

Love in **GANGTOK**

IN THE QUIET OF THE HILLS,
HIS JOURNEY WAS ABOUT TO TAKE
AN UNEXPECTED TURN.

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"This story is a work of fiction. Unless otherwise indicated, all the names, characters, events and incidents in this story are either the product of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental."

Dedication

This story is dedicated to my beautiful wife and our amazing honeymoon in Sikkim. We'll have many more trips in future to different mountains all over India, but none of them will ever be as special as Sikkim, because it was our very first one together; also, because the place itself is so drop dead gorgeous.

Besides that, I truly believe she is just like this story... she loves easily, is wonderfully crazy, a little bit clumsy, extremely dramatic, and totally unpredictable. I love you, and I hope we have tons of kids together soon. Lol!

Author Introduction



Currently based in Hyderabad, Faiz Syed is an IT professional by day and a deeply creative storyteller by heart. A psychology student committed to spreading mental health awareness, he weaves human behavior, raw emotion, and subtle humor into everything he creates. Following his debut novel *DUSKY*, which won readers over for its refreshing, progressive male lead, Faiz is back with *Love in Gangtok*. This book marks his first step into an interconnected storytelling multiverse. When he isn't writing, he uses creativity to spark meaningful conversations online.

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About the Book

Set against the breathtaking, mist-covered mountains of Sikkim, a solo traveller named Dhananjay arrives in Gangtok seeking nothing but the quiet beauty of the hills. Instead, a chance encounter introduces him to Banera, and his world is instantly rewritten. What follows is a sweeping, deeply passionate romance that blooms over one unforgettable night. Lost in her eyes and the cinematic charm of the winding mountain roads, Dhananjay experiences a love so intense it feels written in the stars. But in the quiet of these hills, a single day can alter your destiny forever, and his journey is about to take an unexpected turn.

Day 1



1.

The Arrival

Putting my face out of the window of a running bus, as every moment passed, I savoured every moment. The wind was extremely cold, but it couldn't make me pull my face back inside. For the first time in my life, I was watching snow falling from the sky... touching my skin... and it felt so soft.

I was born twenty-five years ago but felt alive today. Closing my eyes, I wanted to feel every molecule of this cold air on me. It made me realize that back home, life had become dull and boring. Every day was the same... monotonous. But as I entered the mountains, everything felt special. I forgot about my house and my work. I did not want to think about my old life anymore... at least for a while. It felt so beautiful that I wanted to stay in this moment forever.

"Sir!" the conductor suddenly called out in his loud voice breaking my moment. "Please do not put your head out of the window like that. It is dangerous. You might get hurt." He told me. I listened to him and pulled my head back inside. I was a tourist here, so I knew it was smart to listen to the locals. They knew these roads much better than I did.

This was the very first time I was travelling away from my home in Calcutta. I planned to stay in the mountains for a few days. I really hoped this trip would help me feel better. I was not unhappy with my city... no one could be unhappy staying in Calcutta... but I was very tired of my life there.

I've lived in Calcutta all my life. I went to school there, finished college, made friends, started working, had girlfriend, got cheated by her, and then cheated too. Finally, we broke up. In twenty-five years, I had seen and done almost everything possible in that city.

Most people start to hate their home after living there for a long time. They get tired of the same streets and the same routine every single day. But I did not hate Calcutta. It was my home! I was just burnt out. My mind and my body were exhausted. I simply needed a holiday to breathe fresh air. Maybe one day I will move to a different place, but I will never despise the city where I grew up. I just needed to get away for a while to find myself.

I work for a fashion designer and his son back in Calcutta. Saved up all my holiday time so I could take a long break for the last two months of the year. My plan was to start in Gangtok and then travel through the seven sisters of Northeast India. I wanted this holiday to feel like it would never end.

As we moved within Gangtok, I could see that the dogs here looked different than the ones in the city. They had thick, extra fur to stay warm in the cold mountain air. Even the traffic looked like a piece of art. The streets were very narrow, but the drivers were very patient. Cars moved in neat, single lines on both sides. They always left enough space in the middle for cycles and scooters to pass by smoothly. Nobody tried to drive too fast or overtake the car in front of them. People's homes and buildings were aesthetically stacked on the hilly road. Footpaths were mostly made of stones.

Everything felt very calm and quiet. Back in our metro cities, people are always in a hurry, but here, nobody was rushing... and they were so happy about it. I noticed how clean and disciplined the town was. Honking, smoking, or spitting in public was a punishable offence. Imagine being jailed for spitting on the street. Sounds too much but all these rules made the roads

spotless. Maybe this helped people develop great civic sense. The ground was so clean that I felt if my food fell, I could pick it up and eat it without worrying about germs or catching infections.

The air was fresh, and there were beautiful flowers planted along the paths. Even the trash cans were painted and placed neatly everywhere. I had never seen this kind of discipline before. It was a completely different world compared to the busy, messy streets I was used to.

After sitting in the bus for six hours since leaving Jalpaiguri, the conductor finally announced. "We are almost at the hotel now," he said. Around me, I heard other passengers sighing with relief. "Thank God! My back hurts so much from sitting," one person said.

That made me realize that my back didn't hurt at all. I was so busy looking at the beautiful view outside that I forgot about any pain or tiredness. The only small problem I had during the whole trip was the name of the restaurant where we stopped for lunch... Arpita Hotel! Despite the food being good... that name still stings. Remember I mentioned my ex-girlfriend who cheated on me, and I cheated back on her... Yes... that was Arpita. Anyways... besides that, everything around me looked perfect and peaceful.

"Okay, everyone, listen up! Wake up! We are finally here," the conductor shouted. He was a bit annoying... actually... he was extremely annoying, clapping his hands loudly to make sure no one was sleeping. The bus pulled up in front of a large building. A big sign outside said, "Rufeena Residency."

"This is your home for now," he continued, waving his arms around. "Please go to the front desk and get your room keys. Follow the rules, don't break the furniture, and please... do not take food from strangers. We don't want anyone getting a stomach infection while we're travelling." He told us.

"And please listen closely..." the conductor said and slowly I noticed his face become serious. He lowered his voice, making everyone lean in to hear him. "There is something scary happening in this city right now... A serial killer is out there... he steals small babies and drowns them in the small local waterfalls nearby... very sad and very dangerous." He announced and the bus went completely silent.

Even though there were no babies or children on the bus, I saw a few people look around nervously. One lady gripped her bag tightly, and an older man frowned, looking out the dark window. The air felt heavy for a second. "As of now, I don't see any kids here but if you have some hidden under the seat, or in your bags please keep them closer..." he said and grinned going back to his loud, joking voice.

"Or if you are the serial killer himself, then please get off the bus right now... We don't want any trouble." he added and laughed. Most of the passengers started laughing, and the heavy feeling faded. People began standing up to grab their bags, but a few were still whispering about the news. I just shook my head and got ready to step out.

The conductor was a cheerful person from the Northeast. He had a short height, round face and was always smiling... even when he was being a bit loud and annoying. He was friendly and talked to everyone, mostly cracked jokes, making the long bus ride feel a bit shorter. He seemed like a friendly neighbour you could always trust. But that bus driver...!!!

The bus driver, however, was completely different. He wasn't a local... had a very thin face, a sharp nose, and deep, dark eyes that looked tired and bloodshot. His face looked like it was hiding a hundred secrets, but he never spoke a single word to anyone. Every time the bus stopped, he would stand alone in a corner and smoke one cigarette after another while staring into the distance with a cold, serious look. His silence sometimes looked a bit scary.

The news about the serial killer made me remember reading about a serial killer named Richard Ramirez getting caught in the US recently. Richard Ramirez was nicknamed as the Night Stalker by people there. This driver had that same night stalker, mysterious energy. His sharp features and quiet way of moving made me feel uneasy.

But then I reminded myself that I was alone and didn't have any children or babies with me, so I didn't need to worry about the killer. As long as the killer was only looking for infants, I was safe. Taking my bags, I walked toward the hotel, pushing the image of the driver's haunting eyes out of my mind. "We will pick you all up at 9am tomorrow morning." The conductor yelled from the bus as they left.

2.

Check-in & Checking Out

Rufeena Residency was a tall, four-story traditional Tibetan style building. As I stood in front of it, I noticed how grand it looked against the evening mountain sky. The building had many bright windows glowing with warm yellow light, making it look very inviting in the cold evening. There were golden patterns and designs on the walls that looked like ancient symbols. The roof had a unique shape, like temples. It felt like a very peaceful and special place to stay.

As I walked through the entrance into the reception area, I noticed the floors were made of polished stone that shined under the lights. There was a large wooden desk where a young woman stood ready to help the guests. On the desk, I saw a small statue of a god and some fresh flowers in a vase. The air inside smelled like incense and fresh tea. It was much quieter inside than it was out on the street. Basically, the whole place looked very futuristic... I've never seen these designs anywhere even in Calcutta.

We were about twenty-five people in the group with many of my fellow travellers being senior citizens who looked very tired from the long bus ride. I decided to be polite and stood at the very back of the line waiting patiently for the young woman at the desk to hand out the room keys.

While I was waiting, I looked at the wall behind the reception desk. Among the wooden panels, I noticed several pieces of paper stuck to the wall. My heart sank as I looked closer. They

were sketches and small photos of missing children. All of them were tiny infants... just babies. I stared at their small faces and felt a deep sadness.

How could someone be so cruel to such helpless little beings!?! The warm and cozy feeling of the hotel suddenly felt a bit chilly to me. How could someone do such a terrible thing in such a peaceful place like this!?! I just kept my head down and waited for my turn, trying not to look at those sad photos anymore.

After waiting for twenty minutes and looking at everything in the reception, I finally got my room keys. I was staying in Room 303. The receptionist gave me some important rules. "Sir, please don't bring food from outside into your room," she said. "We also do not allow outside guests. We serve free breakfast from 8:00 AM to 10:00 AM. Lunch is from 12:00 PM to 2:00 PM, and dinner is from 8:00 PM to 10:00 PM. Other than those times, if you order food, it might take longer to be prepared. Please come to the dining area if you are in the hotel during those times." She informed.

"You can smoke cigarettes or pipes, but nothing else. If you decide to drink alcohol, please stay quiet and do not drink too much. We have babies and elderly people staying here who need their rest." She added. "I can live with that." I replied taking my keys and started walking toward the stairs.

As I walked, I thought about my best friend, Mahesh. I wished he was here with me. This trip would be even better if he was by my side. He was about to join but then ditched me at the last moment. But I've planned my revenge on him. When I got back to Calcutta, I would show him my pictures that I click on the holidays just to make him jealous... I hope that would get him to regret his decision of not going with me.

A young staff member carried my bags and led me to my room on the third floor. When he opened the door, I stood still in

surprise. The room was more wonderful than I had imagined. "Will I really be staying here all by myself?" I asked. I felt like I had fallen in love with the room at first sight. The staff member looked a bit worried as he set my luggage down. "Is there a problem, Sir? We can give you a different room if you do not like this one," he offered.

"Oh, no! Not at all!" I said quickly, feeling very excited. "Sir... this is great! I love it." I said immediately taking off my jacket as the boy smiled. Once the boy left, I shut the door and lit a cigarette while scanning every inch of this beauty. I could stay here for the rest of my life.

There was a huge, king-sized bed right in the middle, and it was all for me. The floor was made of beautiful dark wood, and all the furniture... the wardrobe, the table, and the chairs... matched the floor perfectly. It all looked so elegant.

On one side of the room, heavy brown curtains covered the entire wall. I walked over and pulled them aside. I gasped at what I saw as the curtains moved. Behind the curtains was a massive glass wall... like a giant picture frame showing the mountains outside.

Since it was evening, the lights from the houses on the hills were glowing like thousands of tiny stars. The entire hill station seemed to be shining just for me. I stood there for a long time, watching the mountains and the flickering lights, feeling like the luckiest man in the world.

I looked at my watch, and it was 7:00 PM. I knew I won't be eating until at least 9:30 PM, and I did not feel tired at all. So, I had plenty of time to explore the area by myself. I put my jacket back on, locked my room, and walked out of the hotel to see the neighbourhood. We were in a place called Manbir Colony... quiet an interesting area built right on the steep slopes of the mountain. There were many other hotels around, but as I looked back, mine still looked the most grand and beautiful.

As I walked, I felt like I was inside a movie. Because the ground was not flat, the houses were built one above the other, like a giant staircase made of homes. Everywhere I looked, I saw small crystal-clear waterfall coming out of the mountain rocks making a peaceful sound as it flowed down to join the small rivers below.

I was fascinated by how the locals lived here. Many families had turned the front of their houses into small shops. One house had a woman selling fresh green vegetables. Another had a tiny general store selling biscuits and tea. Some houses even had small, cozy coffee shops where the smell of roasted beans filled the cold air.

The best part about being here was the people. Everyone I passed gave me a kind, friendly smile or a nod. Even though it was dark, the streets felt safe and friendly. The air was perfectly cool, just like a natural refrigerator. Every corner I turned showed me something new... a brightly painted wooden door, a pot of colourful flowers, or a view of the distant, glowing valley. I felt so happy just walking and breathing in the fresh mountain air.

I was having such a wonderful time exploring every little corner of this place that I completely forgot to look at my watch. When I finally checked the time, my heart skipped a beat... it was already 9:15 PM! The hotel only served free dinner until 10:00 PM. I did not want to miss out on it or spend my own money on food.

Looking back, I realized I walked quite far away from the hotel. I quickly turned around and started walking back as fast as I could. The mountain roads were steep, and the cold air made it hard to breathe fast, but I did not stop. My legs were tired, but I kept pushing myself. I kept thinking, "I have to get there before the kitchen closes!"

Luckily, I reached the hotel just in time. My breath was coming out in white clouds because of the cold, and my face was red, but

I was happy I made it. Even though I was in a rush, I couldn't help but take one last look at the beautiful lights of Gangtok before going inside. Everything around me was perfectly quiet. The only sound was the soft wind blowing through the trees.

Suddenly, a massive noise broke the silence. CLANG! CLATTER! BANG! It was the sound of heavy metal hitting the hard ground. Someone had dropped a large pile of metal plates and pots. The noise was so loud and sharp that it echoed off the mountain walls... like a small explosion of steel. It didn't just happen once... the utensils bounced and rolled, making a long, ringing "clink-clink-clink" sound that wouldn't stop.

My heart jumped in my chest. One second, it was as silent as a library, and the next second, the air was filled with this crashing, ear-splitting noise. It was so sudden and so loud that I actually pulled my shoulders up to my ears. I stood frozen... waiting for the ringing in the air and in my head to finally fade away before turning around to look at the person responsible for the sound.

3.

Hello You!

I turned around and saw that the noise came from the old, dilapidated house directly across from my hotel. The house had broken wooden walls and a roof that had seen better days. I was surprised anyone could live in such a place. There was an old car parked in the corner. In the dim light, I saw a person dressed in black kneeling on the cold ground, trying to pick up a huge pile of vegetables and metal pots that had spilled everywhere.

Without thinking, I walked over to help. I sat down on the ground in front of the person and started gathering the scattered utensils and vegetables. I did not look at the person's face right away, but I realized it was a woman. A very sweet smell of jasmine came from her, and it was so strong and pleasant that it distracted me a bit. I tried to peek at her, but her long, silky black hair fell forward, covering her entire face... like dark curtains.

After we finished picking everything up, I helped her stand. I held the heavy basket for her while she straightened her clothes. In that moment, the wind blew softly, and her hair moved away from her face.

Finally, our eyes met, and suddenly, the whole world went silent... again. I felt like the clock had stopped ticking. Standing right in front of me was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen in my life. She had a glowing, fair face typical of the mountains, with soft skin that looked like silk against her dark black cardigan.

Those eyes were deep and bright, and they seemed to shine even in the dark night. I completely forgot where I was... I even

forgot about the dinner, the cold air, and my hotel. All I could do was stare at her... feeling like my heart had just found exactly what it was looking for. The light from the moon and the glowing streetlamps fell perfectly on her face. Even the distant lights from the houses on the hills seemed to shine just for her. I was stuck in that moment, staring at her like she was a dream.

"Thank you!" she said softly. Her voice was as gentle as the mountain breeze. Slowly she began to walk toward the old, broken house, still struggling to carry the heavy load of vegetables and pots. She looked so small against the weight of the things she was holding. "Can I help you with that?" I asked quickly as I didn't want her to leave just yet. But she did not answer and kept walking away.

"Excuse me, Miss?" I called out again, a bit louder this time. She stopped and turned around to look at me one more time. When she did, it felt like the air was sucked out of my lungs. Every part of her face and the way she stood was so perfect and graceful... like a painting had come to life. I wanted to say something more, something smart or kind, but my tongue felt heavy. I lost my words. I just stood there in the cold, watching her, feeling a strange, powerful pull in my heart that I had never felt in a long time. I knew right then that my trip to the mountains had changed forever.

"Why do you want to help me?" she asked in her sharp voice and filled with anger. I started to speak, trying to be as gentle as possible. "I noticed that looked very heavy..." I started but she did not let me finish as her eyes grew wide, and I could see a flash of real fear in them. "Are you going to kidnap and drown my baby girl? Are you the serial killer?" she snapped, her words coming out fast.

The question hit me like a bucket of ice water. I stood there, shocked. I realized then that she was a mother. She was alone and terrified, trying to protect her child from the horrors happening in the city. Maybe she had a husband inside... or

maybe she was all alone in that broken house. I didn't take any offence to her suspecting me.

Instead, I felt a deep respect for her strength. I took a small step back to show I wasn't a threat. I wanted her to see that I wasn't what she was thinking. I was just a man who wanted to be kind and help. Even if she didn't want my help, I felt like I had to stay close enough to make sure she got inside safely. It wasn't just about her beauty... it was also about being a good person. I looked into her eyes and tried to show her that she had nothing to fear from me.

"No Miss... please calm down... I'm taking out my wallet for you." I said calmly while reaching into my pocket to pull out my wallet. I took out my Driving License to show her I was telling the truth. "My name is Dhananjay Verma. I am just a tourist from Calcutta... I am staying right there, at the Rufeena Residency, just across the street from your home." I tried to explain her.

I could see she was still unsure, so I held out my entire wallet toward her. "You can keep this with you while I help you carry your things to your door. If I do anything wrong, you will have all my information." I wanted her to feel completely safe. I spoke softly, calmly and stayed a few steps away so I would not crowd her.

She stood there silently, thinking... While she looked at me, I struggled to think of anything else to say. My mind was completely blank because I was so mesmerized by her. Even in the dim light of the street, she looked more beautiful than anyone I had ever met. I didn't care about the cold or the dinner anymore. I just stood there... waiting for her to trust me... feeling like my whole world now depended on it.

I could not blame her for being so careful. I was a stranger to her, and in a place where a dangerous killer was hiding in the shadows, trust was a hard thing to find. When people are scared, everyone looks like a stranger to be feared... every face looks like the monster people are talking about. I knew she was looking

at me and wondering if I was that monster. But my heart was clean, and I only wanted to help.

Slowly, looking deep into my eyes as if searching for the truth, she finally leaned down and placed the heavy metal utensil on the ground for me to pick up. Then, she reached out her hand and took my wallet, holding it tightly. It was her way of making sure I couldn't run away or do anything bad. I picked up the heavy pots and stood there, waiting for her. "After you," I said softly, giving her a small, respectful nod.

She walked toward her old house, and I followed a few steps behind. Reaching the door, she opened it but stayed right there, watching every move I made. She looked like she was ready to scream for help if I made one wrong step. She was clearly very frightened and suspicious, but she was trying her best to act brave. I understood and appreciated that.

In a scary situation like this, we all put on a tough face to protect ourselves and the ones we love. I stayed very calm and moved slowly, wanting her to see that she could truly trust me.

"Where should I put this?" I asked and she pointed toward the kitchen without saying a word. As I stepped inside, I looked around. From the outside, the house looked like a large, broken-down building with two floors. But inside, it was much smaller... just one main room and a kitchen. The windows were all shut tight and locked. There were no electric bulbs... only a few lanterns lit, filling the room with a dim, orange glow.

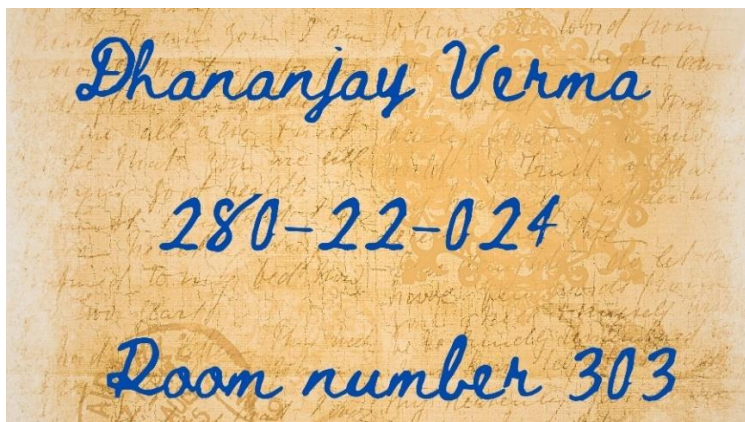
In one corner sat a large bed, and next to it was a small wooden crib. I saw a tiny baby sleeping peacefully inside. I didn't see a husband anywhere. "Please be quick!" she said, staying near the door. I walked past the sleeping baby and went into the kitchen to place the heavy metal pot on the table. When I walked back toward her, I couldn't help but smile. "Cute Baby!" I complimented.

She obviously didn't smile back and just stood there, waiting for me to leave so she could lock the door. I took my wallet from her and looked deep into her eyes. As I stepped out onto the porch, she began to close the door, but I stopped for a second.

"Just one moment, please!" I requested. I took a pen and a small piece of paper from my wallet. I quickly wrote "Dhananjay Verma, 280-22-024, Room no.303" which was my name, hotel's phone number, and my room number. "It is not safe for you to be here all alone, especially with a small child. If you need help at any time, please call this number and ask to be connected to room 303." I said, holding the paper out to her. She didn't move but stared at me with those beautiful, guarded eyes. She wasn't going to take it from my hand.

I didn't want to push her... so I slowly knelt down on the cold floor and placed the note right at her feet. "I understand why you are scared..." I whispered. "I know why you don't trust me. I just want to help a woman who seems so lonely..." I told her while standing up and looked at her one last time. My heart was beating fast. Before I could stop myself, the words just came out... "And so beautiful..."

Without waiting for an answer, I turned around and walked back toward the hotel, feeling her eyes on my back until the door finally clicked shut behind me.



Day 2



4.

You're Luring Me in

Next morning, I sat at a corner table in the hotel's dining room having my free breakfast and slowly sipping hot tea which burnt my lips, but I barely felt it. I was just... lost... entirely. My holiday started so well, but now I felt distracted. All I could think about was that woman.

I spent the entire night tossing and turning in my big bed... unable to forget her face... her eyes and the way she looked at me. There was something about her that felt oddly different from anyone I had ever met. Her beauty was not simple... it was magnetic... it kept pulling my thoughts back to her. I couldn't forget how her eyes sparkled... how she looked both strong and delicate at the same time. She was so incredibly beautiful that it almost felt painful to think about her.

I was seated by the large window where I could see the street outside. My co-travellers around me continued talking and laughing... but I was silent... with my eyes glued on the old, broken house across the road... just hoping, with all my heart, to see even a tiny glimpse of her before I leave for the day's sightseeing. I didn't care about the mountains or the famous temples anymore. To me, the most amazing thing in all of Gangtok was living right across the street in that dilapidated house. I just sat there... waiting and watching... lost in the memory of her grace.

Deep down, I knew I was heading into troubled waters. It felt wrong to be so captivated by a woman who was clearly a mother and probably a wife too. I tried to tell myself to stop thinking about her... but I just couldn't stop... it was like trying to stop the

mountain wind from blowing. My heart simply wouldn't listen to my brain. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw her face again... her soft, glowing skin and those eyes that held so much sadness and fear... like a beautiful poetry that I never wanted to stop reading.

I began to think about her life. If she was married, where was the man of the house? He wasn't there to help her with the heavy utensils... wasn't there to protect her and the baby in these cold, dark night. Despite her presence, the house felt empty... and lonely. I felt a strange urge to be the one to look after her... even though we were total strangers.

I should've asked her more... I should've tried to know her story and why she lived all alone in that broken-down building... even if she lived there with her husband... why did they live there? I hope our paths cross again today... I kept telling myself it would just be a "coincidence" if I saw her again... but the truth was... I was already looking for her. She became like this addiction that would make me ignore all rules just to see her bright, mountain-flower face again.

After breakfast, I walked out of the hotel with the rest of the group. Our bus was already waiting for us. It was the same bus from yesterday... same mysterious driver with those killer eyes. His cheerful sidekick, the conductor stood by the door, waving everyone inside.

I was in the middle but kept stepping aside, letting others go ahead of me, moving to the very back of the line. I wanted to stay outside for as long as possible, hoping and praying for one last look at the woman from the old house. I kept looking... searching for any movement near her door or windows.

As more people climbed into the bus, my heart began to sink... The line kept getting shorter, and I could see my hopes getting crushed slowly. Finally, I was the only person left on the street. I guess I was going to leave without seeing her again. I sighed and lifted my foot to step onto the bus... feeling a sadness in my chest. But just as I was about to give up... I heard a sound.

Across the road... the old, creaky wooden door of the ruined house slowly began to open. I froze in place... holding my breath... It felt as though the whole world had suddenly gone silent as she slowly stepped out of the house... my day felt perfect... I knew I shouldn't be so lost in a stranger, but I couldn't help.

I stood there on the pavement... smiling like a fool. I didn't even know where I was anymore... the only thing that was real was her. She walked over to her car to check something... my eyes followed her every move. I stared at her bright eyes and her soft cheeks. I was so caught up in her beauty that I forgot I was supposed to be going.

"Come on, sir!" I heard the conductor say but didn't move... I couldn't move... I was glued. "Let's go... we are getting late!" He kept calling, but his voice sounded far away, like a tiny bug buzzing in the distance. Slowly she looked up, and our eyes met. She saw me standing there with a big, silly smile on my face.

She looked a little annoyed that I was staring... but even her angry expression looked cute to me. I wasn't ready to stop looking at her, but she quickly turned around and went back inside her house. "Sir!" the conductor's voice was very loud now. By the time I looked at him, he'd already started pulling my arm to get me into the bus... "Please get in, sir! We are late!" was what he kept repeating.

I climbed into the bus... ignoring the angry looks from the other passengers who had been waiting for me. I quickly found a seat by the window so I could keep watching her house till I could. As the engine started and the bus began to move, I saw her door open just a little bit... she peeped outside one last time as I twisted my neck to keep her in my sight for as long as I could... until the bus moved ahead and she disappeared. I felt like I was leaving something important behind... even though I barely knew her name.

5.

The Sacred Lake

I turned front and tried to focus on the trip further. Afterall, this is what I was here for... The conductor walked around, telling everyone to take medicine as the roads ahead were narrow and had sharp turns that could make them feel sick. Today we were visiting the famous Tsongmo Lake and then even higher to the Nathula Pass, which sits right on the border between India and China.

As the air got cooler, the world looked brighter now that I had seen her... like her face was still warming my heart. At about 9:00AM, the bus began to move higher into the clouds and after a long drive, we stopped at a special lookout point. As I stepped off the bus, the view outside took my breath away.

Right in front of us was the mighty Kanchenjunga, which I recently got to know, was one of the highest mountains in the world. It looked like a giant snow, glowing under the bright sun like a massive crown made of silver and gold on top. The mountain looked grand and holy against the deep blue sky. People were so moved that they closed their eyes and began to pray... showing respect to the mountain.

The wind was sharp and fresh... hitting my face with a cold, clean sting that made me feel truly alive. I stood at the edge, looking at the white peaks and the valleys below. Everything was so quiet and beautiful... it felt like I was in a dream where everything... the earth, the sky... my own heart... was just... perfectly still!

As I turned to go back into the bus, I saw the driver standing alone in the corner, smoking a cigarette... thick grey smoke swirled around his head. He looked as if he hadn't slept for days. What felt really odd was... He didn't look at the mountains or the beautiful sky... neither did the exotic beauty of the place soothe him in anyway. He looked completely detached from all of it.

He just kept his eyes fixed on the couples who stood there watching the mountain. He watched them closely... following their movements with a cold, silent stare. Never smiled or said a word. He was like a shadow... watching every hug or shared laugh. It made a shiver go down my spine. Was he just lonely? Or was he... up to something?

I tried to push the creeps away, told myself he was probably just a tired man with a difficult job. After twenty minutes of breathing in the fresh mountain air, I followed the others back into the bus. We started moving again, heading higher into the hills. The road was long and winding, but smooth because the Indian Army takes great care of it.

As the bus climbed higher, the view became truly magical. Thousands of colourful Buddhist prayer flags tied to the trees, poles, and rocks along the way. These red, blue, yellow, and green flags flapped quickly in the wind. It looked like the mountains were covered in bright ribbons, sending silent prayers into the sky... also welcoming the incoming guests in a unique way.

It was almost 12:00 PM, but we had not reached the lake or the border yet. The air that started as a nice chill was now becoming a biting, freezing cold. Frost began to cover the edges of the bus windows, making everything outside look blurry and white.

Inside the bus, I was in my own world... Even though the mountains were grand and the prayer flags were beautiful... my mind stayed with the woman from the old house. Honestly... she never left my mind even for a single second. No matter where I

looked... whether at the deep valleys or the snowy peaks... I kept seeing her face.

It was as if her image was painted in the air. The freezing cold didn't seem to matter because the memory of her soft eyes and that gentle smell of jasmine kept me feeling warm and alive. Every turn the bus took only seemed to bring me closer to her in my heart... which again... I believe was completely wrong.

The bus pulled over at a mountain stop where we had a small cluster of wooden canteens on the hillside. This place was essential for travellers because as the weather changed, air got thinner and biting cold. Since our own clothes were not warm enough for the high mountains, we all went to a rental shop to get thicker ones. I picked out a heavy, thick jacket and sturdy waterproof boots. The shopkeepers also told us to buy small packets of camphor and said sniffing it would help us breathe better in the high altitude.

After getting ready, I looked for something to eat. I didn't want a heavy meal while traveling on curvy roads, so the guy at the counter recommended I eat Maggie Noodles. To go with it, I grabbed a cup of hot coffee. The canteen was filled with the smell of woodsmoke and spices, making it feel very cozy against the freezing wind outside.

I saw our driver sitting alone at a small wooden table... again staring blankly at a group of men nearby. "Can I sit here?" I asked after realizing that I had nowhere else to sit. He gave a short, quiet grunt to say yes. I sat across from him and began to eat. I couldn't help but steal glances at him which he eventually noticed but didn't say a word.

Just then, the conductor walked in. Without looking up, the driver said to him, "Tell everyone to get ready. I will be waiting inside the bus." And then, he stood up and walked out into the cold. The conductor sat in his place as the driver left. "Is there something wrong with him?" I asked the conductor, nodding toward the driver and the conductor looked at me curiously.

"Did he say something to you?" he asked. "No... He just looks... a bit off." I replied. The conductor sighed and looked at the driver. "He isn't a bad man. People just judge him because of how he looks. He is just... sad... very sad." He told me and I felt a bit like an idiot for being so suspicious. Before I could ask the reason for the driver's sadness, the conductor stood up and clapped his hands. "Come on everyone! Let's go! We have a lake to see!" He shouted, and the engine roared back to life.

As the bus climbed higher, the world outside turned completely white. The snow on the sides of the road grew thicker and deeper... wind began to howl with a freezing chill. After about thirty minutes, the bus slowed down, and a massive, sparkling sight appeared through the windows.

"This is Tsongmo Lake!" the conductor announced over the sound of the engine. "Everyone! Enjoy the view and please be back in twenty minutes. We need to move forward after that." He added as we all started getting down.

I stepped out of the bus and stood frozen in place... not from the cold. I was looking at a giant lake that completely turned to ice... looking like a massive, blue-white mirror between these huge mountains. The water near the edges was solid, and the middle looked like a sheet of glass. It felt beautiful... I wondered if people back home even knew such a magical place existed in India. It felt like I just landed on another planet.

Some of my fellow travellers were brave enough to walk right onto the frozen surface of the lake while I stayed at the edge... breathing in the thin, crisp air and staring at the reflection of the clouds on the frozen water. Everything was so bright and peaceful... for a moment, I never wanted to leave this place again.

Nearby, I saw Yaks for the first time in my life... huge animals with long, shaggy hair that reached the ground. Their owners had decorated them with bright red and yellow tassels and colourful bells that jingled in the cold air. "Hello, sir! Would you like a Yak

ride? It is only 10 rupees!" one of the Yak owners called out to me.

I just looked at the animal, and it had such innocent, quiet eyes. I did not want to climb on its back to hurt or tire it. However, I wanted to help the owner and get a closer look at the beautiful animal. I walked over and handed the man the money. "I do not want a ride." I told him with a smile. "I'd love to pet him though." I added.

The man looked surprised but happy as I reached out and sank my hand into the Yak's thick, soft fur. It was very warm and felt like a heavy wool blanket. It stayed very still as I gently patted its head. It was a small, kind moment in the middle of the freezing white mountains.



"The lake is haunted" I heard a tour guide tell a group of people. "You must never throw stones into it. People who threw stones there were followed by a demon for the rest of their lives." He continued explaining. Ignoring the whole thing, I looked away and my eyes landed on a young, newly married couple standing in a quiet corner of the lake. They were holding hands and laughing, looking so happy in the cold air. Suddenly, my heart felt a sharp pull, and I began to imagine what it would be like to

stand right here with her... Yes! The same woman from last night... and this morning.

My imagination was so strong that I could almost see her standing next to me... her long black hair blowing in the mountain wind... her glowing face brightening up against the white snow. In my mind, I held her hand to keep her warm... This place was so beautiful, but it felt empty because she wasn't there to see it with me. In another life... maybe!

As I turned around to walk back, I saw our driver again standing by the bus... his eyes fixed on the same married couple I had been watching. He didn't look angry anymore... he just looked empty... like a man who had lost something and knew he would never get it back. I guess the conductor was right... there was a deep, quiet sadness in him that felt like a mystery I couldn't solve.

"Time to go! Everyone back on the bus!" the conductor shouted. I couldn't believe twenty minutes had passed so fast. I wish I could stay longer... to keep dreaming by the frozen water... but the bus was ready to move. I took one last look at the frozen Tsongmo Lake and the giant mountains. With a heavy sigh and a promise to keep returning here, I climbed inside the bus, ready to head even higher toward Nathula Pass.



6.

An Icy Paradise

We often wish for things we know will never come true... despite knowing the truth... our minds like to gratify itself by creating stories about what could have been... I've been doing that for a while. As the bus started moving and we climbed higher into the mountains, I couldn't stop imagining this trip with her.

I close my eyes and imagine her sitting in the empty seat next to me. Every time I looked out the window at the passing snow, I saw her face... I imagined her laughing as she played with the snow... looking at me with those deep, bright eyes. Then, the bus would hit a bump, and I would snap back to reality. I was daydreaming... but the dream felt more real than the bus I was sitting in.

This feeling for her... I still don't know what to call it... whatever it was... it was growing so intense that it scared me. I've been trying to tell myself to stop... trying to push her out of my head... but she's always there. It's like I'm falling into a deep hole and don't want to be saved. She took up so much space in my mind that I didn't even notice the air was getting thin.

Suddenly, my chest felt tight, and I found it hard to breathe. The oxygen was low because we were so high up. It was only then that I remembered the camphor in my pocket. As I took a breath of the strong scent to help me breathe, I realized that my obsession with her was just like the mountain air... made me feel lightheaded and lost... and I couldn't get enough of it.

Finally, we reached Nathula Pass and everything around us was covered in a thick blanket of snow. As the bus stopped, an Indian Army soldier opened the door for us with a kind smile. "Ladies and Gentlemen! Welcome to the Indo-China Border!" he announced. "You are 14,000 feet high. Please keep using your camphor to help you breathe and make sure to return to the bus within 30 minutes." He added before leaving.

I stepped out of the bus, and for a moment, I forgot to breathe... not because the air was thin, but because the view was like... heaven. The mountains were massive and silent, standing tall against a sky so blue it looked painted. Huge iron gates and fences marked the border between the two countries.

The wind was strong here... blowing snow through the air like small diamonds. Seeing the brave soldiers standing guard in the freezing cold made me feel proud. Every bit of money and time I spent on this trip felt worth it just to stand in this spot. It looked so breathtaking that I stood there staring at the whole place for a while... I couldn't move.

Thirty minutes felt too short for such an amazing place. My chest felt heavy from the low oxygen but, I didn't want to leave. I started walking slowly toward the higher ground and found a small shop tucked away in the snow. They were selling snacks and colourful postcards with pictures of the frozen Tsongmo Lake and the snowy peaks. I bought a few postcards, thinking of the stories I would tell later.

The most surprising thing was a small bakery stand selling Black Forest pastries 14,000 feet above! I bought a slice, and it tasted different. It could be the mountain air, but the chocolate smelled richer and the cream felt smoother than any cake I had ever eaten back home.

Nearby, I could hear sounds of children laughing and playing... throwing snowballs and building small snowmen... their faces bright and red from the cold. I looked around, wishing

there was a photographer to capture this perfect moment... instead, I just tucked the memory deep into my heart.

Suddenly, I felt a soft, cold thud against my shoulder. Someone had hit me with a snowball. I turned around quickly, and my heart stopped... It was her... She was standing there in the white snow... laughing and picking up more snow to throw at me... It felt so real... I didn't even try to move or hide... I just stood there with a big, happy smile on my face, completely lost in her beauty.

I had no idea how she came here but I didn't care... I just wanted to stay in that moment forever. To me, in that moment... she was the only person in the world, and this snowy mountain was our playground. But then, the beautiful dream broke... I felt a small hand touch mine. I looked down and saw a little boy standing there.

"Sorry!" he said softly. "I didn't mean to hit you." He apologized. He had no idea what he had done. For a few magical seconds... he gave me the most wonderful dream I could ever ask for. I looked back at the spot where I had imagined her... but she was gone. Only the white snow and the cold wind remained.

I wanted to see the actual border, but the crowd was too large. So instead, I decided to head back to the bus. As I walked, I tried to find a cigarette, but it was hard to move inside these heavy, thick rental clothes. When I finally found one, I realized I had lost my matches somewhere deep in my pockets.

I saw the driver standing alone in a quiet corner, smoking... like always and walked over to him. "Can I have a light?" I asked as he looked at me with his serious, red eyes. Without saying anything, he reached into his pocket and handed me a box of matches.

Lighting my cigarette, I stood beside him. The air was freezing, and the smoke felt warm. "It is a beautiful place, isn't it?" I tried

to strike a conversation with him. "Hmm," was all he replied and just kept looking at the mountains. "Is that all?" I asked. "You speak very little... Unlike your conductor." I commented. "There is nothing to talk about." he replied silently.

"You could talk about many things... the beautiful mountains, the snow, or even the lake we just saw." I suggested while he took a long breath of smoke and continued to look straight ahead. "I am paid to drive, sir... not to talk." He told me. "But it is nice to be a little social." I told him. "People develop negative perception about you when you don't talk." I added.

He dropped his cigarette and crushed it with his boot. "People can think whatever they want, sir... They'll continue to think even if things were different. I don't intend to change their minds." He replied before turning around and climbing inside the bus. I followed him inside to return his match box.

"Here..." I said and he turned around. "My name is Dhananjay." I introduced myself. Taking the match box, the driver sat in his seat and gripped the steering wheel. "Abdul!" he replied. "That is a nice name." I said and walked to my seat at the back feeling a small sense of pride. It's actually a great feeling when you finally get a quiet person to talk... even if it is just for a moment.



7.

Friends...?

Once everyone was back on the bus, we began our journey down the mountain. As the bus moved lower, the air became easier to breathe. My chest did not feel so tight anymore, and I could finally take deep, slow breaths properly.

We stopped at the same small canteen where we had been earlier that day. Everyone returned the heavy rental jackets and the thick boots. It felt good to be in my own clothes again. Before leaving, I got one last cup of hot coffee for the day. The warmth of the cup felt nice against my cold fingers as I watched the sun begin to set behind the peaks. The drive back to the hotel took a while.

By the time the bus pulled up to the entrance, it was almost evening, just like the day before. As I stepped off the bus, I felt a wave of exhaustion hit me... My legs were sore, and my body felt very heavy. I had never felt this tired in my life... but as I look back at the kind of experiences I had throughout the day, it's all worth it.

Abdul was standing by the door. "See you tomorrow, Abdul." I said as I stepped off the bus. "Please do not go out at night, Sir." he said before climbing into the bus and my heart skipped a beat. A wave of worry washed over me. How did he know I went out last night? Was he following me? Did he see me with that woman? My mind began to race with many questions as I felt restless and a bit scared.

"Wait!" I called out and Abdul stopped. "Did you follow me last night?" I asked as he turned towards me... I was trying hard to keep my voice steady. "I was at the petrol pump filling the bus when you walked past." he replied in his usual short way and I felt a little better, but still a bit worried.

I decided not to say anything more. It wasn't a good idea to talk about a married woman I met late at night. I did not want to get into trouble or have people talk about her. Abdul stood there, waiting... "Do you need anything else, sir?" he asked and I realized I had been staring at him for a long time.

"Ahh... No... Good Night, Abdul!" I said quickly. "You stay safe too." I reached into my bag, pulled out one of the postcards I had bought at Nathula Pass and I held it out to him. Abdul looked at the card unsure... as if he didn't know if he should take it or not. "Please take it." I said with a warm smile. "It is a gift. I won't ask for anything in return. I promise!" I added.

For the first time, the hardness in his face melted just a little bit as he reached out and took the card. "Thank you..." he said softly, giving a small, respectful bow and tucked the postcard into his jacket before getting inside the bus to leave.

Standing on the street, I watched the big bus as the engine made a very loud noise that filled the quiet air. I stayed there until the red lights at the back of the bus faded away into the dark night. For the first time, I felt like I had made a real friend in this strange town.

After Abdul left, I realized everyone else from the bus had already gone inside. The world was quiet and dark... I looked at her house across the road... My mind started to fill with many worried thoughts. Is this a good idea? What if her husband is home today? I might get punched in the face... Maybe I deserve it. Will she be angry? Could I get into trouble? I could actually get into trouble. In fact, I could be arrested.

I knew in my heart that this was wrong... I should just go to my room and sleep or maybe wait for dinner. But my feet would not listen to my brain... like I was being pulled by a string. Without even realizing it, I walked across the street. Before I could stop myself, I reached out and knocked on her wooden door.

As soon as the sound of the knock hit the air, I regretted doing it instantly. I should have waited until morning. Why even morning!?! Who on earth 'am I to her!?! I think I should just run away right now. Just as I turned around, ready to run back to the hotel, I heard the door creak open. I stopped and held my breath... my heart was beating so loud I thought she might hear it.

Slowly, the door opened wider, and there she was... I felt a huge wave of relief... her husband was not the one standing there. It was only her, and once again, I felt completely lost in her sight. "Hello!" I said trying to smile, but I felt very nervous. She looked at me with a confused face and held the edge of the door tightly.

"What do you want from me?" she asked looking a bit annoyed. I just wanted to look at her... But I can't tell her that. "I just wanted to see you." I heard myself. Wait, what? "I mean... I'm sorry!" I said as she looked at me. Was I being somewhat like a creep here? "I... Actually... I just came back from the mountains." I said in a shaky voice. I could again smell that jasmine scent on her again and it made my head spin.

I was so confused that I started saying things I shouldn't. "I know this is wrong..." I whispered. "I know you have a family and a husband." I felt like a fool as the words came out. Why was I saying all this? "But... I got this for you." I said and gave her a postcard. Like yesterday, she didn't move and just kept watching me with her large, dark eyes. "I am sorry for coming so late." I spoke again. "Please accept this as an apology." I apologized.

She stayed silent and didn't reach out her hand... I knew she wouldn't talk to a stranger at night. So, I did what I did the night

before. I looked at her beautiful, calm face one last time... slowly knelt on the cold ground... placed the postcard near her feet. "Sorry once again. I won't be bothering you." I said before standing up and starting to leave.

As I walked back to my hotel, I felt sad... I realized I was acting like a crazy person. She was a married woman with a child, and I was just a man she didn't know. I was probably scaring her... chasing a dream that could never be real... I couldn't stop myself, but I had to stop... this wasn't right.

"Hey!" The voice suddenly came out of the quiet night just as I was walking away. I stopped and turned around slowly... My heart thumping in my chest... She was still standing in the doorway... looking right at me. "I am not a wife." she said in her soft voice... like a gentle breeze.

I stood there, frozen... still unable to believe that she was finally speaking to me... was I dreaming again? Before I could say anything, she spoke again. "My husband died." she added... those words hit me like a splash of cold water as I felt a rush of different feelings all at once.

I felt a strange kind of happiness because she had finally talked... I also felt a deep sadness for her pain. I was so confused that I didn't know what to do with my hands or what to say with my mouth... I just stood there like a statue... looking at her.

Then, she slowly bent down, picked up the postcard I had left at her feet. For a second, our eyes met... for the first time, I saw a flash of something soft in her look. But before I could even take a breath to speak, she stepped back and quietly closed the door.

I was left alone in the street... staring at the wood of the door. My heart was heavy and light at the same time. She wasn't married... but she was carrying a great sadness. I walked back to my hotel with my head full of her voice... still not knowing if I should be happy or sad.

8.

Do I Feel Bad?

I tried to feel bad for her... unfortunately I couldn't. All I knew now was that she was alone and my mind was full of questions. Why did she tell me about her husband just before she picked up the post card? Does she want to talk to me? If she wants to talk, then why did she close the door? I stood by my hotel window, smoking a cigarette and staring at her house across the street.

Should I go back? I didn't want to look like a pervert or something... but I wanted to see her again so badly. My thoughts were suddenly broken by a knock on my door. Who could it be at this time? A wild idea entered my head and my heart jumped... Is it her? Did she decide to come and talk to me? Feeling a rush of pure joy, I ran to the door as fast as I could and pulled it open with a big smile on my face... ready to see her beautiful eyes... sadly, she wasn't there.

Instead, I stood face to face with a bell boy in the hallway looking at me with a friendly smile. "Dinner is ready, sir!" he said as my smile vanished instantly and I felt like an idiot. My heart, which was flying high a second ago, felt heavy and flat. The boy looked at me, confused because my face had changed from happy to disappointment so quickly.

"I'll be there in a minute." I muttered feeling embarrassed. I turned away and walked back towards the glass wall to grab my jacket. I was about to leave just when I saw her again entering the terrace of her house. The moon was out, and she looked like a quiet shadow against the sky.

She was hanging some clothes to dry on the railing as I stood by my window, unable to look away. I've been with another woman before... but I've never felt a pull like this. It was as if my heart belonged to her already. I was a little afraid she would catch me looking... but a part of me wanted her to see me.

Suddenly, she turned around and our eyes met across the quiet street... and we both stood perfectly still. This time, she did not look angry or annoyed. She just looked at me with a soft, calm expression. In that moment, it felt like, maybe she understood me... maybe she knew I wouldn't hurt her. A strange kind of trust grew between us in that silence. We didn't say a word, but it felt like our hearts talked.

Slowly, she turned and walked away... disappearing into her house. Even after she was gone, I couldn't move for a while. I still felt like I was still standing close to her... breathing in the cold night air. Finally, I walked down to the dining area. The room was warm, but my mind was still outside in the cold. I chose a seat right by the window. I kept my eyes fixed on her house... hoping she might step out one more time.

I sat with my plate of food... but I wasn't really hungry anymore. My heart was racing... and I couldn't stop smiling for no reason. I've been to the mountains today but felt like I was still floating on a cloud. Was I falling in love with her? Or was I just caught in a beautiful dream?

I didn't really know her... but in my head, she was perfect. I felt happy because she looked at me... talked to me... but I felt lost because she wasn't there beside me. Every time I closed my eyes... I saw her face. I realized that for the rest of the night, she would be the only one I would see in my thoughts... my dreams.

Day 3



9.

A Divine Start

I woke up much earlier than usual the next morning. I kept glancing out the window at her house while getting ready hoping to see her just one more time before I leave. My heart felt light and jumpy, like a bird waiting to fly. I went down to the breakfast room and sat in the exact same chair as last night... right next to the window. I didn't care much about the food. I only cared about the view of her front door. I finished my entire breakfast without noticing what it was or how it tasted.

Just like the day before, Abdul pulled up with his big bus at 9:00 AM. It was time for our next trip, and all the other passengers were getting on. I walked out to the hotel gate, but I couldn't bring myself to step onto the bus. I stood there, staring at her house... wishing and hoping the door would swing open so I could see her face.

"Good morning, sir." Abdul's deep, strong voice broke my thoughts. He was standing by the bus, looking at me with a calm, flat face. He didn't look angry like others who were waiting for me, but his voice was heavy. "Please get inside, sir. We are running late." He told me.

"Good morning, Abdul. I was just..." I started to speak, but the words died in my throat. At that exact moment, the front door of the house creaked open. My heart began to pound against my ribs as I held my breath, waiting and hoping... Then, she stepped out into the morning light.

The world seemed to stop moving... the noise of the bus... voices of the people faded away... All I could see was her... walking out gracefully like yesterday towards her car parked outside the home. She looked so peaceful and beautiful in the early sun. I stood there like a statue... unable to look away... my eyes following her every move... I felt like I was in a beautiful dream again.

"Lost in the view!" I finally whispered, finishing my sentence to Abdul. She finished what she was doing and walked back toward her house without looking at me. She just quietly went back inside and closed the door. I felt a little sad... but mostly happy just to have seen her. I could live with that for now. It was enough to keep my heart warm for the rest of the day.

Getting into the bus full of angry passengers and ignoring them was becoming a routine now. I sat in my corner seat and looked out the window with a happy heart. "We will start our journey by visiting a holy place today." the conductor announced with a scary face, but I just ignored him and looked at the greenery outside. Today was a day for sightseeing, and our first stop was a place called Ganesh Tok. It was only about 25-30 minutes away from the hotel.

As we moved towards the place, I came to know that 'Tok' means Temple in local language. As the name suggested, Ganesh Tok is a temple dedicated to Lord Ganesha and sits very high up on a hill. When we arrived, the temple looked like it was standing on top of the world. It was colourful, with bright flags fluttering in the wind.

From the edge of the temple, I could see the entire city of Gangtok spread out below me like a toy town. Far away, I could see those giant white peaks of mountains touching the blue sky... everything looked like a piece of art. Like one of those drawings, we made in our art classes in school.

To reach the top, I needed to walk up a winding path surrounded by trees and smell of fresh mountain air. I removed my shoes at the entrance. The stone floor was freezing, and my feet felt numb, but the view was so amazing that I didn't care about the cold. I walked inside the quiet temple to pray, feeling very peaceful.

Within the temple, there was a small shop where tourists could dress up in beautiful, local clothes to take pictures. I ditched on wearing the local clothes but decided to get my picture taken. I wanted to show Mahesh what he missed! The photographer told me to come back the next day to pick up the printed picture.

Since tomorrow was a free day with no bus tours, I knew I would have to find my own way back up the hill to get my picture. As I looked at the clouds floating below the temple, I knew I wouldn't mind coming back to this heavenly place again.

As I walked deeper into this peaceful temple, I saw a wedding happening at the altar. A man and a woman were happily getting married. Suddenly, the world around me changed... suddenly, the groom standing there was me. And the bride... wearing a beautiful dress and a shy smile, was her. My heart started to beat very fast.

I still wasn't sure if this was the right thing to imagine. But this time, I didn't want the dream to end. I didn't try to push her out of my head. I let myself imagine us standing together... promising to stay by each other's side forever. It felt so real and so sweet. Was this a sign from the universe...? Like a manifestation... I hoped with all my soul that one day, this dream would become a reality... I hope this is what God has planned for me.



I was lost in this happy vision when a man from the wedding walked up to me with a big smile and handed me a small piece of sweet. The taste of sugar on my tongue brought me back to reality. But as I finished the sweet, I kept looking at the altar... still feeling the warmth in my daydreaming heart.

10.

Something is Lurking

Leaving the Temple, I put my shoes back on and walked up to a small shop nearby. They were selling tiny models of the temple made of clay. I bought a few of them and some more postcards with pictures of the Temple and the mountains. I think I'd have a mountain of postcards by the end of this trip.

As I walked toward the bus, I bought a hot coffee and some cigarettes from the same shop. I saw Abdul standing in his usual corner smoking alone, looking away from the Temple. "You don't want to go inside?" I asked and he just shook his head slowly. "Is it because you're a Muslim?" I asked, trying to understand him.

Abdul took a long breath of smoke. "I don't like these places... Temples, Mosques, Churches... I like to stay away from all of them." He said calmly. "So, you're a non-believer?" I guessed and Abdul looked a bit uncomfortable. "I used to believe," he said, and his voice sounded upset. "But now... seeing all these buildings and how crazy people act over them... makes me sick." He added.

"Is there a reason why you feel this way?" I asked and he waited for a few seconds before answering. "Personal!" he replied and I knew then that I should stop asking. Abdul then threw his cigarette away and started walking toward the bus. "I am sorry, Abdul." I said quickly. "I didn't mean to make you feel bad." I apologized but he didn't stop walking. "Don't be sorry, sir. The other passengers are coming back. We must move.

Unfortunately, we have to visit more such places today." He said over his shoulder.

He climbed into the driver's seat. I followed him and sat in the seat right behind him. I looked at the small clay temple in my bag. I wanted to give it to Abdul as a gift. Now I knew he wouldn't take it. I sat quietly by the window, wondering what must've happened to make Abdul turn away from such beautiful places... and from God.

Our next stop was going to be the Tashi Viewpoint. As the bus moved, the conductor, stood up again, looking very serious and funny at the same time. "Tashi Viewpoint is one of the reasons we came to the Temple first." he dramatically said, leaning toward the passengers.

"The place is famous for its beautiful view of the mountains. But it's also haunted... People say that a woman went there to watch the sunset but got lost and was never found." He continued with his horror episode. "Now, when the fog comes, people can see the lady... still asking for her way home. Do not talk to her... or follow her... if you do... you will disappear too." He completed.

Do people take these stories seriously? I think they do because the bus grew quiet... like everyone felt a little bit of fear. But this idiot did not stop there. He leaned in closer, and his voice became a scary whisper. "And there is more." he said. "Last night, near your hotel, another baby has been reported missing." He informed us. "Maybe the serial killer found a new victim... hiding somewhere in these mountains... We must be very careful... someone could die soon." He told us.

I could feel the air in the bus change more drastically now. It was no longer a happy holiday. Everyone felt uneasy and worried. We looked at the trees and buildings outside differently now... like someone was watching us back. No one needed to know the things conductor was saying. The beautiful morning

started to feel ruined... thanks to this idiot. Suddenly, the bus made a loud screech and stopped in the middle of the road.

"Wilsang!!!" Abdul shouted. I've never heard Abdul speak so loudly. And I finally knew the conductor's name now... Wilsang ran to the front of the bus. "What is wrong with you?" Abdul yelled, gripping the steering wheel so hard his hands must've turned white. "If you have nothing good to say, shut your mouth! It's not that difficult." He continued. "People come here to be happy, not to hear about blood and death. Stop your talking right now!" he told Wilsang.

Abdul seemed more than angry... he looked deeply upset, as if the conductor's words had hurt him personally. I wondered why the news of the killer made him so furious. Wilsang on the other hand, got what he deserved. He did not say a word and just nodded before sitting down in a corner. Abdul then took a deep breath and stood up to face us.

"I am very sorry, everyone." Abdul said. His voice was calm again, but his eyes were still sharp. "Please do not listen to him. He tells stories to scare people. Most of it is not true. Please relax and enjoy the mountains. I deeply, personally apologize for any trouble this guy has caused." He added. I did notice how, despite being a driver, he spoke so clearly... like a scholar or a very educated person.

Abdul sat back in his driver's seat and started the engine. The bus moved forward again, but the silence was heavy. Wilsang stayed quiet for the rest of the trip. I sat behind Abdul, wondering why a man who hated Holy Places and Religion was so protective of our peace.

11.

City's Haunted Crown

Soon, we arrived at Tashi Viewpoint. As I stepped off the bus, I saw Wilsang sitting quietly in the corner with his head down... as if he's been punished by a class teacher. "I didn't believe a word you said anyways." I told him with a little laugh while he looked on. "Why are you a conductor? You should try being a movie director." I continued laughing.

Sadly, the guy didn't laugh back and looked very serious. I think he was a bit hurt that Abdul yelled at him in front of everyone. "You won't believe it until it happens to you." he replied in a low, spooky voice. "Whatever! Mr. Scary Storyteller." I joked. "How long can we stay here?" I asked. "Twenty minutes!" he said, looking at his watch. "Try not to get lost." He added as I laughed while leaving.

I started my walk toward the viewpoint. To reach the very top, I had to climb a ton of stone stairs. They were so many that my legs started to hurt, and I started breathing hard... but kept going. When I finally reached the top deck, my breath stopped for a completely different reason. The view was like a giant movie screen.

Tashi Viewpoint is said to be famous because it gives you the best view of the mountains. Right in front of me was the Kanchenjunga... those snowy peaks glowing like white gold under the sun. Just below the mountains, I could see the entire city.

Those colourful houses... like tiny bright blocks scattered across this deep green hills. The air was so clear and cold that I

felt like I could reach out and touch the clouds. There was a small circular platform where people were taking photos and looking through binoculars.

As I stood there, feeling the wind on my face... blue sky was so wide and open... all my worries felt small. It was a place of magic and peace. Even if Wilsang's ghosts were real, they certainly chose a beautiful place to live. I took a deep breath of the fresh mountain air, wishing I could stay here forever.

I walked away from the other tourists to a quiet corner of the high balcony. Slowly, I closed my eyes and let the mountain wind wash over my face. The air was so fresh and thin that every breath felt like a gift. I spread my arms out wide, feeling like I was flying above the world. In that moment, I wasn't just a tourist... I was a part of the mountains... the nature... the clouds.

I felt so happy... But I did wish she was standing right there beside me. I wanted her to feel this cold breeze and see this giant sky. It was strange, but as the wind blew harder, I felt like she was actually there. I could almost imagine her scarf waving in the air. I couldn't stop smiling. When I slowly opened my eyes, I noticed some people staring at me, but I didn't care. That feeling was more important than anything else.

Moving forward, I realized that this place is not just about the view... it is also a place to find treasures. Right in the middle of the area, there is a small shop filled with colourful, handmade scarves and beautiful Tibetan swords. The scarves are made by local people who have lived in these hills for a long time. I bought a few bright scarves and a replica sword to hang on my wall back home.

I found a perfect spot right in front of the Kanchenjunga mountain to get my picture clicked by the photographer there. Just like before, he handed me a small paper slip and asked me to collect the developed picture tomorrow. I don't know how many of these I would be collecting today. But I didn't mind... Each one was a promise... that I would remember this magical

place forever and keep coming back whenever I can. I took one last look at the golden sun hitting the snow and headed back down to the bus.



"You're still angry?" I asked Abdul as I walked back to the bus. "I'm sorry you all had to hear that." Abdul apologized, looking a bit calmer. "The only reason I don't fire Wilsang is because of his wife who happens to be my Rakhi Sister." He told me. Wow! Our man has a 'rakhi' sister and claims to dislike God. Anyways! His choice. "You don't have to fire him... He is a good guy. Just doesn't know when to stop talking." I told him.

"He doesn't even know what to talk. Others have complained about him previously." Abdul told me. "Unfortunately, he doesn't even understand the fact that tourism is our main source of income." He added. "You know best." I replied while looking back at the mountain. "By the way, it is so beautiful here. Do you really think this place could be haunted?" I asked Abdul as he stood by the bus door.

"People like to believe stories that are exciting." he said. "They like myths more than the truth." He added. "And what is the truth?" I asked. "It LURKS... behind such scary stories and beautiful places." Abdul told me and I looked at him with surprise. How can he sound so... intelligent!?! "You talk like a

very smart man." I pointed out. "Why are you a bus driver?" I asked.

Abdul said nothing for a while as I looked at him. "We must move, sir." He replied, ignoring my question completely as other passengers started to get on the bus. Wilsang came and stood by the gate. "You should talk about Abdul instead of your ghost stories... that would be more interesting." I told him as we both looked at Abdul moving towards the driver's seat, looking straight ahead.

"He is just... sad." Wilsang told me. "He just needs... sex... a lot of sex." He continued. "You are an idiot!" I said looking at him. "Thank you." Wilsang replied. "And about to be jobless... maybe!" I added before going inside the bus. I climbed and sat down as we moved to the next stop.

12.

A Spiritual Outing

Next, we arrived at the Do Drul Chorten which is one of the most famous and important Buddhist Temples in all of Sikkim. As I walked toward it, I saw a massive white building with a golden dome on top welcoming us. The gold shined brightly under the sun... like it was a second sun sitting right there on the hill.

There were long rows of prayer wheels all around the base of the building... beautiful metal cylinders with holy words carved into them. I watched as people walked in a circle, spinning every single wheel one by one with their hands. Someone said there are 108 of these wheels. I didn't know the exact meaning behind them, but watching people spin these felt divine and special.

I moved further and peeked into a large room nearby. There were about hundreds of monks dressed in dark red robes sitting together, saying the same prayer at the very same time. The sound of their voices was deep, low and peaceful... filling the air like a melodious hum.

Despite that room being almost overcrowded with monks, I've never felt so much peace in my life. The air smelled like burning incense. One of the monks waved at me to come and sit with them. I really wanted to, but I didn't want to break the magic of their prayer or distract them by walking in. I just smiled and bowed my head to say thank you.

Before leaving, I stood in front of the golden dome. A photographer was there, and he took a picture of me with the

beautiful temple in the background. Again... he asked me to return tomorrow after handing me a slip. Tucking the third slip in my pocket, I looked back at the peaceful place one last time. This place was truly like a treasure of the mountains. The calm that I could feel inside me was something I hadn't felt in years.



Moving further, our final stop for the day was Hanuman Tok, another famous temple dedicated to Lord Hanuman. This temple sits higher than all the other places we visited previously. While getting off the bus, I noticed that the Indian Army takes care of it which is the reason why everything was very clean, neat, and so quiet.

The temple is painted with bright, beautiful colours that stand out against the green trees. I met a Priest inside who told me that, while Lord Hanuman was flying through the sky carrying a huge mountain of life-saving herbs, he stopped at this very spot to rest for a moment. It's because of that, the air around the temple smells sweet and fresh... and every plant here is said to be carrying medicinal and healing qualities.

To reach the main area, I walked through a long passage with a bright red roof. From the windows, I could see the snowy mountains again, looking closer than ever. The view was so big and wide that it felt like I was standing in the clouds. The sound

of small bells ringing in the wind made the whole place feel like a dream.

I went inside and sat down to pray. Even in this holy place, my mind went straight to her. I closed my eyes and imagined her standing next to me... again! Her hair blowing in the cool mountain breeze. I wished I could take her hand and show her how beautiful the world looked from up here.

I finally finished my prayer and walked back to the bus... my heart was full of the quiet peace of the temple, but my head was still full of her face. The sun was starting to go down, and we were ready to go back... hoping that the end of the day would bring me closer to her once more.

13.

Thukpa, Name & Stories

When I got back onto the bus, I realized I had not eaten anything all day. I felt so hungry, restless and tired that my head started to hurt. Every time the bus bounced, I felt a sharp pain all over me. It's a bad idea not to eat when you're on a tour, especially on a hilly or a slopy area. I just wanted to be back at the hotel... or eat something so I could stop feeling so dizzy. My brain stopped working so bad that I forgot to ask Abdul to stop somewhere for food while we were returning... and I realized this only after the bus stopped outside our hotel.

"Abdul!" I called out as soon as everyone stepped off the bus. "Is there a restaurant around here?" I asked. "Not really, sir." Abdul said. "You could eat at the hotel." He suggested. "It's past lunch and dinner is not yet ready. They'll take longer. Could you drive me somewhere else?" I asked, feeling desperate. "I need to pick up people from the hotel down the road for Siliguri Station... Bus would be full. I can't let you stand inside. I'll be fined. Sorry. Maybe you could get something down the house shops." he replied before leaving. That could be the only option I have left.

As I watched the bus leave, I suddenly got a different idea. Running to my room, I threw my belongings on the bed and rushed back outside. I walked straight to her house. My heart was beating faster than a drum as I stood at her door and took a deep breath. I quickly checked if I smelled like sweat or cigarettes. I was doing fine, I guess.

As I reached out to knock, the door opened before I could touch it. She was standing there looking at me. For the first time, she didn't look scared or angry... she just smiled... pleasantly. "Hi!" I said softly. "I knew you would come." she said in a soft voice and it kind of made me feel shy.

"Actually... I know I wasn't supposed to... but I've been out all day." I told her. "I heard your bus leave." she replied with her eyes looking into mine. "The funny part is..." I said, trying to smile... "I was so busy sightseeing that I forgot to eat... and now my head really hurts from hunger. So..." I informed her. "Is there a place nearby to get food? Maybe you could point me in a direction?" I asked. I desperately wanted to ask her to join me, but I couldn't.

We stood in silence for a moment as she continued to look at me with a smile while I stood there being shy and awkward. Then... she slowly moved back and opened the door wider. "You can come in." she said. I was in a daze... was this really happening? Was I being invited in her house by her? I stepped inside the house, feeling very clumsy. But I felt like I was walking into a dream.

"By the way, my name is..." I said but couldn't complete. "Dhananjay Verma... I know." She said and I almost blushed. She closed the door behind me. The house smelled of sweet noodle sauce. "Is Thukpa okay for you?" she asked. "Anything is fine... except human." I let my morbid sense of humour out for no reason for a moment. "Sorry... I mean it's completely fine... But what is Thukpa?" I asked. "Tibetan Delicacy! Soup with noodles, meat and vegetables." she explained. "That sounds good." I said, looking at her, needing to know who she was.

"What... what can I call you?" I asked with a lot of hesitation... "Banera... My name is Banera Gurung." She said softly with a gentle smile. Finally... I knew her name. As I sat at the small wooden table, still unable to believe this was real, I kept saying

her name over and over in my head... Banera! It sounded so special... just like her.

I sat there and watched her move across the room. Every movement she made was graceful. She then walked toward me carrying two large, steaming bowls and placed them on the table. Banera sat right across from me and for a moment, we just stayed there... stirring our soup and looking at each other.

She had a smile on her face. I didn't know if she liked me or if she was just being kind... but it didn't matter. I felt a rush of joy because, for the first time, she was looking back at me with warmth. My heart was full of wonder. I took a spoonful of Thukpa in my mouth, and it was warm, filled with soft noodles, chicken and vegetables. It was the best thing I had ever tasted, but maybe that was only because I was eating it with her.

"How is it?" Banera asked after her first bite as I looked straight into her eyes. "Perfect!" I replied. I was so lost in her beauty that I forgot about the food. I didn't know if she was asking about the soup or how I felt being there with her. Everything felt exactly as it should be.

"How was your day?" Banera asked as we ate. "It was amazing..." I told her but I could barely keep my voice steady. "We went to all the temples... Clicked pictures there. I need to go back tomorrow to pick up the photos I took." I added.

As I spoke, a wild idea entered my mind... my stomach felt like it was full of butterflies. Shall I ask her to come with me tomorrow to get the photos? Maybe I could get a chance to spend an entire day walking by her side. I was too nervous to ask yet... Let's wait and see where things go from here.

After we finished eating, Banera took the empty bowls to the kitchen, and I walked over to a small cot in the corner. Her baby was there, sleeping peacefully. She looked so small and quiet. "They grow up so fast." I said as Banera came back into the

room. "They get difficult to be put to sleep too." She replied while coming towards me. "What's her name?" I asked softly.

"It's a Him... Raghav!" Banera said with a tiny smile. "Just try not to make any noise near him." She added. I slowly stepped back to not disturb the baby. Also, I didn't want to ruin this moment. Banera looked at me... for a second, the room felt very small and very warm. The air felt heavy with a sweet, romantic feeling.

"Are you okay with wine after food?" She asked looking into my eyes. I'm okay with anything that would help me stay close to her for as long as possible. But I was still so nervous that I could hardly speak. In between my fumbled words, I agreed. "Let's Go." she said and moved towards a small door, holding two glasses of red wine.

"Where are we going?" I asked, completely confused but excited. "You'll see..." she said and started to walk up a narrow set of stairs. I followed Banera as my heart kept thumping in my chest. We came out onto the terrace. I remembered seeing her standing here last night... looking like a dream from far away. But now... I was standing right there with her.

We had our hotel on one side and the almost the entire city on the other side... glowing with thousands of tiny bright lights. It looked like a sea of stars on the ground. When I looked up, the real stars in the dark sky were so bright and clear. It felt like we were the only two people left in the world.

"This is... enchanting!" I whispered as Banera turned to look at me. The moonlight hit her face, and she smiled. I felt a shiver run down my back. Standing there in the cool night air, holding a glass of wine with the woman of my dreams... my heart might explode with happiness.

"You should see this place when it snows." Banera said, handing me a glass of wine. We started sipping it together, talking, trying to learn more about each other. "Every night, my

husband and I would spend hours here... drinking wine... dancing... holding hands... stealing kisses." she said as we stood on the terrace. "He was the perfect husband... until he started abusing drugs and beating me up because I wasn't getting pregnant." she added. My heart sank as I listened, feeling terrible for her.

"He took me to see a lot of doctors... religious men... nothing helped for a long time." Banera said quietly. "Finally, one day, while he was at work, I found out that I was pregnant... I felt so happy... so excited. I thought he would stop hurting me once he knew. I thought we would be happy again like old times." She continued.

She looked away for a second as if trying to stop her tears. "But he never came home that night... not even the next night... not for a week... I searched everywhere... informed the police... checked with his friends... Finally, by the time police found him... It was a dark, rainy night... His car had gone off the road... He was long gone." She said as tears began to fall down her face.

"Since then, I come up here to remember the good days... I drink alone... keep my house dark and I don't let anyone get close to me." Banera told me. "And yet... you let a stranger like me into your home tonight." I said softly and Banera wiped a tear, looking at me with a small smile. "Loneliness... it gets to you sometimes." she replied. "And your eyes... they look very honest... like I could trust them." She added.

I felt a deep pain in my heart but also felt confused. I mean... she missed a drug addict domestic abuser. I wanted to reach out and take away her sadness... but again, I was confused about how to feel. "I feel so terrible." I whispered, watching the moonlight shine on her tears.

"I 'am sorry." Banera said, wiping her tears completely. "I shouldn't have talked about my dead husband tonight. Sorry I ruined the mood." She told me. "Not that..." I said, turning to

face her fully, looking deep into her eyes. "I feel terrible because of everything you had to go through. I'm just so lucky that you chose me to be with tonight. I am glad you decided not to be alone." I told her.

"Just know that you aren't alone anymore. At least not while I am here." I added. The air between us felt warm as Banera looked at me. Then she asked, "So... what's your story?"

"Well... not that exciting and extremely immature." I said, trying to make her feel better. "I fell in love once but got cheated. Then I cheated back on her only to get even. Now that I'm older... I realize how silly and childish that was. I don't even know if I was in love or was it just lust, we had for each other. Whatever it was... it was good while it lasted." I told her my story in short.

Banera let out a small laugh. "This is like a teenage romance." she joked. "Yes!" I agreed, smiling as I watched her laugh. Seeing her smile again was the best feeling in the world. For a moment, all the sadness of her past and the mistakes of mine didn't matter. There was only the two of us, the stars, and the quiet night.

As we stood there laughing with each other, the moment became a little heavy and sweet. I looked at Banera's beautiful eyes and then couldn't help but look at her lips. I noticed that she did the same thing too... For a second, the whole world seemed to disappear, and I thought this was the perfect moment for our lips to meet.

"Are you... going out with your group tomorrow?" Banera asked, breaking the silence, and I took a shaky breath. "Uhh... No!" I said, feeling a little disappointed. "We have a day off. I will be on my own. I'll collect my pictures and then might go shopping for my family." I told her. "Go to MG Market for the shopping part." Banera suggested. "How do I go?" I asked. "I don't know the way." I said, feeling my heart racing.

I couldn't directly ask her to join me... "Would you... I mean... if you are free..." I kept fumbling. Banera smiled, as if she knew what I was trying to say. "You can meet me outside at 10 AM." she said and I felt a huge wave of joy. A giant smile spread across my face... and I actually laughed out loud. I still couldn't believe this was happening... She was coming with me.

"But it will be the three of us." she added and I got confused for a second. "The three of us?" I asked and Banera laughed. "You forgot... my baby is sleeping downstairs." She reminded me. "Oh! Baby Raghav!" I laughed, feeling silly. "You make me forget everything else in the world." As soon as I said it, I realized how honest I was being and how I shouldn't have said that. Banera kept laughing, and it was the most beautiful sound I had ever heard.

When I finally walked back to the hotel, I was so happy that I wanted to shout. I ran to my room and jumped around like a kid. It was cold outside, but I was sweating because my heart was so full of energy. Lying in bed, I looked at my watch, and it was 11 PM.

I tried to sleep all night, but I couldn't. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw Banera's face in the moonlight. I remembered the way she moved her hair behind her ear and the way she smiled at me. I thought about the way we looked at each other on the terrace... everything kept replaying in my head. I fell asleep with her name on my lips... Banera!

Day 4



14.

Like a Dream Come True

I woke up before the sun was even fully up. My excitement wouldn't let me stay still. I rushed through breakfast so fast that I barely tasted anything properly while also ignoring strange looks from the others. As soon as I was done, I ran toward Banera's house. My heart was racing, and I was breathing hard.

When I reached her gate, I stopped to catch my breath while still feeling nervous. I checked my shirt, brushed my hair, and hoped I smelled okay. The mountain air was biting cold, and I shivered, but the excitement in my chest was much stronger than the frost. I knocked her door gently... waiting for it to open... seconds felt like hours.

Finally, the door opened, and my breath got caught in my throat. Banera looked more beautiful than I had ever imagined. She was wearing a thick purple woollen overcoat, soft gloves, a black hat sat perfectly on her head, and a warm muffler was wrapped around her neck. In one arm, she cradled Baby Raghav, who was sound asleep against her chest. In her other hand, she held a large baby basket. She looked like a dream come true.

"It is a beautiful day." Banera said, looking up at the clear sky as she stepped out. I couldn't look away from her. "It was just okay..." I said softly, looking at her. "Now, it feels brighter and a little magical." I added and Banera looked down, and a lovely pink blush spread across her cheeks. She smiled.

"You will have to hold this for me." she said, handing me the basket. "Of course! Happy to help!" I happily obliged, taking it

carefully. "Raghav woke up very early this morning then fell back to sleep after his milk." she explained, adjusting the baby in her arms. "I had to make sure I have enough extra food and diapers for him. I don't want to be caught unprepared." She said and I nodded, happy just to be helping her. Standing there with her in the morning light, I knew this was going to be the best day of my life.

I didn't know we could get a taxi so easily here as we walked down the street for a moment and caught one heading toward Ganesh Tok. Usually, I would spend the whole ride looking out the window but today was different... the most beautiful view was sitting right beside me. I could not take my eyes off Banera as we talked and laughed. I never thought this day would ever come but now it feels so easy... so right. I guess this is how our story goes.

After we arrived at Ganesh Tok, we walked up together. Banera wandered around slowly to enjoy the fresh air, while I went to the studio to pick up my photographs. When I came out, I found her standing quietly near the altar. She was looking at it with a thoughtful look on her face, and I felt a bit worried. Did I bring back the memories of her getting married here? I kept my photos in my pocket and joined her.

"A couple was getting married here yesterday." I said, trying to be casual. "How was the sweet?" she asked. Wait! How did she know that? "I loved it! But how did you know that I had a sweet here? Were you stalking me" I joked. "You wish I was!" Banera shut down the stalking rumours right then as we laughed. "It's a customary sweet that's given to guests and visitors during marriage... happened even when I got married." Banera told me.

"I loved this place so much that I promise myself to get married here one day." I said and it made her smile. "That sounds like a lovely dream. I hope you find the right person to share that with." She told me as my heart kept beating a little

faster. Sensing my worry, Banera spoke again. "Don't worry! I am not sad! I didn't get married here." She finally told me.

I felt a little confused. "But I was told that almost everyone in Gangtok gets married at this temple." I said and she laughed while shaking her head. "I got married in Darjeeling." She told me and I let out a long sigh of relief.

We both got into a new taxi and started heading to our next stop which was Tashi Viewpoint. "So, tell me something, Banera," I said to her. "What's your favourite place to visit here?" I asked. "Can you say my name again?" she suddenly requested with the most beautiful smile on her face. "Why?" I asked, looking at her smile until I realized that this was the first time I used her name. "It just sounds different when you say it." she replied and that put a huge smile on my face. "Banera!" I said again... my voice softer... lovelier this time.

15.

The Perfect View

“So... What is your favourite place to visit here?” I asked again and Banera looked at me for a moment. “You might not like the place I love.” she said. “Try me!” I replied with a grin. “The Namgyal Institute of Tibetology.” she said and she was right. That was beside Do Drul Chorten and I decided to skip going there yesterday. I guess... it was time to make a sacrifice. “I would love to go there... with you.” I told her. “Someday... Maybe!” she replied.

We arrived at the Tashi Viewpoint soon after. We were so busy talking and laughing as we climbed the long stone stairs that I completely lost track of everything. I was so focused on Banera’s voice and her smile and her eyes that I didn’t even notice she was carrying the baby the whole way up.

When we finally reached the top, I saw her stop and gasping for air. I felt a sharp pang of guilt in my chest. “Oh my God! I am so sorry!” I said, feeling terrible. “I am so stupid! I completely forgot to take Baby Raghav from you.” I apologised while quickly taking the baby from her arms. Banera walked over to a bench and sat down, still struggling to catch her breath. I ran to a nearby stall, bought a bottle of water, and rushed back to her.

“Are you okay?” I asked and she just nodded while her hand rested on her chest as she tried to breathe normally. While she rested, me and Baby Raghav went over to the photographer. I gave him the slip from yesterday, and he handed me my photo.

When I turned back, Banera was no longer on the bench. I looked around and spotted her standing by the railing in a quiet corner.

As I walked toward Banera, she removed her black hat. The cool mountain wind was blowing through her hair, making it dance and sway in the air. Her hair moved with the wind just like the colourful Tibetan prayer flags nearby... wild, free, and beautiful. All I could do was stand there and look at her.

Banera slowly turned her head and saw me watching her. She didn't look away. For a moment, it was just the two of us, the gentle wind, and the giant, silent mountains behind her. It was the most perfect view I had ever seen. "Back there you said you forgot that I had a baby in my arms." she said, breaking the quiet.

"I am so, so sorry." I apologised again while feeling my face getting hot with embarrassment. "I was just so distracted by our conversation." I added as she looked at me with a playful glint in her eyes. "You don't have to be sorry... You are going to be punished for that." she said with a teasing smile. My heart skipped a beat, wondering what she meant. She didn't explain, just laughed softly as we started to walk back down the stairs.

"The bus conductor who brought us here yesterday said this place was haunted." I said, trying to keep the mood light and Banera brushed it off. "Do you believe in ghosts?" I asked and she looked out at the hills for a moment before answering.

"I believe that... sometimes... there are secrets hidden behind the things we find beautiful." she said thoughtfully. "It's best to just enjoy the beauty while you're here... and then move on if you want to stay happy... Don't scratch an unknown surface... leave that to someone who is more skilful." She told me. "I don't know if there's a ghost or a monster here, but I do know that this is a beautiful place... that's all that matters." She said and I nodded slowly. It was a very gentle way to look at the world.

We were supposed to head to Do Drul Chorten, but Banera stopped me. "You still owe me for forgetting the baby," she said again with that mischievous look in her eyes. So instead of Do Drul Chorten, she took me to the Plant Conservatory Park while smiling mischievously the whole time... I would follow that smile to the end of the world.

The park looked like a secret garden. It was famous for its rare collection of Himalayan plants and flowers. The whole place looked stunning! For a moment, I felt like we were inside a fairytale as I could see bright, exotic orchids and thick green ferns surrounding us. The air was thick with the scent of wet earth and wild blooms. It felt calm, private, and incredibly beautiful.

"My dad used to take me to that waterfall hidden behind these rocks," Banera said, pointing toward a distant, sparkling cliff. "Let's go!" I said and she started walking. Holding Baby Raghav in my arms, I hurried to keep up. The path grew steep and rocky. I was soon huffing and puffing, but every time I looked at Banera, she was giggling at my struggle. The sound of her laugh made my legs feel light again.

When we reached the top, the sight took my breath away. A massive waterfall was crashing down the mountain... turning into a fine, cool mist before hitting the rocks below. The water looked like diamonds against the deep green backdrop of the forest. The air around us was cool, wet, and refreshing, coating our skin in a light, misty spray. "How do you feel?" Banera asked. "Soothing!" I panted. "I never knew watching waterfall could make me feel this relaxed." I added.

Banera pouted, trying to look disappointed. "Too bad! You aren't supposed to feel relaxed. I was trying to punish you by making you climb all this way!" She told me and I stepped closer to her, ignoring my tired legs. I looked deep into her eyes, where the light of the waterfall seemed to dance. "What a beautiful punishment!" I whispered.

The world suddenly felt very small... It was just us, the crashing water, and the sound of our own breathing. We were standing so close I could feel the warmth of her body. I leaned in, my heart pounding, and for a moment, the distance between us almost disappeared as I felt her lips slowly brush against mine.



Just as the air became electric, the peace was broken. The sound of voices and heavy footsteps echoed through the trees. A group of loud tourists rounded the corner, breaking the spell. Banera pulled back, looking a little flustered. "I think we should get going," she said quickly, turning away as the crowd flooded the space. I followed her, disappointed but happy, knowing that the moment we shared was ours alone.

16.

Calm Before Something Dark

The air between us felt a little shy and sweet as we stepped out of the park. My heart was still racing from that moment by the waterfall, so I decided to break the silence. "I've decided!" I said, hoping to make her smile again. "To truly apologize for my mistake, I'll take you to your favourite place." I told her. Banera looked at me, and her eyes lit up with excitement. "You are joking, right?" she asked, clearly surprised.

"I am too scared to be punished again!" I said with a grin as we walked to the taxi stand. When the taxi arrived, I held the door open for her. "Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, please!" I told the driver and watched her smile grow wider. A childish glow appeared on her face as she slid into the seat.

Banera took Baby Raghav into her arms, and I sat beside her. As the car began to move, she fed the baby. She didn't look out the window once and her eyes stayed on mine, full of a quiet warmth that made my heart melt. "Now, I think I can forgive you." Banera whispered as the taxi pulled up to the museum.

We stepped out together and walked toward the entrance. It looked like a place of history and quiet beauty. A guard stood at the door and gave us a polite nod. "Please remove your footwear here, Sir." the guard said. I took the baby carefully from Banera so she could balance herself. We both stepped out of our shoes, feeling the cool floor beneath our feet.

"Please make sure the baby doesn't make any noise, Mam." the guard reminded us. "Baby Raghav has just been fed well." I

promised, looking at Banera who gave me a soft look, and we stepped into the peaceful halls of the institute together.

As we stepped inside the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, the noise of the outside world simply vanished. Banera said that this place is world-famous, not just for its beauty, but also for studying Tibetan culture and religion. The air inside felt cool, still, and filled with a sense of peace. The building looks stunning... built in a traditional style with wooden carvings and intricate designs that reflect the rich history of Himalayas.

Banera moved through the halls with grace. She led me toward the walls, which were covered in some vibrant paintings which she said were known as thangkas. Thangkas are scroll paintings that are detailed and sacred in Gangtok. "Look at these," she whispered and I leaned closer. "Look closely..." she said gently. "They tell the entire life story of Buddha, from his birth to his journey toward enlightenment." She explained.

I followed Banera's finger as she pointed out small, hidden details I missed. She explained how the stories were woven into the painting, showing scenes of kindness, wisdom, and peace. She spoke softly, her voice echoing gently in the quiet room. It was fascinating to listen to her, and even more fascinating to watch how much she loved these stories.



We walked slowly, stopping at every frame. With every painting, Banera helped me understand a little more about the culture of these mountains. It was as if she were opening a door to a secret world for me. Finally, we reached the last painting, which showed a scene of great beauty and calm. We stood there together for a long time... taking it all in... feeling the magic of history surrounding us.

"World is full of lights... lights that fade one day... happy are those who find the light within themselves. That's what these paintings explain." Banera said as we stood in front of the last painting. "Wow!" was all I could murmur looking at her thinking how stupid I was to ignore this amazing place yesterday. "I was 14 when they built this place." she said while I just admired the way the candlelight flickered on her face.

Just as I was regretting my decision of not coming here yesterday, we moved further and the calm atmosphere suddenly changed... at least for me. We entered a place filled with ancient objects used for dark rituals. There were bowls made from human skulls and tools crafted from human thigh bones.

Even though the room was quiet, seeing these items made a cold shiver run down my spine. It felt like the history here was not just stories... it was something heavy and real. I tried to be as calm as possible but felt scared to death, so I stayed close to Banera.

When we finally stepped out into the bright daylight, I let out a long breath. Right next to the museum, there was a small shop filled with colourful treasures. We stepped inside and found rows of jewellery and beautiful stones. Walls here were lined with ornaments that people wear for good luck. The shopkeeper was a friendly woman who seemed to know everything about her pieces.

"Take this Sir!" she said, holding up a ring with a bright stone. "It will help you earn a lot of money." She told me but I shook my head with a smile. "I'm sorry... I don't really believe in these." I told her and she nodded putting the ring away. Nearby, Banera was looking at a collection of earrings.

"You should get these Mam!" the shopkeeper suggested, pointing to a set of earrings. "They will help you control your anger." She informed and Banera laughed. She picked up a different pair of silver earrings. "I don't get angry... But I actually like these." she said and the shopkeeper smiled. "Oh! those are special too. They make the person more intelligent." She informed us.

"Do you really believe in these?" I asked Banera, watching her examine the silver earrings. She looked at me and shook her head, smiling. "Not really..." she said. "I just found it beautiful." She added. "How much are they?" I asked the shopkeeper and she gave me a price which was a little expensive, but it was well within my budget. So, I bought them for her, wanting to give her something from her favourite place.

As we prepared to climb towards Do Drul Chorten, Banera stopped and sighed. "I can't climb the temple now." she said softly. "That's not a problem." I replied. "You and Baby Raghav can wait here... I'll be back in a minute." I said handing over the baby to her.

I got Banera seated on a comfortable spot near a small shop and then hurried off to the temple to collect my photograph. The task was quick, and I ran back, eager to be by her side again. When I reached, I saw Banera was holding a bowl and eating something that smelled very nice.

Before I could say anything, she scooped up a spoonful and gently pushed it toward my mouth making me take a bite. It was Aloo Mimi. I saw people eating this as a quick snack while traveling toward Nathula Pass, but I had never tried it myself.

"It's delicious!" I exclaimed, while eating. "Its raw noodles mixed with a chili curry." she explained. "Perfect evening snack for a cold day like today." She added. Beside the chilly, it was kind of a mix of soft, boiled potatoes covered in a tangy curry sauce. The spice hit my tongue instantly, making my eyes water and Banera laughed at my reaction. With our bellies full and the sun beginning to dip, we left the area, feeling closer than ever.

17.

London Street

We took a taxi and drove to a place that is said to be the heart and soul of Gangtok, MG Marg. As soon as I stepped out, I understood why people called it "London Street." It was like a different world... the entire street is closed to vehicles, leaving a wide path for people to walk, talk, and enjoy the evening. It was... breath-taking... vibrant.

The road was lined with colourful buildings, glowing shops, and wooden benches where people sat watching the world go by. The air was filled with the smell of fresh coffee and local spices. Everywhere I looked, there were lights, and the energy was so cheerful that it felt like a celebration.

I couldn't stop turning my head to look at every nook and every corner of the place. The shops were filled with everything... from handmade woollens to sparkling jewellery to home decors. Families laughing, travellers everywhere, and the entire place felt alive with a happy, musical rhythm.

"You look fascinated." Banera said, watching me trying to take it all in. "I 'am..." I replied, my eyes still scanning the place. "I've seen markets in Calcutta, but this place... it's a different kind of life... like the entire city has come out to celebrate." I continued.

Walking beside Banera, with the cool mountain air on my face and the glow of the streetlights reflecting in her eyes, I felt like I never wanted to leave. Every step on this street felt like a story, and I was soaking up every single second.

As we strolled down the middle of the street, the beauty of MG Marg was clear. Every inch of this space is high-end, clean, and incredibly well-kept. "How much would a shop cost to buy in a place like this?" I asked, looking at the glowing stores. Banera smiled, clearly amused by my curiosity. "Go on then, ask them!" she said, pointing out to a cake shop.

I walked over to a beautiful cake shop and started chatting with the owner. I came to know that this is the most expensive and desirable real estate in the entire state. And since this is the pride of Sikkim, there is a very strict rule... people who are not from Sikkim cannot buy property here. You can visit it, you can love it, but you cannot own a piece of it.

I came back to Banera, who was waiting by a bench with Baby Raghav. My jaw was nearly on the floor. "They are expensive." I told her. "Even if I had all the money, the law says I cannot buy a shop here because I'm not a local." I added. "You can lease one." Banera corrected me. She then pointed to a shop a few doors down. It was dark, with shutters pulled tight.

"That one belongs to a non-local but has been closed for a long time." she said as I looked at the shop with a 'Not for Sale/Lease' board. I thought about walking over to the next shop to ask if the owner would ever change their mind, but I decided against it. Even the thought of leasing such a prime spot in the heart of Gangtok was far beyond my reach.

I turned back to Banera and laughed, trying to hide how much I really wanted to be a part of this city. "Someday... maybe!" I said with a grin. "If not me, then maybe Baby Raghav!" I joked and gently took Baby Raghav from Banera as we kept walking down the street, leaving the expensive dream behind, just happy sharing the time together.

Banera led me into a small shop filled with handmade bags and local jewellery. These were special crafts only found here. I picked out a few gifts for my family. Then I saw two things on the

counter... a small clay Ganesh Tok and a decorative Tibetan sword.

"Here!" I said, showing them to Banera. "Pick one. I'll buy it for you." I offered. She thought for a moment and then chose the sword. But then, she pulled out something special from her side. It was a black pendant on two chains. The pendant was a heart shape which we could split into two halves. Engraved on it were the words 'Love in Gangtok'. Banera pulled the two halves apart and handed one to me.

"You keep this half, and I will keep this one." she said softly. "If we ever happen to meet again... years from now... we will exchange them to show that we remember." She told me. The moment Banera said those words, a cold, heavy feeling sank into my stomach. It was like a sudden punch.



I didn't realize until then that our time together was so short and staying longer than that was so uncertain. The thought of being apart from her felt like losing a part of myself. I didn't want to think about "years from now." I only wanted to think about tomorrow. I quickly pushed the sad thought away, trying to hide my face. But Banera caught me this time.

"I think you are hungry again." she said, sensing that I needed a distraction. We paid for our things and stepped back out into the cool evening air. "Where should we eat?" I asked, trying to sound cheerful again. "Follow me." she said. We moved further and walked up the creaking wooden stairs until we reached a doorway with a warm, inviting glow. A sign above the door read, 'Baker's Cafe'.

"It is the most famous spot in town." Banera told me. We stepped inside and it felt like finding a secret haven. The cafe was beautiful, filled with the smell of fresh bread, coffee, and sugar. The walls were lined with large windows that looked out over the twinkling lights of MG Marg below.

We found a quiet table in the corner, a perfect spot where we could sit close together and watch the busy street without being part of the crowd. It was cozy, elegant, and had a charm that made me feel like I was in a movie.

I sat with the menu in my hand, feeling completely lost. Back in Calcutta, my world is full of spicy rolls and kebabs. Here, everything looked new and different. I stared at the list of fancy words, trying to hide my confusion

Banera sat across from me, feeding Baby Raghav with a milk bottle. "Confused?" she asked, noticing the look on my face. I let out a laugh and put the menu down. "I have no idea what's written here." I confessed, deciding it was better to be honest than to pretend I knew what I was doing.

Banera smiled, reached out, and took the menu from my hand. "Don't worry!" she said softly. "I might know what you'll like." She said and ordered something from her side. Meanwhile, I needed to let Banera know that I wasn't planning on leaving her alone after this night. Also, I wanted to find out how she would react after knowing about it. So, while we waited for the food, we started a little game.

"See that couple there?" I whispered, pointing to a young couple in the corner. "First date?" I asked Banera to guess. "Third!" she giggled. "What about them?" I asked, pointing to a middle-aged couple arguing. "Ah! Brink of a divorce!" she said, and we both laughed.

"Okay! Your turn... what about them?" Banera said, pointing to an old couple holding hands. My heart swelled, and I looked at her with a crazy smile. I was waiting for this. "I think... That's us in 30 years." I said and her eyes widened... a beautiful blush spread across her cheeks. "That was... lovely!" Banera said softly as the waiter brought our food, her smile so bright it made the entire café brighter.

We finished our meal and started to leave the café. As we walked down the wooden stairs, my foot slipped. I stumbled and landed hard on my knees right on the street. Banera turned around just as I hit the ground. For a second, I felt a wave of relief... thankfully, she was the one holding Baby Raghav and not me.

Then I heard it... A loud, bright, beautiful sound filled the stairwell. Banera was laughing. She stood there, her shoulders shaking... the sound of her laughter was so sweet and contagious that I couldn't help but join in. We both laughed until we were breathless. As her laughter turned into soft, happy smile, I found myself just staring at her. Under the bright, golden lights of the café, she looked like a dream and I couldn't look away.

"Please don't stop." I told her. "I love how you laugh." I added and Banera looked at me with her eyes shining. "I wish I could reach out and give you a hand to help you stand. But I'm a bit occupied." she said, giggling again as she had the baby in her arms. I stood up slowly, dusting off my clothes, but I didn't look away from her face.

"Seeing you laugh like that..." I said with my heart beating fast. "I think I would be happy to fall every single day... for you."

I secretly confessed. Banera went still and stared at me, her expression soft but a little surprised. "I mean... fall in front of you." I quickly corrected myself... but deep down, I knew I meant exactly what I had said.

We walked further into the cool night air of MG Marg before taking a taxi. As we sat in the quiet dark of the car, the silence between us felt warm and full of hope. We drove back toward her house and my hotel. With every mile, I knew my heart was not coming back with me... it was staying with Banera.

18.

Dance? No Music!

We stepped out of the taxi and I froze. Abdul's bus was parked right outside my hotel. Why was it here? I looked around, searching for him, but the area was empty. "Is everything okay?" Banera asked. "Yes!" I replied. "I'm just little surprised to see our bus here." I told her. "You want to go in and check?" She asked. I wanted to go check, but the thought of leaving Banera made my heart ache. My time with her was too precious to waste on others.

"Actually!" I said, looking at her, "I thought it was time for your wine." I reminded and Banera smiled. The worry in her eyes melted away. "Let's go!" she said and we went to her home. Once inside the home, Banera tucked Baby Raghav into his cot until he was sound asleep. She then removed her purple woollen coat, and I saw her black woollen dress she was hiding under it all way. She then picked up a bottle of wine and two glasses.

As Banera turned, she saw me standing in the corner, carefully carrying her old gramophone that I found in the corner. She let out a laugh before we headed up to the terrace together. The night air got cooler, but the wine made us warm and relaxed. We sat on the edge of the terrace, looking out at the city lights that twinkled like fallen stars below us. "So... Mr. Verma!" Banera broke the silence in a little tipsy and sweet voice. "How was your day?" She asked.

I looked at her face, glowing softly under the moonlight. "If I could have only one wish in this life... it would be for this day to never end." I said and Banera looked at me... her expression soft

and dreamy. "I guess you still have a couple of hours left." she replied. "I'm trying to make the most of it." I told her.

"Is there something you didn't like about the day?" She asked. "A lot of things actually... I'd like to list them out." I said and Banera looked at me attentively. "First and foremost is the fact that this day is about to end. Secondly, I don't like your eyes..." I said and Banera's smile slowly vanished. "Because they don't let me look anywhere else." I told her. "And lastly... I don't like the distance between us... which I wish to remove at least for a while." I added. I wanted to do something now.

My heart began to race. I knew this was a risk and she might tell me to leave, or she might get angry, but I couldn't hold back anymore. As Banera looked at me, I slowly moved and then sank down onto my knees in front of her. Banera looked at me with a mix of surprise and shy hesitation. "What are you doing?" she asked as her voice trembled just a little.

I didn't say a word. I simply looked up at her and reached out my hand, gesturing for her to join me for a dance. She looked at the empty terrace, then back at me. A slow, gentle smile spread across her face. "No music!!!" she whispered softly.

I moved on my knees over to the gramophone which made her laugh and carefully placed the needle on the record. A slow, gentle piano melody began to fill the quiet night. It felt like... magic. I held out my hand, and Banera took it, her skin soft against mine. I pulled her close, and we began to sway. Our private dance floor was the cool stone terrace, with the entire city glowing like stars beneath our feet.

As we moved, we drifted closer. I could feel the warmth of her breath, and it smelled faintly of the sweet wine we had shared. I spun her slowly, and her hair brushed against my cheek like silk. I reached to tuck a stray strand behind her ear, my fingers lingering on the soft skin of her neck. I leaned in and pressed a light, lingering kiss there, breathing in the scent of jasmine and

the night air. Banera shivered in my arms, a soft sound escaping her lips, and she turned to look at me.



We didn't stop moving... we just swayed to the music, closer than we've ever been. The dance was no longer just about the rhythm. It felt deeper, more intense, and full of hidden heat. Every time our bodies touched, a jolt went through me.

As we faced each other, Banera reached up... her hand trembling slightly, and gently touched my face. She let her fingers glide slowly from my eyes, over my cheek, and finally rested them on my lips. My heart was pounding so hard I was sure she could feel it. Her breath came faster now, warm against my skin as she leaned into me, closing the tiny space left between us. Every touch, every heartbeat, and every soft exhale made the world feel like it was disappearing... leaving only the two of us under the moonlight.

Her lips... finally met mine, soft and trembling at first, like a question finally being answered. I drew her in, and the world around us... the city lights... the cold night... the distant stars... simply faded away. Our kiss deepened, growing hungry and slow, as if we were trying to make up for every second we had spent apart.

Her breath mingled with mine, tasting of the wine and the sweetness of her skin. We moved together with a natural, steady rhythm, our bodies pressed so close I could feel the wild, frantic beating of her heart against my chest. Every touch was electric, burning through the thin fabric of our clothes. As I pulled her tighter, our kiss became more desperate... more passionate... a silent promise that we would not let this moment slip away.

We were lost in each other, swaying in the dark... caught in a desire that had been building since we first met. There was no room left for thoughts or worries, only the feeling of her soft skin beneath my hands and the way she pulled me closer, as if she never wanted to let me go. It was like everything we did today... every walk, every laugh, every look... had been leading us exactly to this. I never wanted this to end.

Without any warning, Banera suddenly pulled away from me so quickly that I almost stumbled. The magic of the moment was shattered in a heartbeat. She turned around... putting the cold night air between us... the sudden loss of her warmth left me feeling hollow.

"I'm sorry." was all she whispered in her shaky voice lacking the softness I had grown to love. Banera had turned her back to me... wrapping her arms around herself as if to shield herself from the very fire we had just started. "Banera, but..." I started, my voice desperate, wanting to reach out and pull her back into my arms. My heart was still racing, aching with the need for her, but she cut me off before I could finish. "Please leave Dhananjay." She told me.

Her words were cold and final... like a door slamming shut in my face. I stood there, frozen and confused, unable to understand how we had gone from such intense closeness to this sudden, sharp distance. The disappointment was crushing, heavy in my chest like lead. Our perfect, glowing night had crumbled into nothing... leaving me standing alone in the dark... longing for a touch that had vanished far too soon.

19.

Why the Silence?

As I walked away from Banera's house, my mind felt trapped between heaven and hell. I could not stop the memories from flooding back. Each one more intense than the last. I replayed every second of our day like a favourite song. I couldn't help but remember the feeling of her hand in mine... the way her hair danced in the wind... the soft, sweet sound of her laughter.

I could still taste the faint, lingering sweetness of the wine on her lips... still feel the heat of her body pressed against mine... the way her curves felt soft and perfect in my arms... the arousing thrill of her fingers tracing my face. I was drowning in the memory of our kiss... it was deep, desperate, and intoxicating. I couldn't help but think where we would have gone if that moment lasted longer... imagining the touch of her skin and the rhythm of our breathing.

And then... the reality of the ending crashed on me. The sudden, brutal way she pulled away hit me like a slap to the face. The silence she left behind was deafening. One moment, I was living in a beautiful dream where everything was finally right... next instant, I was walking alone in the cold... feeling completely hollow.

I still couldn't understand what made Banera stop. What did I do to make the fire turn to ice? The disappointment felt like a pain in my chest. I felt dejected... left with nothing but an empty longing and the bitter sting of her final words. My mind kept begging for the 'what ifs' but all I was left with was the silence of the night.

Walking aimlessly inside the hotel with my mind still stuck at the house across the street, I suddenly, I heard a familiar voice call out, "Dhananjay Sir!" I turned around to see Wilsang standing in the lobby. He enthusiastically walked toward me with a huge smile. "Good evening, Sir! We've been looking everywhere for you." He told me. "Is everything okay?" I asked.

"We were invited to have dinner with you and other passengers tonight." Wilsang informed. Why did this had to happen today!?! "It's your last night in Gangtok." He said and reminded me that I might not be seeing Banera again. Wilsang spoke joyfully as usual, but those words hit me like a punch, and it made my heart sink further.

After everything that went down a couple of minutes ago, the last thing I wanted to do was sit around a table and pretend to be happy. "I've been out all day... I've already eaten... You guys carry on." I said, trying to end the conversation. "Please Dhananjay Sir!" Wilsang insisted. "At least come for your friend." He said and I looked at him confused. "My friend?" I asked.

"Abdul is here as well." he informed and I let out a dry laugh. "Wow! he didn't fire you?" I asked and Wilsang laughed. "He won't do that. Please come and meet him. It could be your last chance. We won't be here tomorrow morning." He informed with a sincerity that made it hard to say no.

I stood there for a moment, torn between wanting to be alone and the need to say goodbye to the two people who had been part of this journey. "I guess... I can join you for a little while." I finally agreed letting out a long, shaky breath and followed Wilsang toward the dining area.

The dining area was set up with one long row of tables so that everyone could sit together. "Sorry to keep you all waiting." I announced while walking in, trying to sound normal. "I was out." I added. "We're getting used to it by now Mr. Verma." one of the passengers said with a laugh and others joined in. For the first

time, they were smiling at me, but it felt like they were all laughing at my misery.

"Please sit." Wilsang said, pointing to a chair next to Abdul. I told them I've already eaten but would love to sit and chat. As I took my seat, I hoped that being around people would take my mind off and make me forget about the night on the terrace. But every word people said here felt like background noise.

My mind was a storm of questions. Was I in love with Banera, or was it just a temporary spark between two people in a beautiful place? Did she feel the same way, or was I just a passing distraction? I sat in the middle of the laughter, feeling completely alone... surrounded by a mountain of questions that I knew might never be answered.

Everyone continued to talk and eat and indulge while I never even realized when I moved and stood by the large window, staring out at the city all alone. The view was the same one that had felt so magical minutes ago... but now... it looked different. The bright streetlights that had sparkled like diamonds were now hurting my eyes. They seemed to have lost all their beauty, leaving behind only a cold, artificial glow.

I pulled myself together, forcing my face into a calm, blank mask. I couldn't let anyone see how I felt. I adjusted my shoulders, took a steadying breath, and tried to look as if I were just deep in thought, enjoying the view. Deep down, I was drowning in confusion and pain... but on the surface, I remained perfectly still, a silent actor playing a part I no longer understood.

"Goodbye Sir!" I heard Abdul from behind and jumped. I was so lost in my own thoughts that I never heard him approach. As I turned around, he noticed something was wrong with me. "Are you alright?" he asked. "It's just... nothing!" I lied. I needed some air... away from the crowd. "You know what? Let's go outside and have one last cigarette together." I suggested and Abdul agreed.

As we walked outside the hotel, we passed the entrance. We saw a repairman struggling with a broken light fixture on the wall. He looked frustrated, poking at the wires with a screwdriver. Abdul stopped and watched him for a second. He then stepped forward. "The voltage drop across the circuit is causing the ground fault due to insulation failure in the primary conductor." Abdul said, sounding like a professor at a university.

The repairman and I both stared at him, blinking in total confusion. I had no idea what he was talking about, and neither did the worker. Abdul realized he had lost us. He sighed and pointed a finger at the mess. "Just stop." he said. "Don't pull the whole thing down. Just cut the blue wire and twist the ends together. It will work." He told the repairman.

The repairman did as Abdul said, and the light flickered to life. I stood there, stunned. "How did you know that?" I asked. "That's not something a driver could know." I said in amazement and Abdul being Abdul didn't answer right away.

We walked over to his bus, the cool night air hitting our faces. He pulled out a cigarette, lit it, and for the first time, he let a small smile touch his lips. He looked up at the stars, and then back at me as the smoke from his cigarette went up in the air.

"My name..." he began. "Is Abdul Ali Khan. I graduated with an engineering degree from Jadavpur University, Calcutta. Batch of 1960." He revealed and the world seemed to stop moving. I felt the air leave my lungs. "You are joking right?" I said with my voice shaking with disbelief.

"My father..." he continued, taking a long, slow puff of his cigarette. "Is a Nawab from Calcutta." He told me and I couldn't speak. My jaw felt like it had dropped to the ground. I looked at the man who had driven me across these winding mountain roads for days... the man people treated as nothing more than a driver. My mind was reeling, trying to fit this quiet, brilliant stranger into the person I thought I knew. Everything I understood about this trip had just been turned upside down.

20.

Fi Duniya Wal Akhira

I stared at Abdul, unable to move. A man of his status, a Nawab's son, choosing this life? It didn't make sense. "You're a Nawab's son. You could hire a hundred drivers. You call me 'sir' when I should be the one calling you 'sir' or maybe something greater than that. And why are you working here as a driver?" I asked, still trying to wrap my head around everything he just said.

"All because of a woman Sir." Abdul said in his quiet voice. "The most beautiful woman in the world... my Queen... Sultana!" as he spoke, his face softened, and for a moment, he wasn't a strange driver... he was a man... madly in love. As he looked up at the hotel, and his eyes seemed to see someone only he could see.

"We came here for our honeymoon six years ago. We stayed right here at Rufeena Residency. Those five days were the most beautiful days of my life. We visited every spot I took you to... sat at the same canteen where you rented those clothes. I can still hear her laugh in the mountain air." he continued while I listened.

Abdul took a slow drag from his cigarette. "We loved Gangtok so much that we decided to build a life here. I love to drive because I loved the freedom of it, and Sultana dreamed of opening a small cake shop in MG Market. It was her birthday on our fifth day, and I finally found a shop for her. I bought it on lease as her gift. Seeing her face light up that day... I can still see

it when I close my eyes. It was the happiest moment of my life." He said as the wind grew colder.

"That night... we were driving back from MG Market, laughing and talking about our future. We imagined it all... her baking in the shop... me driving the streets... our nights spent dancing and dreaming together. It was a perfect, rainy night... the city was glowing, so beautiful and soft." Abdul continued.

"But the rain makes the roads cruel. Out of nowhere, a car came flying around the curve, speeding out of the dark. We lost control... I remember the sound of screeching tires... the world spinning... then the sickening feeling of falling into the blackness below. I remember Sultana was holding my hand tightly... I remember the crash... a sound so loud it felt like the earth had split open. Then... there was silence... I don't remember anything after that." Abdul told me while wiping his eyes with shaky hands.

"I woke up in a hospital... a week later. My family was there, their faces pale and drawn. Seeing Sultana was the only thing on my mind when I woke up. I kept asking, 'Where is Sultana? Please, let me see her.' But no one spoke..." Abdul said and my heart began to sink. "They finally took me to a quiet room... and there she was... she looked like she was sleeping... but she was ice cold... My beautiful bride... my Queen... Sultana was gone." He broke down... his sobs shaking his entire face.

"I begged her to wake up... I told her, 'Sultana, get up! Your customers are waiting! You have a shop to run!' But she never opened her eyes. My wife... my Queen... my whole world... taken from me in one brutal second." He said with a stream of tears across his face.

"For six years... I've stayed here... I just couldn't get myself to leave." He said with a lot of pain. "Six years... I've been picking up people who stay in our room... driving them to the places we went... I watch them enjoy like we did. Everywhere I look, I see Sultana. Even the air here smells like Sultana." He continued. "I

am not driving for money... I am driving because this city is the only place where Sultana still feels alive and real to me." Abdul looked into my eyes while my heart felt like it was being crushed.

"You never thought of moving on? Of marrying again?" I asked while choking on my words and keeping a hand on his shoulder. Abdul looked at me... his eyes full of unbreakable promise. "No Sir... I could never..." Abdul replied. "A Moulvi once told me that after we die, we are reunited with the person we were last married to." Abdul told me.

"It could be a superstition... but I can't risk losing Sultana again. She was always so terrified of being alone... especially in the dark. If I married another woman, I would be leaving her alone in the afterlife and that thought scares me to death." This was the most beautiful thing I've ever heard a man say for his beloved. "There's a saying in Arabic... *Fi Duniya Wal Akhira*... In this life and in the afterlife... I couldn't have a life with Sultana, but I'm living every day just so I can be with her for the rest of eternity." He said wiping his tears.

With tears in my eyes, I stood there in the dark... unable to speak as the man who lost everything looked toward the stars... waiting for the day he would finally go home to his Queen. In this moment, I realized that I wasn't just standing next to the son of a Nawab or a Driver or even a friend... I was standing next to a man who had turned his entire existence into a monument for his long-lost love.

I couldn't help but feel proud and heartbroken for the beautiful, tragic, undying love standing right in front of me. I struggled to find my voice... my throat felt tight... my eyes were stinging with tears. Abdul lives a love story deeper than anything I've ever read in a book or seen in a movie.

"You've given love a new meaning for me... my friend." I whispered, my hand resting on his shoulder. "I might forget the mountains, and the streets, but I will never, ever forget you." I

told Abdul as we pulled each other into a long, firm embrace. It was a brotherly hug, holding all the sadness and respect that words could not capture. In the quiet of the night, I could feel the weight of his years of loneliness.

"If you ever come back." Abdul said. "You can find me at this hotel... If I'm still alive, it would be my honour to serve you again." He paused. "But remember me in your prayers... Please, ask God that they let me meet my Sultana as soon as possible." He said and my heart shattered for him. This man was waiting for his life to end so that his love story could truly begin.

We finally pulled apart. I watched as he climbed into the driver's seat, his movements slow and full of memories. Wilsang sat in the back, quiet and respectful. As the engine roared to life, the bus began to roll away, its taillights fading into the darkness of the mountain road.

I stood there alone... cold wind biting at my skin, watching until the last flicker of red light vanished. I was left in the quiet, haunted by the story of a man who was still living in the past, waiting for a reunion that only death could bring.

21.

Could We have a Happy Ending?

How often do you meet men who inspire you so beautifully? As I stood alone outside, I felt emotionally shaken by the things Abdul narrated. This man was a living poetry. He claimed that he never believed in God, but he was the most divine person I've met until now.

Standing alone on the street, I looked at Banera's house and thought of everything that went down with her until now. Is she the person I wanted to share my life with? Not just today... but for every day to come... The only way to know was to face her. Despite the voice in my head telling me to respect her space and go back to my hotel... like always, my feet carried me to her doorstep. Before I could change my mind, my hand reached out and rang the doorbell.

When the door creaked open, my courage nearly left me. Banera stood there, bathed in the glow of the hallway light. Still dressed in the same full sleeved black wool dress, her eyes met mine... for a moment, neither of us could speak. "I..." she started, then trailed off, looking as unsure as I felt.

I didn't wait to find the perfect words. They just poured out of me, raw and honest. "I know how you feel... and to be honest, I think I feel the same way right now." I said, mesmerized by her presence. "I don't have the right words to explain this... and

maybe I don't even need to. Somewhere, I think you feel it too." I told her.

Slowly, I reached out and gently took Banera's hands in mine. Her skin was warm, and she didn't pull away. "Ever since I met you, you are all I think about. I find myself falling for you every single moment, even when I try to stop myself." I confessed looking into her eyes while my heart was hammering in my chest.

"I know the same might not be reciprocated from you... you've been in love before... married before... I couldn't be your first... But I'll do everything I can to make sure that I'm your last." I said while Banera stood perfectly still, listening to every word. Her eyes remained locked on mine... silent and unreadable, but she didn't look away.

"If you will let me... I'd like to stay in your life a little longer. I want to find out if you are the one I want to come home to every night after a long day. I want to see if you are the person I would choose to be with, even in the afterlife." I proposed to her while feeling her breath against my face... soft, steady, and close enough that I could feel the warmth of her presence. The entire world felt like it was holding its breath, waiting for her to move.

"Banera... I lo..." Before I could finish, she stepped forward and silenced me with a soft, lingering kiss. That was the answer I had been praying for and I didn't hesitate. I pulled her against me... my hands finding her back to press her even closer. As I opened my mouth, her lips parted to meet mine in a hungry, deep rhythm. There was no more shyness left. Our tongues met and tangled, exploring each other with a raw, desperate intensity that started getting us aroused even more.

We were kissing right there in the doorway. For us, the world had disappeared. Every touch was electric. The kiss grew wetter and deeper, a heated exchange that left us both breathless and wanting more. I could feel her hands gripping my shoulders, pulling me into her, while I lost myself in the taste of her and the

needy sounds she made against my mouth. It was wild, intimate, and perfectly honest... a collision of two people who had finally stopped fighting their hunger for one another.

Before we even realized, we were inside her home with the door locked behind us. We didn't stop kissing for a single second. Our hands were busy, moving with a desperate hunger. In one quick motion, I pulled her dress over her head, and she did the same with my shirt. Her black bra-panties looked striking against her milky white skin. It felt like a dream to finally have her in my arms like this.

I lifted Banera gently and carried her to the bed. Under the soft, dim glow of a small lantern, I began to kiss my way down her neck. I let my teeth graze her soft skin, leaving small, sweet love bites while her fingers traced the muscles of my back. When I reached behind her back and unhooked her bra, a soft, shaky moan escaped her lips.

As her bra fell away, I saw her breasts fully exposed in the quiet light of the room. She was... breathtaking. I leaned down, my mouth finding those dark brown hard nipples. I teased them with my tongue... took them deep in my mouth... moving from one to the other, making her tremble and arch her back under my touch. The way she reacted to me made my heart race as I continued to lick and bite her breasts while letting my hand explore the rest of her body. I moved back up to capture her lips again, our tongues dancing together in a deep, wet rhythm.

I then sat back for a moment just to look at her. She was lying there, topless and beautiful, just for me. My hand travelled slowly from her neck, down over her curves, and across her stomach.

Without wasting a time, I began to kiss my way down her thighs... my breath warm against her skin. I could smell the wetness and natural scent of her desire between those thighs. Gently, I removed her black panties aside to finally see the most private part of her. I didn't wait any longer and leaned down...

used my tongue to taste her wetness... and she tasted like the sweetest flower in the world. I explored every inch of her vagina, my movements slow and steady.

Banera let out a loud, beautiful moan, her legs stretching wide as she surrendered to the feeling. I found her clit and focused all my attention there, while I slid one finger deep inside her to feel how wet and warm she had become for me. She began to move against my hand, her voice filled with a deep, raw need. As I moved my finger deep inside her, her body shook with a powerful wave of pleasure, and I felt the warmth of her release as she wrapped those legs around my neck, lost in the magic we had created together. I remained there for long to make sure I drink every drop of juice that came out of her.

I then got back up and kissed Banera deeply as she tasted herself on my lips, pulling me back into a long, slow kiss. We rolled over, and this time, she took the lead, moving on top of me. She leaned down and began to kiss my neck, her teeth dancing on my skin with gentle love bites. I couldn't see the marks she was leaving, but I could feel the heat of them. My hands explored the soft curve of her lower back and the firm shape of her hips, squeezing them hard.

Slowly, Banera moved down and sat on her knees between my legs. As she reached for the button of my jeans, we didn't break eye contact. Her eyes were glowing naughtily in the dim light, full of a soft, steady love. I watched her as she pulled my blue denims away and tossed them aside. I lay there with my hands behind my head, watching her admire my hardness hiding beneath my underwear.

She reached out with her warm, tender hands and began to stroke me gently. I watched her face as she looked at me, her touch made me harder. Slowly she removed my underwear and there I lay, completely naked in front of her. Then, she moved down and took me into the warmth of her mouth. I let out a long, shivering moan, closing my eyes as the pleasure washed over

me. It was like heaven. Her hands played with the hair on my chest as she continued, taking her time, making every second feel like an eternity of bliss.

Banera skilfully made sure to continue until I started to feel the pressure building inside me. "I'm about to cum!" I could hear myself groaning in pleasure like never before. But she never stopped... she continued until I released a huge load of cum all inside her mouth as she continued to suck me. She made sure to drain me entirely but never wasted a drop, drinking everything.

Banera eventually came up to meet my lips, kissing me with a wild passion as we tasted her juices mixed with my cum. We rolled over once more, and I took her in my arms. I felt the heat of her against me as she wrapped her legs around my waist. Although I came, the hardness between my legs reminded me that I wasn't done yet.

The tip of my hard, wet penis was touching the entrance of her wet, warm vagina. But we were not rushing... the night was ours... we wanted to feel every inch of each other. We spent time exploring, whispering, and leaving soft bite marks of affection on each other's skin.

Finally, when the moment felt perfect, I made a gentle push and slid slowly inside her, as we both gasped, looking straight into each other's eyes. I watched Banera's eyes pop as I filled her completely. Once she was comfortable, I began to move in a slow, steady rhythm. Our lips met again, and I could hear her soft moans echoing in my mouth.

She held me tight... her arms wrapped around my neck... occasionally playing with my back or squeezing my butt... she kept pulling me closer with every stroke. "Are you enjoying?" she whispered against my ear. "I love it!" I breathed back, lost in the feeling of being one with her.

"Let's switch sides now." Banera said and then moved to be on top... riding with a strength and passion that took my breath

away. The room was filled with the sound of our breathing and the soft rhythm of our bodies meeting. She seemed lost in her own world as her eyes closed... her movements getting faster and more aggressive. We were both sweating now, our skin sliding against each other.

I could feel her nearing her orgasm as she gripped my neck gently, her voice rising in a beautiful, raw sound. "Don't move." she whispered, her body shaking with intensity. I felt the pressure building inside me once again... a hot wave that I couldn't hold back any longer. We both let out a loud, shared cry as we reached the climax together... our bodies shaking in a final, powerful release as we both came together.

The room was quiet afterward... only thing we could hear was us breathing. It was filled only with the scent of our juices and the warmth of our sweat. Banera leaned down and kissed me softly... her lips felt slippery with all the sweat.

As she let my penis out, a lot of juices came off her vagina all over my stomach and private area. Banera slowly went down and took her time to lick everything clean happily. She came back up to kiss me... making me taste our own love juices all in her mouth. "You got pretty wild out there." I whispered, stroking her hair as she laid with me naked... resting her head on my chest.

"I've done this after a year and a half." She whispered as we lay there in the quiet dark... our bodies tangled together... feeling the peace of the night. It was the perfect end to a perfect day. We didn't even realize when we finally closed our eyes, falling into a deep, happy sleep in each other's arms.

Day 5



22.

Let Me In

The sun shone warmly on us early in the morning... waking us up. I looked at the beautiful naked woman sleeping peacefully in my arms under the cream-coloured sheets. More than anything, I wished for this moment to last forever. "You're staring." Banera said softly with her eyes still closed. "I'm gazing." I corrected her. "It's creepy." she said, finally opening her eyes to look into mine. "It's romantic." I told her with a smile on my face. She got up, and we kissed... a gentle and beautiful start to our day.

Still naked, I lifted Banera into my arms and carried her to the bathroom. We stood under the warm shower... water sliding over our skin as we shared a long, deep kiss. In the heat of the moment, I felt my morning wood hard in all its glory. Without leaving her from my arms, I gently pinned her against the wall... her skin all wet and glistening. I filled her wet tightness slowly with a gentle push, and she let out a beautiful moan that echoed through the bathroom.

I held her and started slowly stroking her insides from the bottom as the water poured over us. I didn't let go even for a single second... my mouth exploring her neck... her soft skin while we I continued thrusting her from the bottom. Even with the water washing over us, I could still smell the raw, natural scent of our bodies.

Soon, I felt Banera's body tighten around me. She was breathing fast and hard, and then she let out a loud cry of pure

joy as she had her early morning orgasm. We continued to kiss deeply as I continued pounding her. She then looked up at me with a happy smile on her wet face. But the morning was not over yet. Banera got down and playfully pushed me against the wall.

Without a word, touching me all over, she knelt in front of me. I felt the tiles touch my back as she wrapped her wet mouth all around my hardness. I closed my eyes and let out a long breath, feeling her hands wander all over my body. She was focused and passionate, making the moment feel incredibly intense with the sound of her sloppiness filling the whole place. Slowly I could feel the pressure building deep inside me, a heat I couldn't ignore.

Banera knew exactly what I was feeling and didn't slow down until I finally reached my own climax... pouring whatever remained of my love into her mouth. I could hear my groans echo against the walls. She stayed there until I was completely drained of all my cum, making sure I felt every bit of her affection.

When Banera finally stood up, I leaned in and kissed her deeply, sharing the taste of everything she tasted. We stayed under the water for a long time after that, gently washing each other and enjoying the quiet closeness. It was the most beautiful and satisfying start to a new day.

We finally stepped out of the shower and began to get dressed. It was only then that I noticed the love bites we left on each other. Our bodies were covered in red traces of the night's passion. On her white, smooth skin, they stood out like beautiful secrets. I couldn't help but smile... knowing those marks were a map of how much we wanted each other.

I wore my jeans and immediately drew Banera into a warm hug while she was only in her long shirt. I didn't want to let her go, not even for a second. "I think your bus is here." she whispered as we heard the low rumble of the engine arriving outside. "Exactly!" I said, looking at her with a grin.

"I was just thinking... this trip would be absolutely perfect if I had a beautiful woman by my side for the rest of the journey." I suggested and she laughed playfully. "Oh really? Who is this lucky woman?" Banera asked as I looked deep into her eyes... my heart feeling bigger than it ever had before. "Who else could it be?" I told her. Banera's eyes grew wide with surprise.

"You're joking... they won't allow me to join." She told me. "If they don't allow you." I said firmly... "then I'll get off that bus right now and we'll continue the journey on our own." I told her and a soft, breathless laugh escaped her lips. I leaned closer until our foreheads touched. "I am determined to take you with me forever, Banera." I told her.

"Oh yeah?" she breathed, as she reached up to kiss me. It was a kiss full of promise and a new kind of hope. "Let's do this." she agreed. "Go to the hotel and grab your bags. Talk to the driver and see what he says. I'll pack my things as fast as I can. If the driver says yes, it's perfect. If he says no, we will figure out a new plan together." She told me the plan.

I nodded, feeling a rush of excitement in my chest. The idea of us starting a new path together, leaving everything behind to be side-by-side, felt like the most romantic thing in the world. It was the perfect beginning to the rest of our lives.

23.

A Sweet Victory?

I stepped outside, and the world looked completely different. The sun was glowing with a brilliant light... the mountain air felt sweet and fresh against my skin. My heart was thumping against my ribs, not from running, but from pure joy. I dashed to my room and threw my clothes into my bag as fast as I could. Every second felt like an hour.

I ran to the bus parked in the hotel lot and called out to the driver. "Excuse me Sir!" I said with my voice full of life. I quickly asked if I could bring two more passengers... a woman and her child for the rest of our journey. The driver looked at me calmly. "I am just the driver Sir. I'm only supposed to drop you off to the next location. There are empty seats in the bus. If you want to add someone, you must call your travel agency. Offer a little extra money, and I am sure they will say yes." He suggested.

I didn't waste a heartbeat and ran to the hotel desk. I asked to make a trunk call to Calcutta and they agreed. I finally reached out to Kaushik from Enchanting Nature, the agency who booked my trip. Just like the driver suggested, I offered to pay whatever extra was needed once I got home. To my relief, Kaushik agreed and asked to speak with the driver. I called the driver and handed him the phone so he could hear the official request.

"We leave in the next two hours Sir." the driver told me. "Please make sure your friend is here by then." He requested. I agreed, checked myself out and dropped my heavy bag right there at the reception before I took off running. I sprinted back to

Banera's house with my lungs burning but a huge smile stuck on my face. I reached her door and knocked loudly, still gasping for air. "Congratulations Banera! It's done! You and the little one are officially on the list!" I announced what felt like a sweet victory.

I stood outside, smiling to myself. I knew that giving a beautiful woman so little time to pack for a sudden trip and probably a whole new life meant I had to be patient. I turned around and saw the driver and his conductor busy with the bus. No dislike for them, but in my heart, I really wished it was Abdul and Wilsang standing there instead... I wanted to introduce them to the person responsible for my delay every morning. But what took so long to open the door?

I turned back to the house and knocked again. "Banera!" I called, but no one answered. The silence was starting to feel a bit heavy. I waited a few more minutes, my excitement slowly turning into worry. "Banera?" I tried again, but the house remained quiet. I couldn't wait any longer and pushed the door, and to my surprise, it swung open easily. It was open the whole time.

"I've been waiting..." I started to say as I stepped inside, but the words died in my throat as I walked in. The house looked empty. The dining table was still there, but the wine bottle and the glasses we used were gone. My heart began to race. "Banera!!!" I shouted, running into the room where we had spent the night together.

The bed was there, but the sheets and the mattress were missing. There was no sign of our beautiful, intimate moments from just a few hours ago. Even the baby's bed was gone. I stood in the middle of the room, breathing hard. I could still smell the faint scent of her body in the air, but she was nowhere to be seen.

I ran outside, looking at the spot where she usually parked her car and it was gone. My mind was spinning with confusion. Where could she have gone? Did she leave to get some last-

minute supplies for the trip? Maybe she had to run a quick errand. I decided to stay right there and wait for her return.

"Sir, do you want me to put your bags in the bus?" the driver asked. I nodded quickly, agreeing to let him put the bags while I stood on the porch, my eyes fixed on the road. I waited in nervous anticipation, hoping that at any moment, I would see her car coming around the corner to turn this confusing morning back into a perfect day.

I kept waiting... my eyes glued to the road... but almost an hour passed with no sign of Banera. My heart began to sink as I started to think more. If she had just gone to the store, why would she take the bedsheets and the mattress? Why would she take the wine bottle and the empty glasses? It didn't make sense. I tried to tell myself everything was fine, but a cold feeling was growing in my stomach.

Feeling frustrated and desperate, I decided to ask someone for help. I saw a woman working in the yard of the house next door and hurried over to her. "Excuse me!" I called out in a bit shaky voice. "Do you know where Banera went? Did she say anything to you before she left?" I asked. The woman stopped what she was doing and looked at me with a confused expression. "Who is Banera?" she asked.

"The woman who lives right here." I said, pointing toward the house and the woman's face changed from confusion to a strange kind of pity. "Mister, I don't know what you are talking about. That house has remained empty for the last ten years." She said as I stood there confused, shocked and frozen. The warm sun suddenly felt very cold. I couldn't believe what the hell was happening.

24.

Missing...?

"**W**hat nonsense!" I yelled at the neighbour as my heart pounded with anger. "How can that be? Banera was staying right here! I have seen her every single day. I was with her all day yesterday!" I told her in anger, but the woman didn't back down. "Sir! the owner of that house died about ten years ago. It has been abandoned for a long time. Druggies and hippies with no money use it before moving out." She told me.

I didn't want to hear another word from her. It felt like a sick joke. I turned around and ran into the reception, straight to the front desk. "Did you see the woman leave the house across the street?" I asked the receptionist. She looked at me with a blank face. "I don't know Sir. I just started my shift. But that house is empty. No one lives there..." She started with the same folklore that the woman outside told me.

"Oh! Shut up!!" I snapped, cutting her off. I couldn't listen to it again. I stormed back outside and stood in front of Banera's door. I felt like I was losing my mind. What was wrong? Was she in trouble? Did she just leave me? I tried to stay positive, but a dark, heavy feeling was settling in my chest.

"What happened Sir?" the bus driver asked. He and the conductor were watching me pace back and forth. "I have no fucking idea!" I replied looking at the street. I was so frustrated I could barely breathe. I told him everything. To my surprise, he didn't call me crazy.

"People here love to gossip." the driver said. "But I believe you. I did see a car speed away from that house earlier... almost ran over me while I was washing the tyre." He said and my heart jumped. "Where did it go? Did you see her face? Was she worried?" I asked. "I couldn't see who was driving... it happened too fast." He told me. "But we still have some time left. Let's wait... Maybe she will come back." He added.

So, I waited... standing there like a statue... eyes still on the road... another hour passed. I didn't eat... I didn't drink... My body now felt sore... My head was hurting... the sun made me dizzy. Neighbours started looking at me from their windows. My fellow passengers began to board the bus, looking at me with pity or confusion. I ignored them all. I was waiting for a miracle that wouldn't come. Finally, the driver walked over to me one last time.

"It is time to go sir. I don't think she is coming back. We have everyone else on board. We are already late." He requested. As I stood there... slowly breaking... I heard a few people laughing at me. I felt so small and ashamed. I couldn't believe this was happening again. The beautiful dream had turned into a nightmare... leaving me standing alone... abandoned on the street.

The realization of everything that happened within the last two hours hit me like a brick. It felt heavy and cold, pulling me down to a place I didn't want to go. My throat felt tight... I could feel my heart shattering into a thousand pieces. I felt used... like something someone had played with and then thrown away in the trash when they didn't need it anymore. The strength I was trying to show started to give out.

I couldn't hold it back anymore. The tears didn't just leak out... they exploded in a flood from my eyes. I stood there on the street and cried loudly, not caring who was watching. I felt like a lost child who had just lost something extremely precious. The bus driver came over and wrapped his arms around me in a tight

hug. "It's okay, sir... it's okay." he whispered, trying to calm me down.

Everyone was watching... the passengers looked out from the bus windows... the neighbours stood at their balconies and the hotel staff stood on the porch... everyone watched me fall apart in public. I felt embarrassed... but the pain had become too big to hide.

"Come Sir... We should go." the driver said gently and carried me to the bus as my breakdown was so heavy that I couldn't walk by myself. The conductor gave me some water to drink. They sat me in the front seat right next to the driver. He even got some food and put it beside me. "Eat when you feel like." The driver said softly as he started the engine.

As the bus began to roll away... I kept my eyes glued to Banera's house. My mind was replaying every moment we had shared. I remembered the first time I saw her lively face and those beautiful eyes. I remember seeing them every morning. I remembered our day together... how her hair moved in the wind while we danced and the warmth of her lips on mine. I remembered how it felt to hold her close and make love.

"Will we ever meet again?" I wondered, my vision blurry from the tears. I watched the house get smaller and smaller until it finally vanished behind a curve in the road. "Sir you should look forward." the driver suggested kindly. "The roads are bumpy here. You might end up vomiting." He added.

I turned my head and stared at the road ahead. The conductor opened the window for me, letting the cool mountain air hit my face. It didn't help. I felt empty and hollow... as if the person I was yesterday had disappeared along with that house. It was a cold, lonely end to what I thought was a perfect day.

25.

A Horrific Reality

With Banera disappearing, I felt as if my soul disappeared from my body. The mountains and the trees, which looked so beautiful just hours ago, now seemed grey and lifeless. We moved slowly through the narrow, winding streets... the engine humming a sad tune. Suddenly, the bus slowed down and came to a full stop. We were stuck in a massive traffic jam.

Outside, a huge crowd had gathered on the side of the road. There were police officers and several emergency vehicles in a corner. "What happened?" I asked, leaning toward the window. "There are a lot of cops... Something terrible must have happened." The conductor said from behind.

The bus crawled forward, inch by inch, until we were right next to the centre of the crowd. I spotted a police officer standing close to my window. "Excuse me Sir!" I called out. "What is going on?" I asked and the officer looked at me with a grim face. "The baby killer has struck again." he said shortly, before turning back to the scene.

My heart stopped for a second as his words felt like a cold blade in my chest. There was a small waterfall turned pond in the corner of the road which could be the crime scene. I couldn't stop myself from looking. I searched the ground, my eyes wide with a sudden, terrible fear. The bus moved a few more inches, and then I saw it. There... on a small stretcher, was a tiny body wrapped in a white cloth.

For some reason, the body wasn't covered properly, leaving the face visible for everyone to see. My breath hitched with horror... I felt the world crashing and burning around me as my jaw nearly dropped. I knew that face... I spent all day holding that baby... I felt his small weight in my arms and watched him sleep... It was Baby Raghav... Banera's baby!

A scream died in my throat. I couldn't understand it. How could this be? Where was Banera? Was she somewhere nearby? Was she in danger? Whatever it was... this was the time she needed me the most. I didn't think for another second. I got up, ran towards the bus door, forced it open, and ran out into the street.

"Raghav!" I screamed... my voice cracking as I tried to rush toward the tiny body. But strong police hands grabbed me and shoved me back. "Get back! This is a crime scene, you fucking idiot!" a policeman yelled rudely, blocking my path. I continued to struggle against them... I didn't care about the rules... I only cared about finding Banera. She had just lost her child. She needed me now more than ever.

I broke away and started running wildly through the crowd, searching for her face. Behind me, I could hear the bus driver and the conductor shouting for me to come back. My fellow passengers were leaning out of the windows, cursing at me for holding up the trip, but their voices sounded like they were miles away.

"Where is the mother?" I gasped to another officer nearby. He didn't look at me, but he pointed his finger toward a spot under a tree. I finally saw her sitting there, surrounded by police. Her face was buried in her hands, and her body was shaking with heavy, silent sobs. "Be careful... She is in shock." The officer warned as I began to approach her.

I ran as fast as I could... my lungs burning and my mind filled with a terrible fear. I wanted to pull her into my arms and tell her

I was there. As I reached her... she slowly moved her hands away from the face. I stopped dead in my tracks. My heart felt like it had skipped a beat... It wasn't Banera!

The woman looking up at me was a complete stranger. Beside her sat a man I had never seen before. Both were crying with a pain so deep it was frightening to see. "Who are they?" I asked the officer. "They're the child's parents. They reported their son missing two days ago." He replied as I felt a cold chill run down my spine. If these were the parents, then who was the woman I had spent the night with?

I stood paralyzed... the air around me feeling thick and impossible to breathe. The world didn't make sense anymore. I spent hours yesterday holding that baby. I had felt his small heart beating against my chest while Banera watched us with a soft smile. But if those crying people were his real parents... and he had been missing for two days, then who was the woman in that house?

The horror began to crawl up my spine like a cold insect. I felt a sick feeling in my stomach. As the driver pulled me back toward the bus, I blankly kept looking at the street... desperate to see Banera's face... but she was gone. My mind tried to fight the truth. I tried to tell myself it was just a strange coincidence, but the pieces of the puzzle began to snap together in a horrific way.

Back in my seat, I sat in total silence. I started to remember the small details I ignored. The neighbours said the house had been empty for ten years. Banera told me she had a baby girl when we first met... but later she said it was a boy. And the baby I held... it looked bigger, different from the one I saw the day I arrived. My stomach turned over as the truth hit me with the force of a physical blow.

Banera never had a child of her own... She was abducting them... The police were searching for a man... a Baby killer... but they've been looking for the wrong person. I was the only one

who knew the truth... I had fallen for her. I had held her hand... kissed her lips. I shared my soul with her in that dark, abandoned house.

The reality finally set in... the woman I loved wasn't a lonely mother. She was a monster... a cold-blooded Serial Killer... And she was still out there... LURKing... Hidden in plain sight.

