaj replied softly, his fingers gently brushing against her shoulder.

"Do you come here often?" she asked, turning her face slightly toward him.

"At least once a month, without fail," he answered, his gaze tender. "More if I get a little breathing room. This place keeps me grounded."

Lying there in the quiet room, Raaj began sharing his treasured childhood memories—the games he played in the courtyard, the hidden corners where he used to hide, and the stories his grandfather told him. Ahana listened, completely lost in the beautiful cadence of his voice. A deep, profound wave of safety and warmth enveloped her. Yielding entirely to the comfort of the moment, she turned her body around, sliding closer to him. She placed her hand softly across his chest, embracing him from the side, holding him close to feel the steady, reassuring warmth of his frame.

At her sudden, tender gesture, Raaj abruptly stopped talking. The sheer vulnerability of her embrace touched something deep within him. He smoothly wrapped his powerful arm around her back, pulling her into a tight, fierce lock, holding her against his chest as if to assure her that she was exactly where she belonged.

After a long, loaded moment of pure comfort, Ahana reluctantly broke the embrace, sitting up on the bed with a sudden realization. "Raaj! Look at the time. It's already getting late. Let's go downstairs, or your master-chef chicken curry is going to turn into tandoori chicken."

Raaj let out a soft chuckle. Ahana reached out, extending her hand to him. Taking his hand in a firm grip, she playfully pulled him up from the bed.

They walked downstairs together, where Ahana immediately sat down beside the grandmother, continuing their warm conversation while Raaj returned to the kitchen to finish the final touches.

A little while later, his voice echoed from the dining area, calling everyone for lunch. When they walked in, the aromatic, rich scent of spices filled the room. Raaj had arranged the seating, placing Ahana right beside him as usual. But as they sat down, Ahana noticed a beautiful detail—Raaj had brought out only one large plate for the two of them to share, having already served his grandparents perfectly.

He placed the steaming, golden rice and the rich, dark chicken curry onto their shared plate. The food was piping hot, steam rising into the winter afternoon air. Ahana reached out to mix a portion, but the intense heat of the curry made her fingers flinch back slightly.

Observing her instantly, Raaj didn't say a word. He cleanly took the spoon, mixed a perfect portion of the rich curry into the white rice, and gathered a neat, flawless bite with his own fingers. Turning toward her, he extended his hand, hovering the bite right before her lips.

Ahana's breath caught. For a fleeting second, her cautious mind felt a wave of concern regarding his grandparents' presence right across the table. But as her eyes flickered toward them, she saw both the grandfather and grandmother passing them a beautiful, completely relaxed smile full of deep, maternal warmth.

There was no judgment—only the quiet joy of elders witnessing true devotion.

Reassured, Ahana closed her eyes slightly and took the bite from his hand. The rich flavors burst across her senses. Before she could even comment, Raaj expertly picked up a tender piece of chicken, pulling the meat apart and feeding it to her with an aching gentleness.

From that very first bite until the plate was completely clean, Ahana abandoned her own hand, entirely enjoying the experience of being fed by him. The food was spectacular—absolutely delicious, rich, and cooked to absolute perfection.

"See? What did I tell you?" Raaj smirked, though his eyes were full of pride.

"Okay, fine," Ahana admitted, her eyes shining as she chewed. "It is incredibly yummy. You definitely won this round."

The grandfather let out a hearty laugh, a proud, satisfied smile on his face. He knew his grandson's talents well, but seeing those talents used to cherish the girl beside him brought a different kind of joy to his heart.

When the meal was over and the afternoon began to wane, it was time for them to head back to the college town. They walked out to the courtyard, and as Ahana bent down to take the final blessings from the grandfather, the elderly man smiled gently. Reaching into his pocket, he smoothly drew out a crisp 2000-rupee note and extended it toward her—the traditional, sacred gesture of welcoming a daughter into the household for the first time.

Ahana's cheeks flushed a delicate pink, and she instinctively stepped back, shaking her head in polite shyness. "No, grandfather... please, your blessings are more than enough."

"Keep it, beta," the grandmother insisted from behind, her voice gentle but firm with authority. "It's our love and respect for you. You cannot refuse it."

Raaj stepped up beside her, placing a reassuring hand on the small of her back. "Take it, Aana. It's a tradition."

With a shy, radiant smile, Ahana gracefully accepted the note, bowing her head in gratitude.

They walked through the back gate, and the motorcycle roared to life once more. As they hit the open highway under the amber hues of the evening sun, the entire experience settled deeply into Ahana's soul. She leaned forward, wrapping both her arms tightly around his waist from behind, pressing her face against his black leather jacket.

"Raaj," she called out over the roar of the wind, her voice full of a profound emotion. "It was a truly great day. Thank you so much for giving me this experience. It really... it really felt like being at home."

Raaj tightened his left hand over her interlocked fingers at his waist, his voice carrying a steady, lifetime promise through the helmet. "It is your home too, Aana."

Ahana's heart did a spectacular, warm somersault. Blushing furiously against his back, she tried to lighten the heavy romantic weight before she melted completely. "The food was damn yummy, by the way. You won the challenge fair and square. But remember... my treat next time, okay?"

Raaj let out a bright, triumphant laugh into the evening air. For the rest of the 25-kilometer journey, Ahana kept talking continuously, her voice full of happy, animated excitement as she described every little detail she loved about his grandparents. And Raaj rode steadily into the sunset, his heart completely full, silently adoring the beautiful, expressive cadence of the girl who had finally, completely become his home.

"Buzurgon ke aangan mein aaj ek naya savera dekh aaya,
Use apne haathon se khilaate hue, main apna poorā sansaar dekh aaya.

Wo 2000 ka note mehaz ek rasm nahi thi daadoo ki,
Main Aahana ki us haya mein, apni dulhan ka chehra dekh aaya."

Chapter 15: The Weight of Absence



"Teri aankhon ki zara si nami se mera ji ghabrata hai,
Tu chhupaye laakh humse, par ye dil sab jaan jaata hai.
Tu khud ko akela mat samajhna is dard ke safar mein,
Teri takleef ka har ek katra, seedha meri rooh mein utar aata hai."

The beautiful afterglow of their village trip lingered in the college corridors for the next few days. There was a new, quiet confidence in the way Raaj walked beside her, and Ahana had carefully tucked that crisp 2000-rupee note from his grandfather safely inside her favorite diary like a sacred keepsake. They were settling into the sweetest, most comfortable rhythm of their lives—until reality briefly pulled them apart. An urgent piece of family business required Raaj to leave town for a few days.

The sudden emptiness of the campus hit Ahana the moment his motorcycle roared past the town gates, pausing their daily

rituals. The long, sun-warmed conversations at the cycle stand, the morning tea, and the quiet evening rides were abruptly put on hold. She tried to immerse herself in her studies, but the silence felt heavy.

By the second evening of his absence, a subtle, persistent ache began to bloom behind her eyes. Ahana shrugged it off as mere exhaustion from the winter breeze, walking down to the local medical store on her own to pick up some mild fever tablets. She swallowed the pills in the privacy of her hostel room, determined not to mention a single word to Raaj during their nightly phone calls. He was already occupied, and the last thing she wanted was to become a burden or cause him unnecessary worry from miles away.

But love doesn't require physical presence to read between the lines. True intimacy creates a silent frequency, making a person deeply attuned to the slightest shift in the other person's breath. On the third night, as she lay shivering beneath her blanket, her phone vibrated.

"Aana?" Raaj's deep voice came through the receiver, instantly cutting through the fog in her mind.

Ahana swallowed hard, trying to summon her normal energy, but all she could manage was a soft, slightly ragged, "Hmm?"

It was just a single syllable, a mere exhale, but to Raaj, it was an alarm bell. He paused instantly, the background noise on his end fading as his focus narrowed entirely on her. "Your voice sounds heavy, Aana. Are you okay?"

Ahana forced a small, tight smile into the empty room, trying to clear her throat. "Yeah, Raaj. Just a little tired from the extra classes. Don't worry, I'm completely fine."

There was a long, loaded silence on the other end. Raaj didn't press her further, but his voice dropped into a lower, incredibly gentle register. "Drink some warm water and sleep early, okay? I'm keeping track of the hours until I get back to you."

By the next morning, the mild tablets stopped working entirely. The fever broke through with terrifying force, sending her body temperature soaring. A brutal, crushing pain throbbed inside her head and right behind her eyes, making even the soft morning light feel like needles. Realizing she could no longer handle this alone, she quietly whispered to her classmate and close friend, Sana, asking if she could accompany her to a clinic for a blood test after their morning tuition classes.

Sana took one look at Ahana's pale, shivering frame and immediately took charge. After tuition, seeing that the local clinics wouldn't open their diagnostic labs until a bit later in the morning, Sana guided a weak Ahana back to her nearby home so she could rest on a comfortable bed for an hour.

As Ahana lay on the couch in Sana's living room, her vision blurring from the heat of the fever, her phone suddenly burst to life. It was Raaj.

She pressed the phone to her ear, her voice barely a whisper. "Hello?"

"Aana, come down! I'm back," Raaj's voice rang out, buzzing with the happy, electric excitement of a surprise return. He had ridden straight to her usual spot the moment he entered the town limits.

Ahana's heart panicked instantly. "Raaj... I'm not at the hostel right now. I'm out for some work. I... I'll see you in the evening, okay?"

Sana, who was standing right beside the couch holding a glass of water, saw the stubborn reluctance on her friend's face. Annoyed by Ahana's needless secrecy, Sana abruptly snatched the phone straight out of Ahana's weak grip.

"Hello, Raaj? This is Sana," she spoke rapidly into the phone. "Don't listen to her. Ahana has been burning with a very high fever for the past two days. She can barely stand, and we are currently waiting to go to the clinic for a blood test."

On the other end of the line, the joyous atmosphere completely shattered. Raaj's voice turned instantly sharp with absolute panic and intense gravity. "Sana, give me the exact address of your house. Right now."

Within less than ten minutes, the unmistakable, powerful roar of Raaj's motorcycle echoed through the quiet residential lane. The engine cut out, and the phone in Sana's hand rang instantly. "I'm outside. Bring her out."

Supporting her by the waist, Sana carefully guided Ahana through the front door and out into the courtyard. The moment Ahana's eyes adjusted to the sunlight, she saw Raaj. He was standing beside his bike, his helmet already discarded on the seat.

When his eyes fell upon her, he froze. Ahana's usually radiant face was completely drained of color, her lips parched and pale, and her posture fragile. As he walked toward her, Ahana saw that his eyes were already distinctly watery, glittering with a mixture of raw pain, guilt, and fierce protectiveness. He looked deeply into her dull eyes, his heart breaking at the realization that she had suffered while he was away.

Sana carefully brought Ahana close to the motorcycle. Looking up at the tall, visibly shaken young man, Sana passed him a

reassuring, supportive look. "Take care of her, Raaj. She's really weak."

Raaj looked at Sana, his voice thick with genuine emotion. "Thank you, Sana. Thank you so much for looking after her."

With Sana's gentle assistance, Ahana managed to sit on the back seat of the bike. The moment her hands found the familiar leather of his jacket, a profound sense of safety washed over her, even as the fever raged on.

Raaj started the engine and rode with extreme care, avoiding every bump on the road. But they had only gone a little distance down the quiet lane when he suddenly pulled the motorcycle to a complete stop by the side of the road. Keeping his body steady, he carefully reached down, kicked the side stand out completely, and ensured the bike was entirely balanced before he even attempted to move.

Only when he was certain she was safe did he turn his body around on the seat to face her. Without uttering a single, formal word, he reached out with his right hand, his warm, steady palm gently cupping her hot, feverish cheek.

"Why didn't you ever tell me, Aana?" his voice broke slightly, filled with an aching, raw vulnerability. "Don't you think I'm that close to you yet? I can't see you like this... I just can't see you suffering." He swallowed hard, his watery eyes locked onto hers. "Just remember, everything else in this world comes second if it's about you. Always. Maybe... maybe I need to be more deserving of your trust so you don't feel the need to hide your pain from me."

Ahana's heart melted into a puddle of pure emotion. Looking up at his strained, dusty face, she reached out weakly to touch his sleeve. "Raaj... you must be so tired from such a long journey," she

spoke in a low, raspy whisper. "Please don't worry, I'm fine. I just... I really didn't want to bother you while you were away. I'm sorry. I love you... I never meant to hide anything from you."

Raaj's gaze softened completely, the hurt giving way to an overwhelming wave of affection. He gently wiped a stray tear from the corner of her eye with his thumb. "Don't talk too much now. Save your energy. Let's get you checked."

When they reached the clinic, the sterile smell of medicines usually made Ahana anxious, but today her mind was too numb to care. She sat on the lab chair, waiting for the blood draw. Ahana herself was relatively quiet about the needle, but it was Raaj who looked completely restless. He hovered beside her like an anxious guardian, constantly questioning the lab technician with protective urgency. "Please make sure it doesn't hurt her. Use a fresh needle. Be very gentle, please."

Seeing his dramatic, oversized worry for a simple blood draw, a tiny, amused smile actually managed to break through Ahana's pale lips. Sensing her amusement, Raaj immediately stepped right into her line of sight, bending down slightly to tease her like a small kid to divert her mind.

"Look at you, big girl," he whispered with a playful, handsome smirk, his eyes dancing with mischief. "If you cry when the needle goes in, I'm going to tell the doctor to give you three massive bitter syrups instead of tablets. And I'll personally sit and force you to swallow every drop."

Ahana let out a weak, breathy laugh. "I'm not a kid, Raaj..."

The phlebotomist stepped forward, unwrapping the syringe. As the sharp silver tip caught the light, an instinctive fear made Ahana's hand reach out blindly. Her fingers found Raaj's right

hand, and with her thumb and index finger, she smoothly and tightly pinched his silver ring finger.

Raaj didn't flinch. Instead, he let out a soft, low chuckle, his voice incredibly soothing as he leaned closer to her ear. "Aana... now you have officially decided to hold onto my finger for life, yaa? Fine by me, but let the poor phlebotomist draw the blood first."

Ahana kept her eyes shut tight, her pinch tightening as she felt the brief sting of the needle. Within seconds, the phlebotomist smoothly withdrew the syringe and pressed a cotton swab against her vein, stepping away to label the vial.

The moment they were left alone in the small curtained booth, Raaj immediately stepped closer. Standing right beside her chair, he reached down and smoothly, gently dragged her head a little toward his chest area, anchoring her against his solid frame. He slid his long, warm fingers deep into her hair, stroking her scalp in a rhythmic, deeply calming way that instantly silenced the throb in her temples.

"Look, it didn't hurt at all, right?" he murmured against her hair, his chest rumbling with the steady, reassuring vibration of his voice. "It's all right. Don't worry, I'm right here. You're going to be completely fine, Aana."

Because Ahana had a known history of contracting typhoid during her school days whenever her immunity dipped, Raaj specifically requested the lab technician to run a rapid typhoid test alongside the routine blood counts.

They sat in the waiting area for an agonizing half an hour, her head resting heavily on his shoulder the entire time. When the report finally slid across the glass counter, Raaj picked it up. His eyes scanned the clear positive markers for typhoid.

He didn't panic. He turned to her, his face a picture of absolute, serene calm to ensure she remained relaxed. "It's just typhoid, Aana. Nothing we can't beat. Let's go straight to the doctor, get the exact prescription, and clear this up."

After consulting the doctor and purchasing a neat strip of antibiotics and supplements from the pharmacy, Raaj guided her back to the motorcycle. But instead of heading toward her hostel, his expression became firm and deeply caring.

"We are going to your hostel right now, and you are going to pack your bags for home," he stated with quiet, unyielding authority as he helped her adjust her sweater. "You need complete rest, proper home-cooked food, and your mother's care for the next week. College can wait. Your health cannot."

Ahana didn't argue. The sheer comfort of knowing he was making all the decisions for her was a luxury her exhausted body desperately welcomed.

An hour later, they stood at the bustling local bus terminal. The afternoon sun was beginning to dip, casting long shadows across the concrete platforms. Raaj carried her small backpack on one shoulder, his other arm securely wrapped around her waist to support her as they boarded the bus heading toward her hometown.

He selected a comfortable window seat for her, placing her bag safely in the overhead rack. Before settling her in completely, Raaj stepped out for a brief minute and rushed to a nearby platform stall. He returned holding a bottle of mineral water, cracking the seal open himself so she wouldn't have to strain her weak wrists to twist it. He placed it securely in the mesh pocket right in front of her seat.

"Keep sipping this throughout the ride, okay? Don't let your throat dry up," he murmured, his hands lingering on the back of her seat.

As the bus driver cranked the engine, filling the cabin with a low, vibrating hum, the reality of temporary separation settled over them.

Raaj knelt down slightly in the narrow aisle beside her seat, taking both her cold hands into his large, warm palms. He looked up at her, his eyes thick with a profound, lingering emotion that words could barely capture.

"Take your medicines exactly on time, Aana," he instructed softly, his voice carrying the weight of a lifetime vow. "Eat well. Don't worry about the notes or classes—I will personally manage everything here and keep them ready for you. Just focus on getting strong."

Ahana looked at him, her eyes welling up with tears of gratitude and overwhelming love. "Thank you, Raaj... for everything. Please take care of yourself too."

"I am completely yours, Aana. Taking care of myself means taking care of what belongs to you," he whispered, pressing a quick, lingering kiss onto the back of her interlocked fingers.

He stepped off the bus just as it began to slowly roll out of the station. Ahana pressed her face against the glass window, watching his tall silhouette stand perfectly still on the platform. Even as the bus moved further away into the golden evening haze, Raaj didn't turn around. He stood there, keeping his eyes locked onto her window until the vehicle completely vanished from his sight—leaving Ahana with a heart that was weak from the fever, but

entirely full, knowing she had found a love that was absolute, protective, and completely unshakeable.

Safar tumhara hai magar, bechain ye dil mera hai,
Vida toh kar diya tumko, par meri rooh ka wahin dera hai.

Har saans mein dua hai meri, ki tum jald laut aao,
Tumhare bina is shehar mein, ab sirf tanhai ka andhera hai."

Chapter 16: Blurred Boundaries



"Doori ne sikhaya ki mohabbat ki shiddat kya hoti hai,
Tumhari ek aawaaz sunne ko ye rooh kaise tadapti hai.
Aur jab tum laut aaye toh zamaane ki parwaah kise thi,
Us mod par bas tum the, main thi, aur behti hui hawa ki bandagi thi."

The journey back to her hometown was a blur of physical exhaustion. Inside the bus, Ahana leaned her heavy head against the windowpane, unable to sleep because of the persistent ache behind her eyes. Her mind kept drifting back to Raaj. He had run around for her the entire day—riding straight into town after his trip, handling the clinic visit, and managing everything with a fierce, protective urgency. He had to be utterly exhausted, yet his entire focus had been her safety.

Before the bus even pulled into the terminal, her phone buzzed.

"Aana? Have you reached yet?" Raaj's voice came through, filled with a restless worry.

"Almost there, Raaj. Just a few minutes away," she whispered. "Are you back home?"

"I am, but my mind is still at the bus stop," he confessed softly. "Is your dad coming to pick you up? Promise me you won't take an auto alone in this condition. Call me the exact second you step inside."

Hearing him micromanage her safety brought a comforting warmth to her chest. Only when she safely met her father at the platform and reached home did Raaj finally let out a breath of relief.

The early days of February passed in a quiet rhythm of healing. Ahana's body remained weak, but the distance felt bridged by Raaj's presence on her screen. He became her digital guardian, tracking her medicine timings with precision. "Did you have your food, Aana? Don't take the tablet on an empty stomach," he would remind her gently.

His care was practical, too. Knowing she was worried about falling behind, Raaj systematically collected her academic notes every day. He would sit through the long lectures, compile the detailed summaries, and spend hours on call with her every evening, patiently breaking down the difficult concepts and helping her clear her assignments.

These study sessions naturally evolved into long, late-night conversations. Whenever the boredom of staying confined to a bed made her gloomy, Raaj would switch into his entertaining mode to lift her spirits.

"This campus is an absolute graveyard without you, Aana," he sighed heavily during one of those nights, his voice dropping into

a playful pout. "The cycle stand looks depressed. The morning tea tastes like hot water. Even the stray dogs near the canteen look at me with pity because I'm wandering around like a ghost. You need to get better and save your man from dying of boredom."

As the days bled into the second week of February, the typhoid bacteria finally lost the battle. Her fever vanished completely, her strength returned, and her voice regained its natural, lively ring. They decided she would return to campus on the morning of February 13th.

During their final phone call on the night of February 12th, as she was packing her bags, Raaj's tone suddenly shifted from regular banter to something delightfully mischievous.

"You know, Aana... I've never really understood or celebrated these cliché relationship weeks earlier," he trailed off, a teasing smirk audible in his voice. "But now that I have you... why should we miss out? Let's celebrate the day you come back tomorrow."

Ahana smiled, pulling his leg. "Oh, really? The great Raaj wants to celebrate Valentine's week? And what exactly are we celebrating? You want a fresh batch of typhoid bacteria as a gift?"

Raaj let out a low, deep chuckle. "If the bacteria comes from you, Aana, I'd gladly take it. But trust me, I have much better things in mind to share with you than a fever."

"Shut up, Raaj!" she gasped, her cheeks blooming into a bright crimson.

"I'm serious," his voice softened, turning incredibly tender. "Just come back safely tomorrow. I'm counting down the minutes."

The morning of February 13th arrived with a crisp winter breeze. When the bus finally rolled into the station, Ahana's heart was hammering with excitement. Descending the bus stairs, her

eyes instantly locked onto Raaj, who was standing on the platform way ahead of time.

He stood perfectly still, adoring her presence. He scanned her face, deeply relieved to see that the pale, drained look of sickness was entirely gone. Her skin was glowing, and her body looked vibrant and completely restored.

A massive smile broke across Raaj's face. He stepped forward, effortlessly taking her heavy backpack. "Welcome back, my big girl," he murmured. "Sit on the bike. Let's get you out of this crowded station."

Ahana climbed onto the back seat. The moment the engine roared to life, she slid her arms around his waist, holding him incredibly close from behind and pressing her cheek firmly against his solid back. In a moment of sudden overwhelming longing, she pressed a soft, lingering kiss against the fabric of his jacket, whispering, "I missed you", into the silence of the morning.

Sensing her tight grip, Raaj smiled beneath his helmet. Instead of taking the usual highway leading straight to the hostel, he steered the motorcycle toward a longer, significantly less crowded route. It was a secluded, beautiful stretch of road outside the main town limits, flanked on both sides by a thick canopy of overarching trees that filtered the morning sunlight into golden patches.

Raaj gradually slowed the motorcycle down, pulling over to the roadside beneath the shade of a massive tree. The engine cut out. Both of them dismounted.

Raaj leaned back slightly against the seat of his parked motorcycle, creating a private little space for her to stand between his knees. He looked up at her, his eyes dark, intense, and completely locked onto her face.

Ahana stepped closer, her heart fluttering wildly. "Raaj... what are we exactly doing here?"

Raaj didn't answer immediately. His gaze drifted down, tracing her features before lingering entirely on her mouth. "I swear, Aana... this shade looks dangerously beautiful on your lips today," he murmured, his voice dropping into a low, breathless roughness as he stepped closer. "It's driving me insane. I don't think I can let you leave with it."

Ahana's breath hitched. Under the unwavering intensity of his gaze, her lower lip started trembling. She smiled and sighed softly.

Raaj reached out, his warm, strong fingers gently cupping her chin, turning her face straight to look directly into his eyes.

"Raaj..." Ahana whispered, glancing nervously down the road. "Are we really doing this? People are passing by..."

Raaj leaned in closer, his thumb gently stroking the corner of her lower lip. "Just forget about them. It's only me and you. Just blur everything out. I'll count 3, 2, 1, then you will go with my flow, okay?"

Ahana sighed and looked down in an adorable mix of surrender and anticipation. Closing the final distance, Raaj locked his lips into hers.

It was a deep, passionate release of all the pent-up longing and the agonizing days of distance they had carried in silence. His lips moved against hers with a smooth, intoxicating rhythm—demanding, possessive, yet incredibly tender.

Ahana gasped softly into the kiss, her initial hesitation completely shattering. She melted into his embrace, her fingers tangling tightly into his hair, pulling him closer as she fully surrendered to his flow.

A few bikes and cars passed by them on the tarmac, their engines roaring briefly before fading away, but the two of them completely ignored them. They were entirely lost in each other, oblivious to the outside world, feeling nothing except the warmth of his chest pressing against her and the frantic beating of their hearts. The smooth breeze blew gently around them, rustling the green canopy above like a quiet confirmation that they belonged exactly right here.

When Raaj finally broke the kiss, he rested his forehead against hers, both of them breathing heavily in unison. His lips were slightly stained with her lip color, and his eyes carried a deeply affectionate glow.

He let out a low, satisfied chuckle, his thumb gently wiping a tiny smear of lipstick from the corner of her mouth. "Happy Valentine's week, Aana," he whispered. "Now, let's get you to the hostel before I decide to skip college entirely today."

Ahana could only smile, her heart completely full, holding onto his hand as they got back on the bike—knowing that despite the sickness and the distance, they were exactly where they belonged.

"Mile jo tum toh tham gaya ye jahaan hamara,
Tumhari baahon mein mila sukoon ka kinaara.
Guzarti rahi duniya apni hi dhun mein magar,
Bas tum hi ban gaye dhadkan ka sahaara."

Chapter 17: In Plain Sight



"Subah ki pehli kiran ek naya savera layi thi,
Dhadkanon mein ab tak us chhuan ki gehraayi thi.
Duniya ki bandishon se beparwah hue hum is kadar,
Ki unki har ada mein bas hamari hi parchhayi thi."

The morning sun filtered through the dense green canopy of the campus, casting bright, dancing shadows across the wide concrete pathways. For Ahana, the entire atmosphere felt lighter, charged with a new, breathless energy. The memory of the previous night—the soft rustle of the leaves, the quiet lane behind the library, and the unexpected warmth of Raaj's lips against hers—was still swirling in her mind, making her smile every time she looked at the crowded academic blocks.

Walking into the central courtyard, she caught sight of him almost immediately. Raaj was leaning against his bike near the main

staircase, talking to a few classmates from his wing. He looked effortless in his usual denim jacket, but the moment his eyes cut through the crowd and locked onto her, his expression shifted. He cut his conversation short, took his backpack from the seat, and walked straight toward her.

There was no hesitation in his stride, and certainly no hesitation in hers. When he reached her, his hand naturally slid around her waist for a brief, reassuring second before he smoothly took her heavy laptop bag from her hand, slinging it over his own shoulder alongside his thick Chemistry journals. Ahana didn't pull away, nor did she care about the groups of students chatting nearby. The quiet understanding they had reached the day before had left them completely past the point of caring who was watching.

"You're late," Raaj murmured, his deep voice carrying a lazy, affectionate trace of a smirk as they walked side by side toward the common arts auditorium where their shared elective lecture was scheduled. "I was about to come up to the ITM block to drag you down."

"Traffic near the main gate," Ahana replied easily, tilting her head up to match his gaze. "And you wouldn't dare disrupt an ITM lab."

"Try me," he chuckled, the low rumble of his laughter vibrating between them.

The lecture hall was already buzzing when they stepped inside, a massive room filled with students from three different streams. Instead of looking for separate seats or blending into the middle rows, Raaj guided her directly toward the back corner near the large glass windows that looked out into the rain-tree avenue.

As the professor began writing the lecture outline on the projector screen, the general chatter in the room died down into a steady hum of flipping pages and scratching pens. Raaj pulled out his notebook, but his attention was entirely elsewhere. He shifted his chair slightly closer to hers, his long legs brushing against her jeans, creating a private pocket of warmth in the cool, air-conditioned hall.

Without a single word, Raaj rested his right elbow on the desk, casually shielding his face from the side view of the room as he pretended to read. His left hand slid down into the narrow, hidden space between their chairs.

Ahana felt his fingers slide over her wrist first, his skin warm and slightly rough, before his palm turned upward. She didn't look down. Keeping her eyes fixed on the projector screen with a small, knowing smile playing on her lips, she slipped her fingers directly into his.

Their hands locked together perfectly under the shadow of the desk. Raaj didn't just hold her hand; his thumb began to trace slow, deliberate circles over the sensitive skin of her wrist, his grip tightening every time she squeezed back. The sheer familiarity of it, coming right after the intensity of their first kiss, sent a quiet, thrilling current straight through her. It wasn't born out of fear or the thrill of hiding; it was the simple, absolute need to remain connected, to feel the physical proof that the shift between them was real. They sat like that for the entire hour—bound by a seamless, silent rhythm that belonged entirely to them.

Later that evening, as the campus began to empty out and the streetlamps flickered to life, Raaj walked her down the long, winding path leading toward her hostel gates. The evening breeze was picking up, carrying the fresh scent of approaching rain.

He stopped his steps just a few feet away from the main security arch, turning to face her fully as he handed her bag back.

"I'm heading to the labs early tomorrow," Raaj said, his voice dropping into that low, softer register he only used when they were alone. He reached out, his fingers gently tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear, his touch lingering on her cheek for a heartbeat. "Meet me near the central fountain before your first slot?"

Ahana leaned slightly into his touch, her heart completely full. "I'll be there."

Raaj let out a quiet, satisfied laugh, stepping back with a final, lingering look that promised everything. "Good. Get inside before it starts pouring."

"Dhadkanon ko churakar tumne apna bana liya,
Is benaam se rishte ko ek mukaam de diya.
Ab zamaane ki nazrein bhi kya badlengi hamein,
Jab humne apne dil par bas tumhara naam likh diya."

Chapter 18: In the Shelter of the Storm



"Bheegti raaton mein sulagti ek aas ho tum,
Is dil ki har dhadkan ke behad paas ho tum.
Toofaan chaahe badal de is jahaan ke raaste,
Mere har adhure safar ka mukammal ehsaas ho tum."

"Meet me near the central fountain before your first slot?" Raaj's voice from the previous evening was still looping in Ahana's mind as she hurried down the campus pathway the next morning. True to his word, he was already there, leaning against the stone ledger of the fountain. But he wasn't alone.

As she drew closer, she saw their friends gathered around, frantically waving sheets of paper in the air. The breezy, romantic atmosphere of the past few weeks had abruptly collided with the ultimate reality of college life: Semester Exams.

"Aana! Thank god you're here!" one of her ITM classmates groaned, looking visually disheveled. "Tell me you understood the last three units of database management. If I see one more syntax error, I'm going to jump into this fountain."

Raaj let out a low chuckle, stepping away from the fountain to hand Ahana a warm paper cup of coffee. "Don't bother asking her. I've already booked her brain for the next one hour to help me clear my elective logic. Line up behind me."

"Wow, look at the Chemistry Honours guy acting like he owns the ITM department's topper," their friend teased, breaking the heavy exam tension and making the whole group burst into laughter.

Ahana's cheeks colored slightly, but she happily took the coffee, stepping into the circle. For the next two weeks, romance took on a completely new, chaotic form. It was a whirlwind of late-night group study sessions in the library, caffeine-fueled panic at 2:00 AM, and messy desks covered in a mountain of reference books and half-eaten packets of chips. There were no quiet, secluded walks, but Raaj made sure they were never disconnected. During long study hours, he would pass her rough sheets of paper pretending they were exam formulas, only for Ahana to open them and find small, beautifully sketched doodles of her face or funny stick-figure drawings of their strict professors.

When the final exam buzzer rang on a bright Friday afternoon, the entire academic block erupted in a deafening cheer. Students poured out of the halls, throwing old printouts into the air.

Raaj met Ahana right outside her wing, his eyes bright with a sudden, adventurous energy. He caught her by the wrist and pulled

her away from the celebrating crowd, steering her toward the quiet corner behind the management block.

"We survived," Ahana breathed, leaning against the cool brick wall, a massive wave of relief washing over her.

"We did," Raaj said, stepping close, his gaze locked onto her face with that familiar, intense focus. "And because we survived, we are celebrating tomorrow. No hostels, no assignments, no campus walls. Just a complete day for us."

Ahana blinked, surprised. "What are you planning?"

"Tomorrow morning, the very minute the hostel gates open at 5:30 AM, you're stepping out," Raaj murmured, a thrilled, brilliant smile breaking across his face. "We are taking my bike and heading straight down the coast. There's an ancient temple right by the shoreline a few hours away. We'll take a blessing for our results, spend the whole day by the sea, and I promise I'll have you back right before the 7:00 PM evening attendance. What do you say?"

The pure excitement in his eyes was infectious. Ahana nodded, her heart racing at the thought of a whole day just to themselves.

The next morning, the campus was barely awake when Raaj's bike roared to life near the outer gates. Ahana held onto his shoulders, her small personal backpack secure on her shoulders, the cool morning wind biting at their faces as the city faded into a blur of green fields and open highways. The ride was beautiful, filled with shared smiles through the rearview mirror and the crisp morning air.

But by the time they reached the coastal town, the bright morning sky took a sudden, dramatic turn.

The rain was relentless, washing over the coastal town in heavy, rhythmic sheets. They had managed to visit the temple just in time for the early morning darshan to take their blessings, but as they stepped out, the skies completely opened up, blurring the line between the sea and the sky.

Standing under a fleeting patch of shelter near the temple steps, Raaj looked up at the grey clouds and sighed, offering a playful plea to the heavens. "Look, if You actually want us to come up there and visit You, You've got to stop this rain, Lord. We only have until evening."

As if in direct defiance, the downpour only grew heavier.

Beside him, Ahana let out a soft, melodic laugh. The sound of her amusement was warmer than the damp chill of the storm, her eyes crinkling with pure affection as she watched him argue with the gods.

Realizing they needed better cover, they darted through the rain, finally seeking refuge under the extended wooden awning of a quiet, old house tucked away from the main road. They stood incredibly close, the air between them thick with a sudden, charged silence.

"You know," Raaj murmured, looking down at her rain-kissed face, a teasing glint in his eye. "I would have kissed you by now. But I'm pretty sure whoever owns this house is watching us through the window."

Ahana laughed softly, stepping just an inch closer. They began to tease each other, a breathless back-and-forth of playful denials, mostly from him, pretending to be the responsible one. But their bodies betrayed them. In the narrow space of the awning, they stood shoulder to shoulder, their warmth bleeding through their

damp clothes. His hand brushed against hers. A slow, tentative slide of fingers—her pinky hooking into his, a subtle, electric touch that sent a jolt straight through them.

Her small backpack created a slight barrier between them.

Then, without a word, he entirely changed the game.

Breaking his own rule, Raaj slipped his hand right through the narrow space between her back and the backpack. His palm slid smoothly against her waist, his fingers finding the curve of her hip. With a sudden, firm confidence, he pulled her flush against his chest.

Before she could even gasp at the sudden proximity, he leaned down and caught her lips in an unexpected, deeply romantic kiss, drowning out the sound of the rain entirely.

The kiss was everything—intense, possessive, yet filled with a desperate devotion that made the rest of the world completely fade away.

When Raaj finally pulled back, his forehead rested against hers, his breath coming in ragged gasps. His hand didn't leave her waist, his fingers still curved firmly around her hip as if anchoring her to him. He didn't say a word for a long moment, just looking down into her dazed, flushed face with an expression that was fiercely protective, almost reverent.

"Window or no window," Raaj whispered, his voice rough and laced with a quiet, undeniable depth. "I'm never letting you stay an inch away from me again, Aana."

Ahana could only look up at him, her fingers tightly gripping the fabric of his jacket, her heart hammering wildly against her ribs. She smiled softly, leaning her head against his shoulder for a brief,

quiet second, realizing that no matter how wild the storm outside grew, her safest shelter would always be right here.

By the time the heavy downpour finally tapered off into a gentle, mist-like drizzle, the afternoon sky was already beginning to deepen into shades of amber. Raaj checked his watch, a sudden smirk breaking through his intense expression.

"We have exactly two hours to cover a two-and-a-half-hour distance," he said, adjusting his jacket. "Hold on tight, Aana. We're going to have to race the sun."

The ride back was an absolute blur of cool coastal winds and golden evening light. Ahana wrapped her arms tightly around his waist, resting her cheek against his back, completely unbothered by the dampness of their clothes or the wind whipping through her hair. Every time Raaj accelerated to overtake a truck on the highway, his left hand would reach back for a split second, squeezing her knee reassuringly, letting her know he had everything under control.

The campus clock tower was just striking 6:50 PM when the bike skidded to a smooth halt in the shaded lane right outside the girls' hostel boundary. The streetlamps were just beginning to flicker to life.

Ahana slid off the seat, her legs feeling slightly numb but her heart lighter than it had been in weeks. She adjusted her backpack, her fingers lingering against his palm as she did.

"Ten minutes to spare," she teased softly, catching her breath. "I told you we'd make it."

"Only because you were holding onto me," Raaj murmured, stepping off the bike to face her fully under the soft glow of the

entryway lights. The wild, adventurous energy of the highway had settled into a quiet, heavy warmth. He reached out, gently brushing a stray, wind-blown lock of hair away from her face, his thumb grazing her cheek one last time. "Go inside. Change into dry clothes immediately, and don't sleep with your hair wet."

Ahana smiled, stepping backward toward the security gate, her eyes locked onto his. "I won't. Call me later?"

Raaj let out a low, satisfied chuckle, resting his hands on his bike handles but refusing to look away until she reached the door. "Always. Get inside, Aana."

"Imtihaan-e-ishq mein bhi hum awwal aaye hain,
Teri chaahat ka ye haseen pal saath laaye hain.
Ab door tak chalegi apni mohabbat ki raah,
Jab lehren ke beech hum dil haar aaye hain."

Chapter 19: The Circle of Warmth



"Waqt ki lehren ne badla zaroor samaan hoga,
Par hamare ishq ka rang har pal jawaan hoga.
Jab apnon ke aanchal mein mili mohabbat ki chhaon,
Jaana ki manzil se haseen ab ye kaarwan hoga."

The next two years of college didn't just pass; they flowed like a deep, quiet river. The initial, breathless thrill of hidden glances and secret notes slowly matured into something far more profound—an unbreakable, fiercely loyal bond. They became each other's absolute constants. Through the grueling seasonal shifts of semesters, the exhausting practical labs, the rainy afternoons spent sharing a single umbrella, and the quiet evenings by the central fountain, Raaj and Ahana grew intertwined. They learned each other's silences, cushioned each other's stresses, and loved with a depth that made the chaotic campus around them feel like mere background noise.

Over time, Raaj's habit of caring for her became their unspoken language; he rarely let a meal without ensuring he had fed her himself, his large hands moving with a gentle, protective precession that felt like a quiet vow. He became an architect of her

joy, refusing to wait for special occasions to show his love. Whether it was whisking her away on sudden long drives to clear her head, stealing moments for a quiet coffee date at their favorite corner, or simply sitting for hours in the familiar comfort of their usual restaurant, he made sure she never had to wonder if she was cherished. It was a steady, beautiful rhythm of shared growth that made their love feel inevitable. They were so busy building this beautiful, hidden sanctuary of a life that they almost didn't notice the horizon changing.

But time is an unyielding thief. Before they were ready to admit it, the final semester arrived, bringing with it the bittersweet reality of impending graduation. The reality that their paths would have to separate for a while—as Raaj prepared for his higher chemistry prospects and Ahana lined up her tech career—hung gently in the air.

Knowing their daily campus routine was coming to an end, Raaj decided it was time to anchor their world into something permanent. He wanted her to meet his foundation. He planned a quiet, special lunch at a cozy restaurant just outside the city, bringing Ahana together with the two most important women in his life: his mother and his sister.

When they arrived, the seating arrangement happened with a flurry of quiet, endearing shyness. Ahana, suddenly feeling a beautiful wave of nervousness in front of Raaj's mother, subtly moved to sit on the opposite side of the table, choosing to sit right next to his mother. Raaj, observing her sudden bashfulness with a soft, knowing smirk, sat directly across from her alongside his sister.

His mother, a woman with kind, crinkling eyes and a warmth that instantly made the restaurant's formal atmosphere feel like a living room, reached out and gently patted Ahana's hand. The

nervousness began to melt away almost instantly under that sweet, maternal gaze.

As the food arrived—fragrant, steaming curries and hot, layered lachha parathas—the conversation flowed effortlessly. They laughed about Raaj's stubbornness in college and his sister's endless teasing.

Then, the table fell into a rhythm that was entirely second nature to Raaj.

Without a single thought, completely operating on a habit he had formed since the very first day he had fed her at his village house, Raaj pulled a plate toward himself. With practiced, gentle precision, his long fingers began to cleanly separate the tender chicken meat from the bones. He rolled a piece into a small, perfect bite of paratha, dipped it in the rich gravy, and extended his hand straight across the table toward Ahana's lips.

Ahana went entirely still, her cheeks flushing a deep, furious crimson. She glanced at his mother, completely shy, her eyes silently pleading with Raaj to stop.

But Raaj didn't lower his hand. His dark eyes were fixed on her, steady and completely unbothered by the world. Seeing her hesitation, his mother didn't scold him or look shocked. Instead, a deeply affectionate, knowing smile broke across her face.

Amused by Ahana's shyness and Raaj's stubborn devotion, his mother spoke up, her voice full of gentle teasing. "Look at him. He won't lower his hand, Aana."

Raaj chuckled softly, his gaze never leaving Ahana's face as she finally, shyly took the bite from his hand. "She has this unique issue," Raaj explained to his mother, his tone laced with a lazy, affectionate warmth. "The minute I'm around, her hands suddenly

forget how to work. Plus, she completely struggles with separating meat from bones. I've been doing this for her since day one."

Because reaching across the wide table from the front was proving a little clumsy, Raaj's mother did something that completely overwhelmed Ahana's heart.

With a soft, fluid movement, his mother gently took the plate of fresh lachha paratha. "If it's too far for you from over there, let me take over," she said sweetly. With absolute maternal tenderness, her own hands began tearing the paratha, neatly shredding the chicken, and lifting the bites. She held a perfect morsel right up to Ahana's lips.

Ahana's breath caught. To be fed by the man who owned her heart was romantic; to be fed by the mother who raised him was sacred. She leaned in, taking the bite, a warmth blooming in her chest that had nothing to do with the food. Raaj's mother fed her patiently, piece by piece, until the very last bite, completely enveloping her in a circle of unconditional love. Across the table, Raaj watched them, his chest swelling with a quiet, profound pride.

The lunch extended for hours, filled with bright discussions about their upcoming career plans, shared memories, and hopeful promises for the future.

Later that evening, after they had bidden his family goodbye, Raaj and Ahana walked slowly down the quiet pavement near the hostel blocks. The air was cool, and the streetlamps cast a soft glow over them.

"So," Raaj murmured, reaching down to smoothly interlock his fingers with hers, pulling her slightly closer into his side. "How was it? Did my family overwhelm you?"

Ahana stopped walking, turning to face him fully. She looked up into his eyes, her expression soft, glowing, and incredibly happy.

"Raaj, I loved every single second of it," she whispered, her voice thick with emotion. "Your mother... she is so incredibly sweet. When she started feeding me, I felt like I was right at home. I've never felt so safe, so completely accepted."

Raaj's expression softened, the fierce intensity in his eyes melting into pure, unadulterated devotion. He reached up, his large palm cupping her cheek, his thumb gently smoothing over her skin.

"I told you, didn't I?" Raaj said, his voice dropping into that low, rough register that always made her heart flutter. "They love what I love. And I love you, Aana. No matter where our careers take us after this semester, you are locked into this family. You are locked into me. Remember that."

Ahana nodded, leaning her face into the warmth of his palm, knowing that no matter the distance the next phase of life would bring, their roots had already grown too deep to ever be pulled apart.

"Dilon ke is rishte ko naya ek aasman mil gaya,
Teri baahon mein mujhe saara jahaan mil gaya.
Ab dooriyan bhi kya juda karenge hamein,
Jab teri maa ki duaaon mein mujhe mera makaam mil gaya."

Chapter 20: The Weight of Horizons



"Bichhadna bhi mohabbat mein ek imtihaan hota hai,
Jahan lafz khaamosh hon, wahan dil rota hai.
Tu door hokar bhi mujhse door ja na payegi,
Kyunki meri har ek saans mein tera hi naam hota hai."

As the final week of exams loomed over the campus, a strange, heavy tension settled between Raaj and Ahana. It was a countdown they both dreaded. Ironically, instead of clinging to each other every second, they found themselves occasionally avoiding each other's gaze in crowded corridors. They didn't dare look too closely or speak too deeply in public; the emotions swelling in their chests were so raw, so close to the surface, that a single tender word might cause their defenses to shatter into a burst of tears in front of everyone.

But when the final buzzer of the last exam finally rang, the facade crumbled. While the rest of the campus erupted in

celebratory screams, a profound, crushing heaviness filled both of their hearts.

That evening, bypassing the chaotic farewell parties starting up in the hostels, Raaj kicked his bike into gear and took her straight to their place—the familiar, bare mountain top with its ancient temple and the massive, under-construction park that had become their ultimate sanctuary.

Walking over to their usual spot near the unfinished stone structure, a profound quiet settled over them. Silently, systematically, they stepped out of their shoes and sandals, placing them neatly side by side. They unpocketed their phones, setting them down screen-side down, side by side, completely locking the rest of the universe out of their sacred space.

Then, they sat. And the silence began.

It wasn't a peaceful silence; it was a heavy, suffocating quiet, thick with everything they were too afraid to voice. For a long time, neither looked at the other, their eyes trained on the dark horizon stretching out from their silent peak.

Suddenly, overwhelmed by the sheer weight of his emotions, Raaj shifted. Breaking completely, the fierce, unyielding guy let go of his pride. He leaned down, burying his face into Ahana's lap, seeking shelter in her presence one last time.

As he lay there, his broad shoulders began to tremble. He didn't sob out loud, but hot, silent tears began to pour from his eyes, quickly soaking through the fabric of her pants against her thigh.

"You're going to leave, Aana," Raaj whispered, his voice completely broken, rough with an agonized ache. "The day is

actually here. I won't be able to see you everyday. I won't be able to just look across a room and find you."

Ahana didn't speak. She couldn't. Her own throat was tight with a suffocating pain, and her own tears were already streaming silently down her cheeks. With trembling fingers, she reached down, gently wiping the moisture from his temples, and then softly slid her fingers through his thick hair. She moved her hand in slow, rhythmic strokes, trying to anchor him, trying to assure him that she was still right here.

Leaning down, her heart aching with a fierce, protective love, she tilted her head and pressed her lips to his wet cheek. She kissed him softly, leaving her lips there for long moments, pulling back only to press another kiss against his skin with heavy, lingering gaps.

They couldn't talk. For hours, as the twilight melted into a deep, starless night, they just held onto each other in that position. Because it was the final night of graduation, the hostel rules had been waived for the farewell celebrations; there was no restriction of time, no curfew to race against.

He pulled her into his chest then, locking his arms around her waist, and they stayed like that, watching the vast dark horizon from their mountain peak for hours, clinging to the stillness of the night. It was only when the midnight air grew biting and bitter that Raaj finally stood up, gently guiding her back to the bike. They rode back to campus in a heavy, protective silence, giving her just a few fleeting hours in her hostel room to finalize her packing and brace for the dawn.

Finally, right outside her hostel doorstep before they parted for those few hours, Raaj reached out, cupping her face in his large,

warm hands, and leaned in to press a deep, lingering kiss right onto her forehead—a seal of absolute devotion.

"Come and meet me," Raaj said, his dark eyes locked onto hers, burning with a desperate, quiet obsession. "Whenever the distance gets too much, just come. Even a glance is enough, Aana. I can't be far from you. I love you. Over these years, it has grown so much... it's terrifying. I feel like I genuinely can't survive without your presence around me."

Ahana swallowed the lump in her throat, her hands tightly gripping his wrists as they rested on her cheeks. "I feel the exact same way, Raaj," she replied, her voice shaking but filled with an underlying conviction. "We will find a way. Our roots are too deep. God is merciful... He didn't bring us this far just to lose us. He will give us a way. Please, don't cry."

The morning air was biting and crisp when Raaj arrived outside her hostel gate, much earlier than the scheduled buses. His eyes were bloodshot, and Ahana's face was pale, but without a word, he took her heavy luggage, balancing it on the front of his bike, and they rode down the empty morning streets to her favorite local tea shop.

The small stall was quiet, the steam from the large brass kettle rising into the chilly dawn air.

The shopkeeper handed them two clay cups of steaming hot tea. Sitting side by side on the wooden bench, their fingers occasionally brushing against the warm clay, they drank in silence, spent hours sitting quietly and stealing some moments of being together. Both of their eyes were completely teary, the steam from the tea rising to meet the moisture on their lashes.

When they finally reached the bustling bus stop, the loud honks and shouting conductors rudely shattered their quiet bubble. The bus to her hometown was already idling, its engine vibrating heavily.

Raaj loaded her luggage into the lower compartment, his movements slow, delaying the inevitable. When he turned back to her, the finality of the moment hit them like a physical blow.

Ahana looked up at him, her lips trembling. "Raaj..."

Raaj stepped closer, completely ignoring the crowd of passengers swirling around them. He reached out, his hand wrapping firmly around her wrist, his thumb pressing into her pulse point—a final, desperate attempt to print his touch into her skin.

"Don't look back when you step onto that bus, Aana," Raaj murmured, his voice cracking, a single, stubborn tear escaping and tracing down his cheek. "Because if you look back and I see your face, I swear to God, I will pull you right off that step and never let you leave this city."

Ahana let out a breathless, watery laugh, her heart shattering and swelling all at once. She stepped into his space, her free hand coming up to touch his chest, right over his racing heart.

"I won't look back," she whispered, her eyes shining with absolute devotion. "But only because I don't need to. I'm leaving my heart right here with you anyway. Take care of it until I come back to claim it."

Raaj's grip tightened on her wrist for one last, electric second before he slowly, reluctantly, let his fingers slide away.

"Always," he whispered against the morning wind.

Ahana turned and climbed the metal steps of the bus. True to her promise, she kept her eyes fixed straight ahead, blinking through a veil of tears as she found her window seat. As the bus groaned and began to roll forward, pulling away from the curb, she finally allowed herself to look down.

Raaj was standing exactly where she had left him, his hands shoved deep into his jacket pockets, his shoulders square, his eyes tracking her window through the dust. He didn't wave. He just stood there like an unyielding statue against the backdrop of the waking city, a solitary anchor in the shifting crowd, watching her horizon move away from his.

"Vida ki is subah mein ek ajab si pyaas hai,

Tu door ja rahi hai, phir bhi dil ke paas hai.

Ye aakhiri chai, ye behte huye aansoo gawah hain,

Ki hamari mohabbat ka mukammal hona abhi baaqi itihaas hai."

Chapter 21: The Geometry of Distance



"Doori ne sikhaya hai ki yaadein kaise sambhaali jaati hain,
Jab paas na ho koi, toh tasveerein kaise nihaari jaati hain.

Faasle meel ke bhale hi hon hamare darmiyaan,
Par dhadkan aaj bhi sirf tere naam se sambhaali jaati hai."

The phantom ache began the exact second Ahana's bus pulled away from the curb. For over two years, their days had been measured in shared footsteps, the low rumble of Raaj's bike engine, and the comforting weight of his hand finding hers. Suddenly, that entire universe was compressed into a glowing smartphone screen.

By the time the bus finally reached her hometown that evening, the separation already felt like a physical weight. Ahana stepped down into her familiar family environment, but her mind was entirely left behind at that dusty bus stop.

She had barely unpacked her first bag in her bedroom when her phone vibrated violently. It was Raaj. He hadn't even waited for the night to fall; he had been tracking the clock, counting down the hours it would take for her bus to arrive.

Ahana pressed the phone to her ear, her voice small and thick with an immediate wave of emotion. "Raaj?"

There was a long, heavy pause on the other end. All she could hear was the deep, uneven sound of his breathing, as if he had been racing against time just to hear her voice. When he finally spoke, his voice was lower than usual, rough with a raw, immediate ache.

"Tell me you're missing me, Aana," he murmured, bypassing any formal greetings. "Because I just got back to my room, and the silence here is loud enough to drive me insane. If you tell me you're doing just fine, I'm packing a bag and riding straight to your town tonight."

A watery laugh escaped Ahana's lips, a single tear immediately slipping down her cheek, though her face split into a wide, radiant smile. "I'm not fine, Raaj. I've been looking out the bus window the entire journey wishing I was on your bike instead. I miss you so much."

A long, slow exhale vibrated through the speaker, as if her words had finally allowed his shoulders to drop. "Good," Raaj rasped, a faint trace of his lazy, protective arrogance returning to his tone. "Because I'm losing my mind. Everywhere I look on this campus, I keep seeing you. I passed by our usual tea stall on the way back, and I couldn't even look at it. It felt completely empty without you looking teary-eyed over the steam."

Ahana leaned her head back against her bedroom wall, closing her eyes, letting the deep timbre of his voice fill the empty space

around her. "We knew this first day would be the hardest," she whispered softly, trying to anchor both of them. "But remember what we said on the mountain peak. Our roots are too deep. This distance is just a temporary phase."

"I don't care about the miles, Aana. I care about the time," Raaj said, his tone turning fiercely possessive. "Every second I'm not looking at you feels like wasted time. But I'm holding onto your promise. You left your heart with me at the bus stop, remember? I'm looking after it. I'm not letting it go."

They stayed on the line for hours, through the evening and deep into the dead of night, refusing to hang up. They shared the mundane details of her arrival, his ride back, and gently mapped out how they would sync their daily schedules so they wouldn't miss a single beat of each other's lives. The physical distance between their towns was vast, but as the night deepened, the space dissolved entirely. They were right back in their sacred, quiet loop.

When they finally whispered their reluctant goodnights, Ahana fell asleep with her phone pressed firmly against her chest, right over her heart, knowing that the distance hadn't weakened their bond—it had only made their need for each other pull tighter.

"Doori sirf ek lafz hai hamare pyaar ke aage,
Hum bandhe hain ek dooje se ankahe dhaage.
Badlengi raaste, badlengi manzil ke pate shaayad,
Par hamara thikaana rahega sirf ek dooje ke saaye."

Chapter 22: The Defiance of Distance



"Khwahishon ka samandar jab hadon ko paar karta hai,
Tab ye dil kisi bhi raaste se nahi darta hai.
Do hafton ki tanhai ne ye hunar sikhaya hai,
Ki jab mohabbat shiddat ki ho, toh har faasla simatta hai."

Two weeks. Fourteen days of a grueling, monotonous routine that felt less like living and more like merely surviving.

Back in her hometown, Ahana felt like a ghost walking through her own life. She sat through quiet family dinners, smiled politely at relatives, and helped around the house, but her mind was perpetually miles away. The silence of her bedroom was suffocating. Every time she looked at her phone, she half-expected to see a casual text from Raaj telling her he was waiting outside her college gate. Instead, there were only text notifications and the sterile reality of distance.

For Raaj, the separation brought out a restless, brooding quiet. He spent hours just sitting on his porch or staring out his window as the evenings blurred into night, his mind entirely consumed by her absence. The house felt too big, the silence too heavy. He would pick up his bike keys just to drop them back on the table, realizing with a bitter twist that there was nowhere he wanted to ride if she wasn't sitting behind him, her hands holding onto his waist.

Their nightly calls, once a sanctuary, had slowly turned into an agonizing reminder of what they were missing. Raaj's voice through the speaker was rough, low, and laced with a tense, volatile frustration.

"I can't do this quietly, Aana," he had growled into the phone just two nights prior, the sound of his heavy footsteps clear over the line as he paced his room. "I'm sitting here doing absolutely nothing, and every single corner of this place just reminds me of you. I'm kicking the bike into gear tomorrow. I don't care about the hours or the highway. I'm coming to see you."

Ahana had spent an hour talking him down, using every ounce of her logic to calm his fierce, impulsive streak. "We promised we'd find a way," she had pleaded softly, her own heart aching. "Just hold on a little longer."

He had finally yielded with a rough, defeated sigh, but the desperation in his voice lingered in her mind long after they hung up.

By the fourteenth night, Ahana reached her own breaking point. She lay awake staring at her ceiling, the sheer craving to see him, to feel the solid warmth of his hand, and to look into his dark, protective eyes swelling until it completely consumed her. Raaj

wasn't the only one capable of being fiercely impulsive. She was done waiting. She was done letting the miles dictate her life.

The next morning, around 8:00 AM, while her family was busy settling into their usual daytime routines, Ahana quietly made her move.

She layered on a thick jacket, tied her hair securely, and grabbed her scooty keys. Ensuring her phone was fully charged, she crept out of the house and started the engine. The crisp morning air hit her face the moment she rolled past the front gate, but any lingering anxiety was completely drowned out by a wild, electric surge of determination.

She hit the open highway just as the morning traffic was beginning to stream steadily under a bright, clear sky.

Driving a scooty on a vast, sweeping highway in the morning hours was grueling. The wind whipped violently against her helmet, her fingers grew numb against the handlebars, and the massive trucks roaring past made her grip tighten in focus. But she didn't slow down. With every mile marker she passed, the heavy, suffocating weight of the last two weeks began to lift, replaced by the sheer thrill of what she was doing for him. She was moving toward her anchor.

By the time she finally crossed the threshold into the rugged outskirts of Raaj's hometown, the sun was high, bathing the landscape in a warm, golden glow.

Her muscles were aching and her lips were dry from the highway wind, but a radiant, unstoppable smile broke across her face. She pulled her scooty onto the side of the massive, sweeping concrete overbridge right at the town's entrance. Below her, the

town was busy with daytime activity, but up on the bridge, the air felt completely alive.

With her heart hammering wildly against her ribs, she pulled out her phone and dialed his number.

Raaj answered on the second ring, his voice rough, gravelly, and heavy with sleep. "Aana? Why are you up so early? Is everything okay?"

Ahana leaned against the concrete railing, looking out at the horizon, her breath catching slightly in her throat from the sheer excitement. "Everything is perfect. Where are you?"

"In bed, looking at our pictures," he muttered honestly, a low, exhausted sigh traveling through the speaker. "Just wishing you were here. Why?"

"Get out of bed, Raaj," she whispered, her voice bubbling with a sweet, triumphant warmth. "Grab your keys and come over to the highway overbridge at the entrance of your town. I'm waiting."

There was a sudden, violent rustle on the other end—the distinct sound of sheets being thrown off and a chair scraping blindly against the floor. "What did you just say?" Raaj's voice instantly lost every trace of sleep, turning incredibly sharp and breathlessly intense. "Aana, do not play with me right now. Where are you?"

"I'm not playing," she laughed, her eyes tearing up slightly from the sheer joy of it. "I'm literally standing on the overbridge. I drove down on my scooty. Come and find me."

The line went dead.

Down in the town, Raaj didn't even care that he was just in a plain t-shirt and sweatpants. He snatched his bike keys, flew down the stairs of his house, and kicked his engine to life with a fierce roar that shattered the quiet neighborhood dawn. He rode like a man possessed, cutting through the morning streets, his eyes locked entirely on the silhouette of the overbridge rising in the distance.

When his bike thundered up the concrete ramp of the bridge, his eyes scanned the empty expanse until they locked onto a small, familiar figure standing beside a scooty.

Raaj slammed on the brakes, his tires screeching to a harsh halt just a few feet away. He didn't even park the bike properly, letting the kickstand drop carelessly as he threw himself off the seat. His dark eyes were wide, filled with absolute, utter disbelief as he stared at her.

Ahana barely had time to take a step forward before Raaj closed the distance. He reached out, his large hands gripping her upper arms firmly, as if to physically check if she was actually real and not a figment of his sleep-deprived imagination.

"Are you completely insane?" Raaj breathed out, his voice shaking with a potent mix of raw shock, fierce protectiveness, and overwhelming love. "You drove all this way? Alone? On a scooty? In the freezing morning hours?"

"I missed you," Ahana replied simply, her eyes shining with absolute devotion as she looked up into his face. "You said you were losing your mind, Raaj. I couldn't let you lose it alone."

The last string of Raaj's restraint snapped. Pulling her fiercely into his space, he wrapped his strong arms around her waist, lifting her slightly off her feet as he buried his face into the crook of her neck. He held her so tightly it was almost bruising, breathing in the

familiar scent of her hair, his broad shoulders tension-melting completely against her.

"You're going to kill me one of these days, Aana," Raaj murmured roughly against her skin, his grip tightening. "I swear to God, my heart stopped when you called."

When he finally pulled back just an inch, his hands came up to cup her face, his thumbs gently wiping away the stray tears that had gathered on her lashes from the highway wind. He looked down at her lips, then up at her eyes, his gaze burning with that familiar, quiet obsession. Without a word, he leaned down and pressed a deep, lingering kiss onto her forehead, holding his lips there for a long, breathless moment to stamp her presence into his soul.

Because it was a stolen, surprise visit, they both knew the clock was ticking. Ahana had to turn around and drive back before her absence became noticeable at home, and Raaj had his day ahead. It was a short, fleeting meet—barely an hour stolen from the universe—but looking at the way his face lit up, Ahana knew it was the most special hour of their entire separation.

They stood by the concrete railing of the overbridge, holding hands tightly, sharing a single warm cup of tea from a nearby vendor while the morning wind swirled around them. They didn't talk about the distance or the ache anymore; for that one hour, the miles didn't exist.

When it was finally time for her to leave, Raaj meticulously checked her scooter, his hands lingering on the handles, his face darkening with the impending separation but his eyes soft with a profound respect for what she had just done for him.

"Drive slow," Raaj commanded softly, his hand resting gently on her helmet as she sat on the scooty. "Call me every hour. If you don't call, I'm riding out right behind you."

"I will," Ahana smiled, starting the engine. "Take care of my heart, Raaj."

"Always," he whispered.

As Ahana turned her scooty and began the journey back down the overbridge, Raaj stood at the highest peak, watching her until she became a tiny speck on the distant highway. A fierce, proud smile slowly broke across his face. He was completely, irrevocably ruined by her—and he loved every single second of it.

"Pal bhar ki mulaqaat bhi sadiyon ka sukoon de jaati hai,
Jab mohabbat meelon ka safar khud tay karke aati hai.
Wo aayi, wo muskuraayi, aur meri rooh ko phir se zinda kar gayi,
Ab ye dil uska hai, aur ye dhadkan sirf uski gawaahi deti hai."

Chapter 23: The Blueprint of Forever



"Ek hi shehar mein hamari dhadkanon ka thikaana ho gaya,
Jo kal tak door the, aaj unka roz ka milna ho gaya.
Nazdeekiyaon ne sikhaya hai is mohabbat ka naya saleeka,
Ab har saans par sirf tera aur mera hi fasaana ho gaya."

Sometimes, the universe tires of testing two hearts that refuse to break.

The grueling months of distance finally melted away when the university admission lists were published. By what could only be described as a beautifully orchestrated plan of fate, both Raaj and Ahana secured admissions into two of the top universities in the exact same city. When the confirmation emails arrived, the sheer relief was intoxicating. The miles were gone. The highway was no longer a barrier. They were going to share the same sky again.

To stay completely focused on their independent academic journeys, they both took separate, personal rooms near their respective campuses.

The day of the move was a blur of heavy suitcases, nervous excitement, and family goodbyes. Both sets of parents dropped them off, helped them carry their trunks up the stairs, gave their standard lectures about focusing on their careers, and finally boarded their trains back home. The moment the family footprints faded from the hallways, the new chapter truly began.

Instead of resting, they immediately rushed to each other's spaces. Ahana spent hours in Raaj's room, her small hands organizing his chaotic pile of textbooks, setting up his desk, and hanging his jackets in the wardrobe, while Raaj handled the heavy lifting in her room, fixing her curtains, checking the door locks with a fiercely protective eye, and making sure her space was absolutely safe.

When the rooms were finally set, they went out for their first quiet lunch together in a small, sunlit café down the street. Sitting across from each other, watching the afternoon light dance on the table without a ticking clock forcing a departure, a profound sense of peace settled between them. They were finally home.

As the weeks rolled into months, their bond evolved. They were no longer the college teenagers stealing quick glances in the campus corridors; they were growing up. They met up whenever their university schedules allowed—quick coffee dates between lectures, evening walks down the city lanes, and quiet weekend study sessions. With this maturity came a subtle, powerful shift. The raw, emotional gravity that had always pulled them together began to blend with a deep, undeniable physical attraction. It wasn't rushed; it was the natural, beautiful blooming of two people who had belonged to each other for years.

The true shift happened on a quiet, overcast afternoon when Ahana visited Raaj's room.

They had planned to head out for dinner, but the sky suddenly broke into a heavy, dramatic downpour, the fat raindrops drumming violently against his window glass. The world outside was completely washed out, trapping them in a warm, intimate sanctuary of their own.

They abandoned their plans, sitting close together on the edge of his bed, the cool breeze from the window cutting through the humid air. The conversation, which usually flowed like a river, slowly slowed to a heavy, breathless murmur. The proximity was electric. Every time Raaj's eyes dropped to her lips, Ahana's heart did that familiar, violent flip.

Raaj looked at her for a long, quiet moment, his dark eyes burning with an intensity that made the air feel thick. Without a word, he shifted back slightly and patting his thigh, he murmured, "Sit here, Aana. Face me."

Ahana's breath hitched, but her devotion never hesitated. She shifted, sliding onto his lap, her knees framing his waist as she faced him entirely. Being this close, feeling the solid, rhythmic thumping of his heart against her chest, stripped away the rest of the universe.

Raaj's large hands came up, his long fingers tangling gently into the hair at the nape of her neck, tilting her head up just an inch. When his lips finally met hers, it wasn't the fleeting kiss of the overbridge or the bittersweet farewell of the bus stop. It was deep, slow, and completely consuming. They kissed like two people who had been starving for each other, entirely lost in the rhythm of the rain outside.

Ahana's hands found his shoulders, her fingers slowly brushing up into his thick hair, holding onto him tightly as if

anchoring herself against the sheer wave of sensation washing over her.

As the kiss deepened, the boundaries of their innocence began to stretch. Moving entirely with the intoxicating flow of the moment, Raaj's hand slid down from her shoulder, his palm warm and rough against the bare skin of her waist. Sensation spread across her body like wildfire, a soft gasp escaping her lips into his. But as his hand slowly, gently began to slide upward beneath the hem of her top, a tiny, protective instinct flickered in Ahana's mind.

They were growing, but some sacred steps belonged to the future.

Without breaking the kiss immediately, Ahana's small hand moved down, her fingers gently but firmly wrapping around his wrist. She held his hand, guiding it slowly and softly back out from beneath her top.

Raaj didn't fight her for even a microsecond. The moment her fingers anchored his hand, his movement stopped completely. He ended the kiss with a soft, lingering pressure on her lower lip, his forehead coming to rest against hers, both of them breathing heavily in the quiet room.

Ahana slid off his lap, sitting side-by-side with him on the bed, her cheeks flushed a beautiful rosy pink. She smoothed down her top, looking at him with eyes full of absolute love and an unshakeable certainty.

"We should go afar only after we are married first, right?" she whispered softly, her voice steady despite the racing of her heart.

Raaj looked at her, the intensity in his eyes suddenly softening into a beautiful, boyish warmth. A low, breathless laugh escaped his lips. "Yes, of course," he muttered, his heart swelling with a profound respect for the girl sitting beside him.

He looked down at his hand, then reached into his pocket and pulled out his bike keys. Holding the heavy metal ring, he let the silver keychain dangle between his fingers like a priceless heirloom.

He turned to her, his face splitting into a brilliant, completely devoted smile. "So, Miss Aana? You wanna marry me?"

Ahana looked at the dangling keychain, then up at his handsome face, a joyous, ringing laugh echoing through the room. "Yes!" she said, her voice full of a beautiful, lazy arrogance that mirrored his own. "Because honestly, if it's not me, who else in this world has the audacity to take my place?"

Raaj's laugh was loud and triumphant, completely filling the space between them. He grabbed her hand, his thumb stroking her palm. "Nobody, Aana. Nobody else. Not even in my wildest thoughts." He looked directly into her eyes, his tone dropping into that fierce, possessive register that always made her feel like a queen. "It is only you, and you, and you. Forever."

With infinite gentleness, Raaj took the metal keychain and looped it carefully around her ring finger, a makeshift promise ring under the canopy of the rain.

Ahana didn't care about gold or diamonds; looking at that silver ring on her finger, she threw her arms around his neck, burying her face into his chest as he wrapped his strong arms around her waist, holding her so close that their heartbeats completely merged into one.

"Chaabi ke us chhalle mein maine apni kaaynaat dekhi hai,
Teri baahon mein simatkar maine apni aukaat dekhi hai.
Log dhoondhte honge mehlon mein mohabbat ko apni,
Maine toh tere is chhote se kamre mein poori kaaynaat dekhi hai."

Chapter 24: The Sacred Rebellion



"Ye kaisi bechaini hai jo kam nahi hoti,
Tere paas hokar bhi ye pyaas kam nahi hoti.
Jab rooh ne tujhe apna shauhar maan liya hai,
Toh phir duniya ki rasmon ki parwah kyun hoti?"

Setting a boundary is one thing; living with the aftermath of it is another entirely.

In the weeks following that rainy afternoon proposal, a quiet, intoxicating restlessness settled over both of them. The makeshift ring—Raaj's heavy metal bike keychain—sat prominently on Ahana's dressing table, a constant, gleaming reminder of the promise they had made. But instead of calming the storm inside them, that memory had only unlocked a door that neither of them could close.

The innocence of their teenage years had completely burned away, replaced by the heavy, consuming reality of two adults who were desperately, irrevocably in love.

They tried to focus on their university schedules, but the city felt smaller now. Every time they met for a quick meal or walked

back to their rooms under the golden, amber glow of the afternoon sun, the tension between them was thick enough to bruise. It was in the way Raaj's hand would linger on her waist when he guided her through a crowd, his grip tighter, more possessive. It was in the way Ahana's eyes would fixate on his lips while he spoke, her breath hitching every time he leaned in close.

They weren't just missing each other anymore; they were craving each other. A raw, physical ache had anchored itself deep in their chests.

The breaking point didn't come from a grand fight or an outside threat. It came from the quiet, agonizing realization that they were living a double life. In their hearts and minds, they already belonged to each other fully. They shared their dreams, their daily struggles, their finances, and their souls—yet every single day, they had to untangle their fingers, walk into separate rooms, and lock the doors.

The distance between their separate apartments started to feel just as punishing as the miles between their hometowns had been.

One late afternoon, Raaj came over to Ahana's room. They had planned to head out for a meal together, but as the sunlight slanted through the windows, the mundane act of leaving felt suddenly unbearable.

As Ahana turned around from the mirror, adjusting the belt of her jeans, she found Raaj standing near the doorway, just watching her. He hadn't even finished putting on his jacket. His dark eyes were shadowed, heavy with a profound, exhausted longing that mirrored her own precisely.

"Aana," he murmured, his voice incredibly low, a rough vibration in the quiet room.

She walked over to him, her heart already hammering against her ribs. When she reached out to touch his chest, Raaj caught her hand, his fingers crushing hers gently. He pulled her against him, burying his face in the crook of her neck, his chest rising and falling in heavy, ragged breaths.

"I'm losing my mind," he whispered against her skin, his strong arms wrapping around her waist with a desperate, crushing force. "I go back to my room, and the silence just screams your name. I sit there counting the hours until I can see you for ten minutes between classes. This half-life... it's killing me."

Ahana tilted her head back, her eyes shining with unshed tears, her fingers gripping the lapels of his jacket. "I know," she breathed, her voice trembling. "I feel it too, Raaj. Every single second."

Raaj looked down at her, his gaze burning with a fierce, absolute certainty. His hand came up to cup her jaw, his thumb smoothing over her flushed cheek. "We aren't playing games anymore. You are my woman. I want to wake up next to you. I want to build our life without having to say goodbye at sunset. I don't care about the grand celebrations or what society dictates three years from now. I need you legally, spiritually, completely mine."

Ahana looked into his eyes and saw the truth of her own soul reflected there. They didn't want to cross their moral lines in the shadows. They wanted their love to be honorable, sacred, and true. And if the world wasn't ready to give them that commitment yet, they would go out and claim it themselves.

She wrapped her hands over his, a beautiful, fearless smile breaking through her vulnerability.

"Then let's stop waiting for the future, Raaj," Ahana whispered, her voice ringing with an unshakeable devotion. "Let's make it official. Just you and me. Let's do a court marriage."

Raaj's breath hitched, a fierce, primal warmth flooding his features as he stared at his girl—the one who never hesitated, the one who matched his madness step for step. He leaned down, pressing a hard, desperate kiss onto her lips, a silent vow sealed in the quiet, sun-drenched afternoon.

The decision was made. No drama, no turning back. Just two hearts taking absolute control of their destiny.

"Na koi gawah hai, na koi tamasha hai,
Hamari mohabbat ki apni hi ek bhasha hai.
Bas haath thaam kar chalna hai umr bhar saath tere,
Ab toh meri har saans mein bas yahi ek abhilasha hai."

Chapter 25: The Silent Vow



"Na koi shehnai baji, na koi baraat saji,
Par aaj hamari rooh ek-doesre ke naam saji.
Duniya ki rasmon se pare, ek chhota sa vaada hai,
Tu ab se meri duniya, mera sab kuch, mera aadha hai."

The decision wasn't an impulsive run to a temple in the middle of the night; it was a deliberate, quiet pact made by two mature minds. They knew the realities of the legal system, and they chose to walk through it step by step.

The next morning, they entered the Registrar's Office. It wasn't romantic—it was a world of dusty tables, the rhythmic clatter of old keyboards, and formal paperwork. They filled out the application under the Special Marriage Act, signed the declaration, and submitted their documents.

Then came the test of patience: the mandatory 30-day notice period.

Those thirty days were a quiet, surreal blur. To the rest of the world, they were just two dedicated university students attending lectures, sharing library desks, and discussing assignments. But beneath the routine, an electric undercurrent ran through every glance they exchanged. They were counting down the hours. Raaj quietly searched the city for a small, cozy apartment—a place away from the student hostels, a sanctuary that would belong solely to them.

They also made a sacred pact regarding their families. Sitting together one evening over a shared cup of tea, Ahana had looked at Raaj, her eyes soft but firm.

"Our parents love us, Raaj," she had murmured, her fingers tracing the back of his hand. "We are doing this because our hearts can't handle the waiting, but we can't break theirs. When the time is right, after our studies, we will convince them for a traditional, official wedding. They will see us take our vows properly. We will never tell them about the court marriage. There's no need to hurt them with a truth they wouldn't understand."

Raaj had nodded, kissing her forehead. "Never, Aana. This secret stays between you, me, and the four walls of our home."

When the thirtieth day finally arrived, they returned to the office with three close university friends acting as witnesses. There was no heavy red saree, no grand procession, and no loud music. Ahana wore a simple, elegant ivory kurta, and Raaj was in a crisp white shirt. In front of the registrar, they signed the final ledger.

When the official stamp hit the paper, Raaj looked up at Ahana. The metal bike keychain was replaced by a simple, delicate

gold band on her ring finger. They were legally, undeniably, husband and wife.

That evening, the heavy wooden door of their new shared apartment clicked shut, locking out the rest of the world.

The apartment was small, smelling faintly of fresh paint and the jasmine incense Ahana had lit earlier. The rain, as if wanting to bless their union once again, began to patter softly against the windowpanes, cutting off the city's distant hum.

Raaj dropped his keys on the counter. In the dim, warm light of the living room lamp, he turned to look at his wife. The sheer gravity of what they had done settled over them. The waiting was over. The separate rooms, the midnight goodbyes, the artificial boundaries—all of it had dissolved into the quiet air of this room.

Ahana stood near the window, her heart racing a thousand miles an hour. She wasn't scared, but the sudden, absolute freedom of belonging to him fully made her breath catch in her throat.

Raaj walked over to her, his footsteps deliberate and completely silent. He stopped just inches away, his towering frame casting a protective shadow over her. Slowly, his large, warm hands came up, his thumbs gently tracing her jawline, lifting her face so her eyes had no choice but to meet his burning, possessive gaze.

"You are mine, Aana," he whispered, his voice thick, rough with an emotion he had suppressed for years. "My wife. Completely."

A beautiful, breathless smile touched Ahana's lips. "And you are mine, Raaj."

He didn't wait any longer. Raaj leaned down, his lips crashing against hers with a fierce, intoxicating hunger that swept away any

lingering hesitation. This kiss was entirely different from the ones before. There was no hesitation, no sudden braking point. It was deep, consuming, and deeply possessive. Ahana's hands immediately rushed up to his shoulders, her fingers tangling tightly into his thick hair, pulling him closer as if trying to merge her very skin with his.

Raaj groaned softly against her mouth, his arms wrapping around her waist, lifting her effortlessly against his solid chest as he carried her toward the bedroom.

He placed her gently onto the soft mattress, immediately coming down over her, his heavy warmth anchoring her to the bed. The dim light from the hallway spilled across the sheets, illuminating the flush on Ahana's cheeks and the dark, unbridled devotion in Raaj's eyes.

His fingers trembled slightly as they reached for the small buttons of her kurta. One by one, he parted the fabric, his knuckles brushing against the sensitive, smooth skin of her collarbone. Ahana's breath hitched, her eyes closing as a delicious, intense shiver rippled across her entire body at his touch. He slid the fabric from her shoulders, his gaze roaming over her bare skin with absolute reverence, making her feel like the most sacred thing in his universe.

Leaning down, Raaj pressed his lips to the hollow of her throat, his warm breath sending waves of heat straight to her core. His hands slid downward, tracing the elegant curve of her waist, pulling her hips flush against his. The sheer friction of their bodies, unhindered by boundaries, was electric.

Ahana arched into his touch, her hands sliding under his shirt, her palms mapping the hard, rigid muscles of his back. She wanted

him closer, wanted to strip away every last barrier between them. Sensing her unspoken surrender, Raaj pulled his shirt over his head, discarding it carelessly onto the floor.

When his bare chest pressed down against her, the heat was intoxicating. Raaj's hands moved with a slow, agonizing possessiveness, exploring every curve, every secret contour of her body, worshiping her with a patience that drove them both to the edge of madness. Ahana held onto him tightly, her nails digging softly into his shoulders, her soft gasps and whimpers echoing in the quiet room, completely lost in the rhythm of his touch.

The rain outside intensified, a torrential downpour mirroring the storm of passion inside the room. Every touch was an unspoken vow, every breathless kiss a declaration of absolute ownership. They moved together not with haste, but with the profound, soul-deep certainty of two people who had endured the fire of separation just to reach this sanctuary.

In the quiet, early hours of the morning, the room grew still.

The storm outside had slowed to a gentle drizzle. Raaj lay on his side, his strong arm wrapped securely around Ahana's waist, pulling her bare back completely against his chest. Ahana lay nestled in his warmth, the white sheet pulled up to their shoulders, her hand resting over his forearm. The simple gold ring on her finger caught the faint, gray light of the breaking dawn, gleaming softly against her skin.

Raaj leaned forward, pressing a soft, lingering kiss onto her bare shoulder, his grip tightening around her waist just a fraction more.

"Good morning, Mrs. Raaj," he murmured, his voice husky with sleep.

Ahana turned her head slightly, her face glowing with a profound, radiant peace. She smiled, locking her fingers with his. "Good morning, Mr. Husband."

"Hadon ko paar kar ke jo aaj sukoon mila hai,
Sadiyon ki pyaas ko jaise koi dariya mila hai.
Ab kisi aur savere ki khwahish nahi is dil ko,
Teri baahon mein mujhe mera poora jahan mila hai."

Chapter 26: Beyond the Campus Walls



"Deewaron ke saaye se nikal kar, ek nayi duniya basaayi hai,
Apni hi sharton par humne apni khushi sajaayi hai.
Duniya ki nazar se door, ye sukoon ka jo lamha hai,
Teri baahon mein simat kar, maine khud se rihaayi paayi hai."

Living a double life was a beautiful, thrilling secret. To the outside world, they were just two dedicated students navigating different universities. But the moment Friday afternoon arrived, the distance between their campuses dissolved. Their small, hidden apartment became their true sanctuary—the only place where their two separate worlds merged into one.

Sundays were the most sacred. The air in the room held the faint, earthy sweetness of attar and the thin, calming trail of sandalwood incense drifting from the corner.

Raaj moved quietly through the kitchen, the soft clinking of plates the only sound in the early morning. With everything prepared, he walked back into the bedroom. He paused in the doorway, his tray momentarily forgotten. Ahana was buried deep under the heavy blanket, a small, peaceful shape against the pillows.

A wave of profound gratitude washed over him. He remembered the early, desperate days—the fleeting glances he used to steal of her across the campus, the secret prayers he whispered just to see her smile. He had once been prepared to spend a lifetime simply admiring her from afar. Now, she was his—his wife, his reality, his life—sleeping peacefully in the sanctuary he had built for her. He stood there for a long time, simply adoring the sight of her, thanking the universe for this beautiful, impossible gift.

He set the tray down and moved to the bed. With infinite care, he leaned down, pressing a lingering, tender kiss against her cheek, right over the silken strands of hair that had fallen across her face.

Ahana stirred, a soft murmur escaping her lips as her eyes fluttered open. Seeing him there, she didn't ask for time or wakefulness; she simply turned, her arms winding tightly around his chest. She pulled him close, pressing her face against his heartbeat—the most familiar, grounding sound in her universe.

Raaj chuckled, the sound vibrating against her forehead. "Breakfast is waiting, Mrs. Raaj," he whispered.

She reached for his oversized cotton T-shirt, pulling it on over her head, the soft fabric swallowing her frame. After a quick, shared moment in the washroom, they moved to the balcony, where the morning air was crisp and fresh.

Raaj didn't let her sit in a chair. He pulled her onto his lap on the floor cushions, a soft shawl wrapped around them both. He

took the egg sandwich, tearing off a piece with his large fingers to feed her, his eyes never leaving her face.

"You know," he said softly, "sometimes I look at us and I realize how incredibly lucky we are. Our families have given us such a solid foundation. We don't have to fight for survival, Aana. We have the rare privilege to focus on building something beautiful."

Ahana rested her head on his shoulder. "We have the luxury of time, Raaj. We aren't scrambling for bread or rent. We're truly blessed."

"Exactly," he agreed. "And I don't want to waste a second of it."

Their day became a blur of shared laughter and movement. They headed out to a local park, spending hours at a trampoline arena, shedding their adult personas and laughing until their sides ached. They ate a casual lunch at a favorite spot, trading bites and stories, acting like the world was entirely theirs to explore.

By the time they returned to their apartment, the sun was sinking, casting long, amber shadows across the living room floor. Raaj felt a sharp pang of resistance—he wanted to stop time itself. He held her close, his arms locking around her, pulling her into a desperate, silent embrace as if he could anchor her there forever. The golden light caught her hair, and for a moment, he just breathed her in, trying to memorize the exact rhythm of her breathing to carry him through the week.

But the evening forced their hands. As the last of the warmth left the room, the reality of the coming week returned. They packed her things in silence, a heavy, tender sorrow hanging between them.

Raaj started his motorcycle, the engine's low rumble cutting through the quiet evening air. Ahana climbed on behind him, her

arms wrapped tightly around his waist, her face pressed against his back as they rode toward her private room near her university.

When he pulled up to the quiet street, he kept the engine running, reluctant to break the connection. He turned to face her, his gaze intense, scanning her face as if searching for a hidden reserve of strength.

"I'm already counting the hours until Friday," he confessed, his voice thick with a raw, restless ache. "It's only a few days, but it feels like an eternity."

Ahana reached out, her fingers tracing his jawline, her touch light yet searing. "I'll be right here, in your heart, until then. Every second."

Raaj leaned in, giving her a deep, lingering kiss that tasted of everything they couldn't say—a silent vow of devotion. He pulled back, his eyes searching hers one last time. "I love you, Aana. More than all the days I've spent waiting for you." He squeezed her hand, his thumb tracing her palm. "Ta-ta, Mrs. Raaj."

As she stepped off the bike and walked toward the entrance, she looked back once. He was still there, the moonlight catching the lines of his silhouette, waiting until she was safely inside—a guardian watching over the sanctuary they had built beyond the campus walls.

"Rooh ke parinde ne jab se tera saaya paaya hai,
Har zakhm-e-wafa par marham sa gehra saaya hai.
Zindagi ka har lamha ab teri khushboo mein simta hai,
Jaise khud Khuda ne meri mohabbat ko apna banaaya hai."

Chapter 27: Stolen Futures



"Sapnon ki ek nayi duniya humne sajaayi hai,
Kal ki fikr chhod aaj humne ye mehfil jamaayi hai.
Khushiyon ke rang mein doobi hai hamari ye haseen shaam,
Jaise Khuda ne khud hamari mohabbat ki daastaan likhi hai."

The first two days of the week had been a relentless march of lectures and assignments, but the air crackled with anticipation for Wednesday. A sudden mid-week holiday had given them a rare gift—a few extra hours to steal away from their separate worlds.

Over the phone, their conversation was a playful, teasing dance.

"So," Raaj teased, his voice dropping into that deep, velvet register that always made Ahana's breath hitch. "I've been staring at

the clock all morning. How much longer are you going to keep a married man waiting?"

Ahana laughed, the sound bright and infectious. "A married man, huh? You're awfully demanding for someone who still owes me a rematch in that video game we played last time."

"Is that a challenge, Mrs. Raaj? Because I'm pretty sure I let you win just to see you smile."

"Oh, please! You were sweating bullets. Admit it, you're just afraid of being beaten by your wife."

She paused, her tone softening, becoming more intimate. "Actually... I'm not really feeling up to going out into the chaos today. I'm having a rough time, and my body feels like it's been through a war. Can we just... be lazy?"

Raaj's voice instantly shifted, his playfulness replaced by an instinctive, protective warmth. "Say no more. I'll come pick you up. I'll handle everything—you just focus on resting. And don't worry, I've got the supplies covered."

When he picked her up on his bike, he handed her a small, insulated bottle of hot water. "For the cramps," he said softly, checking the buckles of her bag. "Did you lock your room properly? Don't worry, I've got you."

As they rode, he leaned back slightly, his voice cutting through the wind. "You know, it's not always about being physically involved. Our togetherness is for life. We can have fun, enjoy the night, spend time—that's what matters most. Of course, I love your body, but not more than your soul," he teased, his grin audible even over the engine.

He stopped at a pharmacy before they reached his flat, stepping out to buy her pads with the casual ease of a man who saw this as part of taking care of her. Once they reached the sanctuary of his room, the atmosphere shifted to pure, domestic bliss. Ahana changed into his oversized T-shirt and shorts, looking impossibly small and cute. Raaj couldn't take his eyes off her, his gaze filled with a quiet, adoring hunger.

He pulled her into his space, playing a soft, melodic romantic song. They swayed together, his hands resting on the small of her back, his lips brushing against the sensitive skin of her neck, sending shivers down her spine. The dance was slow, a rhythm of heartbeat and breath.

Playfulness soon took over. He pinched her side, and she shrieked, chasing him around the room until she caught him, sinking her teeth into his hand and leaving a faint, perfect stamp—a mark of her possession.

"My mark," she declared, giggling.

Later, she forced him to lay on his stomach. She carefully applied her favorite shade of lipstick and pressed a kiss onto his bare shoulder blade, creating a vibrant, crimson stamp. She grabbed his phone, laughing as she clicked pictures of their "brands" on each other. They stayed up until midnight, the world outside forgotten, Raaj holding her close, her warmth soaking into his chest until they both drifted into a peaceful, heavy sleep.

The morning sun filtered in, casting a golden hue over the tangled bedsheets. Ahana woke first, her eyes tracing the scene. Their positions had shifted; Raaj was curled against her like a child, his head resting squarely on her chest, his dark hair tickling her

chin. He looked so incredibly innocent, the ruggedness of his usual self stripped away by sleep.

She stayed perfectly still, propped up on one elbow, just watching the steady rise and fall of his chest. When he finally stirred and his eyes cracked open, she didn't wait. She kissed his forehead, whispering, "Good morning, Hubby."

Raaj groaned, pulling her closer, closing his eyes again, wanting to anchor himself in the moment.

"I want us to be successful, Raaj," she murmured, stroking his hair. "I want us to start a business, be independent, make our families proud. Also, we'll have a home, a big one, where our families can stay under one roof. We'll go on trips, take long rides—but we'll never sell your bike, okay? It's been with us through everything. Are you listening?"

Raaj's voice was a rough, sleepy whisper against her skin. "Yup. I'm not only listening; I'm fitting every word into my mind. With you, every moment is beautiful. You're talking about the future, but just look at me—I'm the happiest, most blessed person in the whole world right now. I've got you, Aana. I love you. I'll always do everything you like."

Ahana smiled, her heart feeling full to the point of aching. She nudged his shoulder, her tone shifting to a mock-serious one. "Enough dreaming for now. Get up, sleepyhead. We have classes to attend. Friday is just a day away... I'll come back to you soon. Get up."

Raaj sighed, finally pulling away, their fingers lingering for a second before he stood up, ready to face the world, unaware that the countdown to Friday had already begun.

"Manzilein abhi aur bhi hain, ye toh bas shuruwaat hai,
Hamari adhoori baaton mein bhi kitni sundar ye mulaqaat hai.

Kal ki har ummeed ab in aankhon mein basi hai,
Saath tere jeene ki har zid, meri rooh ki pyaas hai."

Chapter 28: The Shattered Glass



"Waq̤t ki raftaar ne aaj kaisa sitam dhaya hai,
Haathon ki lakeeron se maano sab kuch mitaya hai.
Kal tak jo saath jeene ki kasmai̤n khaate the,
Aaj usi rooh ne mujhse mera har khwaab cheena hai."

Friday began with a promise. They spoke on the phone, the morning sunlight filtering through their respective rooms, tethering them together by nothing more than words.

"Stay there, I'm coming to get you the moment your classes end," Raaj said, his voice firm with that possessive, protective warmth.

"No, Raaj, please," Ahana countered, her voice dancing with secret excitement. "I have some extra classes. Just stay put. I'll

manage a cab. Don't force me to come, okay? I have a surprise for you... just wait for me."

She hung up, her heart fluttering. She didn't want him to pick her up because she wanted to walk through the door with a gift that smelled of him—a scent that would say I am always with you.

After the final bell, she booked a cab. She had the driver drop her off a block away from the perfume shop near their apartment. It was a boutique shop, lined with crystal bottles. She found it—a glass bottle with a scent so strikingly similar to his, yet refined, carrying a hint of the White musk and citrus and the adventure. She felt overwhelmed, imagining his smile when he opened it.

"Could you wrap this, please?" she asked the shopkeeper.

"We don't do wrapping here, ma'am. You'll have to go to the stationery storefront across the street."

Ahana nodded, beaming. She walked out into the golden afternoon light. She was so consumed by the thought of his surprise that she stopped in the middle of the pavement, opening the cap of the bottle. She sprayed a mist onto her wrist, bringing it to her nose, inhaling the familiar, grounding scent of her husband. She stepped onto the road, looking both ways, her mind miles away in their sanctuary.

A heavy truck, moving with a velocity that defied the speed limit, ignored the red light.

There was no time to scream. The impact was a blur of screeching tires and a sickening, hollow thud. Ahana was thrown against the asphalt. She landed hard, but her hand—the one clutching the gift—remained locked in a desperate, bruising grip. The truck didn't stop; it shuddered as it rolled over her.

The glass bottle shattered inside her palm. Shards of crystal embedded deep into her soft skin, mingling with the spray of perfume and the spreading crimson of her blood. She wasn't dead, but the light in her eyes was flickering like a dying candle. People rushed from the shops, voices rising in a panicked, discordant chorus.

Raaj sat in their apartment, the silence suddenly feeling heavy, suffocating. A nameless, jagged hurriedness clawed at his chest. It's too late, he thought, his heart hammering against his ribs. I should have gone to her.

He dialed her number. Ring. Ring. Ring.

"Hello?" a stranger's voice answered, frantic and trembling. "There has been an accident. The girl's condition is severe... near the perfume shop. We've called the ambulance."

The phone slipped from Raaj's hand. He didn't think; he didn't breathe. He ran with a speed that defied logic, his feet pounding the earth, his throat raw, crying out in a silent, jagged scream that refused to make a sound.

He reached her in two minutes. The scene was a nightmare carved in reality. He dropped to his knees on the oil-stained road, gathering her limp body into his arms.

"It's alright, Aana... look at me, you're fine", he choked out, his tears falling onto her face. "Aana, please... open your eyes."

Ahana couldn't see; her vision was a dark, swirling fog. She felt the warmth of his chest, the only thing she knew. She tried to raise her hand, the movement agonizing. Her palm was shredded by the shards of the perfume bottle, the glass glistening in the blood. Raaj

reached behind her, supporting her, his own hands trembling uncontrollably.

She couldn't speak. She didn't have the breath to say goodbye. She only managed to bring her bloodied hand up, brushing her fingers against his cheek—a final, trembling caress of love.

Then, her hand fell. It landed against the road, heavy and lifeless, as if the soul had simply drained out of her fingertips.

Aana!" Raaj's roar tore through the city, a sound of a man losing his entire universe.

The ambulance arrived, but the journey to the hospital was a blur. He held her, whispering, talking to her, begging her to just open her eyes. She's just tired, he lied to himself. She's just sleeping.

At the hospital, he pushed the nurses aside, desperate to stay with her. He called her parents, his voice breaking as he spoke. "Uncle, don't worry... she just had an accident. Please, come to the City Hospital."

He sat outside the emergency ward, a statue of grief. He called his friends, not for comfort, but for the logistics of a nightmare he couldn't grasp. Twenty minutes later, the doctor walked out, his expression hollow.

"We did everything we could."

Raaj lunged at him, grabbing his coat. "No! You're lying! She's just resting, she promised me! Check again!"

He argued, he pleaded, he broke until he was forced to stand back. The police formalities, the sterile paperwork—it felt like a script from someone else's life.

When her parents arrived, the air in the hospital turned to ice. The sound of her mother's scream, a primal, jagged tear in the fabric of the hospital corridor, was the moment Raaj's world disintegrated. Her parents were ushered into the room, their wails filling the hallway. Raaj watched from the doorway, his body frozen, his soul screaming in silence. When the parents finally stumbled out, broken and hollow, the staff allowed him in.

He approached the bed, her parents standing near the window, their eyes too clouded with their own grief to notice the intensity of his. He leaned down, pressing his face into her neck—her skin was already cooling, but the scent of the spilled perfume still clung to her, now cruelly masked by the metallic tang of blood. He held her hand, his fingers tracing the jagged cuts where the glass had been.

It was a goodbye he wasn't meant to have.

When his friends pulled him away, he sat on the hospital floor like a stone. Her parents were lost in their own tragedy, and Raaj was left to drown in his.

The funeral was a blur of white cloth, burning embers, and the hollow chanting that signified the end of all things. Raaj stood amidst the smoke, his eyes dry.

When the rituals were done, he walked away. He went back to their apartment. He locked the door, climbed onto the bed where they had spent their last morning, and pulled the blanket over his head.

He stayed there for days, in the dark, the scent of the broken perfume bottle and the ghosts of a "stolen future" lingering in the air like a silence that would never end.

Chapter 29: The Fragrance of Absence



The apartment had become a tomb. Three days had passed in absolute darkness. The air inside was stale, heavy with the phantom scent of her—the faint, lingering smell of her shampoo, and beneath it, that cruel, metallic tang of blood that still stained his clothes.

Raaj hadn't opened the door. He hadn't eaten. He sat on the floor, staring at the empty space where she used to be, his mind playing the last forty-eight hours on a loop, frame by agonizing frame.

His friends had come and gone, knocking, pleading, eventually leaving food at the doorstep that went untouched. Then came the call from his mother. She had been trying to reach him for days, and when the silence became unbearable, she had contacted his friends. They had told her. The truth hit her like a physical blow, and the next day, she arrived in the city, her own heart shattered for the girl she had known as her son's world.

When she reached the apartment, surrounded by his friends, she didn't knock—she called out, her voice trembling with a mother's desperation. "Raaj... beta, please. Open the door. It's Mamma."

Silence. Then, a slow, dragging sound. The lock clicked.

The door creaked open, and the sight that greeted them was enough to make his friends turn away in tears. Raaj looked like a ghost. He was wearing the same clothes from that Friday, the dark, dried stains of Ahana's blood still crusted on his shirt. His eyes were hollow, sunken pits of grief.

As he saw his mother, the last shred of his endurance snapped. He didn't speak; he didn't move. He simply collapsed. He fell onto the floor, clutching his mother's knees, burying his face in her saree, and let out a sound—not a roar, but a long, low, soul-shattering wail.

For an hour, the room was filled with nothing but his agony. His friends wept openly, and his mother held him, rocking him back and forth, her own tears soaking his matted hair. She was sobbing too, her body shaking as she mourned the girl she had already begun to think of as her daughter.

Finally, the sobbing slowed to a ragged, broken gasp. His hands, trembling violently, reached up to grip her arms.

"I love her, Mamma," he choked out, his voice barely a whisper. "She can't leave me like this. I should have gone to pick her up... I should have been there. I wish... Mamma, I wish we both would have died. I can't live without her. I can't see her die... I feel the blood on my hands. It's all my fault. How did she bear all that pain? How could she leave me, Mamma? How could she?"

His mother pulled him closer, her voice thick with her own pain, struggling to keep her composure as she wiped her wet cheeks. "Listen to me, Raaj," she whispered, her voice cracking as she leaned her forehead against his. "It's fate. It's not in our hands. God takes pure souls early. We cannot carry this blame."

She swallowed hard, taking a shaky breath to steady herself before she could finish. "Will Aana's soul be happy, watching you from heaven like this? You cannot make her cry. She is in our hearts; she always will be. When our time comes, we will go, but we cannot waste the life we have left. Be strong, like she was. Don't you dare be like this. This is a hard time for all of us, but this, too shall pass." She squeezed his shoulders firmly, her tone hardening into a mother's command. "Now, get up. Take a bath."

His mother stayed for the next few days, acting as the anchor for a soul that was drifting out to sea. She forced him to eat, forced him to breathe, but she couldn't silence the echoes.

Fifteen days had passed. The apartment was clean now, the blood-stained clothes were gone, but the echo of Ahana's voice remained. He could still hear her talking about their future—the house, the business, the long rides.

One afternoon, he walked out. He went to the boutique near their room, the shopkeeper looking at him with a mix of pity and recognition.

"She bought a perfume here," Raaj said, his voice devoid of emotion. "Which one was it?"

The man silently pointed to a shelf. Raaj bought five bottles.

That night, back in the dark, he sprayed it. The scent filled the room, sharp and sweet, a ghost of her presence. He sat on the floor,

scrolling through the photos on his phone, watching her smile at him, her eyes bright with the plans they would never fulfill. He sprayed the perfume on his clothes, on his pillows, and as the scent wrapped around him, he sat in the silence, crying for hours, living in the only place she still existed—his memories.

Chapter 30: The Eternal Vigil



"Yaadon ki is dhund mein, tu ab bhi saaya ban ke rehti hai,
Tu door hokar bhi meri har saans mein basti hai.
Toofaan toh guzar gaya, par nishaan gehre de gaya,
Par teri rooh ke sukoon mein, meri ab bhi hasti hai."

They say that love is a fire—it burns, it consumes, and eventually, it leaves behind only ash. But they are wrong. For some, love is not a fire; it is a fossil. It is something that the weight of time does not destroy, but instead preserves, turning a fleeting moment into something hard, indestructible, and eternal.

There are men who walk through life, meeting a thousand faces and forgetting them all. And then there are men like Raaj, who meet one face, one soul, and in that collision, decide that the rest of their life will be nothing more than a long, quiet vigil for the

one they lost. He did not move on because he did not believe that moving on was a virtue. To him, loyalty was not a debt to be paid to the dead; it was the only way he knew how to be alive.

Now in his thirties, Raaj stood as a man built on a foundation of "what could have been." His brand, AaRa Elixir, was not just a business; it was his sanctuary. Every bottle sold was a syllable of her name whispered into the world. He had built their dream home—a three-story tribute to a life cut short. The ground floor breathed with his family's noise, but the top floor was hers. He had transformed it into a shrine. Life-sized portraits of Ahana lined the walls, her laughter frozen in oil and canvas, her gaze following him as he paced the floors. In his office, tucked between files and ledgers, her framed photograph sat on his desk, the silent witness to every deal he signed.

Every evening, the ritual began. He would climb the stairs to the top floor, and the world would fall away. He would sit on the cold floor for hours, pouring his soul into the silence. He spoke to her of everything—the agonizing memory of the first time he saw her, the rush of the first touch, the foolish, desperate sweetness of the day he applied glue to her shoes just to keep her near. He talked to her about the mountain peak where they had touched the sky, and the narrow, suffocating walls of their first apartment where they had dared to dream of a forever that never arrived.

He was a man who lived in two timelines: one where he grew older, and one where he stayed frozen in the moment he lost her.

His devotion was a quiet, unshakable wall. When the world whispered about marriage, he became deaf to it. After years of watching him, even the most persistent relatives eventually fell silent, humbled by a love that didn't demand, didn't compromise, and didn't fade.

He remained her pilgrim. Every year, he traveled to her parents' home, a quiet son-in-law they never officially had, but whom they loved more than any other. He would wander to the balcony of her childhood home, where she had once stood in the chilling air of a New Year's past, navigating the distance between their lives. He would stand there, his hand tracing the cold railing, feeling the ghost of her warmth. And sometimes, he would just drive there his old bike—the metal frame, even now kept as new—to the entrance of her parents' place, and he would simply rest his hand on the throttle grip of her old scooter. He would close his eyes, feeling the texture of the rubber, trying to summon the phantom sensation of the miles she had once covered just to be with him.

When the perfume she gifted—that specific, haunting blend—became rare, he didn't just move on to something else. He became an alchemist. He would take the empty, glass-shattered remnants of those last bottles to perfumers across the city, pleading with them to capture the scent of her absence.

And When the emptiness of his success becomes too heavy to bear, he rides his old bike back to that flat. He stays there for days, holding the cushions they once shared, letting his tears soak into the fabric, grounding himself in the quiet sanctuary of their first life together.

But then, grace arrived in the form of a little girl.

He adopted her, naming her Aana. She was not a replacement; she was a miracle. When his mother or his grandparents called her name, the sound would ripple through the house like a haunting melody. Raaj would freeze, his heart hammering against his ribs, wondering if, in some folded corner of reality, it was her voice he heard. Holding little Aana felt like holding a mirror to the past, a

way to breathe a little more, to keep his pulse steady for one more day.

He walked to the window of the top floor tonight, the silver bike keychain—the ring she ever wore—glinting in the moonlight. He knew he was a man living a long, slow goodbye. He had built the house, he had raised the child, and he had kept the faith. He stood looking out at the vast, uncaring city, knowing that he was the keeper of a flame that no amount of time could extinguish.

He was Raaj, the man who had lost everything, and yet, because he refused to let her go, he was the only man who had never truly lost a thing. He lived for the scent of her, for the echo of her name, and for the day when the vigil would end and the distance between them would finally, mercifully, collapse into nothingness.

"Tu hai, tu thi, aur tu hi rahegi,
Meri har khaamoshi mein teri hi dhadkan bahegi.
Safar toh mera hai, par manzil tu hi hai,
Ab umr bhar meri rooh, teri hi baat kahegi."