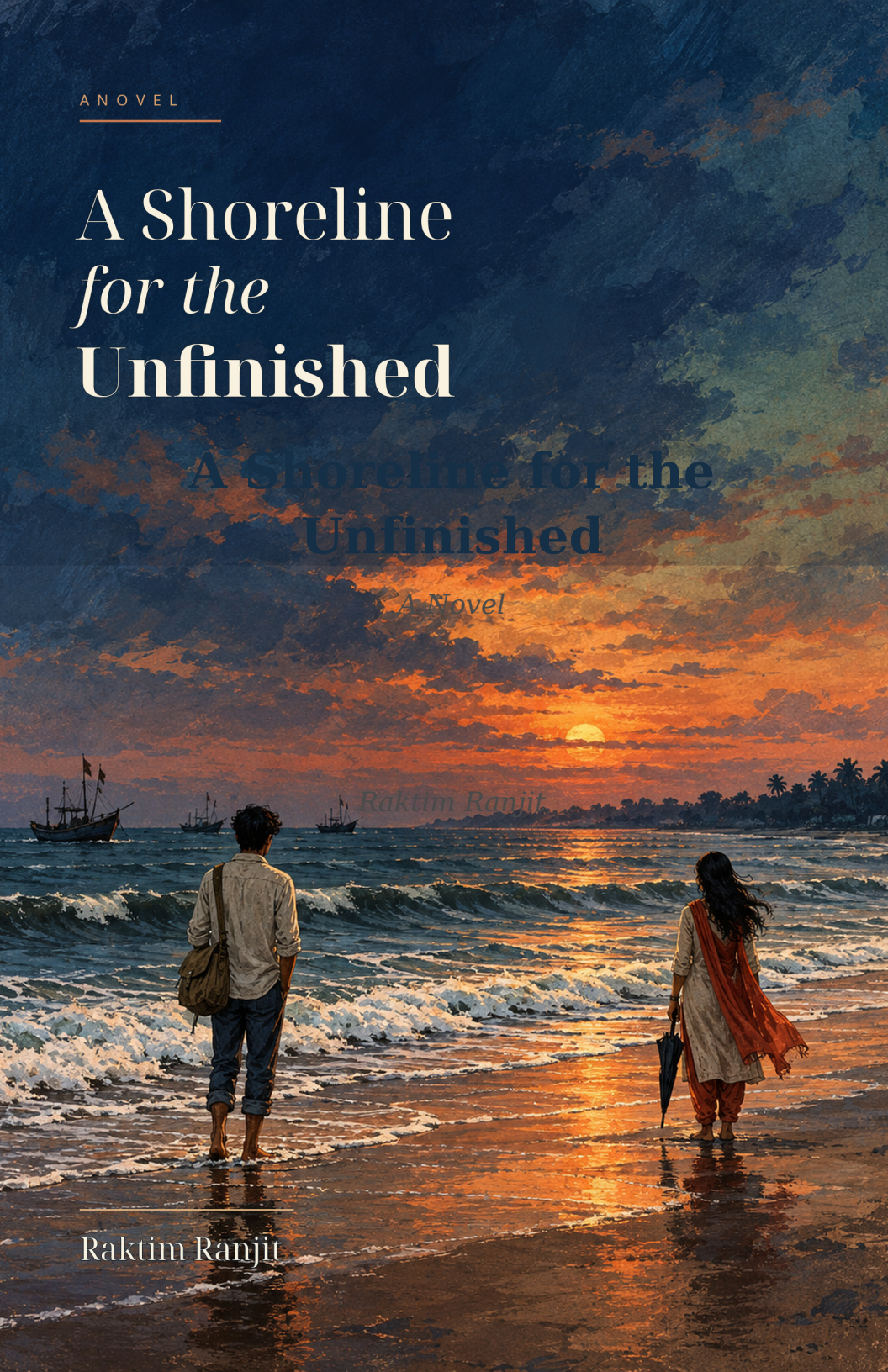

A NOVEL

A Shoreline *for the* Unfinished

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A Novel

Raktim Ranjit

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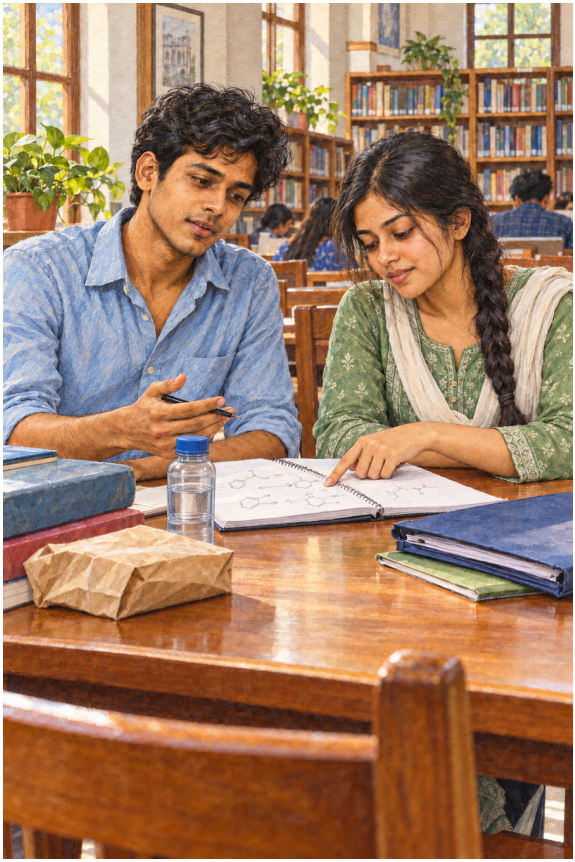
Disclaimer: This novel is entirely fictional and is written for entertainment. Its characters, relationships, dialogue, events, institutions, and storylines are imagined and are not based on the author’s personal memories. Ramnagar, Digha, Shankarpur, and some other place names are real; the story’s settings and everything that happens in them are fictional. Any resemblance to real people, living or dead, or to actual events, is purely coincidental. I have no intention to identify, portray, offend, or harm any person or community.

Part One
The Shape of Us

Chapter One — The Library Table



The first study session

On my first day at Shonabithi College, I kept my timetable open on my desk and copied the room numbers into the margin of my notebook. At school near Ramnagar, I had known every teacher and every shortcut. Here, the bell sent us into corridors that split around a courtyard, and I watched the other students to see which staircase led to the next class. By lunch, I could

find the science rooms. I still did not know how to join a conversation.

On my second day, I reached class without checking the noticeboard. After an organic chemistry lecture, Anurima Das stopped me with a question about a reaction. Most of our classmates were already folding their notes into bags. I began to explain it in the corridor, then the next lecture bell rang and we realized we were blocking the doorway. She asked if we could meet in the library the following day. I checked the last-bus time in my head before I said yes. I wanted to seem easygoing, though I was already measuring the afternoon against the last bus that would get me home before dark.

On the third morning I left home with the notes in a plastic folder and enough money for the journey back. My mother asked why I was going to college so early. I said I had to revise before class. She reminded me to eat something, then wrapped two luchis—thin, pan-fried breads—in paper and put them into the side pocket of my bag. I meant to tell her I was meeting someone, but the words felt too large for a conversation that had only lasted one afternoon. I thanked her and stepped out before she could ask why I had changed into the shirt I usually saved for presentations.

The bus was already carrying schoolchildren and people going into town. I stood until a seat opened near the back, keeping the folder flat against my knees. When the bus slowed near the

market, I thought about getting down and buying tea, then remembered the money I had set aside for the return fare. I stayed where I was. The driver braked hard at a turn, and the corner of my notes bent beneath my thumb. I smoothed it out and read the reaction again, although I knew it well enough to explain. I was not preparing for chemistry. I was preparing to sit across from Anurima without making it obvious that I had been looking forward to it.

I arrived early enough to choose a table and then regretted choosing it. The one near the window was too visible; the one at the back was too far from the light. I settled between them, took out my notebook, and copied the reaction onto a clean page so I would not have to work in front of her with my old, cramped notes. The rain had stopped before lunch, and the sun lay in bright squares across the clean reading tables. The shelves were arranged by subject; at the return desk, a librarian was sorting a neat stack of books while two students whispered over their notes beneath the steady sweep of the ceiling fans. Through the broad windows I could see the green courtyard and the covered walkway leading to the science rooms. At the next table, a boy tapped a pen against a water bottle. I knew the reaction Anurima had marked. Organic chemistry was a required subject, not our main field, but I liked it well enough to remember the mechanism.

When Anurima came in, she was carrying two books and looking at the room as if she had not

decided whether she wanted to stay. I lifted my hand. She saw me and smiled in recognition, not excitement, but I held on to the smile as if it had been meant for more. She sat down, opened her notebook, and turned it toward me. “This one,” she said. “I keep getting the product wrong.”

“It’s not difficult,” I said.

She raised an eyebrow. “Then it should be easy to explain.” I took her pencil. Its point was blunt, and my first arrow came out crooked. I erased it and began again in the margin. Anurima leaned closer to follow the steps, her hair brushing my sleeve. I could have explained the reaction to anyone in the class without looking up; with her beside me, I became aware of every movement I made and could not decide where to put my free hand.

Until then I had been useful from a distance. People borrowed my notes and asked me for answers before exams. I was not friendless, exactly, but at the village school near Ramnagar I had never learned how to enter a conversation once it moved beyond classwork. Anurima asking me to sit with her felt larger than it should have.

I was an ordinary student who kept his books neater than he kept his thoughts. I liked science and spent too much time reading beyond the lesson, even when the exam would ask for only three lines. Before tests, classmates borrowed my notes. One afternoon a boy took my chemistry notebook because he had missed two practicals. He promised to return it before the

bus. I spent the final period copying the diagrams from memory onto loose paper, leaving spaces where I could not remember the labels.

When the bell rang, he handed it back at the door. Three boys called him to the field. He thanked me and ran to catch up. I watched them cross the yard, then put my loose pages away. I did not resent him; he had needed the notes, and I had been able to help. Still, I had learned to be glad for a conversation while it lasted, even when the other person had already moved on.

At lunch, the boys argued about cricket. I knew the rules but not the players or the stories that made them laugh. Once I asked who had won the previous match; someone answered, the conversation moved on, and I returned to my book. The girls were not cruel to me. They simply had no reason to seek me out, and I took that absence personally. I could not tell whether they disliked me or had never thought about me. By the time Anurima asked for help, I treated being noticed as a rare event that might end if I moved too quickly.

She tapped the page. “Why does it go there?”

“Because this group pulls electrons—” I began, then stopped. “Wait. I’ll show you the step before that.”

She did not nod to spare my feelings. She asked the question another way until the answer made sense to her. I liked that she wanted to understand the reaction rather than admire me

for knowing it. When we finished, she copied the mechanism carefully, a blue ink mark crossing the side of her finger.

“All right,” she said. “I might pass this subject now.”

“You were going to pass anyway.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I know you’re not bad at it.”

“A generous assessment after one reaction.”

I laughed. Her smile told me the joke had landed, and the nervousness in my shoulders eased a little. We had come to study, but we stayed until the sunlight moved off the tabletop and the boy at the next table stopped tapping. Between questions, Anurima told me which classes she liked and which she endured. She could tell, she said, when a lecturer had stopped explaining and begun repeating the textbook. I told her about my old school and the subjects I liked too much to admit I liked.

When she stood, the chair scraped against the floor. I wanted to ask whether she needed the notes, although she could copy them herself. I knew that was not the reason I wanted to ask. She closed her notebook before I could find a less obvious excuse.

“Are you going to the cafeteria after class?”

“Yes,” I said, too quickly.

“Good.” She tucked the notebook under her arm. “See you there.”

That afternoon, I went home with the reaction still in my head and her question beside it. On the bus I replayed the conversation and

found three places where I should have said something better. I had not asked if she wanted to study again. I had not told her I liked talking to her. I had answered too quickly when she asked about the cafeteria, which might have made me seem desperate. By the time I reached home, I had built a whole second conversation out of the one we had actually had.

The next day, when I saw her across the corridor, I found myself watching to see whether she would turn my way. She was speaking to another student and did not look up. I told myself that this proved nothing. Then I walked to class thinking about it anyway.

Chapter Two — The Cafeteria

I reached the cafeteria early and pretended I had come for the tea. It was a long room with metal tables and windows that stayed open in every kind of weather. Rain made the floor slick near the entrance; in summer, the water was never as cold as we wanted. The tea was too sweet, the vegetable pastries often cold in the middle, and nobody minded. Students came there between classes because it was close and because there was nowhere else to sit without being asked to buy something.

I bought tea in a paper cup and took it to a table by the window. Anurima arrived with her notebook under one arm and glanced at the cup.

“You’ve already ordered?”

“I thought you might want tea.”

“You thought correctly.”

She went to the counter, brought back a paper cup of her own, and sat opposite me. Then she opened her notebook and asked about the next reaction. It took me a moment to realise she was teasing. I had assumed the library session ended when she left the room; she had treated it as the beginning of another conversation.

We started with chemistry and wandered into other subjects. When she asked why I was so careful not to spill tea on the notes, I said the pages were the only clean copy I had. She wanted to know whether I always kept everything in order. I told her my room would

prove otherwise. She said she liked the version of me that had a tidy notebook, and I could not tell whether she was teasing.

When we were packing up, she asked if she could message me if she got stuck on the next reaction. I gave her my number. That evening, after dinner, her name appeared on WhatsApp.

Anurima: Did you get home all right?

Me: Yes. The bus was crowded, but I made it.

Anurima: How far is it from college?

I told her about the bus ride from Ramnagar and how I usually counted the return fare before spending anything. She asked what my house was like and whether I had a room of my own. I described the room at the back of our house, the window facing the trees, and my mother reminding me to eat before I left in the morning. Her questions were ordinary, but I found myself answering more fully than I expected.

Anurima: Do you talk to your mother about everything?

Me: Not everything. We mostly talk about what needs doing.

She said she could talk to her mother about most things, though there were subjects she had first tried to understand on her own. Then she told me about a friend who had missed class because she was embarrassed to ask someone for a sanitary pad. Anurima had been angry—not at her friend, but at the way people had made an ordinary need feel shameful. Periods, she wrote, were not a curse or a secret.

I answered that I had never thought much about how difficult it could be to ask. She said that was exactly why people should be able to talk about it without turning it into a joke. The conversation stayed there for a while: what we had been taught at home, what classmates joked about, and how silence could make a simple question feel dangerous.

Then she asked if I was comfortable talking about something more personal. I said I thought so, though I was not sure what she meant. She explained that people spoke about sex and masturbation as if both were dirty, even when they were asking honest questions. She added that I did not have to answer anything I did not want to.

After a pause, another message appeared.

Anurima: Can I ask you something directly? Do you masturbate?

I read it twice before replying. I had never heard anyone ask without turning it into a joke or a challenge. For a moment I typed nothing, then wrote that sometimes I did. I added that I had not really talked about it with anyone.

Anurima: That’s okay. You don’t have to tell me anything else. I just don’t think it should be treated like a trap.

I was embarrassed, but she did not tease me or ask for details. A few minutes later, she sent a question about the next chemistry chapter, and I was relieved to answer. Her openness was not an invitation or a test; it was simply how she chose to speak. I wanted to impress her with an

equally confident reply, but instead I asked what she meant by a particular term. She explained it without laughing at me. I could be uncertain in front of her without becoming a joke.

After that, the cafeteria became part of our routine. We met between classes when our timetables allowed; sometimes she brought a question, sometimes I brought notes, and sometimes neither of us had an academic reason to sit together. We learned who took sugar in tea and who disliked coriander. Anurima leaned forward when she laughed. I had a habit of answering questions nobody had asked, and she noticed that too.

The first time we ate somewhere beyond the college gate, a lecture had ended early and the afternoon still had an hour left in it. Anurima closed her notebook and asked whether I had to catch the bus straight home. I said I did not, though I had not thought about what else I might do. She suggested the little restaurant beside the stationery shop, where students could sit for a while without ordering much.

The menu was handwritten on a board near the counter. I read it from the top, then went back and checked the prices. Anurima was looking at the names of the dishes, but I could feel myself doing the arithmetic: bus fare, something to eat, and enough left in my pocket for the ride home if the evening ran late. I settled on an egg roll before she could ask what I wanted.

“That’s what I was going to get,” she said.

“You’ve already read the menu?”

“I have been here before.” She nodded at the board. “The chow mein is good too, if you want to share one.”

I said the roll would be enough. She did not argue or offer to pay. We ordered one each and found a table near the open front, where the traffic kept lifting the edge of the paper napkins. The roll was hot enough to burn my tongue. Anurima laughed when I tried to hide it, then unscrewed the cap on her water bottle and slid it toward me.

We talked about the lecturer who had dismissed us early, then about a film she had watched with her sister, then about the way people in class made a spectacle of anyone who asked an awkward question. The food was gone before either of us noticed. When we stood to leave, she asked if I would come back with her another day. I said yes too quickly, and she smiled as if she had heard the speed of my answer.

One afternoon she asked whether I had ever been in love. I said no. She asked if I had ever liked anyone, and I told her maybe. When she wanted to know whether I had told the girl, I looked down at the tea cooling in my cup. I was afraid of being laughed at, and afraid that saying it aloud would turn the feeling into something she could reject. As long as I kept it inside, I could pretend it was still possible.

“I didn’t know what to say,” I told her.

“That’s fair,” she said, and did not push.

I was grateful and a little disappointed. Around us, students came and went. A group from the nutrition department argued about a practical; someone dropped a spoon; a vendor outside called the price of guavas. I began to imagine that if I stayed near her long enough, she might understand what I could not bring myself to say. At the time, I mistook that private hope for a plan.

Chapter Three — Four Plates

Anurima brought her friend Aheli to the cafeteria on a Thursday. Aheli took the chair beside her and looked at Anurima’s open notebook.

“This is Aheli,” Anurima said. “She thinks I spend too much time studying.”

“I said you spend too much time pretending to study,” Aheli corrected. “There’s a difference.”

Anurima made a face at her, then introduced me as the person who explained chemistry without making her feel stupid. Aheli asked if I could explain statistics. I said no, and she laughed at my honesty.

The next day I brought Sagnik, my friend from school. He could turn a five-minute wait into an event. He knew which shop sold the best muri, a puffed-rice snack, which bus conductor let students ride without exact change, and which lecturers could be distracted with a question about their old college. I had known him long before I learned how to make friends at college, and I felt more like myself when he was around.

He arrived halfway through lunch, carrying two cups of tea and a story about the bus conductor who had accused him of paying with a torn note. Sagnik told it as if he had won a court case. Aheli asked what the conductor had actually said. Sagnik repeated the sentence in a voice that made the man sound ridiculous, and

Aheli laughed despite herself. I watched him bring her tea without asking whether she wanted it. She accepted the cup, then told him not to make a habit of deciding for her.

“See?” Sagnik said to me. “She argues even when I’m being generous.”

“Maybe she can be grateful and still disagree,” Anurima said.

He laughed, but his face changed for a second. I noticed it and looked away. At the time, I thought the quickness of his mood was part of his charm. He could make people feel included, and he liked being the person who knew what everyone should do. I knew the second part annoyed me sometimes. I had not yet learned to take that annoyance seriously.

The four of us began sitting together. First it was a shared table, then a walk to the gate, then a stop at the stall for masala muri. Sagnik and Aheli found a way to argue about almost anything, while Anurima and I kept their arguments going by taking opposite sides for no reason. The stall stood just outside the college road, where the traffic thinned enough for people to wait without being pushed into the dust. The vendor mixed puffed rice with chopped onion, green chilli, mustard oil, and lime in a tin bowl, then added chanachur, a crunchy spiced snack mix, and passed the paper cones across the counter.

Anurima always asked for more chilli. I pretended I could manage the same amount. One afternoon, she watched me blink through

the spice and pointed out that I was sweating. I blamed the weather, although the day was cool. She shook her head and passed me her water bottle. She did not make a performance of helping; she simply slid it across the table.

We went to nearby restaurants three or four days a week. They had plastic tables, menus with curled edges, and fans that made more noise than wind. We chose meals that fit the pocket money we had brought and split dishes when someone wanted to save their cash for later. Sagnik and Aheli bickered through the meals: he complained that she ordered too much, and she ate the last piece to prove she could. Anurima usually sat beside me. If we shared a menu, she angled it so both of us could read.

A week later, our nutrition lecturer divided us into groups for a short presentation on a familiar meal and its nutritional value. Sagnik volunteered our four names before the lecturer had finished explaining the assignment. Aheli turned around in her seat and asked whether he had also volunteered to do the work. He grinned and said he would handle the introduction.

We met in an empty classroom after the last practical. The room held the day’s heat; the ceiling fan clicked once each time it turned. Anurima brought a sheet of ruled paper, Aheli had borrowed a reference book, and I had written down the approximate ingredients in a plate of masala muri from the college stall.

Sagnik arrived late with a packet of biscuits and announced that he had a better topic: biryani.

“Biryani isn’t a familiar meal?” Aheli asked.

“It’s familiar to everyone.”

“Not as a daily meal. And the assignment asks for something we can analyse properly.”

Sagnik put the packet down. “I said I’d do the introduction.”

“That isn’t the same as choosing the subject.”

He looked at me, as if I might confirm that she was making too much of it. I bent over my notes. Anurima pushed the sheet toward the middle of the desk. “We can compare the stall’s masala muri with what someone might add at home. It’s cheap, it’s familiar, and we can be honest about what we don’t know.”

Aheli opened the book to a chapter on energy and nutrients. I began listing what went into the stall version: puffed rice, onion, chilli, oil, lime, peanuts if the vendor had them. Sagnik leaned back and said we were making a lot of effort over a snack. I asked whether he wanted to choose another topic. He shrugged.

“We can make it less complicated,” Anurima said. “We don’t need to pretend we know the exact quantities. We can weigh one serving and explain that the result only applies to that serving.”

I had been thinking the same thing, but I had not planned to say it. She looked toward me, waiting. I suggested we visit the stall after the lunch rush, ask the vendor to make one serving the way he normally did, weigh the ingredients,

and measure the oil he added before mixing it in. That would still describe one serving, not every plate he sold. Aheli added that we should distinguish the nutritional estimate from a claim about what people ought to eat. Sagnik tapped the biscuit packet against his knee.

“So I can still do the introduction?”

“If you want,” Aheli said. “Just don’t tell everyone it’s the healthiest food in town.”

He laughed, and some of the tension left his shoulders. “Fine. I’ll say it’s the food most likely to stain your shirt.”

The work took longer than we expected. We argued over whether the measured serving represented what the vendor usually added. He told us he had used slightly less while we watched, so Anurima wanted us to note that limit instead of choosing a neater number. When the classroom attendant came to lock the corridor, we gathered our papers and went outside. The rain had started again, fine at first and then heavy enough to blur the road beyond the gate.

We waited under the awning with our bags between our feet. Aheli complained that Sagnik had eaten the biscuits he was supposed to share. He handed her the empty packet as evidence that sharing had already happened. Anurima laughed and leaned her shoulder against the wall. I stood beside her, trying not to crowd her, while water ran from the edge of the roof in a steady line.

“You explained that well,” she said, nodding at the notes in my hand.

“I only measured things.”

“That’s what the assignment is about.”

It was a small compliment, and she did not wait for me to make something out of it. She turned to ask Aheli whether she had an umbrella. I folded the notes carefully so the rain would not reach them. I remember that afternoon because it was the first time I had contributed without first being asked for an answer. I did not yet understand that being included could be ordinary. I only knew that when the four of us left the college together, no one walked ahead and left me behind.

The following week, we carried our measurements to class in a folder that had begun to soften at the corners. Sagnik had written the opening on the back of a practical sheet. He had made it sound like a speech about the history of street food, although our lecturer had asked us to discuss one serving and what we could reasonably estimate from it.

“You’ve written a whole page,” Aheli said, reading over his shoulder.

“I’m setting the scene.”

“You’re introducing the entire history of puffed rice.”

“People need context.”

“They need to know what we measured.”

Anurima took the sheet from him and scanned it. “Keep the first two lines. Then say why we chose the stall version.”

Sagnik frowned at the page, but he did not take it back. “Fine. A shorter history of puffed rice.”

When our turn came, the four of us stood at the front with one sheet of figures and a paper cone from the stall as a prop. Sagnik began with a joke about the mustard oil that had nearly marked his shirt. The class laughed, and even our lecturer smiled. Then he said we had measured a single serving rather than treating one vendor’s recipe as a standard for every plate. His voice was steadier once he reached the part he had prepared himself.

Aheli explained the ingredients and how we had estimated their amounts. She was clear about the limits: the vendor’s hand was not a measuring spoon, the amount of oil varied, and our calculation could describe only the serving we had weighed that afternoon. When she finished, the lecturer asked whether we could still call the snack nutritious if the estimate changed each time.

I had written an answer in the margin of my notes, but when I looked up, I saw the lecturer waiting for me. My throat tightened. Anurima shifted the page toward my side of the table without saying anything. The familiar list of ingredients was there, with my small question mark beside the oil.

“We can describe what is in the serving we measured,” I said. “But the variation means we shouldn’t turn that result into a general claim about every portion. We can say what we

observed and what we weren’t able to measure reliably.”

The lecturer nodded. “That distinction matters.”

My answer was shorter than the one in my notes. I had expected to keep talking until I sounded certain. Instead, I stopped when I had said what we knew. Anurima met my eyes for a moment, then looked down to let Aheli take the next question.

The lecturer pointed at the oil entry and asked how we had measured it. “We asked the vendor to measure what he normally added before mixing the serving,” I said. “He used slightly less because he knew we were measuring, so we’ve noted that the estimate may be low.” Sagnik added that the vendor had let us take the sample after the lunch rush, when there was time to answer our questions. He did not claim the vendor had followed a standard recipe. He made the detail sound worth including, and it was.

We received a good mark, with a note to make our method easier to follow next time. Outside the classroom, Sagnik read the note twice and declared that the lecturer had praised his introduction. Aheli said the lecturer had praised our method. They began arguing over which part had made the presentation work, but neither sounded truly angry.

Anurima walked beside me toward the stairs. “You didn’t look at your notes once at the end.”

“I looked at them before I started.”

“That’s not the same thing.”

“I knew the answer.”

“You knew part of it. The rest you worked out.” She said this without making it sound like a test I had passed. “You should let yourself notice that.”

I looked at the folder under my arm. “You moved the page toward me.”

“You had written the answer.”

I wanted to tell her that the page had been easier to read because she had moved it, though the writing had not changed. I thanked her instead. She accepted the thanks and asked if I was coming to the stall. The four of us were already heading there, and I followed without needing to decide whether I had been invited.

At one of the restaurants, Sagnik ordered a plate of egg rolls before anyone else had opened the menu. The waiter had already written it down when Aheli said, “I don’t eat egg.”

Sagnik looked up from the menu. “You could have told me before I ordered.”

“You could have asked before you ordered for everyone.”

He smiled, but the smile came a beat late. “I was trying to make it easy.”

“I know. But I still don’t eat egg.”

The waiter waited with his pencil raised. Sagnik glanced at him, then at Aheli, as if the decision had become a public test. Anurima closed the menu she had been reading. “We can get one for whoever wants it and order something else for the table.”

“That’s what I meant,” Sagnik said. He turned back to the waiter and added a plate of vegetable chop. Aheli asked for tea. I asked for the same, though I had not wanted tea until she did. The waiter repeated the order and left.

For a few minutes, Sagnik made jokes about the menu, and the awkwardness loosened. When the food came, Aheli took a vegetable chop and pushed the egg rolls toward the middle. Sagnik offered her one anyway, then caught himself. “Sorry. Habit.”

“You’ll learn,” she said.

He laughed, and she did too. The tension passed, at least on the surface. I had grown up with Sagnik and knew these shifts: a favour offered, a flicker of pride when it was refused, then a joke to bring everyone back. I treated it as one of his moods, not a pattern worth asking about. That evening, with Anurima beside me, I let the moment go.

After lunch, the four of us walked to the gate. Aheli and Sagnik went ahead, still debating whether the college could serve a decent meal for the price. Anurima slowed to match my pace. She asked whether I was glad I had brought my friend. I said yes.

“You look different when he’s around,” she said.

“Different how?”

“Less like you’re waiting for permission to speak.”

I wanted to ask whether she liked me better that way. Instead I said Sagnik had known me

since school. She nodded and did not rescue me from the answer I had chosen.

One afternoon, when Aheli and Sagnik went to the counter, Anurima asked whether I thought they liked each other. I said they argued too much. She said that was not an answer. From our table we could see Sagnik leaning over the counter to ask the vendor for an extra spoon. Aheli had already taken one from the jar and was telling him not to order for her.

“He likes her,” I said. “I don’t know if she likes him back.”

“You never know anything about people.”

“I know chemistry.”

“That isn’t the same thing.”

I watched Sagnik hand Aheli the spoon she had already found. “It would be easier if people just said what they meant.”

“Would it?” Anurima asked. She folded the softened rim of her empty paper cup. “What if someone is waiting for you to say it first?”

I thought she meant Aheli. “Then they’ll be waiting a long time. I’d rather be sure.”

Anurima looked toward the counter. By the time she turned back, her expression had gone light again. “You’re going to make people work very hard to understand you.”

I said she was exaggerating. She only smiled and asked whether I had finished the notes for the next class. I returned to the safer subject. I did not recognise the question she had asked as something that could include me.

Sagnik started waiting for Aheli after class. He learned what she liked to eat and which bus she took. One afternoon, after our practical ran late, he went ahead to the stall and came back with two paper plates of vegetable chop. He had remembered that she did not eat egg. Aheli looked from the food to him.

“You didn’t have to get me anything.”

“I wanted some too,” he said. “If you don’t eat it, I’ll have to finish both.”

She laughed and took one of the plates. “That sounds like a problem you made for yourself.”

“I’m generous. It’s a difficult life.”

He said it lightly, and for a while we ate without making the gesture mean more than it did. When Aheli’s bus came, Sagnik walked with her to the stop and asked if she had her notes. She checked her bag and showed him the book. He watched her climb aboard, then turned back toward us.

“She could have waited for the next one,” he said.

“She had to get home,” I replied.

He nodded, as if he knew that. I thought he was disappointed because the day had ended. I had seen him be generous and heard him complain that nobody respected him, but I did not connect those parts of him.

Chapter Four — The Price of a Plate

After college I climbed to the second floor of our three-storey house and dropped my bag in the room at the back, its window facing the trees. The room was spacious, and visitors often paused when they came in. We had another house shared with the joint family, and we owned land. My father had a good job, as my grandfather had before him; money was secure at home. If I asked my parents for more, they would have given it to me. I disliked asking, so I carried twenty to fifty rupees to college and tried to make it last. Some classmates brought a hundred or two and ordered without checking the menu. Beside them, my allowance felt small. I mistook that feeling for being poor, though it came from a comparison I had made myself.

A second plate meant spending most of the money I had chosen to bring that day. I tried not to think about it as we walked into the restaurant beside the main road.

It was a narrow place with a glass case near the counter and a television mounted too high in the corner. We took the table closest to the wall. Sagnik ordered for everyone before we had decided what we wanted.

“We’ll split it,” he said. “It’s easier.”

The dishes arrived. Aheli stole a piece from his plate. Anurima asked for the chilli sauce. I tried to follow the conversation and not calculate the price of every bite.

When the bill came, Sagnik reached for it. I reached too, because I did not want to be the one who never paid. Our hands touched the paper at the same time.

“I’ve got it,” he said.

“We can split it.”

“Next time.”

He said it easily. I heard something else: *You can’t afford it.* Maybe that was not what he meant. I kept the thought anyway. Outside, Anurima fell into step beside me. “You got quiet.”

“I’m fine.”

“You always say that when you’re not.”

I looked at her, then away. The road was busy with bicycles and auto-rickshaws. A bus passed close enough to lift the loose end of her dupatta, the long scarf over her shoulder. “I don’t like people paying for me.”

“Then pay next time.”

“If I can.”

She stopped walking. “Aritra, I didn’t ask Sagnik to pay. He wanted to. It’s not a test.”

“I know.”

“Do you?”

There was no accusation in her voice, only a question. I could have answered honestly: I did not know how to be with a girl I liked without measuring what I could provide. I did not know how to accept kindness without turning it into a debt. Instead I said, “Let’s go. We’ll miss the auto.”

She held my gaze for a second, then began walking again. On the ride home, I kept hearing her say, “It’s not a test.” The town slid past the open side of the auto-rickshaw; I watched the shops go by and tried to think of a reply that would not sound like an argument.

I did not yet know Anurima was not asking me to be rich. I had not asked her what she wanted at all.

At home, a bill for the electricity sat beneath the blue clip on my mother’s cupboard. She kept the household papers together; my father handled the larger expenses. When she sent me to buy oil or potatoes, I brought back the change and set it beside her sewing machine. No one asked whether we could afford dinner. I still held on to my own coins as if each had a rule attached.

One evening she was sorting vegetables on the floor when I came in. The power had gone out, and the room was lit by a rechargeable lamp. I put my bag down and sat across from her to cut green chillies. The knife was blunt; I had to press harder than I should have. She glanced at my face.

“What happened?”

“Nothing.”

“You’ve been saying nothing since you came home.”

I told her the boys at college carried more money than I did. I tried to make it sound like an observation, not a complaint. She listened

without interrupting, then returned to the vegetables.

“Do they have more?” she asked.

“I don’t know. They spend more.”

“Those are not the same thing.”

I looked at the chillies in my hand. “If I had money, I could take someone out without thinking about the bill.”

“Someone?” She did not look up, but I knew she had heard the part I had tried to hide.

“A friend.”

“Then ask the friend what she wants to eat.”

“It’s not that simple.”

My mother nudged the bowl closer to me. “It rarely is. But you don’t have to solve everything with money.”

I was old enough to recognise that she was offering advice and young enough to think I already knew its limits. I wanted to tell her that gifts mattered, that being able to pay mattered, that I could not ask Anurima to meet me at a roadside stall forever. Instead, I said the chillies were making my eyes water. The power came back before she answered. She reached for the switch, and the tube light filled the room with its familiar hard glare.

The next afternoon, Anurima and I shared tea outside the nutrition building. She took out a small notebook and showed me a list of things she had to do before the next practical: buy paper, borrow a reference book, ask her cousin about a form. I watched her cross off each item as she finished explaining it.

“You plan everything?” I asked.

“Only the things I’m afraid I’ll forget.”

“What are you afraid you’ll forget?”

“The things that matter.” She capped her pen. “You don’t have to keep worrying about the restaurant bill, you know.”

I was surprised. “I’m not.”

She tilted her head. “You counted the change twice.”

I had not known she noticed. The realisation embarrassed me more than the bill itself. “I just like to be sure.”

“You’re allowed to be sure without punishing yourself for it.”

She said it lightly, as if she were talking about a lab measurement. Then she asked whether I had finished the notes for the next class. I answered, relieved to have a question I knew how to solve. I wanted to be able to take Anurima anywhere and buy whatever she liked. She had not asked me for either.

Chapter Five — The Things We Heard

Sagnik liked to know what people thought of him. He would ask a question and pretend it was a joke. “Aheli thinks I’m annoying, doesn’t she?” Or, “Anurima said you’re too serious.” He made the question sound harmless by laughing first. If you agreed, he could pretend he had only been teasing; if you disagreed, he had still learned what you thought.

At first I thought he wanted reassurance. He had always been louder than me, but sometimes the loudness seemed to be doing a job. He needed the room to keep answering him.

In school, I had thought of that loudness as a kind of shelter. At the science exhibition in Class Eleven, our rainwater model stopped working just before the judges reached our table. I had made the cardboard houses and painted the lanes; Sagnik had been meant to explain how the water moved from the roofs into the storage tank. The small plastic tube had slipped off its joint. I was crouched behind the table trying to push it back on when I heard the judge ask what had happened.

“The demonstration is taking a break,” Sagnik said. He did not sound embarrassed. He picked up the loose tube, showed the judge where it had come apart, and explained how the rain would pass through the filter before reaching the tank. He knew enough from listening to me practise that he could make the

explanation sound simple. The judge leaned closer. I fixed the joint while Sagnik kept talking, and by the time he finished, the water ran through again.

We did not win anything. On the way home, Sagnik said the model would have been fine if I had used stronger glue. I told him he could have explained the filter without pretending the system was working. He laughed and bought us both lemon ice from the stall near the bus stop. I remember the cold sweetness and the wet cardboard smell of the model between us. I also remember that he had stayed at the table while I fixed it. We had been useful to each other in different ways, and I had taken that to mean we would always know how to be friends.

The first time I noticed how easily his questions could change the mood, the four of us were waiting for class to begin. Anurima and Aheli were comparing notes for a practical while Sagnik turned a paper cup around on the desk. He had been telling a story about a teacher from his school, but nobody laughed at the ending. He looked at me as if I had missed a cue.

“You know what I mean, right?”

“I think so.”

“You think so, or you agree?”

“I don’t know the teacher.”

“That’s not what I asked.” He smiled, but his thumb kept bending the cup’s rim. “Do people think I talk too much?”

Aheli glanced up. “Sometimes.”

He turned to her. “You could have lied.”

“You asked.”

“I was joking.”

“Then why do you look hurt?”

Anurima closed her notebook. Sagnik laughed as if the exchange had gone exactly as he wanted. The cup made a small crack under his thumb. He flattened it and set it down.

“You two are impossible,” he said.

“And yet you keep sitting with us,” Aheli replied.

“Because I’m generous.”

The lecturer came in before the conversation could go further. Sagnik leaned back, and within a minute he was whispering a joke to me about the lecture notes. He could turn a tense moment into an ordinary one if he wanted to. I mistook that skill for proof that the tension had not mattered.

One afternoon, while Anurima and Aheli went to buy notebooks, Sagnik leaned across the cafeteria table. “You and Anurima talk a lot.”

“We’re friends.”

“Sure.” He dragged the word out. “She tells you everything?”

“No.”

“She tells Aheli you never notice when someone likes you. That she’s tired of having to make everything clear.”

I looked at him. “Did Anurima say that?”

“Not in those words. It’s what she means.”

He lifted both hands as if I had accused him. I had not. I should have asked what words Anurima had actually used. Instead, I spent the

rest of the day trying to remember whether she had ever looked at me in a way I might have mistaken for ordinary friendliness.

The following week, Aheli asked if I knew why Sagnik had been acting strange. We were outside the practical room, waiting for a lecturer to bring the keys. Anurima had gone to fill her bottle. Sagnik was down the corridor, laughing with two boys from another section.

“He says you don’t like him,” Aheli said. “He says you’ve been telling Anurima not to talk to him.”

“I never said that.”

“I thought so.”

“Why would he say it?”

She shrugged, but her eyes were tired. “You should ask him.”

I found him alone at the muri stall after college. He had bought a cone and was trying to eat without getting mustard oil on his shirt. I stood beside him, waiting for him to offer some. He held it out, and I took a handful.

“Aheli says you told her I’m keeping you away from her,” I said.

He stared at me, then at the road. “I didn’t say that.”

“She says you told her I asked Anurima not to talk to you.”

“I said you get weird when we talk. That’s true.”

“I never asked her to stop.”

“You don’t have to say it directly. You go quiet. You look at me like I’ve stolen something.”

I could hear the truth in the second sentence, which made the first one harder to answer. I had been jealous. I had not told Anurima what to do, but my silence had become its own kind of pressure.

“I don’t want to control who she talks to,” I said.

“Then don’t act like you do.”

He took another mouthful, still looking toward the road. Then he wiped his fingers on the newspaper cone. “She thinks I’m a child.”

“Did Aheli say that?”

“Not in those words.” He looked at me, almost daring me to laugh. “She says I turn everything into a joke. Maybe I do. If I don’t, I have to find out whether she likes being around me when I’m not making her laugh.”

I understood the fear before I understood what he had admitted. “You could ask her.”

“And if she says no?”

I looked down at the muri in my hand. “Then you’d know.”

“Is that what you do with Anurima?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t know what I’d do with the answer.”

He laughed, but this time it was quiet. “At least you know that much.” He pinched another handful from the paper cone. We stood beside

the stall until the vendor began clearing the counter, neither of us saying what the other should do next.

I still wanted him to admit that he had repeated my private hesitation as a fact about my intentions. Instead, he had shown me the fear behind his jokes, and the part of myself I had been keeping behind silence. For a moment I thought we had cleared something up. I did not ask whether he had said anything else to Aheli or Anurima. I did not want the answer badly enough to risk another accusation.

When I rejoined the girls, Anurima was waiting near the college gate. She asked if I had spoken to Sagnik. I said yes. She watched my face for a moment.

“And?”

“He said he hadn’t told Aheli that I asked you not to talk to him.”

“Did he tell her you get weird when we talk?”

I paused. “Something like that.”

“Do you?”

“Sometimes.”

She adjusted the strap of her bag. “I’m not asking you to pretend you don’t. I’m asking you not to make it my job to guess.”

I walked with her to the auto stand. She did not ask another question, and I did not volunteer anything. We stood in line with several students from her class, leaving enough space between us for everyone to think we were simply waiting for the same ride.

Sagnik was still my friend. He knew where I had come from, what my school had been like, which teacher had once called me a walking textbook. He had sat with me through exam results and family trouble, the sort of ordinary loyalty that is difficult to count until it begins to disappear. If I confronted him and he laughed, I would look foolish. If I said nothing, the group might continue as it was.

The silence followed us into the next week. Anurima began asking me questions when Sagnik and Aheli were not there. Had I heard this? Had he told me that? Was I upset with her? I kept saying no. I wanted to be the calm one, the reasonable one. I thought calmness meant never making anyone uncomfortable.

One day, after class, she walked with me to the gate. “You can tell me if something’s bothering you.”

“Nothing is.”

“You don’t have to protect me from every unpleasant conversation.”

I looked at her. “I’m not.” She gave me a small, unconvinced smile. “All right.” Then Sagnik called her name from behind us. She turned. I watched him catch up and say something I could not hear. They walked ahead together, not touching, not doing anything that should have mattered. My stomach tightened all the same.

That evening, I tried to write a message to Anurima. I typed, *Sagnik said you think I don’t notice when people like me.* I deleted it. I typed,

Did you tell him I'm too serious? I deleted that too. The unsent words made me feel both safer and more suspicious.

The next morning Sagnik came to class smiling. "You're quiet," he said. "Did I do something?" I looked at him and thought of the two versions of every conversation he might be carrying between us. I still had no proof. I had only the words he said and the unease they left behind.

"No," I said.

He grinned. "Good. I thought you were angry." I told myself I had chosen peace. It was easier than admitting I had chosen not to find out.

Chapter Six — A Message in Her Name

The trouble began with a message I sent from Anurima's account. By then, Sagnik had told me that Anurima was tired of me. He had told her, I later learned, that I thought she was leading me on. He told Aheli that I had asked him not to spend time with her. Each version was small enough to sound plausible and large enough to make the next conversation feel dangerous.

I did not know all of that at once. I knew only that Anurima had begun looking at me as if she were waiting for me to explain something, and that Sagnik could sit beside us smiling as though nothing had changed.

One afternoon I saw a message from him on Anurima's phone. She had left it on the table while she went to the counter. The screen lit up. I saw his name and a line that began, *I was only saying—*

I could have waited for her to come back. I could have asked what he meant. Instead, I picked up the phone. I told myself I was going to see what he had written, nothing more. Then I was reading their conversation, then scrolling upward, then forming a story from fragments. I found the part where he had called me too serious. I found a joke about how Anurima always had to explain things to me. I found a message where he had written that she deserved someone more confident.

My face went hot. The cafeteria noise seemed to move far away. I put the phone down when I heard her returning. She took it without noticing. I watched her tuck it into her bag and felt both ashamed and newly certain that I had to do something.

That night, I opened Anurima’s account on my own phone and wrote to Sagnik. I didn’t have her permission. Before I sent the first message, I paused over the words and tried to imagine how she would phrase them. I told him she knew what he had been saying, that she cared about me, and that he had to stop interfering. He replied before I had put the phone down. I answered as her, then answered again when he pushed back. I accused him and claimed she had chosen me, though she had never said that. By the time I stopped, I had turned my guess about her feelings into something I was presenting as fact.

At college the next day, Sagnik barely spoke to her. The tension in the group eased. Anurima looked relieved, and I took that relief as evidence that I had helped.

I told Anurima what I had done before the week was over. I had been waiting for a moment when she would understand why I did it. The longer I waited, the harder it became to bring up.

We were standing in the corridor after class. The others had gone ahead. She had asked why Sagnik had suddenly stopped speaking to her. I

could not keep the secret and still pretend I had been honest.

“I messaged him,” I said.

“You did?”

“From your account.”

The expression on her face changed so quickly I almost missed it. First confusion. Then disbelief. Then anger that seemed to arrive from somewhere deeper than the moment.

“You used my account?”

“I wanted him to stop. He was saying things about you and me. I thought if he understood—”

“Who asked you to do that?”

“No one. I was trying to help.”

“You were pretending to be me.”

“What did you tell him?” she asked.

I told her. I had written that she cared about me, that she had chosen me, and that Sagnik should stay away. Saying the words aloud made them sound more certain than I had been when I typed them.

“I hadn’t chosen anything,” she said. “I hadn’t even told you I wanted a relationship.”

“I thought you liked me.”

“You thought. That isn’t the same as knowing.”

I looked at the floor. There was no way to defend the sentence without turning my guess into another claim about her. “You’re right.”

“Even if he was bothering me, you didn’t have to decide what to do in my name.”

I reached for the explanation I had rehearsed in my head, but every sentence sounded worse as soon as it left me. “He was bothering you.”

“You could have asked what I wanted.”

She did not raise her voice. She spoke slowly, as if she wanted to make sure I heard every word.

“I thought you would be glad,” I said.

“Why would I be glad you went behind my back?”

I had no answer that did not begin with *because I thought I knew what was best for you.* She looked toward the stairs. “I need to go.”

“Anurima—”

“Not now, Aritra.”

She left. I remained in the corridor with the late-afternoon sun cutting a bright square across the floor. My hands had begun to shake. I wanted to follow her and make her understand that I cared. I wanted to do the one thing she had just asked me not to do.

I went to class instead. I copied the lecturer’s notes without taking in a word, then walked to the bus stop with the page folded in my pocket. On the ride home I kept composing a message that began with what Sagnik had done. Each time, I stopped before sending it. That was the part I had been trying to avoid: whatever Sagnik had said, I had chosen to use Anurima’s account and speak in her name.

The next morning, I sent: *I’m sorry I read your messages and wrote to Sagnik as you. I shouldn’t have gone through your phone or used*

your account. I wanted to stop him saying things about us, but I had no right to speak for you. You don't have to reply now.

She saw it before lunch. I watched the small mark beneath the message change and then stared at the screen, waiting. Her reply came much later: *We should talk when Aheli is there. All four of us.*

I typed that I understood. I wanted to ask if she still liked me, if she would ever trust me again, if the message meant she had not decided to end our friendship. I sent only, *Okay. Tell me when.*

The group planned to meet near the canal that weekend. We said it was to clear the air. I wanted it to be a return to what we had been. I had not yet learned that those were different things.

Chapter Seven — Shalukbend

A conversation beside the canal

Shalukbend was a short walk from my house. The canal curved beneath a line of trees, and a narrow path led down from the road to a level patch beside the water. In the afternoon, light moved through the leaves and broke across the slow surface. Children sometimes came to skip stones; bicycles leaned against the trunks. It was one of the prettiest quiet places nearby, and

we had chosen it because no one would hurry us along. That afternoon, though, every word sounded as if it had been prepared in advance.

Sagnik was already waiting when Aheli and I arrived. He stood up, brushed dust from his trousers, and asked if Anurima was coming. The question sounded ordinary. I noticed that he had asked it before saying hello to either of us.

“She’s on her way,” I said.

He nodded and looked across the water. Aheli sat on the low concrete edge beneath the trees. I stayed standing, partly because there was no room beside her and partly because I did not know where I wanted to be when Anurima arrived. The week had been a succession of careful greetings and conversations abandoned before the important sentence. I had written apologies in my head until they sounded like arguments.

Anurima came down the path a few minutes later with her bag hanging from one shoulder. She greeted Aheli first, then me. Sagnik gave her a quick smile, as if the four of us had met for tea rather than to discuss the damage we had been doing to one another.

“Shall we sit?” Aheli asked.

We arranged ourselves along the edge, leaving a small gap between Anurima and me. A bicycle bell rang on the road above us. Someone was selling vegetables nearby; the seller’s call rose and fell until a bus drowned it out. I watched a line of ants carry a crumb along a root, then forced myself to look at the others.

“We should say what happened,” Aheli said. “One at a time, if possible.”

Sagnik leaned back on his hands. “I don’t know why we’re treating this like a trial.”

“Because every time one of us asks you a question, you say you were joking,” Aheli replied. “You told me Aritra was asking Anurima not to talk to you. Then you told him she was tired of him. You told me she liked you.”

“I didn’t say she liked me.”

“You said she gave you signals.”

“That’s not the same thing.”

Anurima took the strap of her bag off her shoulder and folded it in her lap. “What signal did I give you?”

Sagnik’s face shifted. “I don’t remember the exact conversation.”

“Then why are you sure?”

“You talked to me. You were friendly. I thought there was something there.”

“I talk to Aheli too,” Anurima said.

He gave a tired laugh. “Fine. I’m the only person in the world who has ever misunderstood someone.”

“That’s not what she said,” I put in. I had meant to keep quiet until I could speak calmly, but I could hear myself becoming defensive. “You told me she didn’t want anything to do with me.”

Sagnik turned toward me. “And you went through her phone.”

The words landed exactly where he aimed them. Anurima’s gaze moved to my face. I could

have said he was changing the subject. I could have told them I had already admitted it to her. Instead, I felt the old wish to be seen as the person who had made one mistake for a good reason.

“I did,” I said. “I shouldn’t have.”

“That’s convenient,” Sagnik said. “You get to spy on her and then call it a mistake.”

“I’m not calling it anything. I’m telling you I did it.”

Anurima watched me for a second longer, then looked down at her hands. “I don’t want this to turn into a contest about who did the worst thing.”

“It already has,” Aheli said. She rubbed her thumb over the edge of her phone case. “I want to know why we have to hear everything from someone else. If Sagnik had something to say to me, he could have said it. If you two were confused about each other, you could have asked each other.”

No one answered immediately. The canal water clicked against a bottle caught in the bank. I thought of the message I had sent from Anurima’s account and felt the shame return, sharper because the day was bright and there was nowhere to hide it.

“I thought I was protecting you,” I said. “I should have come to you first.”

“You should have left my account alone,” Anurima said. Her tone was even. “If you were worried, you could have told me. I would have decided what to do.”

I nodded. I wanted to explain that Sagnik had been lying, that I had been frightened, that I thought I was preventing him from making things worse. Each explanation had some truth in it. None changed what I had done.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

She nodded once, not in acceptance but to show she had heard. “All right.”

Sagnik let out a breath. “So now I’m the only bad person here?”

“Nobody said that,” Aheli said.

“You’ve been saying it since we sat down.”

“I’m saying you carried different stories between us and acted surprised when they collided.”

“I never wanted you all to fight.”

“Wanting it or not doesn’t change what you said,” Aheli replied. “You told Aritra that Anurima was tired of him. You told me he didn’t want you near her. You told Anurima he was jealous. When each of us asked you, you laughed and called it a misunderstanding. We’re trying to talk about what happened, and you keep making it sound as if we invented it.”

Sagnik looked toward the canal. “I said Aritra got weird when we talked. He did.”

“I did get jealous,” I said. “That doesn’t mean you had to tell her I wanted to keep you apart.”

“I didn’t say it like that.”

“You said it close enough that she believed it.” Aheli had been rubbing her thumb along the edge of her phone case. She stopped and looked at Anurima. “And you keep asking me what he’s

said, but you don’t ask him to say it in front of you. Then we all come here, and I’m supposed to speak carefully while he tells us he never meant it.”

Anurima’s shoulders tightened. “I didn’t know everything he was saying. I asked him what he meant when I heard it.”

“You asked me too,” Aheli said. “I thought we were friends enough to tell each other when something was wrong.”

“We are.”

“Then why did I find out from him that you thought I believed him?”

Anurima’s mouth opened, then closed. She looked at me, and I could not tell whether she wanted me to answer or stay out of it. I did neither. The silence stretched. Aheli’s voice rose. She had been holding herself still for most of the conversation, but now the words came faster. She turned toward Anurima and snapped in Bengali, “Dui takar mukh niye dosh takar attitude!”—a two-taka face carrying a ten-taka attitude. The insult was meant for her. Anurima’s face changed; she stood and pulled her bag strap back onto her shoulder.

“Don’t talk to me like that.”

Aheli stood too. The anger dropped from her face almost as quickly as it had arrived. “I was angry. I shouldn’t have said it.”

“You said what you wanted to say.”

Sagnik stood, too quick to let the moment pass. “See? Nobody can say anything around her.”

“Leave it,” I said.

He looked at me. “You don’t get to tell me what to do.”

The four of us began speaking at once. Aheli was trying to explain what she meant. Sagnik said no one had listened to him. I tried to interrupt them both. Anurima stood apart, one hand gripping the strap of her bag, her eyes moving from one face to another. For a moment I wanted to reach for her, to make the group stop long enough for her to hear that I was sorry. I did not know whether that would be for her or for my own relief.

She walked toward the path. I followed for two steps, then stopped when she did not look back. The road above us was loud with a passing auto. She waited until it had gone before turning around.

“I need some time,” she said.

I nodded. “Okay.”

Aheli caught up with her. They left together. I watched them climb to the road and disappear behind a shopfront. Sagnik picked up a stone and threw it toward the water. It struck the surface once and sank.

“You think you’re better than me?” he asked.

“No.”

“Then why did you go behind my back?”

I turned to him. “You’ve been telling people different things about each other for weeks.”

“I didn’t use anyone’s account.”

“No,” I said. “You didn’t.”

There was no satisfying answer after that. We stayed by the canal as the sun lowered behind the trees. Sagnik sent a few messages on his phone and did not tell me to whom. I watched the last light thin across the water and disappear. On the ride home, I kept composing the apology I would make to Anurima. Each version began with what I had meant to do. None began with what I had done.

For the next two days I did not contact her. I wanted to ask whether she still trusted me, but that would have made her responsible for calming the fear I had helped create. On the third afternoon, she messaged about the nutrition project. She had the reference book and wanted to know whether we could work on the charts at my house, where I had the notes we needed.

I read the message several times before replying. I typed, *Are we all right?* Then I deleted it and wrote, *Yes. Come whenever you're ready.*

She answered with a time and asked me to make sure the project sheets were there. It was a practical plan, not a promise that she had forgiven me. I wanted to treat it as both. I set the notes on the table and told myself it was only a project meeting.

Chapter Eight — The Project Picnic

The afternoon the project stopped

Anurima came to my house before the group finally came apart. We had a college project to finish. She arrived with a folder, two pens, and a packet of biscuits. My family was out for the afternoon. The house felt different with the front door closed and no one calling from the next room.

She had taken an auto from the main road and walked the last stretch after the driver refused to come down our narrow lane. When I opened the door, she was brushing dust from the hem of her kurta. I offered to take her bag. She handed it over, then immediately asked where we could sit and work. Her directness helped me stop thinking about how unusual it felt to have her inside the house.

I brought water and tea. She opened the packet of biscuits and set it between us, as if we were on a study break in the cafeteria. I told her my mother had left rice and vegetables in the kitchen, but Anurima said she had eaten on the way. We laughed when the house clock chimed the wrong hour; it had been slow for weeks, and no one had bothered to fix it. For the first hour, we kept to the assignment and the weather outside.

“We should finish the charts first,” she said.

“Yes.”

We sat at the table. For an hour, we did what we had come to do. She wrote headings; I checked the references. She drew a line through one of my sentences and replaced it with a shorter one. I told her the new version was better. She looked pleased, then tried not to show it.

The weather had turned cool after a cloudy morning. A little wind came through the half-open window and lifted the corner of our papers. Somewhere outside, a pressure cooker

whistled. The whole afternoon seemed to have slowed down around the table.

We argued over a heading. I wanted to write that a balanced diet improved overall health; she said it was too broad to be useful. I suggested adding a sentence about micronutrients. She read the line, tapped the end of my pencil, and said I had used the word “important” three times on one page.

“It is important,” I said.

“Then prove it with something more interesting than the word.”

I crossed out the sentence and tried again. She watched me write, then leaned over to point at a reference in the book. A trace of blue ink had appeared on the side of her finger. She rubbed at it with a tissue, making a pale streak across her skin.

“You’ve been quiet since the canal,” I said.

“I was quiet before the canal.”

“I know.”

She folded the used tissue into a small square. “You keep waiting until something becomes a problem before you tell me it’s bothering you.”

“I don’t like making things worse.”

“Sometimes not saying anything makes things worse for longer.”

I looked at the page. “I thought if I explained what Sagnik was doing, you’d understand why I read the messages.”

“I understand why you were worried.” She paused. “That doesn’t make it all right.”

“I know.”

“You keep saying that.”

I put the pencil down. “I’m sorry I used your account. I should have come to you first.”

She glanced at me, then back at the project. “Thank you.”

She did not ask me to promise anything. She returned to the notes, and I followed her lead. We worked through the next section without deciding what her thanks meant for us.

When we finished the section we had planned, she stacked the papers and checked that none had been left under the book. The light had shifted across the table, and the house was quiet enough that I could hear the clock lose another minute. Anurima checked the time on her phone and said the project was still only half done. I said we could finish the charts another day. She did not move to gather her things. Neither of us reached for the next page. Anurima looked at me. I looked back. It was not the first time we had held each other’s gaze, but it was the first time neither of us found an excuse to stop.

I could see the question in her face and knew I had one too. I did not ask her to say what she felt first. I moved my hand across the table, slowly enough that she could move away. She turned her palm upward. Our fingers met and stayed together. The project pages lay between us, full of words about nutrition that had suddenly become hard to read. We sat without speaking until I asked if I could hug her. She

nodded. I stood, and she stood too. I put my arms around her with the awkward care of someone handling a thing he had wanted for so long he no longer knew how to touch it.

It was my first hug. I held her too stiffly. She laughed softly against my shoulder and adjusted one of my arms around her waist. The correction made us both laugh, and the laughter made the room feel safer.

When we moved apart, she did not move far. I touched her cheek with the tips of my fingers. She closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them.

“This feels nice,” she said.

For years, I remembered the way she said it, looking past me at the unfinished pages. I wanted to kiss her. I said so, because for once I did not want to hide behind silence.

“Please don’t,” she said.

I stopped. “Okay.” She looked relieved, and I was glad I had not made her repeat herself. We sat back down. The project was still there, half-finished, but neither of us could return to it properly. We talked instead about what this meant and what it might mean later.

“I like you,” she said. “I don’t know if we’d be good together.”

“We can find out.”

“And if we aren’t?”

“Then we’ll know.”

She looked toward the unfinished charts. “What happened with Sagnik still bothers me.”

“I apologised.”

“I know. But you were worried, and you decided what I needed before you asked me. You used my account and spoke in my name.” She kept her voice low, not angry now, but careful. “I don’t want someone to protect me by taking my choices away.”

The words stung because I had no answer that could make the act smaller. “I don’t know what to do when someone I care about is being hurt.”

“You can ask me.”

I nodded. I wanted to tell her I would never make that mistake again, but I had already learned how easy a promise was to give when the person in front of me was asking for something harder. “I’ll try to remember that.”

“Trying matters,” she said. “But I still need time to know what I want.”

“I don’t know what this makes us,” I said.

“Neither do I.”

We did not settle the question. The others were still our friends, the group was still bruised, and neither of us had said we wanted a relationship. For that afternoon, we let the feeling remain what it was without asking it to become a promise.

When she left, she carried the folder and the packet of biscuits. I watched her walk down the lane until she turned the corner. The project stayed on our table, unfinished for another day.

The four-person group did not survive the month. Sagnik stopped waiting for Aheli. Aheli stopped asking me what he had said. Anurima

and I returned to being careful with one another, then to being less careful, then to something without a name. We never became a couple. We never became strangers either.

I thought for years that this unfinished thing was the reason I could not move on. Much later, I began to see it differently: the afternoon mattered, but it did not obligate either of us to continue what we had started to feel.

Chapter Nine — The Year Between

After the group broke apart, college became larger and lonelier at the same time. I still saw Anurima in class. We shared notes. We sometimes ate together. There were days when she made room for me beside her, and days when she left before I reached the corridor. I tried to read each small change as an answer. She never gave me one.

That was not her fault. I had never asked the question clearly. Sagnik and I remained friends, though the friendship had acquired a place neither of us liked to touch. He told me he had moved on from Aheli. I said I hoped things were all right between them. He shrugged. We did not talk about the messages again.

In the next stretch of college, I dated Tiyasha for about a month. She was an artist, short, quick to smile, and often away visiting relatives. We held hands once on the walk near the bus stand. I remember the warmth of her fingers and the way I kept thinking I should feel more certain than I did.

We met through a classmate who knew she painted. The first time we spoke properly, she was trying to carry a large sheet of paper through the college gate without bending it. I held the gate open while she turned the sheet sideways and laughed at the absurdity of the task. She had a small streak of blue paint near her wrist. When I pointed it out, she rubbed at

the wrong hand, then laughed again when I corrected her.

“I’m always finding paint in strange places,” she said. “My mother says one day I’ll leave a blue fingerprint on the rice.”

We began talking after class. Tiyasha was easy company. She asked about my studies and remembered the answers. She told me about the relatives she visited and the paintings she wanted to finish. She was often away on weekends, and sometimes our plans changed because an aunt or cousin had asked her to come over. I did not mind at first. I had been lonely, and the fact that someone wanted to meet me seemed like enough reason to try.

One afternoon we walked from the bus stand toward the market. She told me about an unfinished painting of a woman standing beside a window. I asked what the woman was looking at.

“I don’t know yet,” she said. “That’s why I haven’t finished it.”

“Couldn’t she be looking outside?”

“That’s what everyone says.” She shifted her bag to the other shoulder. “I want to know what she’s thinking before I decide what’s outside.”

I liked the answer, though I did not know what to do with it. When we reached the crossing, a bus came too close to the curb. She reached for my hand. I held it, surprised by how warm her fingers were and by the fact that I was trying to evaluate the feeling while it happened. She glanced at me, perhaps waiting for a

reaction. I smiled. She smiled back. Then the bus passed, and we let go to cross the road.

She would miss my calls. I would wonder whether she was busy or had changed her mind. When we met, she was kind. Nothing dramatic happened. There was no betrayal, no fight, no grand reason to end it. We sat together one afternoon and admitted, gently, that it was not working.

There was one Saturday when we had planned to meet near the stationery shop so she could show me the painting she had been working on. I reached the crossing early and bought tea from a stall. The paper cup softened in my hand while I watched the buses pull in and out. I had brought my chemistry notes, though I knew I would not read them. I wanted to ask whether the woman by the window had finally found something to look at.

Tiyasha called after the time we had agreed to meet. She was at her aunt’s house; her family had decided to stay for lunch, and she could not leave yet. She sounded apologetic. I said it was all right. She asked if I was sure. I looked at the tea, at the notes I had taken out and not opened, and said yes again. We spoke for another minute about the painting, then ended the call.

I finished the tea and walked to the stationery shop anyway. The owner had put a fresh display of coloured paper in the window. I stood there long enough to choose a blue sheet I did not need, then carried it home folded inside my notebook. The next week, Tiyasha came to

college with the painting between two pieces of cardboard. The woman still stood beside the window. Tiyasha had added a cup on the sill and a shadow on the floor, but the view outside remained blank.

“I thought you might have finished it,” I said.

“I changed my mind about what finished means.” She looked at me, then back at the page. “You always say it’s fine when plans change.”

“I don’t want you to feel bad.”

“I know. But then I can’t tell whether you wanted to see me.”

I looked at the painting. “I did. I was disappointed when you couldn’t come. I just didn’t know how to say that without making you feel guilty.”

Tiyasha folded the cardboard over the picture but kept one hand on it. “I keep thinking I’ll have time, and then my family asks me to go somewhere. I don’t want every time we meet to become a test I’ve failed.”

“I think I keep saying it’s fine because I’m afraid that if I tell you what I need, you’ll decide it’s too much.”

She turned the painting in her hands. “And I keep saying yes because I don’t want to disappoint you, even when I’m not sure I can come.”

We sat with that for a while. Around us, students crossed the corridor carrying practical records and lunch boxes. Tiyasha tucked the

painting into its bag. “I think we’re trying to make this work because we think we should.”

“Maybe.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You aren’t.”

She gave me a look that showed she knew I was making the answer easier for both of us. I tried again. “I don’t think either of us did anything wrong. I just don’t think we fit.”

“That’s what I mean.”

“You’re a good person,” she said.

I hated that sentence then. It sounded like a door closing politely.

“You are too,” I said.

We walked to the bus stop together and waited for different routes. When hers came, she lifted the paper bag so I could see the painting was still safe. Then she climbed aboard and found a seat. I stayed on the pavement until the bus moved into traffic. I wondered whether I had learned anything from the month except that I could be wanted and still not know what to do with it. I did not know how to practise asking for what I wanted. So I went on waiting.

For weeks, the blue sheet I had bought stayed folded inside my chemistry notebook. I had not asked Tiyasha for more than she could give, and she had not promised what she could not manage. Still, I had wanted to see her, and I had hidden that want until it was easier to call the relationship a mismatch than admit I was afraid of being difficult. By the time the next college fest came around, I thought I had

learned something from the month. I was in my second year, carrying a coil of cable toward the rehearsal hall, when a wavering guitar phrase stopped me outside the door.

Chapter Ten — The Rehearsal Hall

Anwesha at the college fest rehearsal

The college fest had turned the campus into a place I barely recognised. Colour paper hung from the verandah railings. Someone had painted a sign for the music room and spelled the name of the department wrong. The courtyard was full of students carrying chairs, extension cords, and cardboard cut-outs. Every few minutes a microphone shrieked, then went quiet, then shrieked again.

I was in my second year by then, old enough to be useful and young enough to be sent wherever something had gone missing. A senior handed me a coil of cable and told me to take it to the rehearsal hall. I pushed open the door with my shoulder.

She sat on the floor near the far wall, a Hawaiian guitar across her lap. She wore a white sari with a red blouse. The sari was tucked neatly for movement, though the end had slipped over one shoulder while she practised. She was not looking at anyone. One hand picked out the strings while the other guided the slide with a precise, unhurried confidence. A bright, wavering melody rose from the instrument. When she let the last note fade, it seemed to hang in the room. She found the phrase again, but the final note slipped flat. She adjusted the slide and tried once more. A chair scraped behind her; someone asked where the extension cord had gone. She waited for the noise to pass, then began again, letting her voice follow the guitar. The song was hers, she later told me, an unfinished piece she had been preparing for the fest. She called it “The New Route.” When the refrain came, the guitar found a brighter pulse beneath her voice; the repeated phrase was easy to catch, even from the doorway.

Verse 1

I got down one stop too soon;
the tea stall shut its door.
I asked the man who swept the steps
which lane would reach the road.
He pointed past the shuttered shop;
I checked the time and walked.
The bus was gone; the evening stayed,
and so did I, for once.

Pre-chorus

No one had to wait for me.
No one had to say, “Come home.”

Chorus

I missed the bus; I found my feet,
one street, one street at a time.
No map, no call, no one to meet—
tonight, this road is mine.
If I lose the way, I'll ask;
if I'm tired, I'll take my time.
I missed the bus; I found my feet,
one street at a time.

Verse 2

The tailor pulled his shutters down;
a radio sang next door.
A dog got up, then changed its mind,
and settled by the store.
My phone lit up; I let it ring,
then watched the evening turn.
I didn't need to know the end;
I only had to learn—

Pre-chorus

No one had to wait for me.
No one had to lead me home.

Chorus

I missed the bus; I found my feet,
one street, one street at a time.
No map, no call, no one to meet—
tonight, this road is mine.
If I lose the way, I'll ask;
if I'm tired, I'll take my time.
I missed the bus; I found my feet,
one street at a time.

Bridge

Maybe home is not a place
someone keeps for me.
Maybe it's the step I take
when I can't yet see.

Final chorus
I missed the bus; I found my feet,
one street, one street at a time.
No map, no call, no one to meet—
tonight, this road is mine.
If I lose the way, I'll ask;
if I'm tired, I'll take my time.
I missed the bus; I found my feet,
one street at a time.

She sang it without looking up, as though she were still trying out the words for herself. I did not yet know her name. I only knew the feeling of walking somewhere unfamiliar and finding, by accident, that you could keep going.

I stood in the doorway holding the cable. Someone behind me said, "Are you going to block the entrance all day?" I stepped aside. She looked up at the sound, and the moment became ordinary again. A student with a cable had paused in a doorway. A musician had glanced over. Nothing had happened.

The rehearsal continued. She adjusted the tuning, played the phrase again, and stopped before the final note. A boy with a dholak offered a suggestion. She listened, tried it once, then shook her head.

"It's pulling the melody in the wrong direction," she said.

Her voice was calm. She had the confidence of someone who knew what she was hearing. I put down the cable near the stage and stayed longer than I needed to. Later I learned she had studied music for years and taught younger students. That afternoon, I only knew that her

hands seemed to understand the instrument better than I understood most people.

The trouble with the rehearsal was not the music. It was the room. The microphone kept picking up a thin electric whine, and every time someone touched the stand the sound shivered through the speakers. One of the seniors came in looking for another cable. I pointed to the coil I had just carried over.

“That one’s for the keyboard,” he said. “We need the long one.”

The long one was tangled beneath two instrument cases. I crouched to pull it free. At the same time, the singer at the microphone asked if they could change the key because the original sat too low for her voice. The dholak player started tapping a new rhythm while the keyboardist tried to find the scale. Everyone spoke at once.

Anwesha waited until the noise settled. “Let’s try it from the beginning,” she said. “The key can change. The phrase has to stay.”

She played the opening again, slower than before. The singer hummed along. The first attempt faltered, but Anwesha did not make a face or stop the song. She played the phrase once more, keeping the pulse steady until the singer found it. On the third try, the dholak came in beneath her, soft enough to leave room for the melody.

I stood with the cable in my hands. Nobody had asked me to stay, but the rehearsal had begun to feel like a problem I might help solve

by being quiet and useful. When they stopped, the singer thanked Anwesha. She only nodded and asked whether she wanted to try the line again before the next group needed the room.

The senior sent me to fetch tape from the storage cupboard. I ran down the corridor and back. By the time I returned, Anwesha had moved to a different corner, the guitar resting across her lap again. The others were discussing the order of the performances. She was listening without joining in, testing a short run of notes under the conversation. It was the first time I noticed that she did not need an audience to play. The instrument seemed to be where she went to think.

When the song ended, she set the guitar beside her and began coiling its cord. I made myself walk over.

“Can I ask you something about this?” I said.

She looked at the guitar, then at me. “About the Hawaiian?”

“Yes. I’ve seen it before, but I don’t know how it works.”

“Do you play?”

“Not really.”

“Then it’ll be easier.”

I could not tell whether she was teasing. She shifted the guitar so I could see the strings. “This is a slide guitar. You don’t press the strings down like you do on a regular guitar. The steel slide changes the pitch as you move it.”

She showed me how the bar glided over the strings. I asked a question, then another. She

answered each one without making me feel foolish. When I asked whether it was hard to learn, she said it depended on whether I was willing to sound bad for a while.

“I can do that,” I said.

“Everyone says that before the first practice.”

“Have you been playing long?”

“Since I was small. Four years seriously, maybe more if you count lessons before that.” She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “I teach younger students now. Music is the one thing I don’t get tired of explaining.”

She offered me the slide. I held it between two fingers, unsure how much pressure to use. She adjusted my grip, careful not to take my hand until I had settled it myself.

“Don’t push down,” she said. “You’re going to mute the sound if you press too hard. Let it rest on the strings.”

I moved it. The note came out bent and ugly.

“That sounded like a door asking for oil,” I said.

“It sounded like a first attempt.”

She showed me again, this time guiding the movement with her own hand beside mine rather than over it. I tried once more. The note still wavered, but it held long enough to resemble music. Anwesha looked genuinely pleased.

“There,” she said. “Now you know the instrument can make a sound.”

“That’s a generous description.”

“You’ll have to earn the generous one.”

The senior called her back to the rehearsal. She took the guitar from me and shifted into place, the teasing gone from her face as she listened to the singer begin. I stepped away before anyone asked me to move. For the rest of the afternoon, whenever I crossed the hall, I found a reason to glance toward her corner.

I asked her name. “Anwesha,” she said.

“I’m Aritra.”

The name exchange should have ended there. Instead, we kept talking—about the fest, which year she was in, which department, how long she had been at college. When a volunteer came to ask Anwesha to rehearse again, she asked if I used Instagram.

I did. I gave her my username. She found me and followed me while we stood in the rehearsal hall among the cables and instrument cases. I left with no guitar lesson, no promise, and the ridiculous feeling that something had begun.

Chapter Eleven — The Message Thread

Anwesha sent the first message that evening. It was a photograph of the Hawaiian guitar resting across her knees, with the caption: *The instrument that made you stop in the doorway.*

I looked at the message long enough for the screen to dim. Then I typed: *I was delivering a cable.* She replied with a laughing face. *That's what you were doing. It isn't why you stayed.*

I wrote, *Maybe I wanted to know whether the instrument was difficult.* Then I erased it. It sounded as if I were asking for another lesson, which was safer than admitting I had watched her play. I tried again: *You were good. The singer sounded better once you found the right key.*

Her answer came a few minutes later. *She was nervous. Everybody gets nervous before the first song.*

I read the sentence as if it might contain a message about something beyond singing. I typed, *Do you get nervous?* She replied, *Before a performance, yes. Before teaching, no. People are easier to understand when they're learning something.*

I asked about the lessons she taught. Some of her younger students arrived convinced they had no musical ability, she said; the first task was keeping them there long enough to hear themselves improve. I asked if she had learned every instrument she had mentioned in the hall.

She had tried several and kept the ones that stayed with her: harmonium for practice, ordinary guitar for songs with friends, harmonica for carrying in a pocket. The Hawaiian guitar was the one she returned to when she wanted to be alone.

I had not known an instrument could have different uses in a person’s life. I told her I usually studied when I wanted to be alone. She asked if I enjoyed it or if I was simply good at it. I started to reply that those were the same thing, then realised she had asked a real question.

“Both, I think,” I wrote. “Though I don’t know how to stop when I’m tired.”

“That sounds like something you should learn before you teach anyone else.”

The next day we talked about the fest again. I asked whether she had always known she wanted to be a musician. She said she knew she loved music, but she had not decided what to do with that love yet. People kept asking what came after college, as if a person had to choose one road before finishing the one they were on.

“Do you know what you want?” she asked.

I thought about my degree, the family’s expectations, and the sense that I should already have a plan. “Not really.”

“That’s allowed.”

I read her answer twice. When people asked what I planned to do after graduation, I usually named the next exam and hoped it counted as a

plan. She had said “That’s allowed” as if I could admit I did not know without apologising for it.

I wanted to tell her she was right. Instead I asked about the tuning. The conversation wandered from strings to songs, from songs to college, from college to what she wanted to do after graduation. She wrote in full sentences and answered the questions I asked. Sometimes she asked questions back. I took each reply as a reason to keep going and each pause as evidence I was bothering her.

Our messages often arrived between other things. She would reply while coming home from a lesson, then disappear for an hour because she had to help with dinner. I would see the typing indicator appear and vanish, and invent reasons for it. When she sent a voice note, I listened with the phone close to my ear so my family would not hear. Her voice sounded different from the rehearsal hall: softer, with a little room echo and the occasional clatter of something being moved nearby.

One night she sent a recording of a melody she was trying to arrange. It was only a few seconds long. I listened twice, then wrote that I liked the part where the note seemed to slide into place.

“That’s the bit I keep getting wrong,” she said in a voice note. “You can hear it?”

I sent back that I could, although I had no technical words for what she had done. She asked me to listen again and tell her whether the second attempt sounded better. I did. We

talked about the difference until it was late enough that she wrote, *I have a class in the morning. Go sleep, professor.*

I typed that I was not sleepy. She sent a photograph of her music book open on a table, the notes marked in pencil. *Neither am I. But some of us have responsibilities.*

The next morning I went to college tired and pleased with myself for having been included in a private, ordinary part of her day. I mistook that feeling for certainty. It did not occur to me that a conversation could be warm without making a promise.

As the days passed, I sent her a photograph of the guitar I had once tried to learn on. She said the strings looked too old.

“They’re probably older than me,” I wrote.

“Then they deserve retirement.”

I laughed in the middle of the road and a man on a bicycle looked over. Then, for no clear reason, I stopped writing first. I told myself she was probably being polite. She had plenty of friends, musical training, a full life. Why would she be interested in someone who knew three guitar chords and had to look up the fourth? I could feel the old logic returning: if I stopped before she lost interest, I would never have to watch it happen.

Anwesha did not write for a few days either. The silence became proof. Then, on a morning when rain had left the road shining, she climbed into the auto I was taking to college.

I was in the back seat beside a student carrying a rolled-up chart. The driver had just started moving when Anwesha appeared at the open side, one hand holding the roof rail.

“Aritra!” she called.

The auto stopped. She got in, smiling so broadly that for a second I thought she was greeting someone behind me.

“Hi,” she said, settling beside me. “You disappeared.”

“I was busy.”

“Busy doing what?”

I had no answer that sounded convincing. “College.”

“We all have college.”

She said it lightly. The auto jolted over a broken patch in the road. Her shoulder bumped mine, and she laughed as she caught the seat in front of us.

We talked all the way to campus. She told me about a song she was practising. I asked how she could tell when a guitar was out of tune. She explained, then made me listen to the difference by humming two notes. The chart student got off halfway through. Neither of us shifted into the space he left.

When we reached college, Anwesha stepped down first. “You can message me, you know.”

“I know.”

“Do you?”

I smiled. “I’m learning.” She shook her head at me and walked toward the arts building. I stayed by the auto for a moment after she left.

The driver asked if I was getting down. I was already standing beside him.

Chapter Twelve — The Fallen Phuchka

The seniors told me about the phuchka a week later. We were packing decorations after rehearsal when one of them asked, “So when are you going to say yes to Anwesha?”

I had been trying to untangle a string of lights. “Say yes to what?” They looked at one another. “You really don’t know?”

“Know what?”

“She likes you.”

I laughed. “She hasn’t said that.”

“Maybe because you haven’t noticed anything.”

The senior told me about the phuchka stall outside college, where crisp, hollow shells filled with spiced potato and tangy water were eaten in one bite. Anwesha had been there with some first-year students. She had looked across the road at me while holding one in her hand. She had been staring long enough that the shell softened and fell. I had walked past without seeing her.

“You didn’t even look over,” he said. “We all saw it.”

I tried to remember that afternoon. I remembered crossing the road with my bag cutting into my shoulder. I remembered thinking about an assignment. I remembered a burst of laughter from the stall. I had not looked.

“You’re sure?”

“We were sitting beside her.”

They reenacted it for me, which made the story worse. One senior held an imaginary phuchka between two fingers and stared across the room. Another pretended to walk past with his head down, carrying an invisible bag. When the first senior dropped the snack, they all laughed. I asked them to stop, but I was laughing too, mostly because embarrassment had nowhere else to go.

“Was she upset?” I asked.

“No. She laughed when it fell.”

“At me?”

“At the phuchka. You weren’t even looking.”

I tried to picture her there. The stall was beside the college gate, beneath a blue plastic sheet that sagged when it rained. The water in the steel pot always smelled of mint and tamarind. I could remember passing it, though not who had been standing there. The fact that other people had noticed her looking at me while I had not noticed her at all made me feel oddly exposed. They had watched her look across the road while I kept thinking about my assignment.

I kept untangling the lights after the seniors moved on to another story. The cord only knotted itself further. I pictured Anwesha beneath the blue sheet, watching me pass with my eyes on the road, and wondered what she had expected me to do. Stop? Say hello? I had done neither. By the time I got home, I was no longer sure whether the seniors had been

teasing me or giving me a chance to notice something I had missed.

I did not ask Anwesha. I did not want to turn a second-hand story into a declaration she had never made. Instead, I wrote to her that evening. We talked about the fest and the songs she was practising. I tried to be less careful. She seemed pleased that I had come back into the conversation, though I could not have explained how I knew.

The next afternoon, I saw her near the college gate, standing beneath the blue sheet over the phuchka stall with two girls from her year. I nearly kept walking. Then I remembered the seniors' performance of the falling snack and decided that, if I could not manage a sentence, I could at least say hello.

She noticed me first. "You're looking this way today," she said.

"I'm trying to improve."

"At what?"

"Not walking past people without seeing them."

Her friends exchanged a glance. Anwesha shook her head, smiling. "That sounds like a difficult course. You should practise."

"I'll need a teacher."

"I'm busy. Ask the seniors." She turned back to the stall, but the smile stayed in her voice. I stood with them for a few minutes while they argued about whether the tamarind water was too sweet. I did not know the other girls well enough to join the argument, so I listened. When

Anwesha offered me a phuchka, I accepted and tried not to eat it too quickly. The shell cracked, and the filling ran down my thumb.

“You’re not very good at this,” she said.

“I’m new.”

“You’ve lived here all your life.”

“Not to this stall.”

She laughed, and one of her friends asked whether the seniors had really told me about the fallen phuchka. I nodded. Anwesha covered her face with one hand, but she was smiling.

“It was one phuchka,” she said.

“They made it sound like a historic event.”

“They’re seniors. They need something to discuss.” She took another from the vendor and held it out to me. “I was looking at you. Then you walked past. I forgot what I was holding.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t see you.”

“You were carrying your books and thinking very hard.” She said it without reproach. “Now you’ve seen me.”

Her friend asked the vendor for more tamarind water. Anwesha turned to answer a question about the fest, and the moment passed into the noise at the stall. I ate the phuchka she had handed me, careful not to spill the filling this time. They returned to arguing about the performances, and I listened, answering when someone asked which ones I planned to watch. I left before anyone could ask me to stay. I had come over on purpose, but I still could not let her see how much I wanted to.

“You’re quiet in person,” she wrote.

“I’m quiet everywhere.”

“No. You ask too many questions about music.”

“That’s different.”

“How?”

I typed, *Because I like hearing you talk.* I erased it. I typed, *Because you know a lot.* I sent that. She replied, *That is not the same answer.*

I stared at the words. They were not a confession. They were not a joke either. I could have met her there. I could have said what I meant without needing her to say it first.

I wrote, *Maybe I like talking to you.* She sent a heart. I put my phone down and walked around the room once, as if I had to make space for the feeling before I could sit with it.

Chapter Thirteen — The Lucky Person

Anwesha called me a few days later and asked whether I was a good person. I was at home, sitting near the window with a notebook open on my lap. The question caught me so off guard I looked at the screen to make sure it was really her.

“What kind of question is that?”

“Just answer.”

“I don’t know. I try to be.”

“Are you capable?”

“At what?”

“At caring about someone. At staying. At making a person happy.”

I wanted to ask why she was asking. Instead I said, “You’re capable. You’re a good person. Whoever has you will be lucky.” There was a small silence on the line.

“Do you want to be that lucky person?”

The question arrived without a joke around it. I heard the ceiling fan above me, the faint traffic outside, my own breath. My first instinct was to ask whether she was serious. My second was to retreat into something clever.

“I haven’t thought about it,” I said.

She was quiet. I could hear how the answer sounded. I hurried to repair it. “I mean—I like you. I just don’t know what you want from me, or whether we’d be good together. We can talk. We can see where it goes.”

The words came out in the wrong order. I heard them settling between us and wished I could take back the first one. I was not trying to reject her. I was trying to leave myself room to be certain before I made a promise. At that age, I thought uncertainty was a form of honesty. I had not yet learned that it could feel like refusal to the person waiting for an answer.

“You don’t have to say yes because I asked.”

“I know.”

“And you don’t have to say no because you’re scared.”

That was too close to the truth. I went quiet.

“I’m not asking you to marry me tomorrow,” she said, gentler now. “I’m asking if you want to try.”

“Yes,” I said. “I want to try.”

She let out a breath. “Okay.” We did not become a couple in that call. We agreed only to stop pretending we were having an ordinary conversation. Before we hung up, she asked whether I had eaten. I told her I had. She asked what, and I admitted I had only had tea and biscuits. She scolded me, then laughed when I promised to eat properly. I did not know whether the small domestic concern meant anything beyond itself. I liked being included in it.

The next day, we met between classes near the staircase. The corridor was crowded, and two students behind us were arguing about a practical record. Anwesha held her books

against her chest and asked if I had thought more about what she had asked.

“I have,” I said. “I still don’t know how to do this properly.”

“Neither do I.” She shifted the books in her arms. “That’s why I asked if you wanted to try, not if you already knew everything.”

I wanted to promise I would never hurt her. The promise rose automatically, ready before I had thought about what it required. I let it pass. “If I say something badly, tell me.”

“I will. You have to listen when I do.”

“I’ll try.”

She held my gaze for a moment, then nodded. “We’ll see, professor.” A friend called her from the other end of the corridor. She went to join her, and I opened my notebook as the bell rang. We had not named ourselves a couple. I still had to get through the next lecture, and she had a class across the courtyard. That evening, I knew we would talk again.

After that, Anwesha began calling most days. Sometimes we talked about college. Sometimes she told me about a song she had learned. Sometimes she asked what I had eaten and whether I had reached home. I started to expect the calls. When I was with friends, I found myself checking the time. I learned that she preferred calling after dinner, when the house quieted, and that she sang softly if she thought someone might overhear. I learned the names of the pieces she was practising and the small frustrations of learning them: a note that would

not sit, a finger that kept slipping, an accompanist who changed tempo. I did not understand the technical details, but I liked how her voice changed when she described them.

One night she called after practising the Hawaiian guitar. I could hear a faint metallic twang behind her voice, followed by a pause and the same few notes again.

“Is it meant to sound like that?” I asked.

“No. That’s why I’m practising.”

“It sounds nice.”

“You say that about everything I play.”

“I’m trying to be supportive.”

“You’re trying not to tell me it’s wrong.”

I laughed. She played the passage again, slower this time. I could hear her stop, adjust her fingers, and start from the beginning. The notes came out more cleanly. Then she asked what I thought had changed. I guessed the timing. She said it was the pressure of her hand, and explained how a small adjustment made the string speak differently. I could not have repeated the explanation to anyone else, but I listened as though there might be a test.

“Why do you keep practising the same part?” I asked.

“Because I know what it can sound like when I get it right.”

She said it without self-pity. The answer stayed with me. At school I had thought talent meant doing something easily. Anwesha made me see the work that happened before anyone else heard the song. I asked her to play the

passage one more time. She did, and this time I recognised where it changed.

“There,” I said.

“You heard it.”

“I was listening.”

The quiet on the line after that felt different from the silences when neither of us knew what to say. I imagined her sitting with the instrument across her lap, pleased that I had noticed the small improvement. I was glad she had called me into that part of her evening.

The first time she called while I was in the middle of an assignment, she heard my pencil moving across the page.

“Are you studying?”

“I’m trying to.”

“I can call later.”

“No, it’s fine. I’ll call you back in half an hour.”

“Finish the assignment first,” she said. “I’m not going anywhere.”

I put the phone down and tried to work. The paragraph kept breaking apart whenever I looked at the clock. I made a mess of the last two lines, crossed them out, and called her back thirty minutes later. She answered on the first ring.

“Did you finish?”

“Most of it.”

“You could have taken longer.”

“I wanted to talk to you.”

She was quiet for a beat, then said, “You can tell me when you need to finish something, you know.”

“I know.” I wanted her to hear that she mattered, not that I was keeping score of the minutes. I did not yet understand how often I would confuse the two.

Chapter Fourteen — A Winter Call

The night Anwesha told me she loved me, I was under a blanket and trying to finish an assignment. It was winter, the kind of cold that did not make the house unlivable but found every gap in the window frame. I had drawn a line beneath a paragraph and was debating whether to rewrite it when her call came. The window rattled whenever a vehicle passed over the broken patch of road outside. From the next room I could hear my father turning the pages of a newspaper. I had put the phone beside the notebook, screen down, and told myself I would finish the page before checking it again.

“Are you busy?” she asked.

“Not really.”

“Can I tell you something?”

“Of course.”

She asked if I was alone. I said I was in my room, though the door was open and my father was only a few steps away. I got up and closed it gently. The latch did not catch the first time. I tried again, listening to the small click before I returned to the bed.

“You sound nervous,” I said.

“I am.”

“Did something happen at home?”

“No. Nothing like that.” She took a breath and let it out slowly. “Do you remember what you said the other day? About whoever has me being lucky?”

I remembered. I had meant it as praise and a way to avoid saying more about myself. “Yes.”

“I keep thinking about it.”

She was quiet again. I heard a breath catch, then another. “I love you,” she said, and began to cry. I pushed the notebook away. “Anwesha, what happened?”

“Nothing happened. I just— I love you so much.” Her voice broke. “I can’t live without you. When I give my heart to someone, I want that person for life. I want to marry him. I want to grow old with him. If it doesn’t happen, I don’t know what I’ll do.”

I sat up beneath the blanket and knocked my knee against the desk. I loved her. I knew it from the way I saved small pieces of my day to tell her, from how I searched the auto line for her face. Her words reached far beyond the question I had been brave enough to ask myself. I could not picture a wedding or explain what kind of husband I would be. I could picture the next morning, the next walk to the gate, and the next time she would call while I was trying to study.

“Are you asking me to say the same things?” I asked.

“No.” She sniffed and tried to laugh, but the sound broke halfway through. “I’m telling you what I feel. I don’t want you to say anything because I’m crying.”

The answer made the room feel less crowded. I pulled the blanket around my shoulders and listened while she found a tissue. I heard the

soft rustle, then the tap of something against her phone. Neither of us spoke for a while. Outside, an auto passed the broken patch in the road and the window rattled in its frame.

“I want to be with you,” I said. “I don’t know how to promise a whole life tonight. But I know I love you, and I want us to try.”

She was quiet long enough for me to wonder if the call had dropped. Then she asked, “You mean it?”

“Yes.”

“Even if we have to take time?”

“Yes. We can take time.”

I wanted to answer at once, and now I had. The tears had surprised me, but they were not the reason I said it. Nothing in the room changed; the assignment still waited on the desk, my father still turned pages in the next room, and the cold still found the gap in the window. Yet I felt as though I had stepped out of the version of the evening I had planned and into one I had chosen.

“Then are we boyfriend and girlfriend?”

I smiled into the dark. “Yes. We are.” She laughed through the last of her tears. “Say it again.”

“We’re together.”

“I’m your girlfriend?”

“You’re my girlfriend.”

“And you’re my boyfriend.”

“I am.”

She made me repeat it until she was satisfied. I remember the assignment open beside me, the

pencil rolling off the blanket and onto the floor. I did not pick it up. She asked what I was doing. I told her I had been trying to finish an assignment. She said she had ruined my study time. I said she had improved it. She laughed, and then we began working out when we could meet at college. We chose after the next day's lecture. I wrote the time in the margin of my assignment, then added her name beside it.

When we hung up, the house had gone quiet again. I reached for the pencil, but the paragraph on the page no longer made sense to me. I read it twice, put the pencil down, and kept thinking about seeing her in the morning.

The following morning, I woke before the alarm. The assignment was still open on the desk, one paragraph unfinished. I washed, dressed, and read the page once more, though I remembered almost nothing from it. On the way to college I kept rehearsing how I would greet her. Every version sounded either too casual or too eager.

She was waiting by the corridor when I arrived, the strap of her bag looped around one wrist. For a second we only looked at each other. Then she said, "So?"

"So what?" I asked, though I knew.

"You're still my boyfriend?"

"Unless the call expired overnight."

She laughed and touched my sleeve. "Don't joke. I was serious."

"I know. I was too."

Some of the tightness left her face. She asked whether I was happy. I said I was, and then admitted that I was nervous. She told me she was nervous too. We did not make another promise about marriage or forever before the first class. We walked to the lecture room together. The morning was ordinary: attendance sheets, late students, someone asking about notes. Yet the word *boyfriend* had crossed from the phone into the day, and I carried it with me through the first lecture.

Chapter Fifteen — Timetables

After the call, college divided itself into two timetables: the one printed on the notice board and the one Anwesha and I made between us. The official one listed lectures, practicals, and deadlines. Ours included the time her class ended, whether we could meet before the next one, which auto we might share, and how long we could talk before someone came looking for either of us.

I started carrying an extra pen because she often forgot hers. She started bringing a small packet of biscuits because I forgot to eat when I was trying to finish an assignment. We walked between buildings with our fingers linked and let go before entering the more crowded corridors. Sometimes she tucked her hand into the fold of her sari or the pocket of her cardigan; sometimes she held mine openly, as if there were no reason to hide.

One afternoon she found me in the library with my lunch untouched beside my notebook. I had spent the break correcting a practical record and had told myself I would eat after finishing the page. The page kept acquiring mistakes.

“You’re doing that thing again,” she said, pulling out the chair opposite me.

“What thing?”

“Acting as if food will wait until your work is perfect.”

I looked at the clock. The break was nearly over. “I’ll eat later.”

She opened her tiffin box. The smell of fried rice escaped before the lid was fully off. “Then eat later with me now.”

I began to refuse. She had brought enough for herself, and I did not want to take what she had carried from home. She listened to the first half of my objection, then pushed the box between us.

“Aritra, it’s rice. I can get more at home. You can’t get more time in this break.”

There was no scolding in her voice, only an impatience with the way I could turn a simple kindness into an accounting problem. I took the spoon she offered. The rice was warm, with bits of egg and green chilli. We ate quietly at first, careful not to draw the librarian’s attention. Then she asked what I was writing, and I explained the practical in too much detail. She kept listening, even after the chemistry gave way to my complaint about the record’s impossible margins.

“You know,” she said, “you explain things better when you stop trying to sound like a textbook.”

“That’s because the textbook is more qualified than I am.”

“The textbook isn’t sitting here with me.”

I laughed. She smiled as if that had been the answer she was waiting for. When the bell rang, she packed the empty tiffin and took my notebook to inspect the page I had been fighting

with. She found a line I had copied twice and circled it. I had helped her with chemistry before; this time she helped me see the mistake in my own work. We went back to class with the corrected page between us and her empty tiffin tucked under one arm.

The first time she held my hand in front of her friends, we were leaving the canteen. I had been telling her about an assignment and did not see her friends until we were almost beside them. Anwesha did. She caught my fingers and kept walking, greeting them with her free hand.

“You know Aritra?” she said.

One of the girls laughed. “We’ve seen him before.”

“This is my boyfriend,” Anwesha said. She said it with a little pride, not as a challenge. My face warmed. I was not used to being introduced as someone’s chosen person. I nodded at her friends and tried to look as if the word had not changed the air around me.

After they moved on, I said, “You could have warned me.”

“What for?”

“I didn’t know I was being introduced.”

“You were standing beside me. That was the warning.”

She laughed and swung our joined hands once. I felt both pleased and exposed. I did not ask her to stop. I only hoped nobody would notice how much the introduction mattered to me.

On our calls I gave her the small things I had saved up: a lecturer’s strange remark, the boy who had fallen asleep in class, a drawing in the margin of my notes. She told me about songs she was learning and the lines she kept getting wrong. I had always talked to her; now I expected to hear her voice at the end of the day.

She did not laugh at everything. Sometimes she asked me to explain why I thought it was funny. I liked that she made me finish a thought instead of letting me hide inside a half-sentence.

“You say ‘it was nothing’ about everything,” she told me once.

“Because most things are nothing.”

“Then why do you remember them?”

I had no answer. She waited. I began to understand that she was not always asking for information. Sometimes she wanted me to stay with the feeling long enough to name it.

The timetable did not always make room for us. One Thursday I waited near the college gate after my practical, expecting Anwesha to finish her class soon. I had two hours before the bus I usually took home, and I thought we might use some of them together. She came down the steps with her guitar case and an apologetic look.

“I have to go straight to a lesson,” she said. “One of the girls I teach has her assessment next week. Her mother has already called twice.”

“I can come with you,” I said. “I’ll wait outside.”

She considered it, then shook her head. “You have your own work. And I don’t want to spend the lesson thinking you’re bored on the veranda.”

I told her I would not be bored. It was true, but not the whole truth. I wanted the extra time; I wanted to be the person she chose when the rest of her day was crowded. I had not yet learned that wanting to be included did not mean I had to be included in everything.

“I’ll call you when I’m done,” she said. “If you’re still at the stop, we can have tea.”

She stepped out to the road and raised her hand to stop an auto. The driver had room for the guitar case only if she held it across her knees, so she climbed in sideways and pulled it close to her. Before the auto moved, she looked back and lifted her fingers in a small wave. I waved too, then stood by the gate feeling foolish for having treated her ordinary plan as a test of how much she wanted me.

I took my notebook out and sat on the low wall beside the gate. I managed two pages of revision. When she called, the background noise was a child repeating the same scale and her patient voice correcting the third note. “I’m finished,” she said after a while. “Are you still there?”

We met at the tea stall across from the bus stop. She told me the student had finally got the phrase right, then showed me the pencil marks in her lesson notebook: the places where the girl rushed, where she forgot to breathe, where she

had improved since the previous week. Anwesha had drawn a small star beside the line she wanted her to practise.

“You keep records for lessons too?” I asked.

“If I don’t, I forget what she’s managed. Then I tell her to do the same thing again, and she thinks she hasn’t improved.” She stirred her tea and watched the milk settle. “A little progress is easy to miss when you’re the one doing it.”

I thought of my own notebooks, where I marked errors but rarely marked anything I had learned. Before I could turn the thought into advice, the bus arrived. We drank quickly, laughing when the tea was too hot to finish, and walked to the stop together. She left for home. I left for mine. The time had been short, but it belonged to both of us without either of us having to give up the rest of the day.

Once, the umbrella turned inside out in a gust. Anwesha laughed so hard she had to hold the wall. I tried to fix it while the rain ran down my neck.

“You’re getting soaked,” she said.

“I’m handling the umbrella.”

“The umbrella is handling you.”

She took it from me, folded it closed, and we ran through the rain the rest of the way. In the corridor she wiped water from my forehead with the edge of her dupatta. I remember being embarrassed by how much I liked that.

Other firsts came quietly. Once, while we waited for an auto after class, Anwesha leaned against my shoulder and stayed there even

when the driver called out that he was leaving. One afternoon, after the last lecture, Anwesha asked if I would wait while she collected her Hawaiian guitar from the rehearsal room. She had a short piece to practise before the music group met again, and she wanted to hear whether it sounded different outside the room where she had learned it. I followed her down the corridor. The rehearsal hall was nearly empty, with chairs stacked against one wall and a strip of late sun crossing the floor. She took the instrument from its case and sat on a chair near the window, resting it across her lap.

I had seen her play at the fest, but not this close. She held the steel bar lightly in one hand and picked a few notes with the other. The sound slid between them, clear and almost voice-like. She stopped, adjusted her wrist, and tried the same passage again. On the third attempt she reached the note she wanted, then laughed at herself for looking so pleased.

“Why do you keep stopping?” I asked.

“Because I can hear where it’s not right.”

“I couldn’t tell.”

“That’s why you’re listening and I’m practising.” She turned the instrument slightly so I could see the strings. “This bar changes the pitch without lifting the note. You move it too far and everything goes sharp.”

She showed me how she placed her hand. I tried once, careful not to press too hard. The note came out uneven, and the bar scraped faintly across the strings.

“You’re gripping it like a chemistry pencil,” she said.

“I know how to hold a pencil.”

“You’re holding this as if it might run away.”

She covered my fingers with hers for a second and eased them into position. I tried again. This time the sound was cleaner, though it still did not belong to the melody. We both laughed. She took the instrument back, played the phrase once more, and let it settle into the room. I listened until she stopped.

“Do you ever get tired of practising?” I asked.

“Sometimes. I get tired of being told what it should lead to.” She wiped the strings with a soft cloth before putting the guitar away. “People ask if I’ll teach, or perform, or do something useful with it. I like playing. I don’t always know what I want it to become.”

“You don’t have to decide now.”

She looked at me. “You say that as if you believe it.”

“I’m trying to.”

She smiled, not quite convinced, and carried the guitar to the rehearsal-room cupboard. We walked outside and sat on the low steps beside the department building after most of the students had gone. She told me about a song she wanted to learn next. I listened, still hearing the last phrase she had played, and became aware of how close her hand was to mine.

When she finished speaking, I asked if I could kiss her. She looked at me for a moment, then

said yes. I leaned in too quickly and stopped halfway. She was still looking at me, waiting.

“I’m nervous,” I admitted.

“So am I,” she said. “We have time.”

I moved closer more slowly. The kiss was brief, softer than I had imagined, and over before I could decide whether I had done it properly. When we moved apart, she laughed—not at me, but at the nervous expression I could feel on my own face.

“You look like you’ve just passed an exam,” she said.

“I feel like I might have failed one.”

“You can practise.”

She kissed me again, this time without either of us trying to make the moment into a perfect one. We were shy in the beginning, then clumsy, then more comfortable. We learned each other by asking and noticing. When the caretaker came through the courtyard to lock the side gate, we stood and walked toward the auto stand. Anwesha kept her hand in mine until we reached the road, where the traffic thickened and we had to let go.

Chapter Sixteen — What a Gift Could Say

Anwesha liked gold. She liked the way it caught the light in shop windows and the way her mother’s old bangles sounded together when she moved her hands. She liked a good parlour visit, a new set of clothes, a small thing bought simply because she wanted it.

I learned these preferences in pieces. She did not ask me to buy them. If anything, she often said she could manage for herself. But I was already looking for ways to turn affection into objects someone could hold.

I had not grown up thinking of gifts as something I should buy with my own money. My family could have helped if I had asked, but I was reluctant to ask for extras and wanted to stand on my own feet. At college, some of my classmates carried more pocket money than I would have chosen to spend in a month. I turned that difference into a private measure of my worth. I had absorbed the idea that a boy who loved a girl should be able to provide, and I mistook the size of a gift for the strength of a promise.

Anwesha did not know how much thought I put into choosing something. One afternoon we passed a shop window where a blue kurta hung between two bright dresses. She stopped to look at it, then kept walking.

“You liked that one?” I asked.

“The colour, yes. I don’t need another kurta.”

She had said it without regret. I remembered the shade anyway. Another time she stopped in front of a jeweller’s window to look at a small gold pendant. She did not ask for it; she only watched the light move over its surface before we carried on. I remembered that too, though I was not yet ready to buy it.

A few days later, I returned to the market alone and found the same kurta still in the window. The shopkeeper named a price. I asked whether he had another one in the same size, then compared it with a similar piece in the shop next door. The difference was not enormous, but it mattered to me. I walked back to the first shop and bought it.

On the way home I kept checking the paper bag to make sure the parcel had not shifted. The gift was not expensive by the standards of the city students I had envied, but it was more than I usually spent at once. I had chosen it carefully, and I wanted her to see that.

She laughed at the wrapping, not at me.

“You’ve made a parcel that looks like it survived a storm.”

“It did. I carried it here.”

“From where?”

“The storm was metaphorical.”

She rolled her eyes and opened it. When she saw the colour, she looked up at me. “You remembered.” I had. I remembered more than I knew what to do with.

She gave me things too: a notebook with a sturdy cover, a small keychain shaped like a

guitar, food she had cooked at home. None of it was a ledger. I tried to make it one anyway, privately measuring whether I was doing enough.

We ate out whenever we could. I usually chose a place I could afford and hoped the menu would look like a preference rather than a limit. One evening after class, I took Anwesha to a small restaurant on the market road. The room was crowded, the ceiling fan clicked as it turned, and a family at the next table was arguing gently over who had ordered the extra chilli.

Anwesha opened the menu and scanned it from top to bottom. I already knew which dishes were safe for my pocket, but I waited for her to choose.

“Fried rice and chilli chicken?” she asked.

I checked the price once more. “We can share both.”

“I was going to suggest that.” She closed the menu. “You don’t have to pretend you were hoping for something else.”

The words caught me. I wondered if she had noticed the way I read menus, or if she was only trying to save time. The waiter returned before I could ask. I ordered the two dishes and a glass of water. When the food arrived, Anwesha took the first bite of chicken and shook her head.

“Too sweet.”

“It’s fine.”

“It’s pretending to be chilli chicken.” She pushed the plate toward me. “You can be polite

to the waiter. You don't have to be polite to the sauce."

I laughed and tried a piece. She was right. We added vinegar and green chilli from the little bowls on the table. It improved the dish, though not enough for her to stop criticizing it. By the time we finished, she had eaten the last piece of chicken and insisted I had left it for her.

"We should learn to cook this better," she said, looking at the empty plates.

"I can cook."

"You can make rice."

"That is the foundation of cooking."

"Then build on it."

On the walk back, she stopped at the jeweller's window. The pendant she had noticed earlier was still there, lit from below so it seemed brighter than the others.

"When do you think we'll get married?" she asked.

I looked at the pendant, then at her. "When I'm twenty-seven or twenty-eight. I want to finish my studies and be earning properly."

"Twenty-six," she said.

"That's not much earlier."

"It is if I have to wait." She said it lightly, but kept her eyes on me. "I don't want to wait until we're old."

"We won't be old at twenty-six."

"You'll say that when I'm twenty-six too."

I laughed. She turned from the window and slipped her hand into mine. We had no plan beyond the ages we had named, no agreement

about where we would live or what either family would say. Still, as we walked on, I found myself counting the years as if they were already ours.

We began exchanging food. I made biryani when I had time and packed tiffin for her on college days. She brought fried rice, chilli chicken, and her own biryani. Sometimes I made the same dishes she did, and we argued about which version was better. She always said hers. I always said mine. Neither of us believed the argument mattered.

The kitchen became another place where we could be together without needing to invent a reason. We chopped, stirred, tasted, and got in each other's way. I was bad at chopping. She told me to hold the knife properly. I told her she was too strict. She said someone had to be.

One afternoon we tried to make chilli chicken together. She had already prepared the sauce when I came in, and I insisted I could handle the vegetables. I cut the capsicum in uneven blocks while she watched, arms crossed.

"Those pieces are enormous."

"They'll cook."

"Eventually. The chicken will be finished before the capsicum understands what's happening."

She took the knife from me and showed me how to turn the vegetable against the board. I tried again, this time slower. She let me do it without taking over, though her hand hovered near mine whenever the blade slipped. We argued about the amount of chilli, then tasted

the sauce and added more vinegar because we had both decided it needed something.

When the dish was ready, she stole a piece from the pan before I could put it on a plate and burned her tongue.

“You said it was ready,” she said, fanning her mouth.

“It is ready. It’s also hot.”

“Those are different facts.”

We ate standing at the counter because the table was covered in books. The chicken was too spicy and the capsicum too large, but she finished her portion. Later, she sent me a message saying her family had liked it. I saved the message, though I would not have admitted that I kept things like that. The next time we cooked, she brought her mother’s version of the sauce in a small jar and made me taste it before we added anything to the pan. I said mine had been better. She said the only person who believed that was me.

A few weeks later, we decided to go to Digha after college. It began as one of the plans we made while packing our books: we would finish the assignment, catch a ride, eat something near the beach, and come back before evening. Neither of us carried much spending money. I checked what I had in my wallet twice, then tried to make the gesture look casual when she asked if we should bring anything from home.

“Just ourselves,” she said. “And maybe water. The stalls charge too much for a bottle.”

We took a shared auto from Ramnagar. It was a short ride, but the driver waited until every seat was filled, and the afternoon stretched while people climbed in and out with bags, market parcels, and one sleepy child. Anwesha sat by the open side. When the auto jolted over a rough patch, she caught the rail and laughed at my expression.

“You look like you’re calculating the suspension.”

“I was checking whether the bag would fall.”

“The bag is on your lap.”

“I know. I checked.”

She shook her head and looked out at the road. The ride was ordinary enough that I had no reason to pretend it was a grand outing. That made it easier to enjoy. We talked about a lecturer’s habit of repeating the same point until the class stopped taking notes, then drifted to a song she had been practising. She tapped its rhythm on the side of her bag, stopping whenever the auto hit a bump and starting again from the beginning.

At Digha, the sea was louder than the conversations around it. The beach was busy, and the wind carried sand against our legs. Anwesha took off her sandals and held them by their straps. I kept mine on until a wave came farther up the shore than I expected and darkened the toes. She noticed and laughed, then stepped back just before the next one reached her feet.

We bought jhal muri, puffed rice tossed with mustard oil, spices, and chopped vegetables, from a stall and found a place to sit. The paper cone softened where the lemon and oil touched it. Anwesha picked out the crispest pieces first, then accused me of keeping the bigger share. I showed her the cone. She said the evidence was inconclusive and took another handful from my side.

For a while we watched people attempt photographs against the water. A little boy ran from the foam, turned around, and ran back before his mother could call him. A couple argued about which direction to face. An old man stood with his trousers rolled to the knees, looking at the tide as if he had come to check on a familiar neighbour.

Anwesha handed me her phone. “Take a picture.”

I took one while the wind pushed her hair across her face. She looked at it and made a dissatisfied noise.

“You cut off half the sea.”

“The sea is still there.”

“That isn’t the point.”

I took another. In that one, the red umbrella of a nearby vendor filled the corner and she had her eyes closed. She inspected it, then gave me the phone back. “That’s worse.”

“You said take a picture. You didn’t say take a good one.”

“I thought you knew.”

“I’m not a photographer.”

“You’re the one with the phone. Try again.”

For the third, she held her hair behind one ear and looked toward the water instead of at the camera. I showed it to her. She studied the screen longer than she had studied the others.

“All right,” she said. “Send it to me.”

She did not ask me to take another. We returned to the muri, which had gone slightly soft, and argued over whether it needed more chilli. I could have bought her something more expensive that afternoon if I had borrowed money from home. Instead, we shared a snack, made fun of my photographs, and left when the light began to lose its hard white glare.

On the ride back, she leaned her shoulder against mine when the auto slowed for traffic. She told me about a girl in her class who had answered a lecturer’s question with such confidence that nobody noticed she had misunderstood it. I laughed in the right places. My phone stayed in my pocket. I did not check the picture again to see whether it had come out sharp.

After that, Digha became one of the places we went when neither of us needed a special reason. Sometimes we went only as far as the beach and came back. On afternoons when we had more time, we continued along the coast to Shankarpur, walked near the harbour, and bought tea before turning home. The trips were not holidays. We carried our college bags and worried about getting back in time. That was part of what made them ours: the sea sat inside

the same ordinary life as assignments, auto fares, and the next morning’s class.

Chapter Seventeen — The Shoes

A gift made personal

For her birthday, I bought Anwesha a pair of shoes. She had been looking at them in a shop window for a few weeks. They were simple, light-coloured, with laces she said were prettier than the sandals she usually wore. I saved up for them and worried about the size. The shopkeeper let me exchange them if they did not fit, which I considered a generous loophole in the machinery of love.

When she opened the box, she stared at the shoes for a moment. We were in the small front room at her house, where the afternoon light fell through a patterned curtain and made the dust look gold. She had expected a book; I had wrapped the box in paper from the stationery

shop and done a poor job of keeping the corners neat. Her mother had gone to the kitchen to make tea, leaving us alone with the gift and the sound of a pressure cooker from somewhere behind the house.

"You remembered these?"

"You talked about them."

"I talk about many things."

"I listen sometimes."

She smiled and sat on the chair. "I don't know if I can wear them."

"Why not?"

"I've never worn shoes like this. I don't know how to tie the laces."

It was such an ordinary confession that I thought she was joking. Then I saw she was serious. She had spent most of her life in sandals and slippers. The laces looked to her like a small puzzle with no reason to exist.

"Give me your foot," I said.

"That sounds strange."

"I mean—let me help."

She slid one foot into the shoe. I knelt and pulled the laces even. My fingers were not very good at making a neat bow. I had to undo it and start again. Anwesha watched me, smiling.

"You look very serious," she said.

"This is a technical task."

"It's a knot."

"That's what a knot is: a technical task."

I tied it. Then I tied the other shoe. When I looked up, she was watching me with a softness

that made me suddenly conscious of how close we were.

In my mind, I had become a prince. She was Cinderella, and the shoe had found its way home. The thought was ridiculous, but it gave the moment a shine I wanted to keep.

Anwesha stood and took a few steps across the room. She looked down at her feet, then back at me.

“I’m wearing shoes,” she said, as if reporting an astonishing discovery.

“You are.”

“I feel taller.”

“You’re not.”

“I feel taller. That’s what matters.”

She walked the length of the room once more, then bent to inspect the knot. “You’ll have to teach me.”

“I can do that.”

“You’ll have to teach me properly.”

“I will.”

She took off one shoe and sat back in the chair, holding it in her lap. “Show me once.”

I demonstrated slowly, crossing the laces and making the first loop. She tried to copy me, pulled one end too hard, and watched the whole thing come loose.

“That was worse,” she said.

“It was the first try.”

“You said you’d teach me properly.”

“I didn’t promise you’d learn in one minute.”

She made me show her again. This time she got the loops crossed, though one was much

smaller than the other. She tugged at the bow to test it, slipped the shoe back on, then stood and stamped her foot once against the floor.

“It’ll hold,” I said.

“Then it’s good enough.” She smiled and put out her hand.

I took her hand, and she squeezed once before letting go. I carried that small pressure with me for the rest of the day. We went out after tea so she could try the shoes on the road. At first she walked carefully, watching every uneven patch as if the ground had become more complicated. Then she began to swing her arms and take longer steps, testing how quickly she could move without the heel slipping. At the corner she turned and walked backward for three paces to show me she could balance. I told her to look where she was going. She laughed and nearly stepped into a puddle.

On the way back, she said the shoes pinched a little at one toe. I asked if she wanted to take them off. She said no, loosened that lace herself, and kept walking. At the next crossing she tested her step, then drew level with me again.

The next morning she wore them to college. I saw her crossing the courtyard, watching the uneven patches of ground, then lifting her eyes when she reached the steps. She came over and held out one foot.

“Still comfortable?” I asked.

“Mostly.” She bent to check the lace. “I tied it myself.”

“Looks good.”

“I practised before leaving.” She straightened and smiled at me. “Now you don’t have to do everything.”

“I didn’t mind.”

“I know. That’s why I had to learn.” The bell rang. She took my hand as we went inside, the new shoes tapping lightly against the corridor floor. I remember the sound because I had spent so much time choosing them. She had already made them her own.

At the landing, one of her classmates noticed the shoes and asked where she had found them. Anwesha told her the shop, then bent to show the knot she had learned. The bow was uneven, one loop longer than the other, but it held when she tugged it.

“He tied them for me first,” she said, nodding toward me. “Then he taught me.”

Her friend looked at me with a teasing smile. “Very devoted.”

I felt my face warm. Anwesha only laughed. “The shoes are comfortable. That’s the important part.” She started up the stairs ahead of us, taking each step more confidently than the last. At the next landing, she glanced back and waited while I caught up.

Chapter Eighteen — The Old Story

The first time Anwesha asked to look through my phone, she did it like a joke. We were sitting outside the department building. She had been telling me about a friend from her old school, a boy she had liked when she was in Class Twelve. The story came out in fragments: how he had once seemed to choose her, how he later began showing her off to other girls, how he would talk about those girls in front of her as though she were meant to watch. She described the slow change in herself, the way she stopped trusting what she saw and began looking for signs everywhere.

“It made me feel like I was nothing,” she said. “Like I could be replaced while I was still standing there.”

I did not know what to say. I wanted to tell her that I would never do that. I also knew I could not prove it by speaking. She looked down at the strap of her bag while she told me. I asked if she wanted me to listen or if she wanted to talk through what she might do if she saw him again. She said she did not know; she only needed me to understand why she sometimes felt afraid even when nothing had happened.

I listened. She told me that the other girls had not all been cruel. Some had been her friends. That was part of what made it confusing: he could introduce her to them and make her feel included, then turn the attention toward them and watch her understand what he

was doing. She had gone home from school and replayed small moments until every ordinary conversation seemed to contain a hidden comparison. She said she had stopped asking him questions because she was afraid the answer would make her feel foolish.

I wanted to condemn him on her behalf. I wanted to promise that our relationship would never resemble that one. I managed not to turn her story into a chance to display how good I could be. I said I was sorry she had been treated that way and asked whether she wanted to keep talking. She nodded. The request to see my phone came a few minutes later, as if the story had left her needing something she could inspect.

She turned toward me. “You won’t do that to me, right?”

“No.”

She held out her hand. “Give me your phone.”

I looked at her, then at the phone in my pocket. “Why?”

“I want to see who you talk to.”

The request came with a smile, but her eyes stayed on mine. I unlocked the phone and gave it to her. She scrolled through the recent messages, stopping at names she recognised and opening one or two conversations. In a chat from my practical group, a classmate had sent me a photograph of the notes I had missed. Anwesha read the exchange, then looked up.

“You were studying together?”

“We were checking the assignment.”

She held the phone for a moment longer before handing it back. I felt relief that there was nothing to explain and discomfort that I had let her search for something to explain. When she found nothing else, she leaned her head against my shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I know it’s silly.”

“It’s okay.”

“You don’t have to let me.”

I could have said that. I could have asked her not to check again. Instead I put the phone away and told her she did not have to be afraid of me. She closed her eyes against my shoulder. I thought that meant I had answered well.

“You won’t cheat?”

“No.”

“You won’t start talking to some girl and forget I exist?”

“I won’t.”

She nodded as if storing the answers somewhere she could reach later. For a while, the questions were occasional. Then she began asking them more often. She noticed which girls spoke to me after class. She wanted to know who had messaged. Once, when my phone lit up on the table, she asked who it was before I had read the screen.

“It’s probably my class group,” I said.

“Probably?”

“I haven’t looked.”

“Then look.”

I did. It was the class group. She watched my face as I showed her. I felt a flicker of irritation.

I swallowed it. She had told me what had happened before; I believed her fear came from there. If I was patient, if I never gave her a reason, perhaps she would stop needing to check.

“I don’t want you to feel worried,” I told her.

“I don’t want to be this kind of person,” she said. “I hate checking. I hate asking. I just keep thinking—what if?”

I took her hand. “There won’t be a what if.” She leaned her head against my shoulder. I felt protective of her, and pleased that she trusted me with the story. When she asked the same questions again, I answered each one more firmly, as if certainty were a gift I could give her.

A few days later, we were sitting on the low wall outside the department when she told me more about home. Her voice had gone quiet, though no one was close enough to hear us. When she was younger, her brother used to hit her. She did not give me a dramatic account or make it sound like one event had changed everything. She said it had happened often enough that she learned to notice the sound of his footsteps and guess what mood he was in.

“And when I cried, my aunties would ask what I’d done to provoke him,” she said. “They never liked me much. I was always too loud, too stubborn, too much of something.”

I felt anger rise in me, quick and useless. I wanted to ask where her brother was now, whether he still did it, whether she wanted me

to speak to someone. Instead I asked, “Do you want me to do anything?”

“No. I just wanted you to know.” She rubbed a loose thread on her sleeve. “People tell me to forget it, but I remember how small I felt. Sometimes I still act as if I have to keep everyone from getting angry.”

I told her she had not deserved it. She nodded, but did not look convinced. I asked if she wanted to go somewhere else. She said she wanted to sit a little longer.

We stayed on the low wall while students crossed the courtyard in noisy groups. She watched them without speaking. When the bell rang for the next lecture, she stood and adjusted the strap of her bag.

“I haven’t eaten,” she said.

We went to the muri stall. She asked for extra chilli, as she usually did, and we ate standing beside the counter while the vendor mixed the next order. We did not talk about her brother again. She had told me what she wanted me to know and stopped there; I tried not to pull the rest of the story out of her.

On the ride home, her question followed me. I had wanted a job to do, but she had only wanted me to know. At the stall she asked for extra chilli and complained when the vendor gave her too little; her voice had returned to its ordinary sharpness. I watched her wipe her fingers on a napkin before we crossed back toward the college road. She had trusted me with a part of her life, then led me back into the afternoon. I

kept looking for a way to prove I could be trusted. I did not know how to let that be enough.

Chapter Nineteen — Senior Year

By the time we were in our final year, the department fest had become our responsibility. The teachers gave us a budget and a list of things to arrange. The list grew each day. We needed a stage, chairs, lights, a sound system, a schedule, volunteers, and someone who could persuade the music club to rehearse before the last possible moment. Anwesha knew half the performers. I knew how to find a cable, make a spreadsheet, and stay late without complaining.

At the first full rehearsal, none of those talents seemed useful. The singer scheduled to open the programme had not arrived, the host had lost his notes, and the harmonium player was waiting for a key that someone had borrowed and not returned. A teacher stood in the doorway asking whether we were ready. Anwesha answered that we would be in five minutes, with the calm of someone who had already decided the five minutes belonged to her.

She sent one student to look for the missing key and asked another to find the singer. Then she sat with the host on the edge of the stage and helped him reconstruct his introduction from the programme sheet. I found a spare key in the music room, but by the time I came back the singer had still not appeared. Anwesha glanced at the empty chair, crossed out the opening name, and moved a group song into the first slot.

“Can they do it without rehearsal?” I asked.

“They’ve been rehearsing for weeks. They just don’t know they’re opening.”

She went to tell them. I stayed behind to move the microphones and check the stand height. When she returned, the group was already gathering their instruments. She had a way of making a decision sound like something everyone had helped choose. I admired that. I was better at fixing what had already gone wrong; she could keep a small problem from becoming a public one.

The teacher came back before the first song began. Anwesha greeted him, gave him the revised order, and asked him to stay for the opening. He looked at the crowded stage, then at her. “You have it under control?”

“We do,” she said.

I was standing close enough to hear the plural. It pleased me more than it should have. We had become a team in the eyes of the department: her voice in front, my lists behind it, both of us staying after everyone else had left. That evening we sat on the steps with tea in paper cups and shared the last two biscuits from her bag. She leaned her shoulder against mine while we reviewed the next day’s schedule. I thought this was what a future looked like—not a grand declaration, but two people learning how to carry the same untidy list.

We spent afternoons carrying chairs and arguing about the order of events. Anwesha stood in the courtyard with a clipboard, telling

people where to go. She looked at home among the noise. When she saw me across the crowd, she would come over and put her arms around me.

At first I thought she was simply happy to see me. Then I noticed the way she looked around before letting go. She wanted everyone to know I was hers, or that I was with her. I liked it. I liked being claimed in public because I had spent so long believing no one would choose me at all.

“You’re smiling,” she said once.

“Am I not allowed?”

“You look proud of yourself.”

“I’m proud of you.”

She gave me a look that said she did not believe me, then held my hand in front of the group anyway. There was a practical reason to be at college more often that year. We had rehearsals, meetings, assignments. But between the events, the old fear returned. Anwesha asked who I had spoken to, whether a girl had messaged me, why I had taken so long to answer. I tried to answer before she had to ask twice.

On the morning of the fest, the sound system failed ten minutes before the first performance. A microphone worked only if the cable was held at a certain angle. The sound technician was on the phone with someone who was supposed to bring a replacement. Students were already gathering in the courtyard, and the department

head had begun asking when the programme would start.

I went under the edge of the stage to check the connection. Anwesha stood beside the music club, keeping the performers from scattering. She called out the next singer’s name and asked the host to stretch the introduction. I found a loose plug, taped it in place, then tested the microphone while one of the seniors spoke into it.

“Don’t touch the stand,” I said. “Just speak.”

The microphone held. The first singer began, though the sound came through softer than we wanted. Anwesha watched from the side of the stage. When the song ended, she gave me a quick nod. I felt the small approval like a medal. For the next hour I moved chairs, checked the cables, and crossed items off the list. The work made sense because each problem had an edge: a missing stand, an unplugged wire, a performer waiting in the wrong room.

During the break, Anwesha came to find me near the equipment table. She had a streak of stage makeup on one cheek and a bottle of water in her hand.

“You saved the opening,” she said.

“The tape saved the opening.”

“You found the tape.” She leaned into me and wrapped her arms around my shoulders. Behind her, two students were carrying a keyboard. She did not let go until they had passed. Then she looked at my face. “You like it when everyone knows, don’t you?”

I laughed. “Knows what?”

“That you’re mine.”

I looked down at the cable in my hands. “I don’t mind.”

She seemed satisfied. She kissed my cheek and went back to the performers. At the time, I thought the public claim meant she was proud of us. I did not ask whether it also helped her feel certain.

By the time the last performance ended, the courtyard had emptied in uneven waves. A few students were folding cloth over the tables; someone had already unplugged the lights, and the stage looked smaller without them. Anwesha came back carrying her guitar case and a paper plate with one piece of cake left on it. She had sung with the music club near the end of the programme. I had stood behind the audience, close to the sound table, and watched her find the first note without looking down at her hands.

It was “Take the Long Way Back,” a song she had been shaping in the margins of her notebook. The music club had learned to follow her without crowding the melody. Before the performance, the microphone gave a small crackle whenever anyone touched the stand. A student tightened the cable and gave her a thumbs-up. Anwesha tested one note; it wavered, then settled. Her voice began alone, low and unhurried. The guitar answered, and the other instruments came in softly beneath it. Halfway through the first verse, the slide dipped

under the note. She let it fall, smiled at the mistake, and found the melody again. Before the chorus, she left a beat of silence. “Don’t turn yet” came back twice over a simple rising melody; the room caught it almost at once.

Verse 1

You told me what the lecturer said;
I missed the turn we knew.
The umbrella turned inside out
and soaked our sleeves right through.
We stopped beside the corner shop,
then watched the traffic pass.
You said, “There’s one more thing to tell.”
I said, “We have a while.”

Pre-chorus

Green light; the last bus rolled by.
I never checked the time.

Chorus

Don’t turn yet, just walk with me;
one more block beside the trees.
Your tea is cold; the shops are closed.
We’ll take the long way home.
Don’t turn yet, just walk with me.
Tell me what you meant to say.
The bus will come around again.
Let’s let this one go by.

Verse 2

Your tea cooled slowly in your hands;
the stall began to close.
You told the story once again
then changed the way it goes.
I knew the shortcut to the stop;
I knew the last bus time.
You said, “There’s one more thing to tell.”
I said, “Then take your time.”

Pre-chorus

Green light; the last bus rolled by.
I never checked the time.

Chorus

Don’t turn yet, just walk with me;
one more block beside the trees.
Your tea is cold; the shops are closed.
We’ll take the long way home.
Don’t turn yet, just walk with me.
Tell me what you meant to say.
The bus will come around again.
Let’s let this one go by.

Bridge

The tea stall stacked its paper cups;
the last bus passed in rain.
We didn’t solve a single thing;
we walked one block again.

Final chorus

Don’t turn yet, just walk with me;
one more block beside the trees.
Your tea is cold; the shops are closed.
We’ll take the long way home.
Don’t turn yet, just walk with me.
Tell me what you meant to say.
The bus will come around again.
Let’s let this one go by.

She sang about the small stories that fill a walk home and the way a familiar road can seem too short when you are not ready to say goodnight. I recognised the feeling, though the details were hers. I did not know whether she had written it for anyone in particular. I only knew I wanted the song to last longer.

“You didn’t clap,” she said, offering me the cake.

“I was working.”

“You were standing right there.”

“The microphone was making a noise.”

“The microphone was fine.” She tilted her head, waiting.

I took the plate. “You sounded beautiful.”

“That took a long time.”

“I didn’t want to interrupt the song.”

She laughed and took the cake back, breaking off a small piece for herself. We sat on the lowest step while volunteers carried the last chairs toward the department hall. Her voice was rough from singing, and she kept clearing her throat. I asked if she wanted water. She said she had already had enough and leaned her head against my shoulder for a few seconds.

“Tomorrow they’ll ask us to do all of this again,” I said.

“Tomorrow we’ll say no.”

“And then do it anyway?”

“Probably.”

We finished the cake and walked toward the gate together. At the road, we had to wait for an auto with room for both our bags. She put the guitar case across her knees and rested her hand on my wrist. Under the streetlight, I saw the pale line where a watch might have sat, though I did not wear one. She followed my glance and traced the mark with one finger.

“You don’t need a watch,” she said. “You look handsome without it.”

I smiled, pleased to be seen that way. I did not ask whether she meant it as a preference or

a rule. When the auto came, she sat beside me and kept her hand on mine until we reached the turn where I had to get out. I went home carrying the empty paper plate and the warmth of her fingers, certain that the future we talked about was already taking shape in the small things.

One evening, after a long day of setting up the hall, my phone rang from an unknown number.

“Are you Aritra?” a man asked.

“Who is this?”

“Are you Anwesha’s boyfriend?”

The way he asked made me wary. “Who are you?”

“Just answer. Are you her boyfriend or not?”

“Why do you want to know?”

Another voice came onto the call, laughing. “Yes, yes, he is. Brother, you’ll understand why we’re laughing later.” I felt my stomach tighten. “What is this about?” They laughed again. The first caller said something I could not make out, then the call ended.

For a few minutes I stood outside the hall staring at the screen. My mind supplied possibilities faster than I could dismiss them. I called the number back. No one answered.

I told Anwesha about it that night. I thought she would laugh with me at how strange the call was. I told it casually, copying the caller’s voice, even laughing at the end.

She did not laugh. “Who were they?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why did they ask if you were my boyfriend?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why were they laughing?”

“They said I’d understand later.”

Her breathing changed. “Did you call them back?”

“Yes. No answer.”

“Why didn’t you tell me as soon as it happened?”

“I just did.”

“You were laughing about it.”

“Because it was weird.”

She went silent. I could hear the old school story entering the room with us—the boy who had made her watch him choose other girls, the months of feeling replaceable. I regretted telling it lightly. I also felt helpless that my uncertainty had made her afraid.

“I’m not hiding anything from you,” I said.

“I know.”

But she did not sound as if she knew. She sounded like someone trying to believe it. She asked to see the number. I unlocked my phone and turned the screen toward her. She read it, then checked the call log to make sure I had not missed another attempt. I could feel my irritation rising, but the call had frightened her, and I had just told her it was nothing.

“You already called them back?” she asked.

“Yes. They didn’t answer.”

“If they call again, tell me before you laugh about it.”

“I will.”

She kept my phone a moment longer, her thumb resting near the number. “I hate that I still feel like this,” she said. “I know you’re not him. I know that. But when somebody talks like I’m a joke, I start wondering what I haven’t noticed.”

I wanted to say that she had nothing to worry about. Instead I said, “I’ll tell you what happens. But I don’t want us calling strangers until we know who they are.”

She looked up. “All right.” She gave the phone back. Her hand stayed in mine for the ride home, and I took that closeness as proof that I had answered well. I had not asked whether she wanted to talk about the fear, and she had not asked me to fix it. We had made one small agreement, then let the night end. I did not know yet how quickly an agreement could become another promise I would use to avoid a harder conversation.

Chapter Twenty — The Application Form

I planned to go away for my master’s degree before I knew how much distance could frighten a person. The application process was ordinary: forms, documents, dates, a list of colleges. I wanted to study nutrition further and see what kind of work might open up afterward. The idea gave shape to the future. I told Anwesha the details as I found them. She listened and asked how far each college was.

The first form was printed from a computer in the college office. I carried it folded inside my notebook and opened it on a library table between lectures. The page asked for marks, certificates, addresses, and a preferred course. I had not filled every box when Anwesha came in with a stack of reference books against her chest.

“Is that the application?” she asked.

“Yes. I’m still deciding which colleges to put down.”

She set the books on the table and sat opposite me. “How many choices do you get?”

“A few. I’ll apply to the ones that make sense.”

“And they’re all away?”

“Most of them.”

She opened one of her books but did not look at the page. I tried to keep filling in the form. The pen caught on the paper where I had pressed too hard. Beside the question about

previous education, I wrote the name of my college, then stopped at the address line.

“You should go,” she said.

I looked up. “You think so?”

“It’s your course. You’ve wanted to do it.”

“I have.”

“Then go.” She turned a page. “We’ll manage.”

The ease of her answer made me smile. “You’re not worried?”

She looked at me over the book. “I didn’t say that.”

For a while we returned to our work. She copied a citation. I filled in the next section. The conversation seemed settled until I mentioned the possible start date. Then she asked how often I would come home. I answered with the best guess I had. She asked if the hostel allowed phones at night. I said I assumed so. She asked what I would do if the first college did not accept me. I had not thought that far ahead.

“I’ll apply somewhere else.”

“And if you get in somewhere very far?”

“I don’t know yet.”

She set her pen down. “I want you to go. I just don’t want to be left behind.”

I reached for her hand across the table. She let me hold it, but her fingers stayed still. “You won’t be.”

“You can’t promise that nothing will change.”

“I can promise I’ll keep choosing you.”

She looked at the form between us. “That’s a promise you can keep today.”

I did not know what she meant. I took it as reassurance, and she allowed me to. When the library closed, I folded the application along its old crease. I had filled in most of the boxes. The last one asked for a photograph. I tucked the form into my notebook and walked Anwesha to the gate.

At first she treated the move as a practical problem. Which train would I take? Would I come home on weekends? How long would the course last? We made guesses and plans. I thought the conversation was difficult but manageable.

The evening the admission confirmation arrived, I read it at the desk while my mother sorted vegetables in the kitchen. The room was warm from the computer fan. I opened the attachment, checked the course name, closed it, and opened it again. Then I sent Anwesha a screenshot.

She called before I had finished rereading the notice.

“You got in?” she asked.

“It looks like it. I still have to take the documents and confirm.”

“You got in,” she repeated, and this time I could hear her smiling. “I knew you would.”

I wanted her to be the first person who knew. Until that call, the confirmation had felt like a page on my screen. Her excitement made it a place I might actually go.

“When do you have to leave?” she asked.

“Not for a while. I need to finish the paperwork first.”

“We should find out how long the train takes.”

“I’ll check.”

“No, we’ll check. Send me the name of the station.” I heard paper moving at her end. “And ask whether there’s a hostel. If you take a room, you’ll spend more.”

I had already begun calculating the fees and travel costs. I had not thought about where I would sleep. “I can manage it.”

“I know. Let’s just see the options.”

We looked up the route while we stayed on the call. The connection required a change at a larger station; she wrote down the train number while I checked the university’s notice again. At one point we both went quiet, reading. I could hear her turning a page and the faint scrape of my mother’s knife against the chopping board.

“It’s exciting,” Anwesha said. “And a little far.”

“Both things can be true.”

“Yes.” She paused. “I want you to go. I don’t want you to make your life smaller because I’m scared.”

I did not know how to answer that without promising I would never make her feel afraid. I said, “I’ll call you when I get there.”

“And when you come home, we’ll have masala muri.”

“That’s the plan.”

My mother called me to help carry the vegetables. I said I would call back after dinner. Anwesha told me to go, then made me repeat the train station so she could write it down correctly. I returned to the kitchen with the confirmation still open on the laptop. My mother asked whether I had got in. I said yes. She smiled and handed me the bowl of potatoes to wash.

For the rest of that evening, I moved between the course notice, the station name in Anwesha’s message, and the ordinary jobs at home. It felt possible to be excited and still belong to the people I was leaving. I did not yet understand that the harder part would be learning to leave without treating someone else’s fear as proof that I had done something wrong.

In the months before the semester began, I started taking small paid projects from students. I helped with presentations and college assignments. The work was not grand, but it was mine. I saved until I could buy a laptop. Then I began teaching myself how to build websites.

I started with WordPress. I watched tutorials, tried themes, deleted pages, and tried again. The work felt like a language with visible rules. If a button sat in the wrong place, I could move it. If a page looked dull, I could change the colour. When something did not work, there was usually a reason I could find.

Relationships did not offer the same satisfaction. There was no setting to change that made Anwesha stop fearing I would leave. There was no single missing line of code.

When I told her about the laptop, she was happy for me. “Now you can do bigger things,” she said.

“Maybe.”

“You will. You’re good at learning.”

I wanted to make that future ours. I imagined the laptop paying for our life together, the projects growing into a business, the business making marriage possible. It did not occur to me that I was fastening two promises together: my education and her sense of safety. I thought if I worked hard enough, neither of us would have to be afraid.

Chapter Twenty-One — The Road Not Taken

For six or seven months, Anwesha’s fear of my leaving became the largest thing in our relationship. She called at night and cried. She asked me not to go to another college, not to meet new people, not to forget her. She asked me to marry her. I would answer gently until my voice began to break with tiredness. Then I would feel guilty for sounding tired.

“It’s my education,” I said once. “I have to go.”

“And what about me?”

“You’re part of my life.”

“But you’re still going.”

One night the call stretched past midnight. I had the university calendar open on my laptop and a list of dates in the notebook beside it. Anwesha was crying quietly enough that I could hear her trying to hide it from the people in the next room.

“If you go, your days will fill up with other people,” she said. “Then I’ll be the person you call when you have time.”

“That isn’t what I want.”

“How do you know what it will be like there? You don’t know them yet.”

“I don’t know them. I know you.”

She did not answer. I looked at the calendar and saw lectures, practicals, the journey home. I tried to describe how often I could travel back, how we would call, how we would plan visits

around exams. The more carefully I explained, the more I heard that I was talking about logistics while she was asking whether she would still matter to me.

"I'm not asking you to stop studying," she said. "I'm asking you not to leave me behind."

I wanted to say those were not the same thing. I also wanted to promise that nothing would change. I had already promised that once, in different words, and knew it was not something I could guarantee. So I said I loved her and would keep choosing her. She said she wanted to believe me. We stayed on the phone until her crying eased, but neither of us had found an answer we trusted.

I knew I should be able to love her and go. On the phone, I could not make those two truths sound as if they belonged together.

After some calls, I stayed at the desk with the university calendar open, shifting the same dates around without changing the answer. In the morning I still answered messages, completed assignments, and made plans. But each choice seemed to split in two: what I wanted, and what might stop her crying.

I made a compromise that seemed reasonable then. I would attend the university only when I had to—exams, practicals, important paperwork—and spend the rest of my time at home building the website work into a business. If I earned enough, I thought, we could marry sooner. I would not be away as much. She would feel safer. I would still complete the degree.

I told her the plan over the phone. I read from the university calendar as I explained it: I would go for exams and practicals, and travel when I had to collect a form, admit card, or mark sheet. On those days I could stay near the exam centre and study instead of making the journey twice. The rest of the semester I would be at home, taking on more website work.

“How many times will you have to go?” she asked.

“I don’t know exactly. Maybe five or six in a semester.”

“And the classes?”

“I’ll ask what I need to do. I’ll keep up with the materials.” I was already making the plan sound more certain than it was. “I can build the business here. If we want a future together, I need to work too.”

“You’ll really stay home?” she asked.

“Most of the time.”

“You won’t go and make another life there?”

“No.”

She exhaled, and her voice softened. “You’re doing this for us.”

“Yes,” I said.

I believed it. I believed that giving up the crowded campus, the friends I might have made, the conversations after class, the chance to be young in a new place—these were small costs beside the future I was protecting.

At home, I marked the exam dates on the calendar above my desk. My mother saw the

gaps between them and asked whether the university had changed its timetable.

“I’m going to stay home between the important days,” I said. “I can study here and take more work.”

She looked from the calendar to the open laptop. “And the classes?”

“I’ll manage the course materials.”

“Will they send them to you?”

“I’ll ask the others.”

“You know them?”

“Not yet.”

She folded the shopping list she had been holding. “You’ve worked hard to get there.”

“I know.”

“I’m not telling you what to do,” she said. “I only want you to be sure you’re choosing it for yourself too.”

I said I was. She rested one hand on the back of my chair, looking at the dates I had marked. I began explaining again: the work I could take on, the trips I could avoid, the money I might save. While I spoke, I heard how carefully I had built the plan around Anwesha’s fear and how little I knew about the university’s actual requirements. I stopped before my mother could ask.

“Have you decided what you want?” she said.

“I want to finish the degree.”

“That isn’t quite what I asked.”

I turned toward the calendar. I wanted the relationship to be safe, the business to grow, and the degree to remain possible. I wanted all

three without having to disappoint anyone. “I think I can do both,” I said.

My mother did not argue. She placed the list beside the calendar and went back to the kitchen. I looked at the dates I had marked, already thinking of them as the only days I would need to be away.

The first time I went to the university after deciding this, I carried my documents in a plastic folder and a shirt I had ironed the night before. The campus was louder than my college. Students crossed the courtyard in groups, comparing timetables and asking where the lecture rooms were. A boy with a guitar case stopped me near the notice board and asked if I knew where the department office was. I showed him the direction on the map. He thanked me and asked whether I was new too.

“Yes,” I said.

“We’re going to find the canteen after this. Come along if you want.”

I looked at my phone. Anwesha had sent a message asking when I would be home. I told the boy I had to leave after I finished my paperwork. He said all right and went ahead with his friend.

The office took longer than I expected. By the time I came out, the courtyard had thinned. I could have looked for the boy. I could have stayed and learned the route to the canteen. Instead I called Anwesha to tell her I was on my way back. She sounded relieved. I felt useful

again, and let that feeling settle over the small disappointment I could not name.

My first semester began to take shape around the absences. I knew which dates mattered because they were written in the university calendar. I did not know the names of the students who sat beside me in class. When someone asked if I would be back the next week, I said I had work at home. That was true. It was also the answer I had trained myself to give.

There was one practical I nearly stayed for. I had gone in to submit a form, and a lecturer told me the nutrition lab was running an extra session that afternoon. It was not compulsory, but he said it would help before the examination. I had time. The return auto would not leave for another two hours, and I had brought my notes in case I found somewhere to sit.

I followed the other students to the lab. They were learning to measure portions and record the ingredients in a standard meal. The lecturer had set out bowls of rice, lentils, and vegetables, along with a scale and a chart of standard servings. A woman in a blue kurta stood at the table beside mine. She introduced herself as Torsa and moved a notebook so I could put down my folder. We compared measurements, then compared the instructions, because neither of us trusted the photocopy.

The chart gave a serving of rice in grams. Torsa weighed it, then looked at the amount in the bowl. “How would you explain this to

someone at home? Nobody I know puts rice on a scale before lunch.”

“My mother uses the small steel bowl,” I said. “She knows how much it holds.”

“Exactly. We need a way to translate the number into something people already use.” She wrote the weight beside a sketch of the bowl. The lecturer was helping another group, so we tried a second portion and noted how much it varied when we packed the rice down. The difference was small, but Torsa marked it anyway.

She asked whether I had always studied nutrition. I told her I had, and that I was trying to build a small website business from home. She asked what kind of websites I made. I explained badly, using the names of tools instead of saying what a client actually got. She listened, then asked whether the sites were for local businesses. When I said I had only just started, she nodded as if that were a complete answer.

“You’ll learn the words while you’re doing the work,” she said. “That’s how the rest of us are doing it too.”

“Are you coming regularly?” she asked when the lecturer stepped away.

“Probably not. I have work at home.”

“That sounds like a lot to manage alongside the course.”

“It is.”

She did not ask me to explain. When the session ended, Torsa said a few of them were

going to the canteen to review the practical and invited me along. The invitation was casual; she was already packing her notebook as she spoke. I looked at the time, then at the message Anwesha had sent asking whether I had finished at the university. I typed that the lab was over and that I would be home soon. Before I could put the phone away, Anwesha asked what time I thought I would reach.

“I can catch the next auto,” I said. “I’ll come for a little while.”

Torsa nodded and led the way across the courtyard. Two other students had taken a table near the canteen window. They moved their bags to make space for me, and one of them asked whether I had understood the difference between a measured portion and the amount a family actually served. I told them about my mother’s steel bowl. Torsa opened her notes, and the four of us compared the weights we had written down. One student had pressed the rice into the bowl; another had left it loose. Their measurements differed enough to make us argue about whether the chart was misleading or we were simply measuring different things.

The conversation shifted from the lab to the long bus rides people made, then to which stall near campus was worth the walk. I found myself answering without first wondering whether I sounded clever. Someone passed me a cup of tea. Torsa drew a small bowl beside the measurement in her notebook and wrote down the range we had found. It felt good to have a

place at the table, even if I had only arrived that morning.

My phone lit again. Anwesha asked if I had left the university. I looked at the message, then at the four of us bent over the notebook. I had no reason I could explain without making a small delay sound like a betrayal. I wrote that I was at the canteen and would leave in a few minutes.

“You can stay if you want,” Torsa said, noticing me turn the phone face down. “We’ll send you the notes either way.”

“I should go. She’s waiting to know when I’ll be home.”

Torsa closed the notebook. “All right. We’ll probably be here next week.”

She tore out a clean sheet and copied the measurements for me. I thanked her and walked to the gate. The conversation had been ordinary; no one had asked me to explain myself or promised we would become friends. I had still wanted it to continue. On the ride home, I folded Torsa’s notes into my folder and kept checking the time. When I reached home, Anwesha sounded relieved. I told myself that returning promptly was a small way to keep the day easy for both of us.

The first semester came and went. I travelled for exams and returned home. I studied, worked, and made websites. I did not complain. If someone asked whether I liked the university, I said it was fine. If they asked whether I had made friends, I said there had not been time.

I did not call it a sacrifice. I called it a plan.

Chapter Twenty-Two — The First Client

The first money I earned for myself came from college projects, before any website clients. My family could have helped if I asked, but I wanted to know I had paid for my own purchases. One classmate brought me her handwritten nutrition project and asked me to type it, arrange it, and have it ready by Friday. She put the pages on the library table between us.

“I can try,” I said. “What do you want me to do?”

“Make it look like a proper project. Headings, diagrams, references. I’ve done the research; I just can’t make the pages look right.”

We agreed on a small fee. I wrote it down because I did not want either of us to remember a different number later. That evening I typed the pages at home, checked the order against her handwritten copy, and drew the tables again so the figures lined up. I found two places where a heading did not match the paragraph below it and called to ask which she meant. She answered from a noisy bus, then texted a photograph of her notes when we could not hear each other.

The work took longer than I expected. By the time I finished, the house was quiet and my eyes hurt from looking at the screen. On Friday she checked the pages at the cafeteria, found one typo, and asked if I could fix it before class. I

did. She paid me with folded notes from her purse and thanked me. The amount was not much, but it had come from something I knew how to do. At first I spent nearly everything as soon as I received it. Then I began keeping some aside.

The laptop was second-hand, heavier than the newer models my classmates carried, with a worn patch beside the trackpad. I checked it twice before handing over the money. The seller showed me the battery and the ports, and I pretended to know more than I did. On the way home, I held the bag against my knees in the auto, afraid the driver’s sudden braking would send it sliding to the floor. I had bought it to make work easier. I had not yet decided what I would learn on it.

I tried WordPress first because I had heard the name. I built practice pages for imaginary shops and copied layouts from tutorials. The work felt like opening a door into a room full of unfamiliar controls. I did not understand hosting, domains, or why a page that looked fine on my screen could look broken on somebody else’s phone. I asked questions online, made mistakes, and started again. A student who had seen one of my college projects gave my number to a furniture seller and told him I was good with computers. That was more confidence than I felt.

The first stranger who hired me sold handmade furniture. He called in the evening while I was sitting beside the laptop I had

bought with my saved money. Behind him, I could hear a fan and the distant sound of a television. He wanted a website that looked “modern” but also “traditional,” and I did not yet know how to turn those words into a design.

“I need a website,” he said. “Simple, but it should look premium.”

I opened a notebook. “What do you want customers to do when they visit?”

He was quiet. “See the furniture.”

“And then?”

“Call me.”

That was the first useful answer. I asked for photographs, a phone number, a list of products, and the area where he delivered. He sent the photos over the next few days, each one with a different background and some with a thumb covering the edge. I spent time making them look consistent. I tried a WordPress theme, then another. Every one seemed to bring its own idea of what the business should look like. I wanted more control than the themes gave me.

I did not know the right vocabulary for what bothered me. I only knew that I was spending longer fighting the tool than building the site. Then I found Odoo’s website builder, which gave me more direct control over the layout. I stayed up late learning it. I was slow, but I could see the result of each adjustment. The work became less like filling in a template and more like arranging a shop window: what should a customer notice first, what could wait, where did the eye go after the photograph?

The client called twice while I was building. The first time he asked when it would be ready. I had no schedule to give him, so I named a date and wrote it on the notebook. The second time he asked if the website would work on a phone. I said yes, then spent the rest of the evening checking every page on my own small screen.

When I finally sent him the preview link, I stayed at the desk with my phone in my hand. His reply came after dinner: *This looks very good. Can we make the contact button bigger?* I changed it, sent a new link, and waited again. When he approved the site, he paid me what we had agreed. I read the bank notification twice, then opened the project and looked at the pages as if the money had changed them.

My mother asked what I was smiling at when I came out of my room. I told her the client had paid. She asked how much. I named the amount, and she nodded, then asked whether I had counted the hours I spent on it. I said I had not.

“You should,” she said. “So you know what to ask next time.”

I went back to the desk and opened a blank spreadsheet. I entered the fee, the hours, and the cost of the domain. The final number was smaller than it had felt when it arrived. Still, the work had paid for itself, and I had made something a stranger could use. It was the first time earning money seemed less like luck and more like a skill I might build.

I had no idea how to price the next project, write a proposal, or persuade a client to trust

me, so I watched tutorials, read forums, and studied how other people presented their work. I tried to make my own portfolio feel less like a collection of assignments and more like evidence that I could solve a problem. When I told Anwesha about the client’s praise, she said, “I knew you could do it.”

“It’s one website.”

“One is how you start.”

I liked the way she made the small thing sound like a beginning. I liked that I could tell her and hear pride in her voice. I did not know how much of my confidence had begun to depend on her reaction.

The next client came through a referral. Then another. I worked late, often from the table where we used to do college projects. With each project I got quicker at asking what the client wanted and choosing tools that gave me enough control over the result. I learned enough to take on several projects in a month.

I made mistakes. I agreed to deadlines before I knew how long the work would take. I accepted changes without clarifying what the client wanted. I did not understand branding or how to find clients outside India. I charged too little, then worried I had charged too much. I learned by doing the work and by being embarrassed when something went wrong.

Anwesha remained my most enthusiastic audience. She asked what I was building, whether a client had replied, whether I had eaten. I sent her screenshots. She told me which

colour she liked. Sometimes she sat beside me while I worked and sang softly to herself, stopping whenever she reached a difficult phrase.

One evening, she came by while I was checking the furniture site on my phone. I had made the contact button larger, as the client asked, and moved it beneath the first photograph. On the laptop the page looked balanced. On the phone the photograph filled the screen, and the button had slipped below it.

“Would you know where to call him?” I asked.

She scrolled once, then twice. “If I already wanted the chair, maybe. But if I was only looking, I’d leave before I found this.” She tapped the screen where the number appeared in small print at the bottom.

I leaned over her shoulder. She moved the phone closer to the window, where the light made the text easier to read. “Can we put the number here too?”

“The client asked for the button.”

“Then keep the button. But a person can want to call without wanting to fill out a form.”

I added the number beside the button and opened the preview again. Anwesha tapped it. Her phone asked whether she wanted to call, and she cancelled before the call went through.

“It works,” she said.

I had never tested that part on a phone. I fixed one more line of spacing, and she checked the page again. Then she went back to the difficult phrase in her song, humming it under

her breath while I compared the mobile and desktop versions.

The website was still rough, but the next morning I sent the client a preview that made more sense on the small screen. He approved the change. I told Anwesha, and she said, “Good. Now it works for someone who hasn’t already decided to buy.” I wrote the sentence in my notebook, not because it was a perfect rule, but because she had helped me see the person on the other side of the page.

I thought we were building our future in parallel: she would study, I would work, and one day we would bring the two paths together. At the same time, my work gave me something I had not expected: a place where effort produced visible results. A page became cleaner. A client came back. A problem that had seemed impossible became a line I could fix. I began to imagine myself not just as a boy who might earn enough to be worthy, but as someone who could make a living from his own skill.

That distinction would take longer to reach my heart than my bank account.

Chapter Twenty-Three — Her Mother’s Tea

The first time I met Anwesha’s mother, I had spent the whole auto ride trying to decide how to greet her. I had imagined a formal interview. A row of questions. Her father sitting at the end of the room, asking what I planned to do with my life. Instead, Anwesha’s mother opened the door, saw me standing beside her daughter, and asked whether I had eaten.

“We had something on the way,” Anwesha said.

“Something is not food,” her mother replied. “Come in. I’ll make tea.”

The house sat a little outside the town. The road to it grew quieter after the last row of shops, then narrowed between small plots and walls. Inside, the front room was neat and bright. A calendar hung beside the doorway. There were family photographs on one shelf and a brass bowl on another. Their home had a warmth of its own. My family had two houses: the joint-family home and our spacious, three-storey house, as well as land and secure work across two generations. Anwesha’s family was more affluent than ours, though I had never felt deprived. At college, I compared the pocket money I chose to carry with what other students spent, as if those amounts could tell me what our families owned.

Her mother asked about my studies, my family, and whether I planned to continue after

graduation. She listened to my answers without making me feel examined. Anwesha sat close enough that our sleeves touched. Every so often she looked at me to see whether I was all right.

The questions came between small movements around the room. Her mother folded a cloth over the back of a chair, checked the kettle, and asked Anwesha whether she had remembered to bring home the notebook she had left at college. Anwesha said she had. Her mother looked toward the bag by the door.

“You said that last time,” she said.

Anwesha went to check. The notebook was inside, and she held it up in triumph. Her mother gave a brief laugh and returned to the kitchen. I liked the ease between them: the familiarity of a repeated argument, the way neither had to explain why the notebook mattered. It made the house feel inhabited, not arranged for a guest.

When her mother returned, she set the tea tray on the table. Anwesha nudged the plate of biscuits toward me. I took one. Her mother noticed I had chosen the broken one and replaced it with a whole biscuit from the tin.

“He can choose for himself,” Anwesha said.

“He can,” her mother replied. “But a guest shouldn’t have to take what’s left.”

I wanted to tell her I was comfortable. I did not. The correction was so gentle that accepting it felt easier than arguing. At my own house, care was often practical and quiet: an extra portion put aside, a question asked from another

room. Here it was being offered to me directly, and I did not know how to receive it without feeling I had to earn it.

“He wants to do his master’s,” Anwesha told her mother.

“That’s good,” her mother said. “What do you want to do after?”

“I’m still deciding.”

“You don’t have to decide everything at once.”

Anwesha looked at me as if she were pleased to hear her mother say it. I told her mother I liked studying, but I also wanted to work. I had begun helping other students with projects and thought I might be able to earn from it. She asked what kind of projects. I explained as best I could. She did not pretend to understand every detail; she asked what I would need to get started and whether I enjoyed the work.

“He can sit with a computer for hours,” Anwesha said.

“Only if there’s a problem to solve,” I said.

Her mother settled into the chair across from us and poured herself tea. “Then I hope people give you interesting problems.”

It was a simple kindness, but it stayed with me. I had expected to be evaluated by how much I could promise. Instead she had asked what I wanted to make of my life.

When we stood to leave, her mother wrapped two biscuits in a clean piece of paper and handed them to Anwesha for the road. Anwesha protested that we were only going a short

distance. Her mother said the road was long enough if we got hungry. Outside, Anwesha tucked the paper into my bag.

“You don’t have to carry everything she gives you,” I said.

“I know.”

“Then why put it in my bag?”

“Because you’ll forget to eat.”

I laughed. It was the same accusation she made on campus, but at her house it sounded like a family fact, something her mother already knew about her daughter’s choice of person. I did not yet understand how much I wanted to belong in that ordinary sentence.

On the way home, I told Anwesha her mother had been kind.

“I told you she would like you.”

“You told her about me?”

“Of course.”

“What did you say?”

“That you’re good. That you work hard. That you’re quiet at first.”

“You said I was quiet?”

“You are.”

I could hear the smile in her voice. We walked beside the road until an auto came. Her hand was in mine. The warmth of her mother’s welcome stayed with me and made the future feel less like a private fantasy.

After that, Anwesha spoke about marriage more often. She asked what age I imagined. I said twenty-seven or twenty-eight, after I had work and some savings. She said twenty-six.

“That’s only a year or two earlier,” she said.

“It makes a difference to the person being asked.”

“You’ll be ready.”

“You’re very certain.”

“I know what I want.” Her grin made it sound playful, but the certainty underneath did not.

“Why twenty-six?” I asked.

“Because if I say twenty-eight, you’ll add another year before you’re ready.”

“I need to be sure I can take care of you.”

“I didn’t ask what you could buy me.”

“I know.”

“I asked when you want it.”

I did not know how to answer without making a promise. “I want to marry you. I want to be able to look after us too.”

“Then work on that,” she said, “but don’t make me wait until the website is perfect.”

I laughed. We both knew no website would ever be perfect.

I imagined a house, a life, her shoes by the door. I imagined being able to offer her everything she liked without checking the price first.

I did not ask whether her certainty changed from day to day. I was afraid the answer might be yes.

Chapter Twenty-Four — The Law She Wanted

Anwesha wanted to become a lawyer. She told me first at a restaurant after we had finished eating. The power had gone out, and the owner had placed a battery lamp on the counter. In its yellow light, she looked unusually serious.

“I want to study law,” she said.

“You should.”

“My family may not support it.”

“Why not?”

She shrugged. “They think it’s difficult. Expensive. They don’t know if it’s right for me.”

“Do you know what course you want?”

“I’ve been looking. There are different ways to do it.” She told me about the colleges she had heard of and the classes she wanted to take. She had already started collecting information. When she spoke about law, she was not childish or uncertain. She was focused. She asked what I thought and listened carefully to the answer.

The next time I went to her house, she had a notebook open on the table. A few college names were written across the top of the page. Beneath them she had listed questions about fees, travel, and admission. Some answers were marked with ticks; beside others she had drawn a small question mark.

“You’ve done all this already?” I asked.

“I don’t want to ask my family for permission before I know what I’m asking for.”

She showed me a brochure she had brought home. The photographs were glossy, the print small. She pointed out the course outline and the dates she had copied into her notebook. She had spoken to someone who was already studying law and had asked what the workload was like. She was not dreaming vaguely; she was trying to make a path she could explain.

She had finished her bachelor’s degree, so the route she was considering was the three-year LL.B. The five-year integrated law courses were meant for students entering after school; she had found a college that accepted graduates for the shorter course. She had written the distinction in the margin of her notebook, then underlined it twice. It mattered to her that she could explain not only what she wanted, but how she meant to reach it.

“My father thinks I should stay with music,” she said. “I already teach. He says I could build a career from that instead of starting again in another field.”

“He said no?”

“He says we’ll talk again. He asks how long the course is, what work I’ll do afterward, whether I can keep teaching. I understand the questions. I just don’t want the questions to become the answer.”

“I know he thinks he’s protecting me from choosing a difficult career without understanding it,” she said. “But every time I bring it up, we go back to the same questions.

I’ve already thought about them. I want him to hear that I’ve made a choice.”

“Maybe he needs time.”

She shut the brochure. “Everyone tells me to give him time. I’ve already given it.”

She did not say this angrily. She said it with the exhaustion of someone who had tried to bring the subject up at the right hour, in the right mood, with every question answered, and still watched it get moved to another day. She asked me to read the fees with her. We went line by line, separating tuition from examination charges, books, travel, and the small expenses that never appeared in the headline figure. She was trying to understand what the course would ask of her, not just what it cost.

“I can help,” I said when we reached the total.

She closed the notebook. “I’m not asking you to take it all on.”

“I know. But if your family won’t—”

“I need them to take me seriously. That’s different from needing you to pay.”

I was quiet. I had heard the fear in her voice and jumped toward the problem I knew how to solve. A number could be transferred. A form could be filled out. I did not know how to persuade a family to believe in a daughter’s choice, so I offered the thing I could measure.

She reopened the notebook and put her finger beside the admission date. “Will you come with me to ask about the application? I want to

hear the requirements from the college, not from someone's cousin."

"Yes."

"And if I get confused, help me understand the form. Don't decide for me."

"I won't."

She watched me for a moment, then turned the page. I knew she was asking for something modest. I still heard it as the beginning of a promise to make everything possible.

She slid the brochure back into the notebook and asked me to look at the application requirements. We read them together, checking each line against what she had already studied. When I found a date she had missed, she circled it and wrote it down twice, once in the notebook and once on the calendar. I asked whether she wanted me to call the college with her the next day. She said she would make the call herself; she only wanted me there in case she needed to check a detail.

"If I get in, I'm going," she said.

"You should."

"Even if they don't make it easy?"

"Especially then."

She studied my face as if she were deciding whether to believe me. "You're sure?"

"I am."

For once, the promise I made was not about keeping her with me. It was about helping her move toward something she wanted. I believed I understood the difference.

“If they don’t support you, will you?” she asked.

“Of course.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

She smiled, then looked back down at the notebook. “I don’t want to give it up.” I believed her. I also believed my income would soon be enough to solve whatever problem stood between her and the course. In my mind, support meant paying fees, buying books, helping with assignments, and being the person who made the path possible.

I did not ask what kind of support she wanted beyond money. I did not ask what would happen if our plans changed. We were young enough to treat a promise as if it already had the power of a contract.

A few nights later, she sent me a voice note. “I wrote a little more after talking to Baba,” she said. Someone called from another room, asking where she had kept the fee receipt. Anwesha answered, shuffled papers, and moved the phone closer to the harmonium. The first chord came out thin. She stopped, pressed the bellows more evenly, and tried again. The second time, it held. Then she began to sing, quietly enough that I could hear the fan turning above her.

Verse 1

The form is folded in my bag;
the fee is circled red.
Baba reads the number once,
then asks me when it’s due.
I know the bus, I know the road;
I know the words I planned.
But every time I reach the door,
they disappear again.

Pre-chorus

The house is quiet; the clock keeps on.
I practise what I’ll say.

Chorus

Tomorrow, I’ll ask again;
tonight, I’ll let it rest.
I can’t decide what he’ll say;
I can decide what I want next.
Tomorrow, I’ll ask again;
I’ll take the answer when it comes.
I’m afraid, and I still want this—
both are true at once.

Verse 2

The receipt is with my notes;
the blue ink’s rubbed away.
I check the date before I sleep,
as if it might have changed.
The harmonium holds one chord;
Ma calls me from the hall.
I close the book, but leave that page
where morning finds it first.

Pre-chorus

The house is quiet; the clock keeps on.
I practise what I’ll say.

Chorus

Tomorrow, I'll ask again;
tonight, I'll let it rest.
I can't decide what he'll say;
I can decide what I want next.
Tomorrow, I'll ask again;
I'll take the answer when it comes.
I'm afraid, and I still want this—
both are true at once.

Bridge

I don't need the road made easy;
I don't need the doubt to end.
Let me ask the question clearly;
let me hear him, then begin.

Final chorus

Tomorrow, I'll ask again;
tonight, I'll let it rest.
I can't decide what he'll say;
I can decide what I want next.
Tomorrow, I'll ask again;
I'll take the answer when it comes.
I'm afraid, and I still want this—
both are true at once.

She called it "The Date on the Form." It sounded less like a declaration than a thought she had been carrying around the house, waiting for a quiet minute to say aloud. I listened twice. Then I asked if she had found the fee schedule. She said she had, and that she would show me the figures when we met. "I'm going to ask him again tomorrow," she added. "Not fight. Just ask." I told her I hoped he would listen. She said, "Me too," and the message ended with the soft clunk of the harmonium lid.

In the months that followed, she began to talk about applications. Sometimes she was excited; sometimes she was frightened. She told me her family had doubts, and I reminded her she could do it. She asked me to help with a form. I did. She asked me to look over a written assignment. I did that too.

We went to the college office on a hot afternoon when the corridor smelled of damp paper and floor cleaner. Anwesha had folded the brochure into her bag and carried her questions in the notebook. At the counter, a clerk told us the application process had changed slightly from the previous year. I started to ask what that meant, but Anwesha had already leaned forward.

“Does the new process affect graduates applying for the three-year course?” she asked. “And do we submit the marksheets online, or bring copies here?”

The clerk explained the steps. Anwesha wrote them down, then repeated them back to make sure she had understood. I stood beside her, holding the photocopies she had brought, useful only when she asked for them. On the way out, I said I thought the visit had gone well.

“It went well because I asked the questions,” she said, not sharply. “You were about to ask whether the college had a hostel.”

“That seemed important.”

“It is. But first I have to get in.” She smiled and tucked the notebook away. “You can help me think about the rest after.”

I laughed, and she did too. I liked that she could correct me without making me feel small. I told myself I was learning how to support her. What I learned more slowly was that being useful was not the same as being in charge, and that she did not need me to turn each difficulty into a bill I could pay.

When her acceptance came, she called me before she had finished reading the message. I heard her breath catch, then the quick tap of her finger against the screen as she opened it again.

“Read it slowly,” I said.

“I have read it twice.” She read the college name, then the line that confirmed her place. Her voice trembled on the final word. “I got in.”

I stood up from the desk, though there was no one in the room to see me. “You got in.”

“I need to tell Ma.”

“Go tell her.”

“I wanted to tell you first.”

I heard a door open at her end and someone ask who had called. Anwesha laughed, a little breathless. “I’ll call you back.”

She did, later that evening. Her mother had been pleased; her father had asked about the fees and the start date. They still had questions, but the place was hers if she chose to take it. I told her I was proud of her. She asked if I would be there when she became a lawyer.

“Yes.”

“Even if it takes years?”

“Even then.”

She laughed. “You say yes to everything.” I heard the smile in her voice and smiled back. At the time, the promise felt as simple as the acceptance letter: she had a place to go, and I would be beside her when she got there.

Chapter Twenty-Five — What I Could Earn

My work began to grow faster than I expected. The first few clients came through people I knew. Then one client passed my name to someone in another country. We spoke by email and video call. I was nervous the first time I had to explain a price in a currency I had only seen on exchange-rate pages. I had no brand, barely a portfolio, and no real system for closing a project. I learned as I went.

I made a small website for my own work. I chose a name for the business, changed it twice, then settled on one that looked good in a logo. I started writing proposals. I discovered that some clients wanted a full conversation before they knew what they wanted; others sent a sentence and expected me to understand the whole business. I learned to ask questions, set terms, and say when a request was outside the project.

The first client who found me outside India joined a video call late in my evening. He wanted more than a website. He asked about the brand: how the colours, photographs, and words would make his small company look established. I had never thought of website design as branding. I had thought of it as arranging pages.

“What do you want a visitor to understand first?” I asked.

He started with the products, then stopped and said the products were not the whole point. Customers could find similar things elsewhere. He wanted them to understand why his company made them the way it did, and why the price was higher than a mass-produced version. I wrote that down. He spoke about the materials, the time each order took, and the fact that customers could ask questions before buying. The more he explained, the less the work sounded like choosing colours and placing photographs. I began to see that the site had to answer the doubt a visitor would have before they were ready to trust a company they had never heard of.

I asked for a few examples of the questions customers usually sent him. He promised to forward some, then asked if I could send a plan by the end of the week. I said yes, though I did not yet know how I would turn the conversation into a plan. After the call, I searched the unfamiliar terms one by one. I read about brand voice, visual identity, and how a website could give a new company a consistent face. I was not ready to call myself an expert. I could, however, see how the ideas connected to work I was already doing. I made a short proposal with the pages, the visual direction, and the revisions we had agreed on. Then I stared at the price I had written. It was lower than the time I expected to spend, but higher than anything I had asked for before.

I nearly cut it in half. Instead, I sent it.

His reply came the next day. He accepted the price and asked when I could begin. I read the message twice, then opened the proposal to make sure I had not promised something impossible. The work took longer than I expected. I had to explain a delay, ask for better photographs, and revise the homepage after the client saw the first draft. But he paid on time and referred another client to me. I began to understand that getting work was not only a matter of being good at the tools. It depended on making the agreement clear enough that two people could recognise when the job was done.

The first time I tried to hold that line, the client asked for two extra pages after the site was almost finished. He described them as small additions. One would need a new layout; the other would collect information from customers and send it somewhere useful. I read the message at night, with the project open on my laptop and the house quiet around me. My first instinct was to say yes. I was still afraid that a client could disappear if I made the work difficult.

I drafted a reply, deleted it, and drafted another. I went back to the proposal and checked what we had agreed. The pages were not included. I wrote that I could add them, explained the extra time they would take, and gave him a separate price. Before sending it, I read the message aloud to make sure it did not sound rude.

The reply came the next morning: “That works. Please go ahead.”

I leaned back in my chair. The relief was disproportionate to the small exchange. I had expected the boundary to end the relationship. Instead it had made the work clearer. The client knew what he was paying for; I knew what I owed him. For the first time, I saw that saying yes to a person did not require saying yes to every request.

That lesson stayed neatly inside my work. I could apply it to a proposal because the terms were written down and the project had an edge. With Anwesha, there was no document to point to, no list of what one of us had promised. I thought the difference meant love should have fewer limits. I did not yet see that kindness without an honest conversation could leave both people guessing.

I registered the business and built a more deliberate portfolio. I began closing projects instead of waiting for someone to tell me exactly what to do. The new confidence came in uneven steps: a call that went well, a proposal accepted, a client who returned, then a week when nobody wrote back. I kept working through both kinds of week.

For a while, I worked on six or more websites in a month. The money was more than I had ever handled at once. I did not know how to save or invest it. I knew how to send some to Anwesha when she needed something and how

to buy the things I had once only imagined giving her.

She asked for smaller amounts at first: a little for an outing, a little for a purchase. I transferred them without thinking. Then she began asking me to pay for salon visits or makeup. She would call me her husband and herself my wifey, laughing that it was my duty to spoil her.

“You’re going to spoil me, right?” she asked one evening.

“You already say that every time.”

“Because you’re my husband.”

“We’re not married.”

“One day.”

“One day is not today.”

“Then today you can still spoil me a little.”

She was smiling. I was smiling too. I sent the money. It did not feel like a burden. I earned well, she enjoyed these things, and I thought of us as a future household already learning how to share.

The requests grew, as did the business. I did not keep an exact account of what I gave. I did not want to. The thought of counting felt mean, as if love should not have a record. I kept a different account in my head: how many nights I worked, how much I could earn, how soon I might be ready to marry her.

The more I earned, the less dependent I felt on pocket money and the less I compared myself with classmates. But the old shame did not disappear. It changed its clothes. I began to fear

that if I stopped giving, I would become the boy I had been before—the boy who thought he needed to prove his worth with what he could provide.

When an overseas client paid the final invoice on a larger project, I asked Anwesha to meet me in town. We walked past the jeweller where she had once paused at the window. The same small pendant was still there, though the light in the display had changed. She glanced at it and kept walking.

“You still like that one?” I asked.

“I like looking at it.”

“Would you choose something if I wanted to buy you a piece of gold?”

She stopped. “You don’t have to.”

“I know. I want to.”

She studied my face, then went back to the window. Inside, the shopkeeper brought out a tray. Anwesha looked at the pendant again, but chose a fine necklace with small leaf-shaped links. She asked to hold it, then turned it over in her palm to see how the clasp worked. The shopkeeper offered a mirror. She lifted the chain to her neck and looked at herself without smiling at first.

“It’s beautiful,” she said. “But this is a lot.”

“I’ve been paid for the project.”

“You could save it.”

“I can do both.” I heard how quickly I had answered and softened it. “I’m not asking you to accept it because you owe me anything. If you don’t want it, we can leave.”

She looked at the mirror again. “I do want it. I just don’t want you to think you have to buy me things so I’ll stay.”

“I don’t think that.” I believed I didn’t. I also liked how clearly the gift said that I had made something of my own and could share it with her. “You can have it because you like it.”

She let the shopkeeper fasten the clasp. Outside, she touched the chain once to make sure it sat flat, then slid her hand into mine. She wore it the next time we went out. I saw her fingers move to it while she listened to me talk about work, and took the small gesture as happiness. I did not ask what else it meant.

One night, while I was waiting for a client to approve a design, Anwesha called from a salon. The background was loud with hair dryers and women talking. She asked if I could send a little more than she had first requested.

“How much?”

She told me. I looked at the amount, then at the project tab open on my screen. I could afford it. I sent it.

“You’re the best,” she said. Someone at the salon called her name, and she told me she would call later. I watched the payment confirmation settle in our chat. Her words stayed with me longer than the conversation did. I did not ask what would happen the next time I could not send the money.

Chapter Twenty-Six — A Different Kind of Quiet

The first change was small enough to explain away. Anwesha used to call after class, usually before she got into an auto. Then the calls came later. Sometimes she sent a message instead. Sometimes she said she was tired and would talk tomorrow. I believed her. Everyone gets tired. People have family, study, errands. Love did not require a report every hour. Before long, the calls were shorter too.

“How was your day?” I would ask.

“Fine. Yours?”

“Busy. I finished the home page for that client.”

“That’s good.”

There would be a pause. I would search for the next thing to say. She would say she had to go. The call ended with a quick goodnight. I began saving small pieces of my day for the next time she sounded unhurried: a client who had changed his mind about a colour, the lecturer who had forgotten which chapter he had assigned, a meal my mother had made too spicy. When the call stayed brief, those details remained with me until they were no longer news.

One evening she called while I was closing a project file. I heard metal dishes clinking in the background and someone asking her a question from another room. She had just got back from class. Her professor had returned a paper with

more corrections than she expected, and she was annoyed at herself for missing a point she knew.

“Tell me what the comment says,” I said.

“I don’t want you to fix it. I just want to complain for five minutes.”

“Then complain.”

She did. She told me how carefully she had checked the assignment, how the lecturer had circled a sentence without explaining what was wrong, and how everyone else seemed to understand the instructions before she did. Her irritation had a laugh running under it; she was upset, but not defeated. I listened and asked what she thought the comment meant. She read the sentence aloud, then gave me the paragraph that came before it. I asked what she wanted the reader to understand. She said the lecturer probably wanted her to connect the case she had mentioned to the rule they had studied, not just retell what had happened. As she explained it, she stopped twice to look at her notes and changed her mind about the order. I stayed quiet until she reached the part she had missed.

“You didn’t need me,” I said.

“I needed to say it out loud.”

For a few minutes she sounded like the girl from the first months, quick to tell me every small detail and unafraid of silence. Then someone called her from the other room. She said she had to help with something and would call later. I told her to go. She thanked me for listening and ended the call.

The assignment still waited on my screen. I closed it, then opened it again, as if the problem there were easier to hold than the one I could not name. She had called because she wanted to complain; I kept replaying the part where she said she needed to say it aloud.

For a while, we still met when our days happened to cross. One afternoon she messaged that she had come into town to photocopy notes for class and had half an hour before she needed to catch an auto home. I was halfway through a client revision. I saved the page, told the client I would send it that evening, and walked to the tea stall near the market crossing.

Anwesha was already there, her bag open on the bench beside her. A thin law book and a stack of photocopies lay across her lap. She had folded the top corner of one sheet to mark a page, then kept smoothing the crease as she spoke.

“My lecturer went through the whole topic as if we had all read the case beforehand,” she said. “I had read it. I still couldn’t follow him.”

“Did you ask him after class?”

“I did. He explained it, but there were people waiting.” She shrugged. “I understand the judgment now. I just don’t know if I understand why he chose that example.”

I asked her to tell me what the case was about. She started with the facts, stopped, and tried again in her own words. By the time the tea arrived, she had worked out the part that had confused her. The stall owner put two

chipped cups on the bench and slid a saucer of biscuits toward us. Anwesha took one, broke it in half, ate one piece, and left the other on the paper wrapper.

“You make it sound obvious when you explain it,” I said.

“It wasn’t obvious ten minutes ago.” She picked up the photocopy and tapped the paragraph she had marked. “I think I need to stop reading the notes as if they’re the answer. They’re just a way in.”

My phone buzzed on the bench. I turned it over. The client had replied to my message with a question about the page. I started to type, then saw Anwesha watching me.

“Do you need to answer?” she asked.

“No. He can wait until this evening.” I put the phone back in my pocket.

She nodded, and we talked about the difference between studying something because it interested her and studying it because she was afraid of failing. I told her I had been enjoying the website work more than my course lately. She asked whether I wanted to keep studying. I said yes, then added that I did not know what I would do with the degree. She did not try to solve it for me. She only asked what part of nutrition I still liked. I told her about the practical work and the way a small change in a meal could matter to someone. She listened, then asked me to tell her more.

While we waited for her auto, she told me about the music lesson she was going to teach

after she got home. One of her students had been working on a phrase for days and finally played it without stopping to check her fingers. Anwesha described the girl’s expression when she reached the last note: first surprise, then the quick look toward the doorway to see whether anyone had heard.

“Did you tell her she played it well?” I asked.

“I asked her how it felt.” Anwesha folded the photocopy once and opened it again. “If I praise her too quickly, she starts playing for me. I want her to know when she can hear the difference herself.”

I had never thought about teaching that way. “So you let her decide?”

“I let her listen.” She tapped the folded corner of the casebook. “I wish someone had done that for me when I was starting.”

The student had asked whether Anwesha would keep teaching if she went ahead with law. Her family had treated the question as if one choice had to replace the other. Anwesha had not answered the girl yet. She was still deciding what her own week could hold once classes began: the travel, reading, assignments, and the lessons she did not want to abandon.

“You can do both,” I said. I meant it as encouragement, though I heard how easy the sentence sounded from the tea stall, with no timetable in front of me.

“Maybe.” She looked toward the road. “But I don’t want to say yes to everything and then become angry with everyone when I’m tired.”

I thought of all the plans I had made for us, each one dependent on how much work I could take and how much time I could free. “You can change your mind once you see the schedule.”

“I can.” She considered that. “I don’t want to stop singing because I’m studying law. But I also don’t want you telling people I’ll manage both before I’ve decided how.”

“I won’t.”

She gave me a look that was not quite distrust and not quite a joke. “You say that like it’s easy.”

I laughed, and she did too. Then she opened the casebook and showed me the paragraph she had marked. We spent the remaining minutes with the law instead of making a plan for her life. She was already running late for her student. She did not ask me to rearrange anything for her, and I did not offer to solve the week she had not yet lived.

Her auto arrived before I had finished. She gathered the photocopies, checked that she had the book, and left the broken biscuit on its wrapper. At the roadside she said she was glad we had managed to meet. I said we should do it again. She smiled and climbed into the auto. I went back to the desk, finished the client revision, and drank the tea cold.

The next time we spoke for long, she wanted help with a law assignment. She read the question aloud, then explained what the lecturer had covered in class. I opened a blank document and helped her sort the points into an order she

could use. We disagreed about one heading. She said it made the argument sound stronger than it was; I thought it clarified the paragraph. We read the section again and found a more exact phrase together.

When she was satisfied, she said, “Wait. I’ve been working on a bit of a song.” There was a rustle at her end, then the low breath of the harmonium as she found the opening chord. She sang three lines and stopped. Someone called her from another room.

“I’ll call you back,” she said.

“That’s all right.”

“I want you to hear the rest.”

“I’ll be here.”

We ended the call. I kept the document open and listened to the fan turn above my desk. She did not call back that night. The next morning she sent a message about a class, and I answered it. I did not mention the song. I thought she had simply run out of time, and she probably had. Still, I had started to notice that the things we did together were easier to finish when they had an assignment attached.

A few nights later, she called while I was revising a client page. I answered and kept typing. She asked whether I was still at my desk.

“Just finishing one thing,” I said.

“You can call me later.”

“No, tell me. I’m listening.”

She went quiet. Then she said she had been telling me about a girl in her class who kept borrowing her notes and returning them late. I

had heard the beginning, but I could not remember what she had said after that. The client page was not urgent. I closed the laptop.

“Go on,” I said.

“I forgot the rest.” She laughed, but without much amusement. “It probably wasn’t important.”

I asked what she wanted to do about the notes. She said she would make a copy next time and keep the original. We talked for a few minutes about her class, then she had to help at home. After the call, I reopened the laptop and finished the change. The work took less than twenty minutes. I told myself I would be more present next time, without asking whether she wanted to keep making time for calls I treated as something I could fit around everything else.

I told myself this was what a settled relationship felt like. She was studying law; I was working. We did not need to spend every evening on the phone. If she needed something, she would tell me; if she wanted to see me, we would find a day. I kept a small list of things I meant to tell her. By the time she had room to listen, some of them no longer felt worth saying. I called that normal and waited for the next call.

Chapter Twenty-Seven — The Scar

His mother tends the cut

The scar came from a capsicum. No one was home, and I had decided to make fried rice and take some to Anwesha. I knew how to cook well enough, though I was slow at cutting vegetables. The rice was ready, the onions were softening in the pan, and I was trying to finish before the food cooled.

The capsicum kept turning beneath the knife. I set it on the chopping board and tried again, but the blade slid over its curved skin. Instead of slowing down or finding another way to hold it, I picked it up in my palm and pressed the knife down.

For a second, I did not understand what had happened. The blade had gone through the

vegetable and into my hand. Blood ran over my thumb and down the side of my palm. I dropped the knife into the sink. The cut hurt sharply when I moved my fingers.

The kitchen smelled of warm rice, onions, and the green bitterness of capsicum. I turned on the tap and held my hand beneath it. Water carried the blood toward the drain, thinning it to a pink ribbon before it disappeared. I pressed a clean cloth against the cut and waited for the sting to settle. My first thought was practical: the knife needed sharpening. My second was that Anwesha would worry if I called her. I did not ask myself whether she would want to know.

I found the first-aid box in the cupboard and wrapped the wound as best I could. The bandage was too loose, so I unwound it and tried again. When I bent my fingers, the cloth tightened. The bleeding slowed. I could still use the hand if I kept it still. The food was nearly done, and I had told Anwesha I would bring her some.

I stood over the pan and considered stopping. The sensible thing was to finish only what I could safely manage, cover the food, and tell her I would bring it another day. But I had already pictured her opening the container, tasting it, and asking how I had made it. I wanted to arrive with something I had cooked for her. In my mind, changing the plan over a small cut felt like making the day less loving.

So I used my uninjured hand to stir and lift the pot. I moved carefully, keeping the

bandaged palm close to my body. Each time I reached for something, the cut pulled beneath the cloth. When the rice was ready, I packed a portion into a container, wiped the counter, and tucked the first-aid box away. I did not notice that I had left a faint red mark on the edge of the sink until I came back for my keys.

The auto ride made the decision seem more foolish. I carried the container in my left hand and kept the bandaged one inside my jacket pocket. Each bump sent a small sting up my wrist. At a traffic light, the food slid across my knees. I caught it with the injured hand before I could think. Pain flashed through my palm. The cloth had started to feel damp. I checked it, saw a red mark at the edge, and turned the stained part inward.

At her gate, I nearly called to say I had arrived. The road behind me had gone quiet after the auto left. I could have asked the driver to take me back. I could have knocked and told Anwesha I had hurt myself before handing over the food. Instead, I stood there trying to work out how to hold the container without showing my palm. Before I decided, she opened the door. I lifted the food and smiled.

Her eyes went to the container first. “You brought it?”

“I said I would.”

“You’re so good to me.”

She took the container. I kept my wrapped hand behind my back. She did not notice, and I

did not tell her. She opened the lid a little and leaned toward the steam. “It smells lovely.”

“It’s still warm.”

“I’ll save some for later.”

She thanked me again. I could have let that be enough. I could have told her about the cut then, in the ordinary voice I used for ordinary things. Instead, I smiled, said I had to go, and let the moment end before she could ask anything else. I had not only hidden the injury from her; I had hidden it from the version of myself who wanted to be looked after.

On the ride home, I felt foolish for concealing it. At another bump, the container shifted on my knees and I caught it with my injured hand. Pain flared. I looked at the bandage, now marked through at the edge, and wondered whether the food had been worth it. Then I supplied the answer I wanted: yes, because she had been pleased.

My mother was home by the time I returned. She was putting away the vegetables she had bought from the market when I came through the door. I tried to keep my left hand behind me, but the bandage had loosened and the red mark showed at the wrist.

“What happened?” she asked.

“Just a small cut. The knife slipped.”

“Have you cleaned it properly?”

“I washed it.”

She put down the vegetables and brought the first-aid box back to the table. I sat while she unwound the cloth. The cut had stopped

bleeding, but the bandage was crooked and the skin around it was raw from the tape. She cleaned the edge, applied antiseptic, and wrapped it again, slower than I had.

“You could have called me,” she said.

“I managed.”

“I can see that.” She tied the end and turned my hand over to check the fit. “Managing isn’t the same as needing to do it alone.”

I did not answer. I thought of the food container in my bag, still warm when I had carried it to Anwesha, and felt a quick, childish embarrassment. My mother asked whether I had eaten. I said I had. She returned to the vegetables, and I sat at the table with my hand resting palm-up, letting the room be quiet around me.

I felt a quiet satisfaction too. I had done what I said I would do, even when it hurt. I thought that was the shape of devotion. It was not entirely false; I had wanted to care for her. But there was something else in it, a private bargain I had not told her about. If I kept proving my love through effort, I hoped she would never doubt it. I did not yet see how easily a person can use pain as evidence that they deserve to be loved back.

The cut healed into a pale line. For years, whenever I saw it, I remembered that she had been pleased with the food. It took longer to remember that I had hidden my hurt from both of us.

Chapter Twenty-Eight — The Exam Room

By the time I was in the second semester of my master’s course, the exam centre was in another city. I rented a small room near the college where we were sitting the papers. The journey took most of an afternoon. I arrived with a backpack, a plastic folder of documents, my laptop, and more books than the room could comfortably hold. The room had a narrow bed, a plastic chair, and a window that looked at a wall. I set the books on the chair and sat on the bed to see whether there was space to open the laptop without balancing it on my knees.

The room was meant to be temporary, so I did not unpack properly. I put my clothes at one end of the bed, the charger near the only plug, and the notes for the first paper on top of the stack. The wall outside the window was close enough that I could see old rain marks in the plaster. From somewhere below came the clatter of cups and a group of students comparing exam dates. I stood by the window for a minute, trying to decide whether to go down and ask which tea stall they meant. By the time I found my sandals, their voices had moved farther along the lane.

I went out alone, found a small place to eat, and returned with tea in a paper cup. The desk was narrow. I set the cup on the floor and opened my notes. I had made a schedule for the week, but it assumed I would sleep well and

understand every page on the first read. I crossed out the hours I had written for revision and made the list smaller. It looked less ambitious. It also looked possible.

The first few days settled into a routine: wake, revise, walk the lanes before the shops crowded, return with a meal, revise again. I learned which shop kept food late and which stretch of road flooded when it rained. The students I heard outside had their own groups and plans. I did not join them. I told myself I was there to prepare, and that leaving after the exam would make the room a useful stop rather than a life I might have wanted to try.

By then, Anwesha had completed her undergraduate degree and started the three-year LL.B. course she had worked toward. I was helping her with an assignment when she asked. We had spoken about her family’s doubts before, but I thought they were getting past them. Her mother knew me. We had talked about marriage. I had work. Anwesha was studying toward the life she wanted.

The night before one of my exams, she called. I had been trying to revise a diagram of a metabolic pathway, drawing it on scrap paper and checking each arrow against my notes. Outside, the corridor light had gone off, and the room was lit by the fluorescent tube above my desk. I had planned to study until midnight, sleep, and wake early. When her name appeared on the phone, I answered before the second ring.

“Can we stay friends?” she asked.

I thought I had misheard. “What?”

“My family may not agree to us getting married.”

“What happened?”

“They don’t agree with love marriage.”

“Your mother knows me. Your family knows me. What changed?”

“My brother has a girlfriend. My father is not agreeing to their marriage. If he won’t agree for my brother, why would he agree for me?”

I sat on the edge of the bed. The room was cold; the fluorescent light made everything look tired. “That’s your brother’s situation. It doesn’t mean your father has said no to us.”

“I don’t know.”

“What does ‘stay friends’ mean?” I asked. “Do you want to end the relationship, or are you afraid your family will make you?”

She breathed into the phone. “I don’t know how to answer that.”

“You must know what you want.”

“I want my family not to turn this into a fight. I want to study. I want to be with you. I don’t know how to make all of that fit together.”

The words were quiet, not a speech. I could hear a television playing behind her and someone moving a chair across the floor. I held the phone harder, as if keeping the connection steady might keep the rest of her life from shifting. I wanted to tell her that the answer was simple: we would choose each other and work out the details. I did not know what it meant for

her to choose me if it cost her a home she still lived in, a family she loved, and a course she had only just begun.

“You told me before you’d come to my house if they didn’t support you. You said we’d figure it out.”

“I know what I said.”

“Then what changed?”

She did not answer directly. I began listing the facts I thought should reassure her: I was earning well, I had started a business, I was willing to support her studies. I had stayed home so we could build a future. Her mother had met me. We had planned our marriage. I spoke as if presenting evidence to a judge.

“I’m trying to explain,” she said.

“Then explain. What is the problem with me?”

“It’s not you.”

“If it isn’t me, why are you asking to be friends?”

“Because I’m trying to find a way not to lose everything,” she said.

I heard the sentence and still answered the part that hurt me. “You can’t keep me as a friend when you know I love you.”

“I know.”

“Then tell me what you want.”

She did not answer. The conversation circled the same ground. Her family might not agree. Her brother’s situation proved something, though neither of us could say exactly what. She wanted to study, wanted me, and did not know how to keep those wishes from colliding with

the life she had at home. I was angry that fear could undo years of promises. I asked for a reason that would make sense. She offered worries, not a verdict.

After a while, we were both quiet.

“I have an exam tomorrow,” I said.

“I know.”

“I need to study.”

“Okay.”

We ended the call without deciding anything. I opened my book, read the same line four times, and could not tell you what it said. I tried to draw the pathway again. The arrows crossed; I rubbed them out until the paper grew thin. My phone lay beside the notes. I picked it up once, thought of calling her back, and set it down again. I was afraid the next conversation would make the word *friends* final. I was also afraid that refusing to discuss it would let her believe I had agreed. I did nothing until the clock passed one, then lay down in my clothes and waited for sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Nine — The Next Morning

The exam was on metabolism. I knew the material well enough, but the previous night had left me with a head full of arguments I could not finish.

The first question asked us to explain how the body used glucose. I read it twice before the familiar sequence returned: the stages, the energy released, the conditions that changed what happened next. My hand knew how to begin before my thoughts had settled. I drew the pathway in the margin, then used it to organise the answer. Halfway through, I heard Anwesha's voice from the night before—*Can we stay friends?*—and lost my place. I put down my pen, found the line where I had stopped, and forced myself back into the paper. The examiner's clock moved in small, steady clicks. By the time I reached the last page, the argument had gone quiet enough for me to check my work.

When I left the room, other students were already comparing questions in the corridor. I walked past them and called Anwesha.

She answered after several rings. "How was it?"

"Fine. I think I did well."

"That's good."

I waited for her to ask about the conversation. She did not. The silence gave me two choices: bring it up again or accept the

relief of talking about something ordinary. I chose the easier one and asked about her assignment.

She had started her law course and was struggling with a written project. I offered to look at it when I got home. She sent the file later that evening. I read the instructions, searched for the relevant material, and helped her organise the argument. She thanked me with a string of affectionate messages and called me her husband. I took the warmth as evidence that the previous night had passed.

The assignment was about a subject I had not studied. I read the prompt twice, then asked her what the lecturer expected. She sent a photograph of her notes, the handwriting slanting toward the edge of the page. I used an AI tool to help me make a rough outline, then checked each section against the instructions and the sources she had been given. She filled in the parts she understood from class; I helped her untangle the order and find where one idea stopped and the next began.

The first outline was tidy in a way that made it useless. It began with a broad definition, divided the topic into neat headings, and ended with a conclusion that could have belonged to any paper. I read it aloud while she followed along in her notes.

“Where does it answer the actual question?” she asked.

I looked back at the prompt. She was right. The outline organised the subject, but it did not

make an argument. I had been relieved to see the page divided into sections and had mistaken that relief for progress.

“What did your lecturer say about it?” I asked.

She turned a page. I heard paper rustle and the faint clink of a spoon at her end. “We have to explain why the issue matters, then compare the two positions. She said not to make it a list of definitions.”

“Then the first section should be the problem, not the definition.”

“That’s what I thought.”

We moved the headings around. She read me the notes she had marked in class. When I asked what one sentence meant, she explained it in her own words, then paused to check the page and corrected one part of her answer. I removed two headings that repeated the same idea. The outline became less symmetrical and more useful.

“This is better,” she said. “I can actually write from this.”

I felt a small, familiar satisfaction. There was a question, a problem, and a page we could make clearer together. I did not ask whether she still wanted us to be together. I asked whether the assignment needed another source. She told me which book the lecturer had recommended, and we made a note to check it before she finished the final draft.

“You’re better at this than I am,” she said over the phone.

“I’m just arranging it.”

“You make it sound simple.”

“It isn’t simple. The assignment is just confusing.”

She laughed. I could hear papers moving at her end. “I knew you’d help me.”

When we finished, she sent a photo of the completed pages and wrote, *My husband saved me again.* I smiled at the message. The question from the night before was still there, but she had given me something familiar to answer: a problem, a task, a way to be useful. I replied with a joke about charging her for editing. She sent a string of laughing emojis. We did not return to the exam-room call.

Over the remaining exam days, I kept my routine: revise, eat, and answer calls from home. When Anwesha called, I asked how her law classes were going. If she mentioned another argument at home, I asked what she planned to say next. I could have returned to the question she had raised. Each time, I waited for a better moment. At the end of the exams, I packed everything into the same backpack.

I returned home after the exams. The business had more work than before. I was building my own brand, learning how to describe what I did, and speaking with clients who had found me through the internet. The work grew until I could hire help for some tasks and manage several projects at once. I was earning more than I had imagined earning when I sat in the college cafeteria counting coins.

The success should have made me feel secure. Instead, it made me believe that I could answer every concern with proof: I was working; I was serious; I could support her law studies; I had not gone away to find someone else. I treated the relationship like a case I could win if I gathered enough evidence.

Chapter Thirty — The Distance Between Houses

Anwesha’s home was not far from mine. By auto, it took about ten minutes if the road was clear. Her family lived beyond the busier part of town, and most errands brought her back toward the market near my house. I used to think that closeness made meeting easy. Later, I learned how long ten minutes could feel when someone did not want to spend them with you.

By then, money had become routine between us. She called me her husband, said her wifey deserved to be spoiled, and I sent money for outings or things she wanted. Later I covered parlour visits and makeup. I did not mind the costs; what I could not explain was why conversation seemed to end as soon as the payment reached her.

The amounts grew. One evening, while I was finishing a client revision, her message came through asking for a much larger sum. I read it twice. I could afford it, but I did not know what she needed it for.

I typed, *What happened?* Before I sent it, I worried the question would sound like suspicion. I deleted it and asked if she needed the money that night.

“If you can,” she said when I called. “I have to pay for something. I’ll explain later.”

“Is it urgent?”

“Aritra, I wouldn’t ask if it could wait.” Her voice was tired, but not sharp. I heard a door

close somewhere near her, then the muffled sound of someone speaking in another room. “I’ll return it when I can.”

I looked at the figure on my screen and at the website still waiting for me. There was enough in my account. That should have been the only calculation. Instead I was thinking of how she used to call just to tell me a story from class, how easily she once stayed on the phone until neither of us had anything left to say. If I refused, would she hear a practical answer or the beginning of an accusation? I could not tell, so I sent the money.

“It came,” she said a moment later. “Thank you, husband.”

“Call me when you’re free,” I said.

“I will.”

She had promised to explain later and agreed to call when she was free. I had no reason to treat either promise as an appointment, but I did. I kept the phone beside the laptop and waited as if the money, the explanation, and the call were all part of the same exchange. She did not call that evening. The client revision remained open; I kept staring at the same line of text, waiting for her to ring. The next day, I told myself there was no reason she had to report every detail to me. That was true. It was also true that I had sent the money partly because I wanted to stay close to her, and I did not know how to admit that without making the gift into a debt.

Once, after I sent money for a parlour visit, she called while she was waiting for her turn. I could hear a hair dryer starting and stopping behind her, then someone asking whether she wanted tea. She asked what I had eaten, and I told her I had forgotten lunch again. She scolded me for it, laughing as she did, and for a few minutes the distance between our houses seemed as small as it had always been. I leaned back from my desk and let her tell me about a woman at the salon who had come in with a picture of a film actor and wanted the same haircut. Anwesha imitated the woman’s serious face; I laughed hard enough that my mother called from the next room to ask what was funny.

When it was her turn, she said she would call me later. “Don’t work too late, husband.” I waited for the call after she got home. It did not come that night. The next morning she sent a message about a class assignment, and I answered it. I did not remind her that she had said she would call. The conversation had been real while it lasted. I used that as proof that nothing important had changed.

A call might begin with a question about my work or her classes, then turn toward something she needed. I would send it and expect us to keep talking. Sometimes she said she had to go. I told myself she had somewhere to be. If I asked whether we could meet, she said she would let me know.

One afternoon she messaged that she was going into town to run a few errands and asked if I could send her some money for the things she wanted to buy. I transferred it. She thanked me, then wrote that she had a parlour appointment as well. I did not ask her to meet me right away. I had learned to fear making each kind gesture feel like a claim on her time. I finished the client revision and kept the phone beside me.

When she messaged that she had reached the market, I asked if she wanted to come by or meet at a café. There was a pause before she replied that she was still running errands and would be leaving soon. I asked if she could spare a few minutes.

I closed the laptop and changed my shirt. Then I waited by the front window, though we had not agreed on a place or time. My mother asked where I was going. I said Anwesha might be nearby. She asked if Anwesha knew I was waiting. I picked up my phone and saw that I had not sent the last message. I did not answer my mother. I wrote to Anwesha and asked if she wanted me to come to the market. She replied that she was already on her way to the auto stand.

I stepped outside anyway. The afternoon had turned hot, and the market lane smelled of frying oil and dust. Autos stopped and started in front of the pharmacy. I watched each one pull away, trying not to look for her in the faces inside. My phone vibrated once: *I'm leaving*

now. Another day, okay? I read it twice, then wrote, *Okay. Get home safe.* The auto carrying her turned at the crossing before I could decide whether she had seen me.

The next time she came into town, I asked again. She did not meet me. Weeks passed. I kept trying to arrange a date, then stopped calling it a date and asked only to see her. I did not want a celebration or a present. I wanted to sit across from her and know whether she still liked being there.

She said yes, then cancelled. Another time she said she would tell me. Each time, I found a reason that made the refusal temporary: she was busy, her family needed her, she was tired after the trip into town. Those reasons might have been true. What I avoided was the larger pattern. The town was small enough that I could imagine the route she took from the market to the auto stand, but I could not make myself believe she had chosen not to see me. I thought I was being patient. I was also learning to accept less than I needed without saying so.

Chapter Thirty-One — The Account

Anwesha had shared her email access with me so I could help manage college notices, applications, and other practical things. It began with a law-college circular she could not find among several messages from the same office. We sat at my desk with her phone between us while she read out the subject lines. I found the deadline, wrote it in her notebook, and marked the date on my calendar too. “You’re better at keeping track of these than I am,” she said. “Can you check for the confirmation when it comes?” After that, she made the account available to me for those tasks. She would ask whether a message from the college had arrived; I would check while I was already at the computer. Sometimes I forwarded a notice or reminded her about a date. It was a practical arrangement she had asked for, one more small task folded into the way we helped each other. I never thought of the inbox as a place to search for secrets.

That afternoon I was looking for a college notice she had asked me to check. A client’s unfinished website sat open in another tab, and the cursor blinked beside a sentence I had been trying to improve. The inbox refreshed. Among the subject lines and routine notices, I saw a location-sharing notification beside the name of a man I did not know.

I stared at it until the screen dimmed. The name meant nothing to me. The fact that a location was being shared raised a question I could not answer from the notice alone. I woke the screen and read it again, then clicked away and back, hoping I had misunderstood what it said. The words did not tell me where she was, how long the sharing had been on, or why it had been set up. They only told me that somewhere, between the ordinary messages she asked me to track, there was a connection I could not place.

My first thought was that someone had found a way into her phone. Anwesha was not comfortable with every feature on it; she often asked me what settings meant or how to use an app. Concern arrived first, and suspicion close behind it. I tried to keep my voice inside the first one. I called her before I could decide which one I wanted her to hear.

She answered over the sound of traffic. I could hear an auto horn and the rough rush of a vehicle passing near her. “Is something wrong?”

“Is someone following you?” I asked.

“What?”

“Your location is being shared with someone. Do you know this person?”

There was a pause. “Why are you asking me that?”

“I saw it in your email. I thought someone might have connected to your account.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“It says your location is being shared with a person called—” I read the name aloud. “Do you know him?”

“I don’t know.”

“Maybe it’s a setting you turned on without realising. Did you share your location with anyone?”

“I don’t know how to do that.”

I looked at the name again. “You don’t know who he is?”

“I have to go. I’ll call you later.”

The call ended before I could ask anything else. I stayed at the desk with the phone in my hand and her inbox open on the monitor. The client’s page was still waiting in the other tab. I moved the cursor toward it, then returned to the notification. My mind kept offering explanations and testing them against her short answers. Maybe she had tapped something by accident. Maybe the man was a relative or a classmate. Maybe she was upset because I had asked. I could not tell which possibility I wanted to be true.

I typed, *I wasn’t trying to accuse you. I thought someone might have access to your phone.* I read it before sending. It sounded defensive, so I deleted it and wrote, *Please check when you get a chance. It may be nothing.*

She replied with a thumbs-up. I stared at that small blue mark, which could mean she understood, or that she was busy, or that she wanted the conversation to stop. I had spent years treating the smallest signs from her as if

they came with instructions. I wanted this one to tell me that everything was fine. It did not.

I closed the inbox and went to eat. The food tasted of nothing. My mother asked if I was still working. I said I had a client problem to sort out. After dinner, I opened the website again and finished the sentence. It took me almost an hour.

I waited for Anwesha to call. An hour passed, then most of the afternoon. I sent a message asking if she had found out what the notification meant. She replied that she had not had time to check. I asked if we could talk in person when she was free. She said she would let me know. I read the words twice. They looked like the other messages about meeting, but this time I could not make myself treat them as ordinary scheduling.

For the first time, I wondered if there was someone else. The thought felt disloyal, as if suspecting her were itself a betrayal. I pushed it away. We had talked about marriage. Her mother had welcomed me. I had helped with her studies. She had once cried because she could not bear the thought of losing me. There were too many promises to fit beside the name on the screen.

I told myself I would ask when we met. In the meantime, I kept returning to that single line in my memory, as if it might change if I read it often enough. I did not know whether I had found the beginning of an answer or only another thing she would not explain. When she

finally agreed to meet, I chose a café where we could talk without being interrupted. I carried the question there with me.

Chapter Thirty-Two — The Café

The conversation they had postponed

After months of asking, Anwesha agreed to meet me at a café in town. I reached early. The place had a glass door and a row of tables beside the window. I chose one where we could sit without being watched by the counter. I asked for water and did not drink it. Each time someone entered, I looked up.

When she arrived, I stood. She smiled briefly and sat across from me. She looked tired, or perhaps I had become too attentive to every sign that something was wrong.

She kept her bag on her shoulder while she sat down. A waiter came over with a menu. Anwesha glanced at it and said she did not want anything. I asked for tea as well. The waiter left. Neither of us touched the menu he had set between us.

“How have you been?” she asked.

“I’ve been trying to meet you.”

She looked down at the table. “I know.”

“Why didn’t you come?”

“Things have been busy.”

“You came into town.”

“I had errands.”

“You could have spared ten minutes.”

She folded her hands. I could see she had done her nails recently, a colour I had not seen before. I hated that I noticed. “I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“I want you to tell me what’s happening. You asked if we could be friends because your family might not agree to our marriage. Then you kept saying we were fine. You called me your husband. You asked me to support you. Now I can’t get you to meet me.”

“My family is complicated.”

“Your mother knows me. You told me you’d come to my house if they didn’t agree.”

“I know what I said.”

“Then help me understand what changed.”

She looked toward the window. A bus pulled away from the stop outside, leaving a strip of dust in the air. I waited for her to turn back.

“I can’t promise anything,” she said.

“You didn’t have to promise marriage. You could have told me you were unsure.”

“I was unsure.”

“For how long?”

She did not answer. The silence opened the room around us. I had imagined this meeting many times, each version ending with her

explaining the fear, the family problem, the reason she had pulled away. I had imagined an answer I could fix. The real conversation gave me nothing I knew how to repair.

“Is it the law course?” I asked. “Is your family pressuring you to stop?”

She looked at me. “They don’t think I can manage it. They say there’s no point spending money if I won’t get a job.”

“You told me you wanted to become a lawyer.”

“I still do.”

“Then we can figure out the fees. You don’t have to do everything alone.”

Her expression changed, though I could not tell whether I had comforted or offended her. “I don’t want you to pay for my whole life.”

“I’m not saying that. I’m saying I can help.”

“I know you can.” She rubbed one thumb over the edge of her phone case. “That isn’t the only problem.”

I wanted her to name the other problem. I wanted to believe that if she did, I could stand beside her and make a plan. She went quiet again, and I heard my own offer hanging between us like another piece of evidence I hoped would prove I was worth choosing.

The tea arrived. The waiter placed it between us and asked if we wanted anything else. Anwesha shook her head. I thanked him. The cup steamed for a minute, then the surface went still. I had not asked her about the location notice yet. I had wanted to begin with us, with

the distance I could no longer explain. But the name on the screen kept returning to my mind.

“There was a location-sharing alert in your email,” I said. “I asked if you knew the person. You ended the call.”

She took the paper sleeve off her straw and folded it in half. “What were you looking for?”

“The college notice you asked me to keep track of. The alert was beside it.”

She stopped folding the sleeve. “And then you called me like I was hiding something.”

“I was worried someone had got into the account. I should have asked whether you wanted to talk about the alert instead of asking the same question again.”

She set the paper down. “I shared the account with you because you help me keep track of things. That doesn’t mean every notification is a problem you have to solve for me.”

I looked at the cup. “You’re right. I’m sorry I made it feel like an accusation.”

She looked away. I did not ask her to forgive me. An apology could not make my questions sound less like an accusation or explain why she had kept me close while avoiding me.

“Do you know the name now?”

“I don’t want to talk about this here.”

“Then tell me when. I’ve been asking to see you for months.”

She turned the paper sleeve over in her fingers. I waited for her to look at me.

“If you don’t want to be with me, say so,” I said. “Don’t keep me waiting and call me your husband when you need something.”

Her face tightened. “I never used you.”

“Then why do you only call when you need money?”

“That’s not true.”

“When did we last meet?”

She looked down again. I could not tell whether she was ashamed or angry. I hated that I could not tell. I had spent years believing I knew her better than anyone, and now I could not read the face across the table. The tea had gone cool. I picked up the cup, then set it down without drinking. I could hear the waiter collecting plates at another table and someone laughing near the entrance. Our silence was not the only one in the café, but I felt as if everyone could see it.

“I think we should stop,” I said.

She nodded once. I asked for the things I had given her that were still hers to return. I did not list every gift or calculate what they were worth. The necklace was the one I could not pretend was ordinary. She said she would bring it back. There was also money she had borrowed; we agreed on what she could return. The details felt vulgar beside the fact that our life together had ended at a café table, but I could not leave without making the ending practical.

When we stood, she reached for my hand, then seemed to think better of it. I let my own hand fall to my side. We walked out separately.

I did not call her on the way home. The auto passed the market road, and I watched the storefronts slide by without registering any of them.

A few days later, we met near the market so she could return the necklace. She had wrapped it in tissue and put it inside a small box. She passed it to me without opening the lid. I remembered the shop mirror, the clasp she had checked, and the way she had touched the chain at her collarbone the first time she wore it out. Now she watched the road instead of me. I took the box in both hands. It seemed to belong to a part of my life we had just ended.

“I also sent you some of what I borrowed,” she said. “I can return the rest later.”

“All right.”

Neither of us mentioned the gifts or tried to calculate what they meant. She had returned part of the money she owed me, less than half of what she had borrowed. I put the box in my bag and thanked her. She nodded. A scooter passed between us, loud enough that we both turned toward the road. When I looked back, she was already stepping toward the auto stand.

I went home and put the small box in the desk drawer. When I came back to the room later, I found myself opening the drawer again. I closed it without taking the necklace out.

Chapter Thirty-Three — The Other Caller

The call came several days later. The man asked who I was. His voice was direct, not angry. I asked his name. He gave it, and I recognised it as the one I had seen beside the location notification.

“Why are you asking?” I said.

“I’m seeing Anwesha,” he replied. “She told me you were her brother’s friend.”

I sat down. He told me they had started talking after she entered the new college. She called him every day. Their friendship became a relationship. He sounded confused, not triumphant. I wanted him to be lying, but he was trying to find out whether he had been given the same missing truth I had.

“Did you know she still called me her boyfriend?” I asked.

“No. I thought you two were over.” He paused. “We were together. We were intimate. I thought she and I were in a relationship.”

For a moment, I could not answer. Anwesha and I had kissed in the college corridors and held each other whenever we found a quiet corner. We had been physically intimate too, and I had understood those moments as part of a relationship we were both still in. She had talked about marrying me as if it were a question of when. The last few months had been different; she had stopped meeting me, and I had felt her pulling away. But we had not ended

things together. I still believed we were a couple when he believed he was her boyfriend.

I asked him when that had started. He gave me a month. The café where I ended things was still ahead of us; she had not returned the necklace or told me plainly that our relationship was over. In those weeks she still called me her husband and asked me to meet. He had been physically intimate with her before the café, while I still believed we were together. I stared at the date on my computer and tried to place those weeks in an order that would make them harmless. Neither of us had known the full timeline.

“Did she say she was going to marry me?”

He went quiet. “No.” I had never met him, but we were asking about the same weeks and getting different answers. I wanted to believe he had misunderstood her, but the dates would not move.

Before we called her, he asked if I wanted him to speak with her alone first. I looked at the date on my computer and thought of the café, the necklace returned in its little box, and every time I had been told to wait for another day. I said I wanted to hear her answer myself. He did not argue. He started a conference call and added her number.

Anwesha answered. The other man introduced himself, then asked why she had told him I was her brother’s friend. For a moment, no one spoke.

“I didn’t say that,” she replied.

“You told me you didn’t have a boyfriend.”

“I told you we weren’t together.”

I leaned closer to the phone. “When did I agree to that?”

“Aritra, don’t start.”

“I’m asking when.”

The other man said they had been talking every day. He had believed her when she said she was free to be with him. She answered that their relationship was complicated, then said I was making it sound worse than it was. He asked whether she had told me she loved him. She did not answer. I was trying to keep up with two versions of the conversation: the one she had with him, and the one she had kept having with me.

“You were telling me you loved me,” I said.

“I liked talking to you.”

“You called me your husband.”

“That was just how we talked.”

The man on the call went quiet. I heard him breathe near the microphone. He asked Anwesha whether she had known I still believed we were together. She said she did not want to discuss this with both of us on the phone.

“Then why did you agree to the call?” he asked.

“I didn’t know he’d be there.”

“You knew I was here,” I said. “You knew I was still asking to see you.”

She did not answer. The call became a series of short questions and denials, each one landing on a fact neither of us could make disappear. At

some point, the man asked if we should end it. I said yes. He ended the conference call. For a second I sat looking at my phone, unsure whether Anwesha had stayed on the line. Then I called her directly. This time I did not ask about her family or the account. I asked the question that had been waiting through all the others.

“Did you love me?”

She was quiet for a moment. “I liked talking to you.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“I don’t love you.”

I pressed my palm against the desk. The scar crossed the heel of my hand, pale and slightly raised beneath the skin. I felt my pulse jump against the wood.

“But you told me you did.”

“I loved him. I like talking to you, but I love him. Don’t bother us.”

I kept the phone against my ear for a few seconds after the line had gone dead. Then I lowered it and looked at the webpage open on my laptop. The client had asked for a change to the contact page. I read the note, then read it again without understanding what he wanted. From the kitchen, my mother called me for dinner. I said I would come, but I stayed seated until she called a second time.

At the table, my mother had kept the rice warm under a lid. My father asked whether I had finished the client’s contact page. I said I had not, though I could not remember what the client had asked me to change. My mother put

dal on my plate and watched me take a few bites.

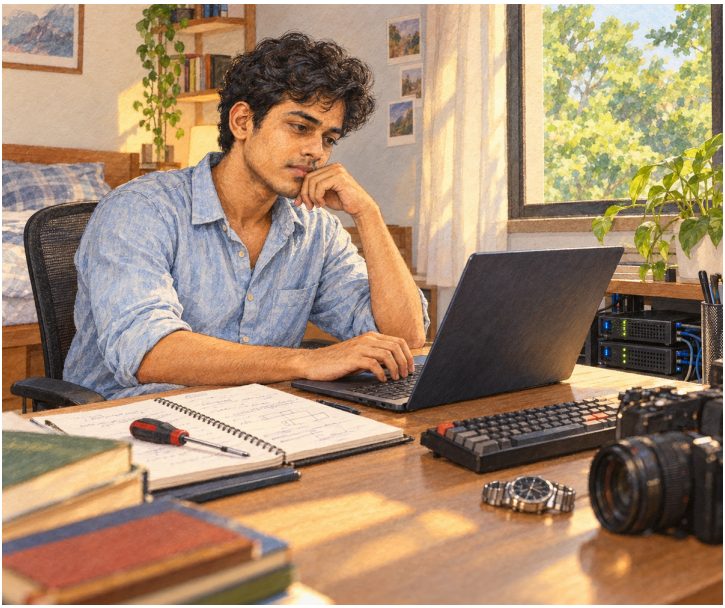
“You’re tired,” she said.

“A little.”

She brought the pickle jar from the shelf and set it beside me. I took a small piece of mango and tried again. The food was warm, and I knew it tasted good. I could not make myself want more. My parents talked about a neighbour’s roof repair while I finished what I could. No one asked me why I had gone quiet. I rinsed my plate and returned to the desk, where the client’s message was still open. I read it again. This time I understood the request, but I left the change for morning.

Part Two
What the River Carries

Chapter Thirty-Four — The Year Without Weight



Aritra's room, looking out toward the trees

For a while, the days continued to arrive with the same ordinary demands. A client wanted a button moved. My mother asked me to bring vegetables from the market. The electricity went out during a call, and I had to explain the interruption to someone who had never seen our lane. The world did not stop because one person had stopped loving me. I understood that as a fact before I could accept it as a feeling.

I kept working. Work was easier than sleep because it gave the hours a shape. I answered messages, revised pages, sent invoices, and learned to recognise the moment when a client was about to ask for something outside the

agreement. I could be precise about a website. I could not read the last three years of my life without getting lost.

My room was on the second floor of our three-storey house, facing the trees behind it. In the morning, the leaves held the light before it reached the road; by evening, the branches became a dark line beyond the window. It was a good room, and the house was one visitors remembered. I had grown up there without thinking of it as something I lacked. I mistook the money I chose not to ask my parents for as money I did not have. I had not yet earned enough to buy the things I would later want for myself.

I began measuring the week by what I could finish: a homepage revised, an invoice sent, a call returned. On days when I had no deadline, I made one for myself. I would sit at the desk past midnight changing a line of code that could have waited until morning, then wake late and tell my mother I had been busy. She did not argue. She left food covered on the stove and asked me to heat it before it went cold.

Even when food tasted good, I sometimes stopped halfway through a meal because I could not find a reason to keep eating. I did not want to frighten my family by describing the blankness, and I did not have a useful name for it. I was not crying or unable to work. I could answer a client and make a joke with my father. Then I would be alone in a room and feel as if I had already used up the part of me that was

supposed to be excited about being alive. I did not make a plan to hurt myself; I simply could not imagine what I was looking forward to. At the time, I mistook my ability to keep functioning for proof that I was fine.

One afternoon my mother asked me to bring tomatoes and green chillies from the market. She gave me the list while I was closing a client’s message on my phone. I folded the paper and put it in my pocket, then walked to the shops with the reply still forming in my head. I came back with a cup of tea from the stall and no vegetables.

My mother looked at the empty bag in my hand. “You forgot?”

I took the folded list from my pocket. It was still there, soft at the creases. “I’ll go again.”

“You don’t have to. I’ll ask your father when he comes back.” She watched me set the tea on the counter. “Were you thinking about work?”

“A client had a question.”

“And did you answer?”

I had not. The question sat unread on my phone, and I had spent the walk home rehearsing a reply I could have written in two minutes. I told her I would do it after tea. She nodded and went back to the kitchen. She did not turn the forgotten vegetables into a lesson. That made it harder to hide behind irritation.

At the university, I sometimes sat through a lecture and realised I had not heard a full sentence. I kept waiting for a dramatic collapse that would explain the way I felt. Nothing

dramatic came. There was only the repetition of ordinary tasks, each one completed without leaving much behind.

Friends asked if I was eating, sleeping, or wanted to go somewhere. I answered briefly and moved on. I did not call Anwesha again. Even anger felt distant.

After one seminar, a woman from another tutorial group walked with me toward the gate. We had exchanged notes once or twice, but never spoken beyond class. Near the tea stall, she asked whether I was seeing anyone. I said I wasn't. She looked at me for a moment, then asked if I wanted to have tea with her sometime.

I heard the question as a request for more than tea. "I'm not ready to be with anyone," I said.

"I didn't ask you to be with me," she replied. "I asked if you wanted tea." Her voice was even; she did not laugh at me or press. She waited while I tried to find another answer, then said, "All right. Maybe another time." She went back toward the department building, leaving me by the stall with the choice I had not been able to make.

I stood there longer than I needed to. I could have joined her for half an hour without promising her anything. I knew that. Still, the invitation had felt like the start of a future I would have to defend against losing. I left without buying tea.

Work kept moving even when I felt still. I had already cut back on university for the business,

and the clients kept coming even when my private life seemed to have stopped. At first the purchases were practical. I bought a MacBook for work, then a heavier Lenovo LOQ gaming machine that could handle the projects I was taking on. Later came more storage, a new phone, cameras, keyboards and a mouse that felt precise under my hand. I even bought an editing keyboard for DaVinci Resolve before I had learned to edit anything worth keeping. I liked having tools that made a larger life seem possible.

The first server took up more room than I had expected. When the delivery men carried the boxes in, my mother moved a chair to make space and asked whether I had bought another computer. I told her it was a server for a home lab. She asked what it would do. I said I wanted to learn how to build and manage one. That answer sounded thin even to me, but it was true.

I spent the first evening reading the setup notes, sorting the cables, and checking the connections. The machine powered on, filled the room with fan noise, and then refused to appear on the network. I rebooted it twice, checked the cable, and restarted the router. Each time the lights came back in the same order and the server stayed invisible. The problem was a setting I had copied from an old tutorial without checking whether it matched my network. When I corrected it, the machine appeared on my laptop. I remember the small pleasure of seeing its name in the list, plain letters on a screen,

because it meant I had followed the problem all the way to its answer.

After that I used the lab to practise: testing services, moving files between machines, and learning how to restore a backup instead of assuming one would be enough. When I added a second server, I had more capacity than my projects required. I knew that. I still liked the hum of both machines in the room, the quiet assurance that they were there because I had chosen to build something and keep learning how it worked.

The pleasure was real, even if it did not fill the whole space I had hoped it would. I could learn a new system, solve a problem, and improve the next version. None of that made me less lonely. It did give my attention somewhere to go besides the old messages, and eventually some of those skills helped me build the mental-health app. I had been looking for a machine that would make me feel complete. What I found instead was work I could return to.

For years I had obeyed Anwesha's advice about watches. If I wore a black shirt, she would say I looked handsome enough without one and that other women might notice. I had taken the remark as affection and the rule as something small I could do for her. During college and much of the university years, I left my wrist bare. After we were apart, I bought a simple Casio. It was light, reliable, and mine to choose. Then I bought an automatic Casio, followed much later by the Tissot PRX I had admired for

years and a Citizen Eco-Drive. I did not need any of them to tell the time. I liked the weight of a watch I had chosen without asking whether it would make somebody else uncomfortable.

The Tissot PRX had stayed on my mind for years. I went to the shop alone and tried it on while the salesperson adjusted the bracelet. He removed two links and set them in a tiny paper envelope. I watched it settle against my wrist, then turned my arm beneath the shop lights to see the dial catch them. On the walk home I kept checking the time, although I had nowhere to be. The watch looked the way I had imagined it would. I was pleased with it, and pleased that I had chosen it for myself.

The rest accumulated in the same way: good clothes, shoes I had once only looked at through shop windows, and more perfume than one person needed. I loved the warmth of Rasasi Hawas, the louder sweetness of 9 PM Rebel, and the clean, bright scents I associated with Invictus Aqua and Louis Vuitton Imagination. Some purchases made work easier; some simply gave an ordinary morning a little ceremony. I do not regret them. Learning to spend on myself taught me to treat money as a tool I could put toward things I cared about, instead of handling every note with the exaggerated caution I had brought from school. Better equipment sometimes did make me work better.

For a while, each delivery gave me the small lift of opening a future I had ordered. Then the box was empty, the charger was plugged in, and

the room was the same room. One evening I looked around at the things I had once imagined would complete my life and felt, strangely, as if I had already used up every dream I knew how to name. The feeling did not make the purchases foolish. It showed me that wanting something and being healed were different kinds of hunger.

At the university, a classmate named Torsa began saving me a seat. She was kind without making a show of it. She had a habit of carrying two pens and lending one without asking why yours had stopped working. When I arrived late to a seminar, she moved her bag from the empty chair beside her. I sat down and thanked her. She asked if I had missed the first part. I said I was fine, though she had asked about the lecture.

Afterward, she walked beside me to the gate. We talked about the assignment, then the rain that had started while we were inside. Once we reached the bus stop, she asked if I wanted tea. I said I had work. She looked at my closed laptop bag, then at me, and did not point out the lie.

“You don’t have to tell me what happened,” she said. “But you can sit for ten minutes without earning it.”

The offer unsettled me more than it should have. I had trained myself to hear every kindness as the beginning of an obligation. I thanked her and walked toward the bus stop. On the way home, I remembered how easily I had

once mistaken being needed for being loved. The thought did not bring relief. It only gave the silence a sharper edge.

A few weeks later she asked whether I had ever considered going somewhere alone. We were waiting outside the department office while a clerk searched for a file. The hallway smelled of damp paper. Torsa was reading a notice about a seminar; I was staring at the floor tiles and trying not to check my phone.

“I’ve been thinking about travelling,” I said, though I had not planned to tell her.

“Where?”

“Nowhere in particular.”

She folded the notice back along its old crease. “That sounds like the best place to start.”

I said I had work. She asked if work would disappear while I was away. I told her it might. She nodded, as if she had expected that answer, and left me with no argument to push against.

That night I opened a map and looked at Delhi. I had imagined the city as a place people went to become important, or to be swallowed. I had never thought of it as a place where I might simply walk for a day without being known by anyone. The next morning, before I could turn the thought into another excuse, I booked my first flight. I had travelled by train plenty of times; I had never watched the ground fall away beneath an aircraft.

In the morning, I packed two shirts, a charger, and the notebook where I kept lists of

work I had already finished. Getting to the airport took longer than I had imagined. I left before the shops opened and reached the terminal with time to spare, carrying my bag from one queue to another while checking the boarding pass on my phone. At security, I watched people place their belts, phones, and wallets into grey trays with the calm of people who had done it many times. I copied them and nearly left my charger behind.

At the gate, I kept looking at the aircraft through the glass. When boarding began, I found my seat by the window and pressed my bag beneath the chair in front of me. The cabin smelled faintly of coffee and cold air. The engines grew louder, the plane turned, and the runway lights began sliding past. I felt the wheels leave the ground in my stomach before I saw the town fall away. Roofs, roads, and fields became patterns too small to follow. Clouds covered them, then opened again. I had expected to be frightened. Instead I kept leaning toward the window, afraid I would miss something if I blinked. When the flight attendant offered tea or coffee, I asked for water and went straight back to watching the wing.

At Delhi, I waited at the baggage belt with the other passengers, checking each suitcase as it went by. Mine came around with one corner of the tag folded under. I pulled it free and stepped aside to let the next person through. The flight had not changed the things I carried with me. It had, however, made me curious about the

journey itself. I left the unanswered calls and old photographs where they were. For the first time in months, I was going somewhere without expecting a person to be waiting at the other end.

Chapter Thirty-Five — A City That Did Not Know Me

Delhi did not offer a revelation. It offered noise, distances, and the practical problem of finding the right road. The first morning I woke in a narrow guesthouse room with a fan ticking above me and a pale stripe of sunlight across the wall. For several seconds I could not place the ceiling. Then I remembered the flight, the booking, the reason I had left, and the fact that none of those things required me to solve anything before breakfast.

I went out with my phone charged and a folded paper map in my pocket, though the map was mostly an excuse to look occupied. The city moved with an impatience I had not learned. Buses sighed at the curb; vendors arranged oranges in pyramids; office workers crossed roads as if they had made private agreements with the traffic. I kept stopping to check directions, then pretending I had meant to stop. Nobody knew me well enough to ask why.

Near a tea stall, I watched a man argue over the price of a paper cup. He was not angry in any grand way. He had exact change in his hand and wanted the seller to acknowledge it. When the seller refused, the man shrugged and walked off. The next customer stepped forward. The seller turned back to the kettle and asked whether I wanted sugar. At the time I was only waiting for tea and trying not to spill it on my shirt.

The seller asked where I had come from. I said I was visiting from West Bengal. He asked if I had relatives in Delhi. I said no, and he handed me the tea without changing his expression. He had heard the answer before. I took the cup to the edge of the stall, where a narrow plank served as a counter, and unfolded my map. The printed lines did not match the roads I had just walked. I traced one route with a finger, then realised the seller was watching me.

“Where do you need to go?” he asked.

I gave him the name of a place I had written down. He pointed along the road, then corrected himself and pointed the other way. “The bus will be easier,” he said. “Ask at the stop. Don’t follow the map for every turn.”

I thanked him. He was already reaching for the next cup. I carried my tea to the bus stop and asked a conductor whether I was on the right side of the road. He pointed to the sign and told me which bus to take. By then I had finished the tea. I folded the map and put it away, then climbed aboard when the bus came.

I spent the day walking through places whose names I had seen on maps. I bought a packet of biscuits at a shop and ate them on a low wall because I could not decide what else to order. A family nearby shared a steel tiffin from home. Their youngest child kept trying to take the crispest piece before his mother had finished arranging the food. I watched them for a while, then looked away before I could turn their ordinary afternoon into a symbol.

At a crowded crossing, a woman dropped a packet of papers. Three people helped gather them; one sheet skidded beneath a parked scooter. I reached it first and brushed the dust off with my sleeve. She thanked us, gathered the pages against her chest, and checked the crossing light. When it changed, she hurried toward the other side. The rest of us went our separate ways. I did not learn her name.

In the afternoon I sat on a low wall and opened my phone. Her contact was still there. I did not call. I did not delete it either. For months I had imagined those two choices as proof of opposite things: calling meant I still loved her; deleting meant I had recovered. Sitting in an unfamiliar city, I began to suspect that neither action could tell the whole truth. I put the phone away and watched a child chase a paper cup that the wind had pushed along the pavement.

That evening I called home. My mother asked whether I had eaten. I told her about the tea and the guesthouse and left out the parts I could not explain. She asked if I was sleeping properly. I said the room was comfortable, which was not an answer. She did not press me. She told me my father had asked when I would be back and that the neighbour’s dog had been sleeping under our verandah again. We spoke about small things until the call began to feel less like a report.

She asked if I was going to Mathura, since I was already so far from home. I had not planned to. I asked whether she thought I should. She

said it was my trip, not hers, then added that if I went I should keep my wallet somewhere safe and call when I arrived. The suggestion stayed with me after we hung up. I searched for trains, found one that would leave the next morning, and booked a seat.

The following day, as the train carried me south, the view changed slowly: dense buildings gave way to fields and small stations, then to stretches of dry land interrupted by shops and walls painted with names. I tried to read, but the words slipped from my attention. I tried to sleep, but every time the carriage jolted I woke and checked that I had not missed my stop. Somewhere between those attempts, I understood that travel could not make a person whole. It could only put a little distance between him and the room where he had learned to feel broken.

At Mathura station, I stepped down into warm air carrying dust, incense, frying oil, and the press of arriving people. A cycle rickshaw driver asked where I was going. I named a place I had found online, then followed him through streets that seemed to turn before I had finished understanding the last turn. The city was busy with worshippers, shopkeepers, schoolchildren, and men carrying sacks. It was not waiting to give me a sign. That was the first thing that made me trust it.

Chapter Thirty-Six — The Water at Dusk

At the river in Mathura

I had no plan for Mathura beyond arriving there. The rickshaw driver dropped me near a lane crowded with shops, and I paid him before asking whether he knew a place to stay. He pointed toward a guesthouse with a faded sign and told me the owner would find a room. The room was small, the bedsheet thin, and the bathroom tap needed to be turned twice before water came. I put my bag down and sat on the edge of the bed, listening to a bell ring somewhere beyond the buildings.

For a few minutes I wondered why I had come. I was not religious in any disciplined sense. I had grown up around rituals and

festivals, but I had never expected a temple or a holy city to answer the questions I had failed to ask properly. I had come because my mother mentioned Mathura and because the train had a seat. That seemed a sufficient reason until I was alone in the room.

I washed my face, changed my shirt, and went back outside. The streets were already changing toward evening. Shopkeepers pulled down half their shutters; families moved together through the lanes; a boy in a school uniform ran past carrying a packet of sweets. I followed the general movement toward the river, stopping once to ask for directions and once because I had mistaken a narrow alley for the way through.

Broad stone steps descended to the Yamuna. By evening, the ghat was crowded. The water held the last light in broken pieces. People came down carrying flowers, small lamps, bags, children who resisted being photographed. A man stood with his trousers rolled to the knees, speaking into his phone while he watched a child splash the water. An old woman sat on a step and untied a knot in the edge of her sari. Nobody looked like they had come to witness my private crisis. They were busy with their own evenings.

I sat near the edge, where the stone was warm from the day. A priest’s voice rose and fell behind me. I could not follow all the words. The flame of a lamp trembled in the wind; someone shielded it with both hands until it steadied. The

person beside him bowed, then stood and passed the lamp along. I watched the small movements more than the ceremony: the careful hand, the child tugging at a sleeve, the old woman finally freeing the knot.

A boy came by with a shallow tray of small leaf bowls holding flowers and wicks. He asked if I wanted one. I shook my head. He moved on without asking why. I watched a woman take one from him, light it from a larger flame, and lower it toward the water. She held the little bowl for a few seconds before letting it go. The wick bent in the wind but did not go out. Her hands remained joined after the offering had drifted away.

When I was small, my mother used to take me to a temple during festivals. I remembered standing beside her, impatient to leave, while she waited for the lamp to come around. She would place my palms together and whisper the words I was meant to say. I never knew what she asked for. I had assumed prayer was a request: a person named what they wanted and hoped the world would agree. Sitting by the Yamuna, I wondered whether my mother had been asking for something less specific, something she could not have put into a sentence. The thought did not make me religious all at once. It made me miss her, and it made me feel less alone in a city where nobody knew why I had come.

A boy with a tray of leaf lamps came past again. This time I stopped him and asked how

much one cost. He named a small amount and showed me how the wick sat in the oil. I had not planned to do anything. I had only wanted to understand what the people around me were doing, and the boy was waiting for an answer, not a story about my reasons. I paid him.

He lit the wick from a larger flame and handed the leaf bowl to me. I held it too close to my chest at first, shielding it from the evening breeze. The light trembled against my fingers. I wondered what I was supposed to ask for. As a child I had repeated whatever my mother said at the temple. Now I had no words ready, and no wish to bargain for Anwesha’s return. I thought of my mother asking if I had eaten, of my father asking when I would come back, of the work waiting on my laptop. I wanted to be able to go home and live through an ordinary day without treating it as evidence that I had failed.

I lowered the lamp toward the water. The current took it, then turned it sideways against a stone step. I watched it for a while, unsure whether to help. The boy was already moving on. A woman nearby nudged the leaf bowl free with the edge of a stick, and it drifted into the darker water. She did not look at me. I did not take it as an answer. I had done one small thing because I wanted to, and then the evening continued.

For months I had imagined that if I understood what happened, the pain would become orderly. I kept arranging the past like papers on a table: the promises, the missed

meetings, the money, the calls cut short, the explanations that changed shape. I wanted one fact to make the rest simple. If she had never loved me, then I had been foolish. If she once loved me, then I had been betrayed. If her family had truly refused, then perhaps I should have waited. Each version asked me to choose a single sentence and live inside it.

The water moved below the steps, carrying the small light away from the place where I had set it down. I could still see the flame for a few seconds between other lamps. Watching it did not tell me what Anwesha had felt or whether I had been right about any of our past. It did make me notice how much I had been asking her choices to explain my worth.

The thought came without grandeur. I had made her the judge of whether I was enough. I had made myself responsible for preventing her fear, for paying what she asked, for putting aside my own education, for reading silence as a puzzle I could solve if I tried harder. I had called some of those choices love. Some were love; some were fear wearing love’s clothes. The distinction hurt because I could not hand all the blame to her and leave myself innocent.

A bell rang behind me. I looked up and saw a group of visitors gathering their bags. One man searched for a sandal that had been left among several pairs. Two children ran toward the stairs and were called back. The evening carried on without resolving anything. I pressed my palms

against my knees and let the discomfort remain there.

I found myself speaking under my breath, though I could not have said whether I was praying or simply admitting what I wanted. I did not ask for Anwesha to return. I asked for the strength to stop making my life depend on whether she did. The words sounded small against the crowd and the water. Nothing answered. A bell rang, a child complained about being hungry, a boatman called to someone on the opposite steps. And yet the asking changed something in me. It did not make the past easier to bear. It loosened my grip on the version of the future I had kept trying to force out of it.

I did not need to turn that into wisdom before I could stand up.

When I finally rose, the river was darker and the lamps seemed brighter. I walked along the steps until the crowd thinned. A young man beside me was taking photographs, asking his friend to move closer to the water. The friend refused, laughing that he would fall in. Their ordinary argument made me smile. It was the first time in months that a smile had arrived before I checked whether I deserved it.

Back at the guesthouse, I opened my notebook. I had carried it to write down work tasks, but on the first blank page I wrote: *I can love someone and still be responsible for my own life.* The sentence looked too neat, like something printed on a card. I nearly crossed it

out. Instead I added beneath it: *I don't know how to do that yet.*

That was closer to the truth. I had not become fearless beside the water. I still wanted to call her. I still wanted the story to have a version in which my patience had been rewarded. I still felt the old instinct to ask what I could have done differently, as if the answer would let me control the next person who came close. But I had noticed the instinct. For one evening, noticing it was enough.

The next day, I asked the guesthouse owner how to get to Vrindavan. He pointed me toward the stand where shared autos waited and told me to ask before climbing in, because not every driver was going the full way. I found one heading there and took the open seat at the back. The ride was short enough for the town to keep changing around me: shopfronts, walls painted with names, people carrying bags and flowers, then the busier lanes where traffic seemed to negotiate by inches.

Vrindavan was louder than I had expected. Bells sounded from somewhere beyond the shops; vendors called out; a scooter horn cut across a family trying to decide where to eat. I had imagined I might arrive and feel a clean, unmistakable answer to the questions I carried. Instead I kept checking where I was, stepping aside for people who knew the lanes better, and trying not to block anyone as I looked up at the buildings. Near a stall, an older couple asked if I could take their photograph. I held the phone

while they stood together, then took another when the first one caught a passer-by’s shoulder across the frame. The woman checked the second picture and nodded. They thanked me and went on. Their small errand became part of my day without asking me to interpret it.

Later I travelled to Agra. I had seen photographs of the Taj Mahal so often that I expected to recognise it immediately, and I did; what surprised me was how slowly the scale of it reached me. People moved through the grounds in clusters, stopping to take turns with the camera, calling children back, fixing a loose scarf, waiting while someone adjusted a pose. I found a place in the line for a photograph, then let another family go ahead when their little girl began to fuss. When my turn came, I took one picture and put the phone away. I wanted to remember the courtyard and the sound of shoes on stone without reducing the visit to a set of images I could later send to someone. The building was beautiful. So was the patient, ordinary business of helping one another get a picture and making room for the next person.

Chapter Thirty-Seven — The Road Home

Aritra returns to the coast alone

The next morning I woke before the alarm. The room was still dim, and for a few seconds I could hear only the fan and a cart rattling somewhere below. The sentence in my notebook was waiting where I had left it. I read it once, then closed the cover. It did not make leaving easier. I packed, checked under the bed for my charger, and took the train back with the same uneasy feeling I had brought with me.

At home, my mother asked whether Mathura had been beautiful. I told her about the river and the lamps, about the small room and the crowded streets. She asked if I had prayed. I

said I had sat quietly. She accepted that answer without correcting it and put lunch on the table.

For several days, I returned to the familiar routine. Work accumulated while I was away. A client had sent three messages about a deadline; another had misunderstood a quote and expected more pages for the same price. I answered both, fixed a broken form, and spent an evening moving photographs from an old phone to a hard drive. On the fourth day, I passed a place where Anwesha and I had once stopped for tea. The memory came with such precision that I could almost hear her asking for extra sugar. I walked past, then turned back and bought tea alone. It was too sweet. I drank it anyway.

The thought from the ghat did not protect me from wanting to call her. One night I opened our old conversation and scrolled until the messages reached the first week. There she was, sending me a photograph of a notebook page, then asking whether I had eaten. I had remembered the relationship mostly by its promises and its ending. The messages showed the ordinary middle: jokes, complaints, the voice note of “The Date on the Form,” my impatient replies when I was busy. I could not tell which parts had been true for her. I could see that they had been true for me.

I put in my earbuds and played the recording. The harmonium’s first chord was rough at the edge; she had been practising alone, not trying to impress me. When she reached the line about

taking the first step and making a road, I remembered why she had sent it: she had been trying to claim a future her family could not yet promise her. The song had not been about me. I had sometimes heard every word she shared as proof of what I meant to her. That night I could let it belong to her. It did not explain the ending or make it hurt less. It reminded me that I had loved a person with a life of her own, not only the future I had pictured beside her.

My thumb hovered over the call icon. I put the phone down and went to the kitchen for water. When I returned, I did not delete the conversation. I also did not call. It was a small decision, almost invisible, and I had to make it more than once before the night was over.

A week later, Torsa found me outside the department building. She had a paper cup of tea in each hand and held one out. I took it. We stood by the railing while students hurried past us toward class. She asked how the trip had been.

“I don’t know yet,” I said.

“That’s allowed.”

I told her about the river, and how I had written a sentence in my notebook that sounded better than I felt. She listened without telling me what it meant. When I finished, she said she was glad I had gone. Then she asked if I was still working every night.

“Most nights.”

“Do you want to?”

The question irritated me because I could not dismiss it as concern. I had begun taking every spare hour as evidence that I was disciplined, when often I was only avoiding an empty one. I told her I did not know what I wanted to do with the time. She said she had no advice, but the college library stayed open until six. We could sit there and do separate work if I liked.

I almost refused out of habit. Then I said yes.

We met twice that week. We did not discuss my breakup either time. Torsa studied for a practical exam; I reviewed a project proposal. On the second afternoon, she left to meet a friend and forgot a notebook on the table. I ran after her to return it. She thanked me, then hurried off. The library returned to its quiet. I finished the proposal and went home without feeling that I had been abandoned by the room.

In the months that followed, I started taking trips when work allowed. In Goa, I carried a paper plate toward the water and kept shifting it away from the wind. Sand blew into the food before I had taken three bites. I tried to save the better pieces, then laughed at myself when the wind tipped the paper. The sea was louder than I expected. I sat with the ruined meal and watched people step back from each wave, then move forward again as soon as the water withdrew. The day did not ask me to have a good time. After a while, I did.

Bali was my first trip outside India. At the airport, the passport I had once imagined as a distant object lay open in my hand while I

checked the entry stamp twice. Beyond the doors, signs and prices made me pause before every small decision. I looked at the currency conversion on my phone before I bought a drink, then put the phone away so I could taste it. I carried the camera I had bought partly because I thought I would become the sort of person who took beautiful photographs. I did take some: a tiled roof after rain, a row of scooters, a plate of food I could not name until I asked. But I also left the camera in my bag for long stretches and watched the light move across walls I would never see again.

The first time I looked at the photographs, I wanted them to prove I had become someone new. They did not. They showed where I had stood and what I had looked at. That was enough. I had spent money on the trip and on the equipment I took with me; some of that spending gave me real pleasure. None of it made me into a person who could no longer feel lonely. I could be grateful for the journey without asking it to erase the one I had come through.

I had been to Digha often with Anwesha. A picture from one of those afternoons came back to me: her hair blown across her face, the red umbrella at the edge of the frame, and the paper cone of jhal muri between us. She had called my first photographs terrible, then kept the last one. We went to Shankarpur too when we had more time. Those places had belonged to our ordinary days together. I did not need to turn

them into evidence that the good part had been false.

On a later visit to Digha by myself, I could leave when I wanted and stay after the first restless hour had passed. I travelled from Ramnagar with a small bag and no plan beyond getting to the sea and coming back before the day grew late. The coast was busy. Families were arranging themselves for photographs; children were trying to run from the water and then daring one another to go closer. Vendors called to people passing with damp hems and sandals in their hands. Nothing about it felt made for my private sadness, which helped.

I bought tea and stood with it until it cooled enough to drink. My phone was in my pocket. A few times I took it out, opened the camera, and put it away without taking a picture. I thought of the photographs I used to send Anwesha when we were still planning a future together. For a while I had assumed that a place mattered more if someone I loved saw it too. That afternoon I watched the water move up the sand and slide back. I did not feel healed. I did not feel especially brave. I was simply there, and the day did not become worse because I had come alone.

On another afternoon I took an auto along the coastal road to Shankarpur by myself. Near the fishing harbour, the work went on beside the beach: people sorting crates, folding nets, calling to one another over the clatter. I kept to the edge of the path and watched until a man

carrying a coil of rope asked if I was waiting for someone.

“No,” I said. “Just looking.”

He nodded and went back to the rope. I bought tea from a stall beneath the casuarinas and stood with the glass warming my hand. The wind kept lifting the paper wrapper around the cup. A group of children ran past with their sandals in their hands, then stopped where the wet sand began. One of them turned back to call for his sister. She was still trying to tie her hair.

I did not take a photograph. I drank the tea, watched the boats and people come and go, then walked back toward the road when I was ready to return. The auto stand was not empty; a few passengers were waiting for enough people to share the ride. I waited with them without needing to tell anyone why I had come alone.

I also visited places farther afield: a market town with an old clock above the bus stand, a hill road with tea stalls built from corrugated sheets. I spoke to people when conversation arose and let it end when it ended. I learned that a good evening did not have to become a promise to count.

My old fear did not disappear. Sometimes, after meeting someone kind, I went home and searched for signs that they had been polite rather than interested. Sometimes I overexplained myself. Sometimes I heard a delayed reply as a verdict. But now and then I noticed the old story beginning and chose not to

obey it. The river in my notebook had not made me invulnerable. It had given me an image I could return to when I tried to make every person who left into proof that I should have been different.

One afternoon, after a seminar I had attended mostly because I was already on campus, I noticed a paper pinned beside the department office. It listed a student counsellor’s hours and said appointments were confidential. I read it once while passing, then again on my way back. I had been sleeping badly, eating because my mother put food in front of me, and turning down ordinary invitations as if each one asked me to risk my whole life. I did not know whether that was grief, depression, or simply a long stretch of being tired. I wanted to ask someone who knew more than I did.

The counsellor’s room was smaller than I expected. There was a desk, two chairs, and a window facing the back of another building. She asked what had brought me in. I began with the breakup, then found myself explaining the years before it: the university I had barely attended, the work I used to avoid thinking, the way I had made myself available whenever Anwesha called. I kept trying to give the story in order, as if she would be able to identify the exact point where it became my fault.

She did not tell me who was to blame. She asked what a typical day felt like now, and what had changed in the things I used to enjoy. I described the blankness, the purchases, the

trips, the way a good day could still end with me reading old messages. When I said I was not crying and could still work, she asked whether I thought those facts meant I was fine. I said I did not know. She nodded and said we did not need to settle on a label in that room. We could start with what I was experiencing and decide together what kind of support might help.

She asked whether I had thoughts of hurting myself. I said no. She asked what I did when the numbness became difficult to sit with. I told her I worked, travelled, or bought something I had wanted. She asked which of those helped after the first hour. I could not answer. We made a small plan for the next week: eat at the table at least once a day instead of at my desk, take one evening away from client work, and return for another conversation if I wanted to. None of it sounded like a cure. That was part of why I trusted it.

When the appointment ended, she told me I could come back, and that I could also speak with a doctor if my sleep or appetite worsened. I walked out with no revelation. The corridor was crowded; two students were arguing over a practical file, and someone had left a steel water bottle on the windowsill. I filled it from the dispenser and stood there drinking. Before I left, I marked the counsellor’s hours in my calendar.

I thought about that room later when the app idea began to take shape. A tool could help someone notice a pattern or prepare for a

conversation, but it could not listen as a trained person did, judge a crisis, or promise that a few questions would make someone well. I wanted to build something useful. I had also begun to understand that wanting to help did not make me qualified to do everything.

The idea for an app arrived much later, in a less beautiful place: at my desk, under a tube light that flickered whenever the refrigerator started. I kept thinking about the habits people used to get through a difficult hour, and the shame that followed when those habits made things worse. I wondered whether a tool could help someone notice the moment before they acted, without scolding them or pretending to solve their life. I knew enough about making software to see how little I knew about the people who might use it.

I opened a blank document and wrote down the questions that had to come before code: Who would use it? What would they trust it with? What should it never promise? And who could help me understand the answers? The page stayed open after I shut down the laptop. It was still there the next morning.

Chapter Thirty-Eight — Questions Before Code

When I started looking for answers, I began with people I already knew. That was not the same as beginning with the people the app might need. My first conversation that felt like the start of the work happened on a call with a former classmate. He rang after dinner to ask if I could help him recover a document from his phone. We fixed the file, but he did not hang up. I heard a television playing in the background and the click of a lighter.

“Can I ask you something?” he said.

“Sure.”

“How do you stop doing something when you know it’s making you feel worse?”

I thought he meant smoking. He said he kept checking a woman’s social media page, someone he had been close to and had stopped talking to. Every time he looked, he found some detail to interpret: a song, a photograph, a comment from another person. He would tell himself he was only checking once, then lose an hour and feel ashamed. He had tried deleting the app from his phone. He reinstalled it the next day.

I wanted to tell him to block the account and get on with his life. I had tried that kind of advice on myself; it sounded decisive and left no room for the fact that he did not want to stop caring. Instead I asked what usually happened just before he opened the page.

“Nothing,” he said. “I’m bored.”

“Are you bored, or are you alone?”

He did not answer immediately. Then he said his evenings were the worst. He finished work, ate, and sat with his phone until he was too tired to think. When I asked what he wished he could do instead, he said he wanted to call a friend, but he felt embarrassed telling anyone how much he still thought about her.

I had no clever reply. I told him I understood the embarrassment. We spoke for another twenty minutes about what he might try on one evening, not as a cure, just as an experiment. He chose to leave his phone charging in the other room and make tea before opening any apps. He said it might not work. I said it did not have to work forever to teach him something.

Two evenings later, he called again. He had left the phone in the other room, made tea, and then gone to get it anyway. He sounded annoyed with himself, as if the attempt had only counted if he completed it perfectly.

“Did you still lose the whole evening?” I asked.

“No. I checked for a few minutes, then stopped.”

“What was different?”

He thought for a while. “I wasn’t pretending I’d only look once. I knew I wanted to check. I just didn’t do it the second I sat down.”

We did not call that progress or make a plan for every night. He said he might try it again. I asked what would make it easier, and he said he did not know yet. The conversation ended there.

The small pause had not taken away his feelings or answered what he should do about the woman. It had given him a little more room to notice what he was doing.

After we hung up, I sat at the desk and thought about how many times I had reached for my phone because I could not stand not knowing what someone else felt. I had wanted someone to tell me how to stop. I had also wanted someone to ask what I was trying to find each time I looked. The distinction stayed with me.

My first conversations after that happened over tea, after class, or during calls that were supposed to be about something else. I asked what made a difficult week worse and what kind of help felt useful. Most people answered cautiously. Some joked. One friend told me he did not want an app reminding him that he was failing at a habit every morning.

I wrote that down. I had imagined reminders as encouragement. To him, they sounded like a daily report card.

At a study-group meeting, Oindrila waited until most people had left before asking what I meant by a private journal. She said she sometimes wrote things down when she was angry, but she could never be certain her family would not look through her phone. A cousin had once found a note and read it aloud at lunch. She did not tell me what it said, and I did not ask.

“If I delete something from the app, does it disappear everywhere or just from the screen?” she asked.

I did not know. I wrote the question down. Oindrila watched me write it, then said the answer would matter even if the app was free. Another person in the group told me he would stop trusting a tool that used the word “healing” too often. A student said she would use a private mood log but would not join a public community. Each answer made the first screen I had sketched look more confident and less useful.

I started over. Instead of asking people what features they wanted, I asked them to walk me through the last time they had struggled with a habit or a relationship. I did not ask for details they did not want to share. I asked what happened before they reached for help, what stopped them, and what they did next. Some stories were brief. Others paused at the point where the speaker had to decide whether I was safe to continue with.

I learned to wait through those pauses. I had spent years trying to fix discomfort as soon as it appeared. This work asked me to stay quiet long enough for the other person to decide what they wanted to say.

One evening I told Torsa about the project. She read my notes, then looked up at me. “You’re building an app for people who feel alone,” she said. “How will you make sure it doesn’t pretend to be a person?”

I started to explain the chat feature I had imagined. She waited until I stopped. Then she asked whether I planned to have trained counsellors available, how private the records would be, and what the app would do if someone described immediate danger. I had no good answers. The questions embarrassed me, but not because she was unkind. I had mistaken the ability to build a thing for the ability to know what it should do.

That night I removed the chat feature from my notes. I wrote down a smaller purpose: help users notice patterns, choose a next step, and find human support when they need more than a tool can give. It was less impressive than my first idea. It was also the first version I could imagine defending honestly.

I began reading about habit formation, boundaries, and mental-health support. I kept a separate page of claims I was not qualified to make. When I had filled both pages, I sent them to Sreeja, a designer I had worked with on a client site, and asked whether she would review a rough first version. She replied with a time to meet after one of her calls. I put it in my calendar and shut down the laptop.

Chapter Thirty-Nine — The First Version

Sreeja had a way of finding the one sentence in a page that the writer had been trying to hide. We met at a café near the bus stand. I had printed the screens in black and white, thinking a paper copy would make the idea easier to discuss. She read them while I explained the purpose, then turned the pages back toward me.

“Which screen would you want if you were having the worst day of the month?” she asked.

I pointed to the check-in page. It asked the user to choose a mood from a row of faces, then offered a short exercise. Sreeja tapped the faces with one finger. “If I choose the wrong one, does the app tell me I’m wrong?”

“No.”

“Then why does it make me choose one?”

I looked at the row again. It had seemed simple when I designed it. Now the faces looked like an exam I had not meant to set. I asked what she would use instead. She suggested a blank line with a prompt that could be skipped. We changed the screen while we sat there, drawing over the printed version with a pen.

That became our routine. I brought a draft; Sreeja found where it assumed too much. I would defend a feature, then hear the assumption inside my defense. Sometimes she was wrong about what a person might need. Sometimes I was. We learned to ask the people

we hoped to serve instead of settling the argument between us.

I built a bare prototype that did almost nothing. It let a person record a moment, notice what came before it, and choose one small action to try next. There was no streak counter, no public score, no message claiming that a week of use meant someone had changed. I added a page of support options, including ways to reach people and services outside the app. It took longer than the feature list I had begun with, and I was relieved when it did.

The first test took place in a borrowed classroom after everyone else had left. Three students sat around a table with their phones. The room smelled of chalk and the wet dust coming in through the open window. Sreeja gave each of them a paper with the task written in plain language: use the prototype to think about a small difficulty from the last few days. They could use an imaginary example or stop whenever they wanted.

I showed them how to open the prototype, then moved to the far end of the room so I would not hover over their shoulders. I had expected to explain what each button did. Sreeja asked me not to. If a button made sense only after I described it, she wanted to know that.

One person, Ayan, closed the app after the first prompt. He turned his phone face down and said he did not know what counted as a small difficulty. I began to offer examples, then stopped. Sreeja asked whether he wanted to

continue with an imaginary situation or be finished. He chose to be finished. We thanked him and did not ask for a reason.

Another student reached the question about what had happened before a difficult moment, then went back to the previous screen and read it again. She tried to type, erased the first line, and left the field blank. I could see her pausing, but I could not know what the pause meant. When she finished, she said the prompt made her feel as if she had to explain the whole story before she could choose anything. We wrote that down.

The third student was Oindrila, whom I had met at the study-group meeting. She opened the settings before trying the reflection page. We had added a privacy summary since our first conversation, and I showed her what the prototype stored and what it did not. She read it twice, then asked whether her entries would be visible to me. I explained the limits of our setup. She studied me for a second and said she still would not put anything personal into it yet. She tried a fictional example instead, then explored the delete option. The entry disappeared from the screen, but the wording did not tell her whether a copy remained elsewhere. She thanked me for the explanation but said she would not have known to ask.

I thanked her and wrote that down too. After the students left, I wanted to explain why the app was safe. Sreeja asked me to wait until we had checked every claim. We spent the next

week tracing where each piece of information went, what happened if a user deleted an entry, and how to make the privacy explanation readable without pretending a short paragraph could answer every concern. The work was tedious. I found it harder than writing code because there was no clever solution that made trust automatic.

When I finally showed the revised prototype to the same student, she tried it again. She still did not enter anything private, but she stayed on the first screen and read the choices. Before leaving, she said, “I can imagine using it. I’m not ready to tell you what I’d write.”

It was not the enthusiastic response I had hoped for. It was more useful. I had been looking for proof that people needed my idea. She had shown me the difference between needing a tool and trusting it with a life.

At home, I made a new list: what the app could do, what it could not do, and what it must never claim to do. The list did not look like a launch plan. It looked like a set of promises that would be easy to break if I became impatient. I kept it beside the laptop while I worked.

Around that time, one of my older clients asked me to take on a large redesign. The fee would have covered months of development, but the deadline overlapped with the first small pilot. I read the brief twice. A year earlier I would have accepted immediately and treated sleep as an adjustable expense. This time I called the client and asked whether we could

move the delivery date. He said no. I thanked him and declined the work.

After the call, the client replied with a polite thank-you. I reread it, looking for some hint that he might come back with a different deadline. The message did not change. I opened our pilot budget and crossed out a feature we had not needed for the first test, then sent the revised list to Sreeja. She wrote back, “Good. Let’s keep the part we can stand behind.” The first version would be smaller than I had imagined. I shut down the laptop and went to the kitchen. My mother had left a plate covered for me. I ate, then returned to the desk. The client’s brief was still in my inbox, but I did not reopen it.

Chapter Forty — The Reminder

The pilot had been running for nine days when a message arrived from Oindrila, the student who had returned to test the prototype. She said she had been having a difficult week and had finally entered something personal. She did not describe what she had written. The next morning, the app sent her a reminder asking whether she had completed the action she chose. She had not.

She was sitting with her family when the notification appeared. Her phone was beside her plate. Someone saw the words—“You planned to take a step yesterday. Did you get a chance?”—and asked what step she had planned. Oindrila locked the screen and said it was a college reminder. The conversation moved on, but she kept the phone in her lap for the rest of breakfast, the screen turned toward her. In her message, she said she had not expected the app to put a private question on her lock screen. The reminder made her feel as if she had failed at one more thing, then left her watching the phone in case it happened again.

I read the message twice. My first reaction was to explain that the reminder could be turned off. I had put the control in settings and mistaken its presence for a choice she understood. Telling her where to find it would not change what had happened at breakfast.

I called her only after asking whether she wanted to talk. She agreed, but sounded

guarded. I apologised for the notification and asked what she wanted to happen to the entry. She said she wanted it deleted. I asked her to stay on the call while I opened the test account and followed the deletion steps with her. The entry disappeared from the screen. I explained that the pilot stored a temporary backup, and that it would be removed after the scheduled cleanup. I heard how much harder that was to say than “It’s gone.” We agreed to send her a note when the backup had been cleared.

After that, I showed her how to turn off all reminders. She thanked me, then said she was not sure she wanted to keep testing the app.

“You don’t have to,” I told her.

There was a pause. “I thought you would want me to stay.”

“I do want your feedback. I don’t want you to feel you owe me more of it.”

She said she would think about it. We ended the call without deciding. I sat with the phone in my hand, aware that I had wanted a successful pilot badly enough to make her continued participation feel like a prize. If I had defended the feature, I could have made her doubt her own reaction. I had done that in other parts of my life, though I had rarely called it by its name.

Sreeja came over that evening. I showed her the message and the notification settings. She did not scold me. She asked how many people had opted into reminders and how many had understood the choice. The answer was not good. We disabled reminders for everyone until

we could redesign the consent screen and test it again.

The change broke the neat sequence I had planned for the pilot. The app now asked users to choose an action, then did nothing unless they returned on their own. My developer friend said we were making the product less engaging. He meant it as a concern about retention, not a criticism of the work. I understood the concern. A tool people forgot to open could not help them. But the right kind of engagement was not the same as making the phone demand attention.

We argued over it for an hour. The developer opened the retention chart and showed us how many people had not returned after the first session. He said most apps used reminders because people forgot they had installed them. Sreeja asked whether that meant they wanted to return. He said there was no way to know from the chart.

I wanted a way to invite people back without punishing them for staying away. Sreeja suggested a neutral check-in that could be scheduled only by the user, with wording they chose themselves. The developer pointed out that this would take another week. I said we would take the week.

That night, when I was closing the laptop, Torsa called. We had spoken only a few times since the library afternoons. She said she had seen my post about the pilot and wanted to ask whether it was still happening. I told her about

the reminder and the decision to pause it. She listened, then said she had once used a study app that sent red warnings when she missed a target. After a while she deleted the app and felt guilty for deleting it.

“People can be lonely and still want to be left alone,” she said. “You need to let those be true at the same time.”

I wrote the sentence down after we hung up, though I was not sure it belonged in the app or only in my notebook.

The next morning, I removed the reminder from the pilot and checked the setting on two different phones. It made our demo less polished. It also made the app less likely to embarrass someone at home. When the backup cleanup was complete, I sent Oindrila the note we had promised. She replied with a thank-you and said she would think about whether to return. I thanked her and did not ask when.

Chapter Forty-One — A Visit in the Rain

Torsa asked to see the prototype after I had something that worked on a phone. We met in an empty seminar room after class. She sat by the window, opened the first screen, and read every line before touching anything. I started explaining the buttons. She raised one hand without looking up.

“Let me see what I understand first.”

She chose a fictional example, skipped the question she did not want to answer, and found the support page. Then she went back and tried to delete the entry. The confirmation asked whether she was sure. She tapped yes, waited, and looked at me.

“Is it gone?”

“From the app, yes.”

“That answer is too quick.”

I told her what the prototype stored and what it did not. She asked whether a person could use it without an account, whether anyone on the team could read an entry, and what happened to a saved entry if the user deleted it. Some questions had clear answers; others showed me what I still needed to check. I wrote them down while she waited. She did not offer to reassure me that the prototype was good. She had come to see what it did.

At the end she said, “It feels more honest than the first idea you described.”

“Because there’s no chat feature?”

“Because it doesn’t pretend to know me.” She returned the phone. “Keep asking people what they need. Don’t assume the answer is the same for everyone.”

After that, we began sharing tea after class. I tried not to decide what it meant. She did not ask me to. We talked about exams, her younger brother’s habit of borrowing her headphones and returning them tangled, and the lecturer who always announced a quiz after saying there would be no quiz.

One afternoon it rained hard enough to keep us under the college verandah. The buses were late, and the steps filled with students waiting for the downpour to soften. Torsa had brought a folder of papers in a cloth bag. I held the bag open while she shifted the pages away from a leak in the roof. A drop landed on my wrist and ran under my watch.

“Your app is getting all this attention,” she said. “And you still forget to carry an umbrella.”

“I remembered. I left it at home.”

“That is a different kind of forgetting.”

I laughed, and the sound surprised me. It was not the careful smile from Mathura or the polite one I had used with clients. It came out before I could decide whether I was ready to laugh with anyone again.

She looked at me, but did not turn the moment into a question. We walked to the bus stop when the rain eased. On the way, she told me she was applying for a research position in another city. I asked when she would know. She

said in a month or two. I wanted to say I hoped she would stay. Instead I asked if she was excited.

She pulled the application notice from her folder and held it beneath the bus shelter so the wind would not catch the paper. The position involved research on food habits and public health. She had read the summary twice and still was not sure what a working day would look like.

“What part interests you?” I asked.

“Finding out how people actually make decisions about food. Not what they say they should eat when someone gives them a form. What they can afford, what their families cook, what is easy to get.” She put the notice away before the rain could reach it. “I don’t know if I’m qualified. I want to find out by doing the work.”

I had seen her make lists for the law course and sit through difficult conversations at home. Here she sounded less like she was defending a choice and more like she was trying to picture a life she had not yet lived. I asked if she had submitted everything. She said she had, then checked her bag as if the application might still be there. We both laughed when she found the folder exactly where she had put it.

“I am,” she said. “And nervous.”

The bus did not come. The rain softened, then thickened again, and the students under the shelter began checking their phones for updates. Torsa took the research notice out

once more. She had marked a paragraph about field interviews and circled the words *community participation*.

“I have to explain why I want the position if they call me,” she said. “I know what I mean when I’m reading it. I’m not sure I can say it without sounding like I memorised the notice.”

“Do you want to practise?”

She nodded, then gave me the short version: she wanted to understand how people made food choices in the circumstances they actually lived in, not only how they answered a form. The explanation came out clearly, but she stopped at the end and looked at me.

I was ready to suggest a tighter opening. Instead I asked, “Did that sound like you?”

She considered it. “Mostly. I made it too neat at the end.”

“What would you say if you weren’t trying to impress them?”

She folded the notice, then opened it again. “That people are not careless just because they don’t follow advice. Sometimes the advice doesn’t fit their day.” She looked up. “That’s what I want to study.”

I told her that sounded like the real answer. She wrote the sentence in the margin of her copy, not as a script but as a reminder. When she put the notice away, I felt the familiar wish to solve the uncertainty for her—to say she would get the position, that the distance would be easy, that we could keep seeing each other. I left all three promises unspoken. She had asked

me to listen, and the answer she found belonged to her.

I nodded. In the past I might have heard her plan as the beginning of a distance I had to prevent. This time I let it be her plan. I told her I hoped she got it. The words were true, even though something in me tightened when she smiled.

When her bus came, she climbed aboard and found a seat by the window. She waved once as it pulled away. I stood there until the bus turned at the crossing, then walked home in the drizzle. I did not know whether there would be a next meeting, and for the first time that uncertainty did not feel like an emergency.

Chapter Forty-Two — The Offer

Torsa sent me the news on a Tuesday evening. She had been offered the research position. The message was brief, followed by a photograph of the email on her laptop and a line that said she was trying not to tell everyone before she had read the terms twice.

I read the message at my desk. I was glad for her. Then I noticed the date she would leave and began composing questions: how often would she come back, would we keep talking, would she still have time for the app? I deleted them one by one. She had sent me good news, not a request to help decide what it meant for us. I replied, “You should read it three times. Then celebrate.”

She sent back a laughing face and asked if I was free the next afternoon. We met at the college gate and walked to a tea stall where the owner knew her order. She told me the position was for a year, perhaps longer if the work went well. She would leave in six weeks. The salary was modest, but the project mattered to her. She had been waiting to do research since her final year.

“I’m happy,” she said, stirring the tea though the sugar had already dissolved. “And I feel guilty being happy because my mother thinks I should take the local job.”

“What did she say when you told her?”

“That the salary in the new place is not much. She asked how I’d pay rent before the first

month’s pay came in, and what I’d do if the project ended after a year.” Torsa looked at the tea, then gave a small shrug. “She’s not wrong to ask. We sat at the table and worked it out. She wrote down rent, bus fare, food, everything. The total was still possible, but there wasn’t much left over.”

“Does she want you to take the local job?”

“She wants me close. She also wants me to be able to support myself. Those two things don’t always point in the same direction.” She folded the paper sleeve from her cup, then unfolded it. “I get annoyed when she asks me to check the numbers again. Then I check them again myself.”

I understood the urge to call a practical question a lack of faith. I had done it with people I loved, whenever they asked about the cost of a plan I had already decided was worth making. “What do you want to do?” I asked.

“I want to go. The work is what I’ve been trying to get closer to. I’m nervous about the room, the commute, all of it. But if I stay because leaving feels difficult, I’ll be angry with myself.” She glanced up at me. “I can miss home and still want to leave.”

“Then go,” I said.

She studied my face. “You say that easily.”

“I’m trying to mean it easily.”

She did not smile right away. She told me she had worried I would become quiet or resentful, that she would have to look after my feelings while she was making her own decision. I

wanted to protest that I would never ask her to do that. But the promise would have been too quick. I had done exactly that to someone before, even when I called it love. So I told her I understood why she was worried.

“I might still miss you,” I said. “I might be sad when you go. But those feelings don’t mean you should stay.”

She looked down at the tea. “That’s new.”

“For me, yes.”

We walked after we finished. At the crossing she told me she would be busy before the move and might not have time to meet much. I told her to take care of the things she needed to do. She laughed and said I sounded like a responsible uncle. I said I would rather be an uncle than an obstacle. She nudged my shoulder with hers.

We had not called the walk anything. I wanted to ask whether she saw it as a date, but I let the question pass. When we parted, I went back to work without reopening the conversation in my head to search for an answer she had not given.

The offer also made the app’s timeline feel real. Torsa had been one of the people who understood what I was trying to make. She would leave before the pilot could grow into anything stable. I thought about asking her to stay involved remotely, but stopped myself. She was moving for her own work. The project could not depend on keeping a person close to me.

That weekend I called Sreeja and the developer. We agreed on a smaller pilot with a fixed end date, clear consent, and no expectation that participants would keep using the tool. We would invite a dozen people who had already expressed interest, explain what data the app collected, and allow each person to leave at any time. The development work would take longer than I wanted. We would pay for the server from the business account and postpone the features that looked good in a launch announcement but did not answer a need.

Torsa read the invitation text before I sent it. She crossed out a sentence that said the app could help people build healthier habits. “That sounds like a guarantee,” she said. We replaced it with a plain description of what the prototype actually did. She added a line saying people could decline without explaining why.

“You don’t have to review everything,” I said.

“I know.” She handed the pages back. “I’m choosing to.”

I felt warmth at that, and also the urge to ask how long she would keep choosing it. I thanked her instead. When the pilot invitation went out the next morning, twelve people received it. Six replied. Four signed up. I sat at my desk looking at the numbers, trying to decide whether they meant the idea was weak or whether four people were enough to teach us something. For once, I did not make the number a judgment on me.

Chapter Forty-Three — Four Users

The second pilot began on a Monday. We met the four participants in a room behind the college library, with the windows open to the lane. A ceiling fan moved the warm air around without making it cooler. Sreeja explained the consent form; I explained what we wanted to learn. We did not ask anyone to share personal histories. Each participant could use fictional examples or skip any prompt.

One of them, a student named Oindrila, asked whether I had built the app because of a breakup. I had not expected the question. The others looked at me, waiting. I could have said it was based on broad research. That would have made the project sound cleaner, but less honest.

“Partly,” I said. “I had an experience that made me notice how people get stuck in thoughts and habits. But the app shouldn’t assume someone else’s problem is the same as mine.”

Oindrila nodded, though I could not tell whether she approved. “That’s better than saying you understand everyone.”

After that, we let them try the prototype. The first screen asked what they wanted help noticing: a habit, a recurring conflict, or a mood pattern. One participant said the choices were too narrow. Another wanted the option to write her own. A third closed the app when he saw the prompt about what happened before a difficult moment. He said he could not remember the

order of events when he was upset. We added a way to begin with what happened afterward and work backward only if the user wanted.

Oindrila spent several minutes on the page that asked what she could try next. She chose “wait ten minutes before replying” and then asked whether the app would tell her what to write. I said no. She said that was both a relief and a problem. In a conflict, she wanted someone to tell her what to do, but she knew that was not always what she needed.

“What would help instead?” Sreeja asked.

“Maybe a question that makes me slow down. Not a solution.”

We wrote that down. The four participants did not agree with one another. One wanted reminders; two did not. One wanted a daily prompt, another wanted to open the app only when she remembered. We asked what controls they would trust. The answers took us back to the settings page and its dull, easily missed toggle. By the end of the afternoon, our feature list had grown shorter and the prototype had grown more complicated in the places that mattered.

The developer turned the phone around so everyone could see the settings. “If reminders are off by default, people may never find the feature,” he said. He was not arguing for a notification at any cost. He had spent the previous week making the settings work, and he wanted the work to be useful.

The student who had asked for a daily prompt leaned forward. “I forget things unless my phone tells me. If I have to remember to open it, I won’t use it.”

Across from her, another participant kept her hands in her lap. “I share a room with my sister. My notifications show on the lock screen. Even if the message is vague, she’ll ask what it means.”

We looked at the screen again. The sample notification underneath the toggle read, *Take a moment for yourself today.* It had seemed gentle when we wrote it. In that room, it looked like a private question the app had decided to ask in public.

“What if it says nothing about the app?” I asked.

“Then I might not know why it appeared,” the first student said. “I still want to choose the time. And I want to stop it without having to explain why.”

The other participant considered this. “If I can switch previews off, I might use it. But I don’t want the app deciding I need a reminder because I missed a day.”

We tried to change the setting. The first tap turned reminders on; the second opened a schedule. To turn them off, the user had to go back one screen and find the same toggle. The participant who had worried about her sister tapped around twice, then handed the phone back. “I can’t tell if it’s off,” she said.

The developer leaned over and found the problem. The switch changed colour but did not change its label. “That’s fixable,” he said. He wrote it beside the other interface notes.

We asked the participants to try again without our help. The woman who wanted reminders chose three days a week and set the time for after dinner. The other left them off, then opened the app manually and completed the same reflection. Neither used it the way we had expected when we first designed the feature. That was useful. I had pictured a single person sitting alone with a phone, able to welcome or ignore a notification. The room reminded me that phones were carried into shared rooms, checked beside family members, and used at hours when someone might be looking over a shoulder.

On the whiteboard, Sreeja wrote two columns: *helps someone return* and *makes someone feel watched*. The reminder sat between them. We left the feature in the prototype for now, but agreed that it would remain off unless a user turned it on, with a separate control for previews and a plain way to stop reminders. The student who wanted them asked if she could change her mind later. The developer showed her where. She tried it herself, then nodded.

When we packed up, the phone went back into its case with a small crack still running across the corner. The settings page had taken longer to discuss than the main reflection. I had

assumed the central work was the question the app asked. That afternoon, I began to understand that the quiet around the question—the room, the screen, the person who might see it—could decide whether it was safe to answer at all.

After they left, Oindrila lingered by the door. She said the app might help her pause before sending messages to a friend she argued with often. Then she asked whether I had ever sent a message I regretted. I told her I had. She wanted to know if I had apologised. I said yes, though not immediately.

“Did the apology fix it?”

“No.” I thought about the hacked account, the private conversation I had tried to manage on Anurima’s behalf, and the way I had announced my secret intervention as if good intentions should excuse it. “It mattered, but it didn’t erase what I did.”

Oindrila nodded, as if she had expected that answer too. She thanked me for the session and left. I did not ask for details about her friend. I did not need to know the whole story to understand the question she had asked.

That night, I found the old note from Mathura among my papers. The sentence I had written there looked less like advice now and more like a problem I was still learning to solve. I could love someone and remain responsible for my own life. That did not mean I could avoid hurting people. It meant I had to answer for my choices

without turning guilt into another way to keep myself at the centre.

I opened the app’s copy document and removed a line that said, “You’re making progress.” We could not know that from one entry. In its place I wrote, “You came back to look. What do you notice now?” It was not as comforting. It left room for the user to decide whether anything had changed.

Chapter Forty-Four — The Wrong Kind of Pause

Oindrila came back two weeks later with a page of notes folded into quarters. She had used the prototype more than the other participants, though she said she had not written anything she would mind showing us. She set the paper on the table and told us she had found one prompt that bothered her.

The prompt asked whether she could wait before responding to a difficult message. We had meant it for moments when anger made a person want to send something they might regret. Oindrila said she had tried it after a relative sent her a series of messages late at night. The app suggested a pause. She had waited, then answered in the morning. The relative continued the same behaviour, and she felt the app had encouraged her to tolerate it.

“I know it can’t know the whole situation,” she said. “But the screen acts like it does.”

I looked at the wording. It said, “A pause can give you room to choose.” That sounded harmless when we wrote it. On the screen, it had the authority of an instruction. We had not asked what the pause was for or whether delaying a response was safe. We had turned a tool into advice.

Sreeja asked Oindrila what she would have wanted to see. Oindrila said she wanted the app to ask whether she felt safe, and whether the problem was a one-time argument or something

repeated. She did not want the app to decide what counted as abuse. She also did not want a long form that forced her to describe what happened.

“Would you want to tell us who sent the messages?” I asked.

“No. I don’t want the app to store their name.” She paused. “I’m not saying this person is dangerous. I’m saying I shouldn’t have to explain the whole thing just to use a prompt.”

I nodded. I had already started looking for a category that would sort her experience into something the app could respond to. She was telling me the category was not the point. What mattered was that the wording had made her feel there was one correct way to answer.

We invited Dr. Mukherjee, a counsellor who had agreed to advise us, to review the prompt. She joined by video that afternoon. The first thing she asked was whether Oindrila wanted to stay for the conversation. Oindrila said yes, then moved her chair farther from the laptop camera. Dr. Mukherjee did not ask for the identity of the relative or the exact messages. She asked what the prompt had assumed.

“That if I waited, I would be choosing calmly,” Oindrila said. “But maybe I was waiting because I was scared of making it worse. Those aren’t the same thing.”

Dr. Mukherjee nodded. She said no set of questions could reliably determine someone’s safety from a few taps. The app could offer a pause as one option, but it had to avoid framing

it as the right response. It should not ask the user to prove that a situation was serious before showing support options. She also told us to be careful not to imply that a person could prevent harm by communicating better.

The developer asked whether we could add a question that sorted a situation into “safe” and “unsafe.” Dr. Mukherjee said that might create false confidence. Someone could select the wrong answer, change their mind, or be using the app in a place where another person could see the screen. We would be better off letting a user skip the exercise and reach the support page immediately. If they wanted to reflect, we could ask what they needed right now without deciding for them.

I listened and thought of all the times I had believed a relationship could be repaired if I found the perfect words. Some conversations needed patience. Some needed distance. Sometimes the problem was not that I had failed to explain myself well enough. I had been slow to accept that distinction because the first possibility gave me a job to do.

We removed the prompt from the pilot and reviewed the rest of the language, looking for places where the app assumed every conflict was mutual or every habit could be interrupted with enough willpower. We made several exercises optional and put the support page within reach from every screen. Dr. Mukherjee marked two more sentences that sounded more certain than our evidence allowed. The pause

prompt became a plain choice to skip and open support. The change delayed the release, and we had to test every route through the screen to make sure no one was trapped in an exercise.

The developer was frustrated. He had rearranged other projects to help us, and every delay cost him time. At the next meeting, he brought a list of unfinished tasks and put it on the table between us. “I want this to be good,” he said, “but every time we find another issue, the release moves. I need to know there’s an end point.”

I offered to pay for another week. He asked whether the app had a clear end point or whether we would keep discovering new reasons not to launch.

I could not blame him for asking. “We’ll launch when the core functions are clear and the safety review is complete,” I said. “If the pilot tells us something important, we fix it. We don’t keep adding features.”

He nodded, not fully convinced. We wrote the criteria together: users could understand what the app did, control what it stored, delete their entries, and find outside support without having to complete an exercise first. We would not claim that the app treated anxiety, depression, or harmful relationships. We would describe it as a reflection tool and state its limits plainly.

Oindrila stayed for the rest of the review. Before leaving, she said she was glad we had listened, though she still did not plan to put her private messages in the app. I told her that

made sense. She folded her notes and put them in her bag.

After she left, I stood by the open window. The lane below was busy with schoolchildren and a vegetable seller calling out his prices. I thought about how quickly I had once decided I knew what another person needed. I had wanted to help Anurima by speaking in her name; later I had wanted to help Anwesha by solving every problem she brought me. I had treated closeness as permission to act. The app had made the same mistake in a smaller, tidier way.

I went back to the table and wrote a line on the top of our review sheet: *Offer choices. Do not turn them into instructions.* It was not a grand discovery. It was the kind of rule I wished I had known how to follow when the person in front of me was someone I loved.

Chapter Forty-Five — The Last Review

The final review took place in a rented room above a stationery shop. The owner had moved a stack of cartons so we could use the table. A ceiling fan clicked on every rotation, and the wall clock ran seven minutes fast. Sreeja laid out the revised screens; the developer opened the latest build on his phone; Dr. Mukherjee joined us by video from her office.

We went through the app one screen at a time. The first page explained that it was a reflection tool, not a treatment or a substitute for speaking with a professional. The next asked what a user wanted to notice and allowed them to skip the question. The private journal stored entries locally unless the user chose otherwise. We checked the delete button twice. We checked whether the support page could be reached without signing in. We checked the wording in the reminder settings, where a user could leave everything turned off.

The review was slow and not especially dramatic. I had expected the final test to feel like a door opening. Instead it felt like finding loose screws in a chair before asking anyone to sit down. Dr. Mukherjee caught a phrase that suggested the user might be able to prevent a conflict by changing their response. Sreeja found a label that sounded gentle to us but might feel childish to an adult. The developer

found a bug that left the screen blank when the network failed at the wrong moment.

We fixed what we could and wrote down the rest. The app would launch as a small public beta, not a finished solution. We would limit the number of people, keep the feedback channel open, and make it easy to stop using it. The launch page would say what the app did and what it did not do. There would be no claim that it could make a person stronger, repair a relationship, or replace professional care.

After Dr. Mukherjee logged off, the three of us stayed in the room. The developer checked the build once more. Sreeja stacked the printouts. I looked at the launch date on my calendar and felt the familiar urge to postpone until nothing could go wrong.

“If we wait until it’s perfect, we won’t learn anything,” Sreeja said.

“If we release something that hurts someone, we’ll learn too late.”

“That’s why the beta is small and the support page is visible. We can’t remove every risk. We can be honest about what we know and watch what happens.”

The developer said we should decide by Friday. His other work was waiting. I told him we would. That evening I went home and opened the launch page again. The first draft said, *A kinder way to change your life.* I deleted it. It promised too much and sounded as if the app knew the shape of someone else’s life. I replaced it with a plain description: a private

place to notice patterns and choose a next step, with no guarantee that the tool would be right for every person.

It looked less impressive. I kept it.

On Friday, we agreed to release the beta. I sent the link to the people who had asked to try it and posted it on the project page. For a few minutes nothing happened. I refreshed the dashboard more often than I needed to. One person created an account. Then another. The number remained small enough to fit on one hand.

I thought of the first time I had made a website for money, when I had counted each payment as evidence that I could build the life I wanted. This was different. The app’s first users were not proof of a future. They were people who had given us permission to learn from a tool we had made. I shut the dashboard and went to eat dinner.

The next morning, a message arrived from one of the beta users. She had tried the journaling page and found it useful, but she wanted to know whether her entries were backed up. I answered with the facts and a link to the privacy explanation. She replied that she would continue testing but would not write anything she needed to keep. I thanked her. The sentence did not sound like a product win. It sounded like a person making a reasonable decision about her own information.

I brought the question to our next check-in without her name or any detail from her entries.

The developer said we should make sure users understood what happened if they changed phones or deleted the app. Sreeja pointed out that an automatic backup would mean keeping another copy somewhere beyond the user’s control. Neither of them was wrong. A backup could prevent someone from losing notes; it could also create a copy the person had not expected us to hold.

We read the storage explanation as if we had never seen it. The words were accurate, but the backup choice sat several taps away from the journal. I asked the developer whether we could bring the setting into the first explanation without making it sound like the app recommended either choice. He moved it onto the opening privacy screen. We added a sentence that said where the entries stayed and that a person could keep using the app without writing anything they could not afford to lose.

The change was small, but it gave the user’s question a place in the product. We did not decide how much information someone ought to save. We made the choice easier to see before they had to make it.

There were also bugs. The font resized badly on an older phone. A page took too long to load over a weak connection. One user could not find the option to delete an account. We fixed those first. My business clients waited an extra day for a few routine changes, and I had to tell them why. One was understanding; another was not. I

gave him a new delivery date and accepted that he might not ask me for the next project.

That week, I did not work through every night. I still felt the pull to prove that I could do more than anyone expected. But I began to see that a project built to help people slow down could not be sustained by a maker who never stopped. I set a time to close the laptop. I missed it twice, then began again.

Chapter Forty-Six — The Empty Seat

Torsa told me she was leaving on a Saturday. The day before she went, we met outside the university gate. She had finished returning borrowed books and was carrying a cloth bag that looked heavier than it should have. I offered to take it. She said it held only notebooks, then handed it to me anyway while she tied her hair back.

We walked to the tea stall near the bus stop. She ordered tea and a plate of biscuits; I paid before she could reach her purse, and she made me promise not to turn it into a habit. We talked about the new room she would rent, the bus route to the research centre, and whether her mother’s food would last the week. She seemed excited, but every few minutes she checked a list on her phone.

“You’ll be busy,” I said.

“I hope so. That’s why I’m going.”

I wanted to ask if she would miss the college, or me. The question would have turned her departure into a measure of our friendship. I asked instead what she wanted to study first. She told me about a project involving food habits and public health, then described the part she was most nervous about: speaking in front of senior researchers. I told her she would find a way. She said she hoped so, and that she did not want to become one of those people who left home and kept apologising for it.

When we stood to leave, she put a hand on my arm. “You can message me about the app, but don’t make yourself wait for my reply. I’ll be settling in.”

“I won’t.”

She gave me a look, amused but unconvinced. “You say that now.” I smiled. She was right to remind me; I had once treated delayed replies as a verdict. We walked to the bus stop and waited without trying to stretch the goodbye into a promise.

The next morning, she sent a photograph of two suitcases and a stack of books by her front door. Her mother had packed enough food for a week, she wrote, and she was trying to convince her family she could buy vegetables in the new city.

I replied that the vegetables there would probably be different and she should prepare accordingly. She sent back a voice note laughing at me. Then she said goodbye to the department group and left the chat. I listened to the note once more, then put the phone away. By evening, newer messages had pushed it down the screen.

At the college, the chair she used to take was occupied by someone else. I stood in the doorway long enough for a student to ask whether I was looking for a seat. I said no and went to the library. There, I opened the app’s feedback sheet and found an entry from Torsa’s last review. She had written that the opening page should let users choose what they wanted

from the session: to name a feeling, make a plan, or simply read. I had already made the change. Seeing her note among the others felt less like losing her than finding evidence that we had worked together.

For the first few days I wanted to message her about every small thing. I held back, then worried that holding back was another kind of performance. Eventually I sent her a photo of the prototype on an older phone, where the font had finally stopped jumping. She replied the next day with a thumbs-up and asked how the beta was going. We spoke for a few minutes about the work, then she said she had to unpack.

The conversation was warm and short. Afterward I looked at the screen, waiting for disappointment to tell me what it meant. It came, but it did not become a reason to send another message. I understood that she had a new life to arrange, and that our connection could matter without becoming the centre of it.

The beta grew slowly. A local study group shared the link. One person asked whether the app worked in Bengali. I had not planned a translation so early, but the question made me realise how narrow the language choices were. The first version was written in English because that was the language I had used for business. I asked two friends to help translate the prompts into Bengali, then had them reviewed by people who would actually use them. Some phrases

that sounded natural to me felt formal or clinical to them. We changed them.

A few weeks later, the app’s first public feedback session took place in the back room of a community centre. We had advertised it as a chance to test the tool, not as a support meeting. Six people arrived. One came with a notebook full of suggestions. Another sat quietly until the others had spoken, then asked whether the app would ever include a way to contact someone they trusted. We said we were considering a page where users could save their own support contacts, but that we would not message those people on their behalf.

A man near the window asked if the app could tell him whether his relationship was bad for him. I started to answer, then stopped. The question sounded like a request for certainty. I told him the app could help him record what was happening and reflect on what he wanted, but it could not decide his relationship for him. If he felt unsafe, he should reach out to someone trained or someone he trusted. He nodded and said he had hoped the app would make the choice easier.

“I understand,” I said. I did not tell him what to choose.

After the session, the room had to be cleared for a children’s art class. We folded the chairs and moved them against the wall. Someone had left a drawing of a blue river on the table, with a boat too large for the water. A child came back for it and said it was supposed to be a boat that

carried a whole family. I held the door while he ran outside with the paper.

Chapter Forty-Seven — In Another Language

The Bengali version took longer than the English one. My first translation used words that were correct and still felt wrong. It sounded like a form designed by an office, not a question spoken by someone who wanted to help. My friend Chaitali read each screen aloud and crossed out the phrases she would never use with another person. She worked through the pages at my desk, reading each line once in English, then again in Bengali. When a sentence sounded too polished, she asked me to imagine saying it to a cousin who had just admitted she was struggling. I could not. I had written the copy as if people came to the app ready to explain themselves clearly.

“You’ve translated the words,” she said, “but not the way someone would say them when they’re embarrassed.”

She showed me how the word we had chosen for “habit” could sound like a harmless routine in one sentence and a moral accusation in another. We tried alternatives aloud. One was too clinical; another sounded as if the app were scolding the user. We settled on a phrase that asked what a person wanted to change rather than naming what was wrong with them. Chaitali read it twice. The first version sounded like a form. The second, after she changed the order of the words, sounded like something a friend might ask without demanding an answer.

At our next meeting, she asked whether we could test the language with people who had never seen the English prototype. I had assumed translation review meant checking for mistakes. She reminded me that the people using it should decide whether the words sounded like they belonged to them.

We arranged a small session at the community centre. The room smelled of chalk and wet umbrellas. Four people read the prompts in Bengali and marked the places where they hesitated. I sat near the door with my notebook closed, trying not to rush in whenever someone stopped. Chaitali read the instructions aloud when asked, but she did not explain what we had meant. One participant said hearing them helped and asked whether the app could offer an audio option. We added that to the list for later testing.

A woman crossed out our word for “habit” so firmly that the pencil tore the paper. “When I read this, I think the app has already decided I’m doing something wrong,” she said. She gave an example: sometimes she let calls from her relatives ring out because she needed a little time before speaking to them. Some days she wanted to change that; on others she had a reason to wait. She did not want the app to turn either choice into a defect.

Chaitali asked what words she would use for the pattern. The woman wrote a phrase in the margin, then read it aloud. It was less tidy than our label and more precise about what she

meant. We tried it in the prompt. She read the new version and left the answer blank.

“Can I leave it like that?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said.

She nodded and set the phone down. Across the table, a man said our word for “support” sounded like official assistance, something a person applied for and might be refused. He would rather see a question about who he could speak with, even if he chose no one. We changed both prompts before the session ended.

A college student named Tuli moved between Bengali and English as she read. When we asked which version was clearer, she shrugged. “Depends what I’m trying to say.” She asked if the app could let her write in Bengali, switch to English for a sentence, then return to Bengali. She did that with her friends; the words came in whichever language carried them best.

The developer said storing entries in two languages would complicate the build. He had already rearranged other work for us, and I could see him calculating the extra time. I asked whether the user should have to choose one language for an experience that changed from moment to moment.

He rubbed his forehead. “It will take more time.”

“I know.”

We did not promise the feature for the next release. We put it on the work list and agreed to test a simpler version. Tuli seemed disappointed, but she said she understood. She

had not come to approve our schedule. She had come to tell us what would make the tool fit her life.

The session also brought the sharpest criticism we had received. One participant said the app made every problem look like something the user could solve by noticing it better. “Sometimes you know exactly what is happening,” he said. “You still can’t change it.”

No one argued. I felt a familiar urge to defend the tool by explaining that it was not meant to solve everything. But intention did not alter what the screen implied. We had put all the actions on the user’s side: notice, write, choose, try. The app could not change a family, a workplace, a partner, or the cost of getting help.

We revised the language so a person could name what was outside their control. We added an option to record what support they wanted from someone else, without composing a message or promising that the person would respond. It was a small adjustment, and it did not solve the larger problem. It did make the app less likely to tell someone that every difficulty was theirs to fix.

That night I sat at the desk where I had first written the idea. I thought about the years I had spent trying to earn security through money, work, and constant availability. When those efforts failed, I had concluded that I was not enough. I had treated a complicated relationship as a task I could complete if I found the correct

method. The app had nearly turned that same belief into a feature.

I wrote a note to myself: *A tool should help someone see choices. It cannot make the world fair, and it cannot make another person choose well.* Before closing the document, I returned to the Bengali draft and read the changed prompt aloud. It still sounded formal. I cut the opening phrase and sent Chaitali the new version to test.

Chapter Forty-Eight — The Invitation

By then the business had recovered from the weeks I had spent on the pilot. A client in Singapore referred me to a small agency that wanted a series of sites. The work was steady, the terms were clear, and for the first time I was negotiating from a position where I could walk away. I hired a local developer for part of the build and paid him before I paid myself. The arrangement did not make me a new person, but it showed me how far I had moved from the student who believed money was a locked room other people had entered first.

At the university, a researcher named Poulomi started talking to me after a seminar. She had been at the community-centre session and wanted to know whether the app would include a way to track sleep. We talked about it while students packed their bags. She told me she was studying nutrition and public health, and that she had helped her cousin keep a food diary for a month. She was direct, quick to laugh, and serious when she disagreed.

A few days later, she asked if I wanted to get tea after class. I opened the message, typed *Is this a date?*, then deleted it. The question would have made her answer something she had not asked. I wrote that I would like to go, and decided I would be clear if the question of dating came up.

“I’d like to,” I said, “but I want to be honest. I’m not ready to start dating anyone. I’m still working out what I can offer.”

Poulomi studied me, then nodded. “I asked you for tea. I didn’t bring a wedding form.”

I laughed, and she did too. She said she was happy to have tea as colleagues. We went to the stall near the bus stop. She ordered less sugar than I did and told me my version tasted like syrup. We spoke about the pilot, then about her cousin, who had tried to change his diet by following rules that made him feel ashamed whenever he slipped. She said the diary helped only when it was used to notice patterns, not judge them.

I told her that sounded familiar. She asked if I meant the app or myself. I said both.

“If you add sleep, are you going to make people fill it in every night?” she asked.

“That was one idea. A reminder, maybe. A few questions in the morning.”

“Then the first thing they see is that they missed something.” She stirred her tea. “People already feel guilty when they don’t sleep. A reminder could make the app another person checking on them.”

I started to defend the feature, then heard how quickly I was doing it. “We could make it optional.”

“Optional in the settings, or optional when it appears?”

I had no answer ready. I looked at the prototype on my phone. We had worked hard to

make the prompts skippable, but the project dashboard also showed us when people opened a screen or finished an exercise. I believed it only gave us general numbers. I had not checked every event or asked whether the explanation on the app matched what the service recorded.

“I think we only see broad usage,” I said. “I should verify that before I tell you.”

Poulomi nodded. “Good. I’d rather hear that than a confident guess.”

I wrote myself a note to check the dashboard. We returned to talking about the cousin’s diary, and the question seemed settled. Later, I would remember it as the first time someone had asked me what the app knew about its users and waited for me to be sure.

When we parted, we did not make plans for another meeting. A week later we crossed paths and spoke again. Sometimes she sent me a paper or a link relevant to the project. Sometimes I replied late because I was working. She did not turn that into a test, and I did not take her kindness as a promise. It was pleasant and uncertain, which was enough for the time being.

The next time we met, the cafeteria had run out of the vegetable cutlets Poulomi wanted. She looked at the empty tray, then at the steel tiffin in my bag.

“Did you bring lunch?” she asked.

“Rice and egg curry.”

“You cook?”

“I like cooking. I’m better at that than chopping.”

She sat across from me with a cup of tea and told me she had once tried to make dal without calling her mother every few minutes. The first attempt had come out too thick; the second had boiled over. She had eaten both anyway. I told her I used to pack lunch for someone I loved. I had not meant to say it so plainly, and for a moment I watched her face for pity.

She only asked, “What did you make?”

“Biryani, mostly. Fried rice. Sometimes chilli chicken.”

“That sounds ambitious for someone who doesn’t like chopping.”

“I had help.”

She smiled and asked if I still cooked. I said I did, though less often. The tiffin was still closed between us. I opened it and offered her some. She took a small portion, tasted it, and said the curry needed more salt. I tasted it too. She was right. We found a salt packet near the tea counter and passed it back and forth until the food was good enough to finish.

We talked about the seminar after that. She did not ask who I had cooked for or what had happened. I was grateful, though I did not say so. When we left, she carried the empty cup to the counter and I carried the tiffin home. The afternoon had been ordinary. I noticed that I was glad it had happened.

One evening, after she had gone, I realised I had not spent the walk home wondering if she

liked me. I had wondered whether the app should include a way to pause data collection. That was not a triumph over heartbreak. It was only evidence that my attention could belong to more than one thing.

I still had difficult days. A song would begin in a shop and carry me back to a bus ride with Anwesha. A client would ask for a quick call, and I would hear the old panic that someone was about to withdraw affection unless I made myself useful. But the memories no longer owned the entire day. I could miss the person I had loved and still finish the work in front of me. I could wish I had acted differently in some moments without believing that every future relationship was already doomed.

The app’s next version went out with the revised Bengali prompts, clearer privacy controls, and a shorter list of exercises. We added a note that users could stop at any point. The download count was modest. The feedback was mixed. One person said the new wording felt easier; another wanted more structure. We kept both comments in the review notes for the next version.

Chapter Forty-Nine — The Screenshot

The post appeared on a Friday afternoon. Someone had shared a screenshot of the app’s reminder screen in a student group, with a caption asking why a mental-health tool needed to know when a person was online. The screenshot showed no private entry, but the question was fair. We had removed automatic reminders from the pilot, yet the option remained in the older build that some testers still had installed.

The old screen offered a scheduled prompt and showed the word “activity.” It did not track whether someone was online; it asked whether the person wanted the app to send a reminder at a time they chose. I knew that because I had built it. But the screen did not make the distinction clear, and the reminder itself was not necessary to the app’s purpose. We had made a feature before asking whether it was necessary.

I saw the post while I was on a client call. The client was asking whether a set of photographs would crop properly on a phone. I answered, promised to send a preview, and kept one eye on the group notifications appearing on my screen. When we ended the call, I opened the app dashboard. The older build had been downloaded by more people than I remembered. Some had not opened it for weeks. I had treated the update notice as enough; now I could see that a person who had installed the app once

might still be looking at an outdated permission screen.

I enlarged the screenshot and read every label. At first I wanted to correct the caption: the app was not watching when anyone came online. Then I looked at the screen as if I had never seen it. The wording was vague enough to invite that fear. Even if the person had misunderstood the technical detail, we had designed a page that left them to guess. I closed the draft reply. Before explaining anything, I needed to confirm what the app actually did.

I called the developer and asked him to remove the setting from the server side as well as the new build. He said the prompt was scheduled locally on the phone, so there was no server switch that would reach every old install. We could disable it in the new version within the hour, but the update might take longer to reach every phone. We agreed to put a notice on the opening page and send a message to beta users explaining that the reminder was not tracking online status, that it had been removed, and how they could delete their account. The notice would not ask them to trust us. It would say what we had done.

Sreeja wanted us to contact the person who posted the screenshot. I hesitated, worried that it would look like we were trying to persuade them to remove the post. She suggested a public reply instead, with no request attached. We wrote: the reminder setting was not necessary to the app’s purpose; it had been removed; the

earlier version may still show it until updated; anyone could turn off notifications or delete their data. We added that the concern had led us to review the app’s permissions again.

The person replied that they had not meant to accuse us of selling information. They simply did not understand why we needed the setting. I thanked them for raising it. They did not delete the screenshot, and I did not ask them to.

That evening, the developer showed me that a hidden analytics tool had been recording basic usage events. It was a standard feature in the service we used, enabled by default. It did not collect journal entries, but we had not made the tracking clear in our plain-language explanation. The setting had been there from the beginning, buried in the project dashboard. I felt my face grow hot as I read the list of events: page opened, exercise viewed, session ended.

We turned it off. Then we sent a second note to the beta users, explaining what had been collected and what had not. I made the mistake of writing “no sensitive information was stored” before checking the technical details. The developer told me one event label might be considered sensitive because it showed which exercise a user opened. I deleted the sentence and started again.

By midnight we had updated the notice and added a way for users to request deletion of their account and associated records. The work delayed the next client delivery. I emailed the client before he asked. He replied that he

appreciated the warning but still expected us to meet the new date. I accepted. The app had created a responsibility I could not put down just because it was inconvenient.

In the morning, I called Dr. Mukherjee. She reminded me that we should avoid making statements about data practices unless we had verified them, and suggested an independent review before we invited more users. The review would cost money and time. I looked at the spreadsheet where I tracked business expenses and moved the launch promotion budget into the review line.

For a moment, the old fear returned: if this failed, all the work would be wasted. I remembered the years I had spent believing the same about a relationship—that if it ended, the care I had given must have been foolish. I had been wrong then. Time spent on something did not guarantee that it would succeed, but failure did not retroactively make every choice meaningless.

I told the team we were pausing new sign-ups until the review was complete. The decision made the app’s progress graph flatten. It also gave us a chance to find out what the prototype actually did, rather than what we hoped it did. I put the pause notice on the landing page and went outside to buy vegetables before the market closed.

On the way back, I passed a group of boys playing cricket in the lane. Their ball struck a parked scooter and bounced into the drain. They

argued over who had to retrieve it, then one of them rolled up his trousers and reached in. He came up with the ball and a sleeve full of dirty water. The others laughed. He laughed too, though he smelled terrible. I went home carrying the vegetables, still hearing their laughter behind me.

Chapter Fifty — The Review

The reviewer was a security consultant named Kunal, recommended by one of my business clients. He did not care that the app had a thoughtful purpose. He cared where the information went, how long it stayed there, and whether a tired person could understand the answer. I showed him the flow and the storage settings. He asked me to open the database.

He did not let me guide him through the clean path. He asked me to install the old build, create an account, write a test entry, delete it, and then show him what remained. When I reached for the mouse, he asked me to explain each step before I clicked. I found myself talking too quickly. He stopped me and asked what the user would see, not what I knew the system was doing.

“Those are different questions,” he said.

I wrote the sentence in my notebook. He moved between the app, the service dashboard, and the privacy page, comparing what each one said. The gap between them was not dramatic. It was a line about crash reports, a vague sentence about backups, a switch buried in settings. The smallness made it harder to defend. We had not set out to mislead anyone. We had still written more certainty than our system could support.

I had expected a list of technical corrections. Instead he found two problems that were simple to fix and one decision we had not made. The analytics events were gone, but a

crash-reporting service still received device information when the app failed. It did not receive journal text, yet our notice did not mention it. We could disable the service, or rewrite the notice and ask users to accept the data collection. The safer choice was to disable it until we could explain exactly what we needed and why.

The second issue was the account system. Users could delete their entries, but the request did not remove every trace immediately. A backup could retain deleted records for a short period. The words on our deletion page promised more than the system did. Kunal said that was common in small products, but common was not the same as clear. He drew a line on a notepad and marked the moment a user pressed delete, the time the main record disappeared, and the later point when the backup rotated out. Our help page had compressed that whole line into two words: “deleted immediately.”

I looked at the phrase and felt my ears burn. We had wanted the instruction to be reassuring. Instead, it was wrong. Kunal did not tell me what to write. He asked me to describe the actual process in one sentence a person could repeat back. I tried twice before I stopped hiding behind technical words.

I called the developer and asked how long a full deletion flow would take. He said several days if we did it carefully, longer if the tests found something else. I looked at the launch

calendar, which had already been pushed twice. The public beta was paused, and a few people had asked when it would reopen. My first instinct was to choose the fastest version and write a longer explanation. Then I remembered Oindrila’s question about a tool that sounded certain while not knowing the whole situation.

“We fix it before reopening,” I said.

The developer was quiet. “That’s another week, at least.”

“Then it’s another week.”

We spent the next days rebuilding the deletion flow and testing it with empty accounts first, then with entries we had created for the purpose. The work was repetitive. Each time we deleted an account, we checked the main record, the backup schedule, and the confirmation message. The developer kept a list of steps; I read the updated copy aloud to see where it became unclear.

We documented what happened to backups and changed the page so it described the delay rather than hiding it behind a general phrase. The app would not keep data forever, but deletion was not instant. We explained that plainly. It took more words than the promise we had removed.

When the review ended, Kunal sent a short report with three items marked complete and one recommendation for continued monitoring. He did not certify the app as safe. He said the specific issues he had reviewed were addressed and listed what the review had not covered. I

appreciated the limits of that statement more than I would have a broad approval.

We met as a team on a Thursday evening. The developer read the report and asked if we were ready to reopen sign-ups. Sreeja asked whether the updated deletion page had been tested by someone who had not worked on the app. I said no. She suggested we find two people and watch them try it without explaining where the button was.

The developer leaned back. “We can keep finding one more review forever.”

He was right about the danger of endless caution. I had already used delay to avoid difficult choices in other parts of my life. Waiting did not automatically make me responsible. We agreed on a boundary: two outside users would test the deletion flow the next day. If they could complete it and repeat back what would happen to their records, we would reopen the beta. If not, we would revise the page once and test again.

The next day, both testers found the button. One misunderstood the backup period, so we changed the explanation to use a simple timeline. The other asked whether deleting the app from her phone would also delete her account. It would not. We had written that distinction in the help page, but it belonged beside the account option itself. We added it there.

On Monday morning, we reopened sign-ups with a short notice about the changes. I did not

post a polished announcement. I explained that we had paused the beta after a user raised a question about data, that we had found settings we had not explained well, and that we had changed them. I included the deletion instructions. The post was less confident than the launch copy I had first imagined. It was also the first one I was not embarrassed to stand behind.

A few people returned. Others did not. The numbers remained small. I stopped refreshing the page every hour and set a time each evening to review feedback. When someone wrote that they had decided not to use the app, I did not ask them to reconsider. Their decision was part of the answer we had asked them to give.

Chapter Fifty-One — One More Conversation

Poulomi and I met again at the tea stall, this time because she wanted to discuss the Bengali prompts. She had been collecting feedback from a few students who used different words at home and in class. One prompt sounded too formal to one of them and too familiar to another. We argued over whether the app should offer alternate versions or let people change the wording themselves.

“You’re trying to make one sentence comfortable for everyone,” Poulomi said. “That’s impossible.”

“I know. But if it sounds wrong to half the people—”

“Then let them tell you it sounds wrong. Don’t pretend you can predict all of them.”

I laughed. “You make it sound very easy.”

“It’s not easy. It’s just not your job to be everyone’s voice.”

The sentence followed me home. I had built the first version from the belief that I could turn what hurt me into something useful for other people. There was truth in that, but also a temptation: if I could help enough strangers, perhaps my own past would become clean. It would not. I could make a tool, listen carefully, and still remain the person who had once crossed a boundary because I thought I knew best.

A few days later, Poulomi asked if I wanted to have dinner with her and two friends. I paused. For months, I had treated every invitation from a woman as if I had to decide whether it was the beginning of a relationship. I asked whether it was a group dinner. She said yes, and added that if I wanted to bring a friend, I could.

I went. The restaurant was loud and the chairs were too close together. One of her friends talked about a job interview; the other complained that the menu had become more expensive since the previous month. The waiter had to ask us twice to move our bags so he could squeeze between the tables. Poulomi read the menu aloud in a dramatic voice, making each dish sound like a legal charge. Her friends told her to stop; she continued until the waiter came back and asked if she had decided.

“Not yet,” she said. “I’m still considering the evidence.”

We ordered more than we meant to: a plate to share, then another because the first one was smaller than the picture. The food arrived unevenly, some pieces crisp and some soft, and the table began passing plates before anyone had agreed who wanted what. I caught myself trying to make sure everyone else had eaten before I took the last piece. Poulomi noticed and pushed the plate toward me.

“Take it. Nobody is going to judge you for eating dinner.”

“I wasn’t waiting for permission.”

“I didn’t say you were.” She grinned. “I said the food is getting cold.”

I took it. Her friends moved on to the job interview and the strange question one of them had been asked. Poulomi asked what I would have answered. I gave the first response that came to mind, and they laughed—not at me, but because it was absurdly earnest. I laughed too. The old instinct to explain that I had meant it as a joke never quite arrived.

Poulomi asked me about the app, then changed the subject when I had answered. We discussed a film none of us had seen and argued about whether a song sounded better on the radio or through headphones.

At the end of the evening, she and I walked toward the main road together. She said she had enjoyed the dinner. I said I had too. We stood by the crossing until her ride arrived. She did not ask what I felt about her, and I did not ask what the evening meant. I went home without trying to convert a pleasant night into a promise.

That did not mean I was ready to fall in love again. I was not. The old suspicion still rose when someone was kind to me. Sometimes I mistook a boundary for rejection and silence for a threat. But I was learning to name those reactions as mine instead of making another person responsible for them. That small distinction changed the way I spoke.

The app reopened in the middle of that month. The first week brought fewer new users than we had hoped, but more detailed feedback.

Someone asked for a way to export their notes. Someone else said they preferred not to store anything at all. We added an option to use the reflection prompts without creating an account, and scheduled a test before promising the export feature.

My business kept moving too. I hired another part-time developer and stopped taking calls after midnight unless a site was actually down. I still wanted to give the app every spare hour. I wanted it to matter. But I began to understand that being useful did not require making myself indispensable.

On a Sunday, I went to the river outside town. The bank was muddy from recent rain. Plastic caught in the reeds; a boy in a school shirt was trying to float a leaf boat while his grandmother called him back from the edge. I sat on a stone and watched the current divide around a post, then join again downstream.

When the light began to fade, the boy’s leaf boat caught against the reeds. He waded one step into the shallow edge, reached for it, and ran back when his grandmother called again. The boat drifted free after he left. I watched it move a little farther, then turned toward home.

Chapter Fifty-Two — What It Could Hold

A month after reopening the beta, we held a small demonstration at the community centre. The room had a whiteboard with a faint blue stain that no one could erase. Sreeja arranged chairs in a half-circle; the developer checked the projector; I put a bowl of sweets near the entrance because my mother had insisted that people should not leave without eating something.

I explained the app in five minutes. I showed the reflection page, the privacy controls, and the support options. I said it was not therapy, did not diagnose anyone, and could not tell a person what to do about a relationship. The words felt heavy, but I wanted them heard before anyone tried the tool.

Then I asked the group to open the public version on their phones. A few people had already downloaded it; others used the demonstration link without creating an account. The room filled with the soft sounds of taps and chairs moving across the floor. I walked between them, trying not to lean over anyone’s shoulder. A man near the window asked where his notes went if he closed the page. A woman wanted to know whether the support options could send a message to someone she chose. I told her the app did not contact anyone. She asked whether she could save a number herself.

I said we were testing that, but the current version did not store contacts.

She nodded and returned to the screen. “Good,” she said. “I’d rather choose when to call.”

The developer wrote something on his copy of the feature list. I added the same sentence to my notebook, not as a guarantee but as a reminder of the choice the user had asked for.

A man near the door asked what made the app different from writing in a notebook. I said a notebook could do much of the same work, and that the app’s value would depend on whether the structure made reflection easier for someone. I did not claim that everyone needed it. He seemed surprised by the answer, then nodded.

“Then why build it?” he asked.

I looked at the screen projected on the wall. It showed the prompt we had spent weeks rewriting. “Because some people prefer a structure, or need a private place to begin. It might be useful to them. But it should not make the notebook seem inadequate.”

A woman in the front row said she used voice notes because she found writing difficult after work. Another participant said he would never speak into his phone at home because someone might hear. The answers did not settle what the app should become. They showed how quickly a feature that seemed convenient from my desk could become awkward in someone else’s house.

After the demonstration, a woman approached me. She had used the beta for several weeks and had asked to speak privately. She told me the app had helped her notice that she felt anxious after certain conversations with a relative. She had not entered the details, and she did not want to. The prompts had helped her prepare for a meeting with a counsellor at a local service.

“Did it solve the problem?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “It helped me explain what I wanted to talk about. The counsellor helped me with the rest.”

I thanked her. She said she did not want her experience used in a public story or advertisement. I told her we would not use it. She asked if the app would remain free. I said the beta was free, but I could not promise what the eventual business model would be. She said that was fair and left with a sweet in her hand.

I went to the back of the room and sat beside Sreeja. I had wanted an account like that—not because I wanted to claim the app had saved someone, but because it meant the work could be a small bridge to help beyond itself. Still, I had to resist the urge to turn her experience into proof. She had chosen what to share and what to keep private. That was enough.

The next morning, a company that funded student projects contacted us. They liked the app’s potential and offered to discuss a grant. The email praised its ability to “transform emotional wellness at scale.” I read the phrase

several times. The money would let us hire a counsellor to review future content and build the language options people had asked for. It would also bring expectations: rapid growth, retention targets, a stronger claim about outcomes.

I replied that I was willing to meet, but we would not describe the app as a treatment or use personal stories without explicit permission. At the meeting, the program manager was polite. She asked whether we could say the app improved well-being if users reported feeling better after a month. I said we could measure what people reported, but that would not prove the app caused the change. She said the wording could be adjusted.

Then she asked if we would share anonymised usage data to help their research. I asked what “anonymised” meant in their proposal and how they planned to protect the data. She said their research team would explain later. I told her I could not agree to it until I understood the details. She made a note and moved to the next topic.

The offer was not rejected. It was not accepted either. I left with a packet of forms and a deadline. On the ride home, I thought of the old version of myself who had measured love by what he could provide. Money had once seemed like the answer to every insecurity. Now funding looked like another invitation to trade a piece of the project for a promise of safety.

At home, I spread the forms over the desk. My mother brought tea and asked if the meeting had gone well. I told her we might get support if we agreed to share some information and make stronger claims. She asked what I thought.

“I don’t know yet.”

“Then read it properly before you decide.”

The advice was so ordinary that I laughed. She looked at me, then smiled too. I called Sreeja and the developer. We read through the proposal together and listed every question we needed answered. We would ask whether the grant could support the project without access to individual usage data and whether they would accept cautious language. If not, we would find another route, even if it meant slower development.

A year earlier, I might have made the decision alone and called it sacrifice for our future. This time I brought the people who would bear the consequences into the conversation. We did not reach an answer that night. We did reach a way to decide together.

Chapter Fifty-Three — Terms

We sent the fund a list of questions instead of a yes or no. The program manager replied two days later and offered another meeting. Their research team could work with aggregate information and a voluntary survey, she said, but they needed evidence that users returned to the app. They also wanted us to describe the project as supporting emotional well-being. She was willing to review our wording, though she could not promise the phrase we preferred would satisfy the committee.

We met again with Dr. Mukherjee on the call. She said “supporting emotional well-being” was broad enough to mean almost anything, which was exactly the problem. The app supported reflection. It might help some people notice patterns or prepare for a conversation. We had no evidence that it improved anyone’s well-being as an outcome.

The program manager listened. She said the committee wanted a project with measurable results. We could propose a short study of usability and trust, she said, rather than outcomes. The grant could pay for the independent review and the language work. In exchange, we would provide anonymous aggregate counts and a report of what users told us they understood. No journal entries, no personal histories, no individual usage records.

“What would count as aggregate?” I asked.

She said the number of people who opened the app, the number who completed a reflection, and the number who returned during the pilot. No names, no text, no device-level trail. I asked whether a small group could still be identified from a count. She said the study team could suppress results when the group was too small, but she would have to confirm the threshold with their research lead.

Dr. Mukherjee asked who would write the survey and how people would be told about it. The program manager said we could design it together, but participation would be voluntary and separate from using the app. If someone declined the survey, they could still use the tool. We wrote that down. The conversation kept moving between the amount of money and the meaning of the words attached to it. Every time the fund offered a broader claim, we asked what evidence it would require.

The program manager was not trying to pressure us. She had reporting requirements of her own and needed to show the committee what its money had supported. She said she could not guarantee approval if we refused all usage information. I understood the position. I also understood that a good purpose could make it easier to stop asking hard questions.

We asked for the agreement in writing. It arrived the next morning. The data section still used a phrase that could be read two ways. Our lawyer friend marked it and suggested a small change. We sent the sentence back with a

question about whether the fund would receive only totals, never individual records. The program manager checked with the research lead and confirmed the distinction in writing.

The fund accepted the revision. A week later the grant was approved, smaller than the amount we had first discussed but enough to cover the review, translations, and a few months of development. It would not pay for a large team or rapid growth. It would let us do the next stage without asking users to provide more than we needed.

The approval email came while I was on a call with an overseas client. I read it after the meeting ended. My first instinct was to share the news with Anwesha. For a second, I could almost see the message opening: the words I would use, the question she might ask. Then I remembered how long it had been since she was the person I told first. I set the phone down and called my mother instead.

She was pleased, but asked whether the money would have to be repaid. I explained the grant. She asked whether the team had agreed on the terms. I said we had. She told me to eat before I went back to work. The ordinary questions made the news feel real.

At the team meeting, we divided the work. Sreeja would lead the language review. The developer would rebuild the data controls and prepare the next version. I would coordinate the study and keep enough client work to cover my part of the business. Dr. Mukherjee would

review the new prompts and help us find a qualified person to advise on support information in both languages.

We also agreed on what would not be measured. We would not call a user’s return to the app a sign of recovery. We would not treat a completed prompt as proof that someone had changed. The report would ask whether people understood the tool, trusted the controls, and knew where to go for help beyond it. The questions were narrower than the committee’s first draft. They were also questions we could answer without pretending to know what had happened in a person’s life.

We wrote the plan on the whiteboard. There were dates, names, and tasks. No one wrote “change people’s lives.” The project looked smaller than the dream I had first carried into it. It also looked possible.

That evening, I walked to the river with the folded grant letter in my pocket. The current was high after two days of rain. Plastic and leaves caught at the reeds. The water did not look serene. It looked busy carrying whatever the bank gave it. I sat on a low wall and read the approval again, though I already knew the important lines.

I had spent years wanting enough money to make the future certain. The grant did not do that. It bought time for a project with a clear limit and a chance to learn. I felt proud of it, then afraid of losing it, then proud again. None of those feelings cancelled the others.

On my way back, I called Sreeja to confirm the first work session. We talked about the language review and whether we needed another meeting room. The conversation was about practical things. When we hung up, I noticed that I had not asked the river to make the decision feel sacred. It had already been made by people sitting around a table, reading the terms and asking what we could honestly promise.

Chapter Fifty-Four — The Words We Kept

The next language review began with a disagreement over one sentence. The English version said: “What would help you feel safer right now?” In Bengali, the first draft sounded formal and distant. The second sounded too intimate, as if the app were a friend speaking from inside the user’s phone. The third used a word that implied the person was currently in danger, even when the prompt appeared during an ordinary disagreement.

We tried versions aloud. Chaitali said one felt like a school counsellor; Tuli said another sounded like a relative asking too many questions. Dr. Mukherjee pointed out that none of the versions should appear without context. The question could be useful, but only if the user understood why it was being asked and could skip it without consequence.

At the next test, we gave the sentence to two people who had not seen it before. One read it silently, then said she would expect the app to tell her what to do if she answered that she did not feel safe. The other said he preferred the formal version because it did not pretend the app knew him. Chaitali asked what word he would use with a friend. He shrugged. “A friend can ask it. A phone can’t.”

I started to explain that the app was only offering a prompt. Dr. Mukherjee raised a hand, and I stopped. The explanation was ours; the

reaction belonged to the person reading the screen. We asked each tester what they understood the app would do with the answer. Both expected something different. That told us the context around the question mattered as much as the translation.

We rewrote the screen to say that the question was optional and that the app could not assess immediate danger. The support link sat beside it. We tested the language with people who had not helped us write it. One person said the wording was clear. Another said it sounded cold. A third preferred the cold version because warmth from an app felt false.

We kept both responses in the notes. There was no sentence that could feel right to everyone, but there were ways to avoid pretending we knew what every person needed. We made the voice plain and let users choose whether to read more.

At the last review before release, Chaitali asked us to try the screen on an older phone from the community centre. The display was smaller than the one we had used at my desk. The Bengali question broke across several lines, and the explanation pushed the options below the bottom edge. A woman who had agreed to test the build tapped the screen, waited, then tapped the same place again.

“Did it freeze?” I asked.

She turned the phone toward me. “I thought I had to answer before it would let me continue.”

The skip option was there. It was simply out of view. The support link was too. We had called the question optional in the copy, but on that screen the user could not see what else they were allowed to do. The developer said we could shorten the explanation, though he did not want to remove the limit about the app’s inability to assess danger. Dr. Mukherjee agreed that the limit had to stay. Chaitali suggested moving it to a separate, clearly labelled note below the buttons, where anyone who wanted more information could open it.

We changed the layout so the question, the skip option, and the support link all appeared together. The longer explanation sat behind a button that said what it contained. We tested the change on the same phone. The woman read the question, put the phone down, and picked it up again. This time she saw the options without asking us.

“I still don’t want to answer,” she said.

“You don’t have to,” I replied.

She pressed skip. The next screen opened. We delayed the release until we had checked the layout on the smaller display and two other phones. It cost us a few days. I had been eager to call the version ready; now I knew that a choice a person could not see was only a promise in our notes.

The new version launched quietly. We did not announce it as a breakthrough. We invited the people who had agreed to test it, explained the changes, and gave them a date when the study

would end. Some returned; some did not answer. One user asked us to delete their account, and the request worked the first time. I checked the record afterward and saw that it had been removed as promised.

The test feedback did not settle the wording. One user said the optional question helped her name what she wanted. Another skipped it every time. We kept the skip button on the same screen and made the support link visible without requiring an answer. It was not a compromise that made both users equally satisfied. It was a way to let each of them use the app without asking the other to be wrong.

The small success should have been enough to let me sleep. Instead I kept thinking about the people who had stopped using the app. I wanted to know whether they had lost interest, found another kind of help, or disliked what we had built. We had no right to demand an explanation. I wrote a short, optional survey and sent it only to those who had consented to follow-up. The survey allowed them to say nothing.

The answers came slowly. One person said the prompts were useful but she preferred paper. Another said she had not understood the app’s purpose. A third wrote that he had found a counsellor and no longer needed the tool. I read that last response twice. I had expected the app’s success to look like continued use. Instead, the clearest positive outcome was

someone leaving because they had found a person who could help more directly.

I sent the response to Dr. Mukherjee without identifying details. She said that was a healthy result, provided we did not turn one person’s experience into proof. I agreed. In the report, we wrote that the beta had helped us test clarity, privacy, and usability. We did not claim that it had treated anyone or changed their life.

The grant committee accepted the report and offered a second year of modest support if we continued the independent review. The business side was less exciting than a large launch. We had no dramatic growth curve, only a few hundred visits to the project page and a smaller number of people who had tried the beta. But the people who did use it had been able to understand the limits, control their entries, and leave when they wanted.

At the next team dinner, the developer raised a glass of soda and said, “To the least viral app launch in history.” We laughed. Sreeja said she would take least viral if it meant nobody had to be tricked into staying. I looked around the table and felt the odd comfort of being part of something that did not depend on me alone.

Chapter Fifty-Five — Her Cousin’s Question

Poulomi called me on a Sunday afternoon. She sounded tired and asked if the app could help someone whose partner kept reading their messages and deciding who they were allowed to meet. I asked whether she was asking for herself. She said no, it was another cousin, and then corrected herself: she did not know if her cousin wanted her to ask.

I told her the app could not determine what her cousin should do. It could not make a controlling partner stop, and I did not want to offer a prompt that made the person at risk responsible for managing someone else’s behaviour. If her cousin felt unsafe, she should speak with someone trained or a person she trusted, and she should decide what information was safe to share. I sent Poulomi the public support page, not a private beta link.

She was quiet. “I thought you might tell me exactly what to say to her.”

“I can help you think of a way to ask if she wants to talk. I can’t write a script that fixes it.”

“I don’t want to make her feel judged.”

“Then ask what she wants from you. She may want advice, or company, or nothing right now.”

Poulomi thanked me and said she would speak with her cousin. I offered to stay on the call if she wanted, but she said she needed to think first. We hung up, and I sat with the uncomfortable feeling that I had not done

enough. It was the same feeling that used to drive me to take over a problem before the person living with it had asked me to.

Two days later, Poulomi texted that her cousin had agreed to meet her for tea. She did not share what they discussed. She said only that her cousin was considering calling a local service and wanted to know whether the app kept a record of what someone read. I told her the public support page could be opened without an account and did not track individual pages. I checked the configuration after sending the message, just to be certain.

The next time I saw Poulomi, she was waiting at the tea stall beside the university gate. A paper cup sat between her hands. She told me her cousin had called the service but was not ready to make any other decision. Poulomi had sat with her for an hour and let the conversation stop where it stopped.

“I kept thinking I should ask her what she was going to do next,” Poulomi said. “I had to stop myself.”

“Did she ask you to stop?”

“No. I just knew I was asking because I wanted the story to have an ending.” She looked down into her tea. “She has to go home and live with what happens. I get to go home after the conversation.”

I understood the distinction, but I had to make myself leave room for her to finish. In the past I would have reached for a comforting answer, something that made her feel better

about what she had done. Poulomi had not asked me to judge her. She was telling me that listening had been harder than giving advice.

“You stayed with her,” I said.

“I did. But I was relieved when she called the service. Then I felt guilty for being relieved.”

“You don’t have to turn relief into a verdict.”

She looked up at me. “That sounds like something you’ve had to learn.”

“I have.”

She nodded, but did not ask for the story. For a while we watched the line at the stall shorten. A student came by to collect two cups and left with three. Poulomi laughed when the vendor handed her a lid that did not fit. She pressed it down on one side, and it popped up on the other.

“This is not a reliable system,” she said.

“We could test it with four users.”

“Only if you promise not to make the lid fill out a consent form.”

I laughed. She did too, and the conversation loosened without needing to become cheerful. We finished our tea and walked as far as the crossing. She seemed relieved, but also frustrated that the problem had not disappeared.

“You did what she asked,” I said.

“Mostly. I wanted to do more.”

“I know the feeling.”

She looked at me for a moment, then asked whether I meant the app or my own life. I said

both. She smiled, not unkindly. “Maybe doing more is not always the same as helping more.”

On the bus ride home, I thought about the part of me that still wanted to turn every problem into a job. I had called it love before. Now I was learning to ask first whether anyone had asked me to carry it.

That evening I updated the project’s support page with a clearer explanation: the page contained general resources; opening it did not send us a signal; the app could not evaluate the safety of a relationship. Dr. Mukherjee reviewed the wording. We asked two testers whether it was understandable. One said it was too much text. We shortened it without removing the limits.

A few weeks later, Poulomi told me her cousin had moved in with an aunt while she figured out what she wanted. She did not describe the decision as final or easy. She said there were practical problems and family arguments. I listened, then asked whether Poulomi needed anything from me. She said no, she only wanted me to know that her cousin was safe for now.

I kept returning to the words *for now*. They were all her cousin could say about the future. I thanked Poulomi for telling me and did not ask for more. Later, I realised I had wanted to take the story and place it inside the app’s success report. It would have made the work sound consequential. But it was not my story to use, and the app had not made the decision.

Poulomi’s cousin had chosen to ask for help. Poulomi had chosen to listen. Other people had offered a place to stay.

I closed the report without adding anything. The project could be meaningful without claiming every good thing that happened near it.

Chapter Fifty-Six — The Release Table

The app’s first public day

The public release meeting was held at the same community centre where we had tested the first prototype. This time the room was full enough that we had to borrow chairs from the next hall. The grant report sat on a table beside the translated prompt cards. I had brought my laptop, a charger, and a printed copy of the privacy summary. My mother had sent a container of sweets. The lid kept slipping open whenever anyone moved the table.

Before the event, we sat together to decide whether the beta was ready to become a public first version. The independent review had found no unresolved issue in the areas it examined.

The language tests showed that some prompts still needed work. We had a clear deletion flow, an option to use the reflection pages without an account, and a support page that could be opened from the first screen. We also had a list of known limitations long enough to make the app look less finished than most launch pages.

The developer said we could continue improving the language after release. Sreeja agreed, as long as we did not call the translations complete. Dr. Mukherjee said the support resources should be reviewed at regular intervals, because phone numbers and services changed. We added that to the maintenance plan. The grant covered the next stage but not indefinitely. We would need to decide how the project could continue without turning user data into a revenue source.

That was the question I had been avoiding. The app had to pay for hosting, review, and development if it was going to remain available. I did not want to charge people who were already looking for help. I also did not want to pretend that software had no cost. We discussed a one-time contribution option, institutional partnerships that did not give partners access to user records, and keeping the basic tool free. Nothing was final. We agreed not to add a payment screen until we could explain the model without making a person feel that their well-being depended on paying.

At noon, people began arriving. I showed them the app and explained its limits. One

person asked whether it was meant for students only. I said it had been tested mostly with students so far, but we did not want to imply that the experience of one group represented everyone. Another asked whether the app could work offline. The reflection pages could, but the resource page required a connection. We put that on the next technical list.

An attendee picked up one of the printed prompt cards and read it twice. “Do I have to make an account to try this?”

“No. You can use the reflection pages without one,” I said. I opened the app on the demonstration phone and showed her where that option began. “You don’t have to write anything either. You can skip the questions.”

She looked at the screen, then at the card. “I’d rather take this and look at it later.”

I handed her a copy. She thanked me and moved toward the door. For a moment I wanted to ask whether she had found what she needed, or whether she would come back. I let her go without turning her decision into feedback she owed us. The card stayed with her; the phone stayed on the table. That counted as an ordinary outcome too.

A local journalist came near the end. She asked whether I had created the app because of a difficult relationship. I said a personal experience had started me thinking about the ways people handle painful habits and relationships, but the project was not a public account of that person. I said I had learned from

other people during development and that my own experience did not make me an expert. She asked if I would tell the story anyway. I told her I was writing it, but the app had to stand on its own rather than ask users to believe in it because of my heartbreak.

She wrote that down. I worried about how the sentence would appear in print, but I did not call her later to shape it. The project was ours; the private lives behind it did not belong to the launch.

At three o’clock, we posted the public link. The first download came from someone in the room. Then a woman from the study group shared it with two colleagues. The count rose by a few dozen over the afternoon, then slowed. A notification came in from a user who had completed the optional first reflection. I did not know who they were, and the app did not tell me. I was glad the system had been designed that way.

The event ended with chairs stacked against the wall and paper cups gathered into a plastic bag. My mother asked if everyone had eaten. Sreeja said she had taken two sweets for the road. The developer was already checking an issue someone had reported in the language switch. The project did not transform into a success story when the link went public. It became available to people who could choose to use it or not.

On the way home, I took the bus past the university. The road was wet from a short rain,

and students crowded under the shop awnings to keep their notebooks dry. At the stall near the gate, four of them stood around a steel bowl of masala muri. One complained that the vendor had added too much chilli; another took the bowl from him and ate anyway. They were still arguing when the bus pulled away.

I remembered our own paper cones, the mustard oil on Sagnik’s fingers, Aheli telling him not to order for her, Anurima passing me water when the chilli got to me. The memory did not arrange us into people who had been right or wrong. It came back as an afternoon that had happened, with its laughter and the small things we had failed to understand. I watched the stall disappear behind the bus, then took out my phone to check the client email I had promised to answer in the morning.

Chapter Fifty-Seven — What the Water Kept

The public version had been out for four months when I went back to Mathura. The trip had no dramatic reason. A client had a meeting in Delhi, and I added two days because I wanted to see the river again. I told myself it was practical: I already knew the train route, and the work was nearly finished. I packed the same notebook, though the page with the first sentence had softened at the corners from being carried around.

Delhi felt less like a test this time. I knew which exit to take at the station and how long the walk to the guesthouse would be. The city was still loud and impatient. It had not changed to reward my return. I worked from a café one morning, answered a client’s questions, and then closed the laptop while there was still daylight. I went to the market, bought a shirt I did not need, and walked until my feet hurt.

In Mathura, I stayed in a different guesthouse. I woke before the street was fully awake and went out for tea. The first stall I found was still setting up. The owner poured water into a dented kettle and asked where I had come from. I told him I was visiting from West Bengal. He asked whether I had come for darshan, a devotional visit to the temples. I said I wanted to see the river. He nodded as if those answers were close enough to the same thing and went back to lighting the stove.

I drank the tea standing beside the stall while the shutters rose one by one. A woman carried a basket through the lane; two boys argued over a bicycle; a man swept dust away from the entrance to his shop, only to have the next passing scooter lift it again. I watched without trying to make the morning explain itself.

The ghat was crowded again that evening. The steps were wet, and someone had tied a strip of cloth to a post. Children ran between families until an older man called them back. The lamps came out as the sky darkened. I sat where I had sat before, though a group of visitors occupied the exact place by the water.

I found a place a little farther down. The river was higher than I remembered. The current pressed against the steps and carried leaves toward the bend. I thought of all the ideas I had attached to it: that it did not need anyone, that it flowed without caring, that it could teach me how to survive people. Those thoughts had comforted me, but they were too neat. The river depended on rain and tributaries, on land and weather. It was shaped by what it met. It did not choose every obstacle, and it did not pass through unchanged.

My phone buzzed. It was a message from the project team. The new Bengali version had gone live, and the first support directory update had been reviewed. One of the users had asked for a simpler way to save a trusted contact. We had not built it yet. I wrote back that we would look

at it in the next planning session. Then I put the phone away.

A call came in a few minutes later from a client. I saw his name and felt the old instinct to answer before the second ring. The site was not down; he wanted to discuss a small change to the home page. I let the call go to voicemail and wrote that I would call him in the morning. When I put the phone back in my pocket, I felt a brief prickle of guilt, followed by the ordinary sound of the ghat: a bell, a child asking for a sweet, a seller calling out to someone on the steps. I had not abandoned my work. I had given the evening a boundary.

I still missed Anwesha. A familiar song could take me back to the winter calls; the smell of food carried between houses could bring back the meals we had cooked for each other. I could remember the tenderness without using it to excuse the ways we had hurt one another. For a long time, I had treated sacrifice as proof that a future was secure. After the breakup, I tried to need nobody. Neither idea had held up in an ordinary week.

I opened the notebook to the page from my first evening in Mathura. I had written, *I can love someone and still be responsible for my own life.* Beneath it, in smaller letters, was my later addition: *I don’t know how.* The crease ran through both lines. I thought of the people who had tried the app, the ones who stopped, and the ones who chose to seek help elsewhere. We had not saved anyone. We had made a small

tool, and people had told us what it could and could not do. I closed the notebook without adding another lesson to the page.

A message arrived from Poulomi. She had seen the new version and asked whether I was back from Delhi. I wrote that I was in Mathura for two days. She replied that she hoped the trip was good and asked if I would be free when I returned. I read it, smiled, and felt the old reflex start up: what did she mean, what did she expect, what would I owe if I said yes? I let the questions pass without answering them for her.

I wrote: “Yes. I’d like to see you. Let’s have tea when I’m back.”

She sent a thumbs-up. There was no promise in it, and none was needed. I put the phone away and sat until the lamps had drifted beyond the bend. When I stood, the stone was cool beneath my palms. The current continued in the dark, carrying the reflected lights in pieces, then gathering them again farther down.

On the walk back, I stopped at a stall for tea. It was too sweet, but I finished it before I reached the guesthouse. I checked the train time, set an alarm, and put my notebook beside my shoes. The client call was at nine; the team meeting was after lunch. I left Poulomi’s message open on the phone until the screen dimmed, then plugged it in and went to bed.