

The book cover features a dark, gradient background transitioning from deep purple at the top to a dark red at the bottom. A large, golden-yellow circle representing the moon is positioned in the upper right quadrant. The sky is filled with numerous small, white, chevron-shaped stars. In the lower half, a silhouette of a city skyline is visible, with two prominent figures in black capes standing on a rooftop. The figure on the left has a yellow horizontal bar across their chest, while the figure on the right has a red one. The title 'THE LAST CONFESSION' is centered in a bold, white, serif font, with the subtitle 'An original campus heartbreak novel' in a smaller, italicized serif font below it.

# THE LAST CONFESSION

*An original campus heartbreak novel*

Created for Shaswat Raj

# THE LAST CONFESSION

*An original campus heartbreak novel with cinematic chapter visuals*

A story about obsession, pride, public humiliation, regret, and the quiet power of choosing yourself.

Note: This is an original fictional story. The visuals are stylized scene plates created for this PDF.

# Contents

1. The Party Where I Stopped Begging
2. The Boy She Used Like a Mirror
3. The Wall of Love Letters
4. The Exam She Let Me Lose
5. Sorting the Ashes
6. Nine in the Morning
7. The Truth Arrives Late
8. Kyoto Without Apologies
9. The Girl Who Crossed an Ocean Too Late
10. Her Seventy-Eight Promises
11. The Garden of Smoke
12. The Life After Waiting

**Chapter 1** A birthday room full of laughter, and one boy finally silent.



*Visual: The Party Where I Stopped Begging*

## *Chapter 1*

# **The Party Where I Stopped Begging**

*The last confession was never meant to win her. It was meant to free me.*

For two years, I believed love was measured by endurance. I believed that if a person knocked on the same closed door long enough, the person on the other side would finally understand the value of the heart waiting outside. That foolish belief turned me into a campus joke.

At Meridian Institute, I was Aarav Sen, the robotics scholarship boy who could build a walking drone from spare fan motors and broken phone batteries. In the labs, professors called me brilliant. In the cafeteria, students called me Tara Malhotra's stray dog.

Tara was the face people remembered when they heard our college name. She was the daughter of the Malhotra Foundation, the girl whose family had donated half the glass buildings on campus, the girl who spoke softly enough to sound kind and coldly enough to sound expensive. I had confessed to her seventy-seven times.

Every time, she rejected me in public.

The first time, she said she needed to focus on studies. The seventh time, she smiled and said I was sweet but not her type. The twentieth time, she did not even answer. By the fiftieth, students had begun counting like it was a festival. By the seventy-seventh, some seniors had made a betting pool on whether I would reach one hundred.

I might have reached it, too, if I had not seen her phone.

It happened three days before her birthday. She had forgotten her phone in the makerspace, and I was carrying it to the administration desk when a notification lit up. My photo appeared on the screen. Below it was a message from her roommate: If you like him so much, why torture him?

The preview of Tara's reply was enough to hollow me out.

Because he is cutest when he is trying.

I should have looked away. I did not. The lock screen opened with face recognition because her phone was tilted toward a framed photo on her desk. In her gallery were more pictures of me than I had ever taken of myself. My name in her contacts was not Aarav. It was Future Husband. In her private notes were dates of every confession, what I wore, what I said, and how long I looked hurt after each rejection.

She liked me. She had liked me from the first week.

And for two years, she had enjoyed watching me lose myself for her.

That night I did not sleep. By morning I had accepted Professor Menon's recommendation for a three-year exchange in Kyoto. By evening I had decided the seventy-eighth confession would be the last.

Tara's birthday party was held in a private room above a piano bar. When I reached the corridor, the door was half-open, and I heard her friends laughing.

"Will Aarav kneel again tonight?"

"Maybe he is preparing the seventy-eighth proposal. Tara, you should say yes before he finally grows a spine."

Tara's voice floated out, calm and amused. "He will not leave. Aarav has liked me for too long. I will accept him when he proves he can be patient."

Something inside me gave a quiet click, like a wire being cut.

I pushed the door open. Everyone went silent. Tara sat under a curtain of silver balloons, her red dress bright against the dark room. For a second her eyes moved over me too quickly, checking whether I had heard. Then she looked away, as if my presence bored her.

Before, I would have walked to her first. I would have complimented her dress, given her flowers, asked if she had eaten, apologized for being late though she had not invited me kindly. Instead, I took the empty chair near the speaker, placed my phone face up, and began filling out the final form for my exchange visa.

The silence around me was sharper than the music.

For the next hour, I did not look at Tara. I laughed when someone told a joke not meant for me. I ate a piece of cake. I replied to Professor Menon. When Tara's friends teased her, she did not react, but I could feel her eyes searching for me again and again.

At gift time, boys lined up with bracelets, perfume, imported chocolates. I waited until the end. Then I took a small black calendar from my bag. It was handmade, twenty-one pages, tied with a silver thread.

I placed it on the table in front of Tara.

"Tear one page every morning," I said. "When the last page is gone, you will receive my real gift."

Her friends exploded into laughter.

"A countdown to proposal seventy-eight!"

"Aarav, you are shameless but creative."

Tara's lips curved. She tried to hide it behind her glass, but I saw the victory in her eyes. She thought the calendar meant I was still playing her game.

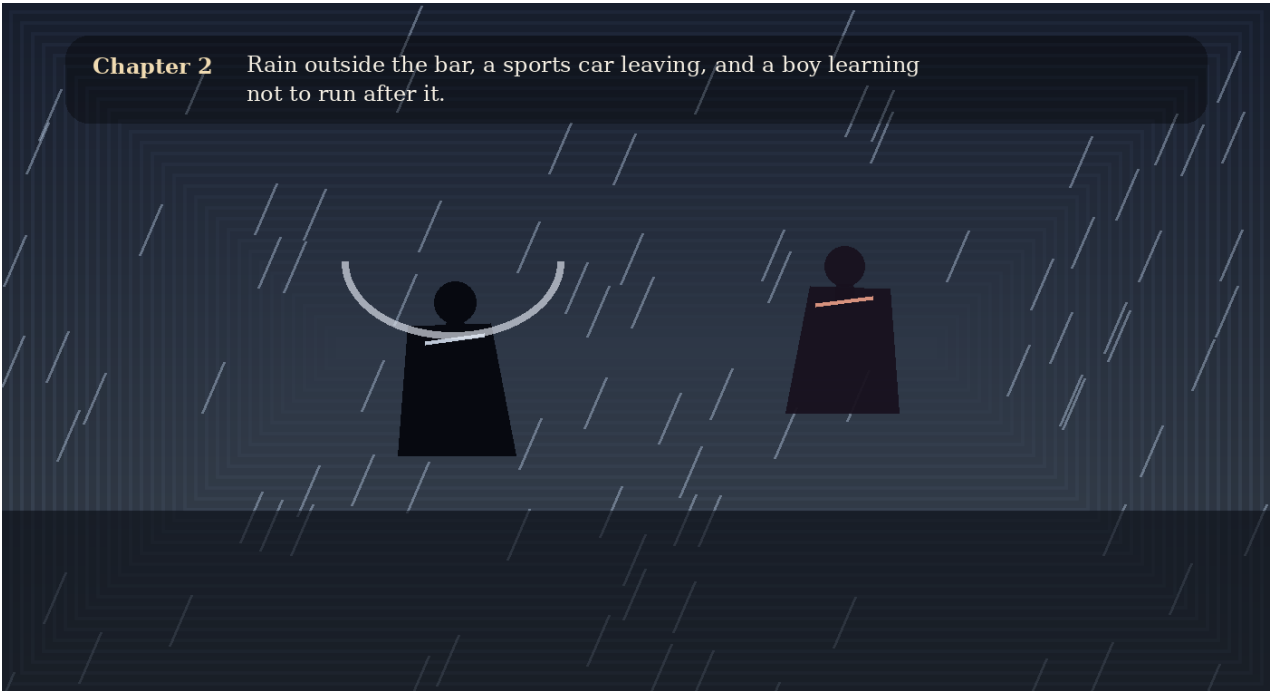
"I told you," she said lightly, "I never promised to say yes."

I smiled at her for the first time that night.

"I know."

Only I knew the last page was not the day I would ask her to choose me. It was the day I would stop choosing her.

**Chapter 2** Rain outside the bar, a sports car leaving, and a boy learning not to run after it.



*Visual: The Boy She Used Like a Mirror*

## *Chapter 2*

# **The Boy She Used Like a Mirror**

*Jealousy is easy to fake. Respect is impossible to fake for long.*

Vihaan Arora arrived at the party fifteen minutes after I gave Tara the calendar. He entered like he owned the room, with a white gift box in one hand and the confidence of a boy who had never been told no by anyone except life.

"Happy birthday, T," he said.

Tara's expression changed instantly. Her cold face warmed. She took the box, touched his sleeve, and told him he looked tired. The entire room noticed. They were meant to notice.

Vihaan was Tara's childhood friend. Before I came to Meridian, he had followed her around for years and received the same indifference she gave everyone else. After I started confessing, Tara suddenly began using him like a stage prop. She fixed his collar in front of me. She took bites from his spoon. She laughed at his whispered jokes and glanced sideways to see whether I was watching.

For months it had worked. I had suffered exactly the way she wanted. I had gone home and wondered if I was ugly, boring, too poor, too eager, too much. Now, knowing the truth, I watched the performance with the strange calm of a person seeing a magician's trick from behind the curtain.

"Aarav," Vihaan called across the room. "You are quiet today. Saving energy for the big kneel?"

The room laughed.

I raised my glass. "Saving energy in general. It has become precious."

Tara's fingers paused on the ribbon of his gift box. She looked at me, searching for the old pain. I gave her none.

Later, when I went to wash cake cream from my hands, Vihaan followed me into the corridor outside the restroom. His smile dropped the moment we were alone.

"How long will you keep embarrassing yourself?" he asked. "Everyone knows Tara does not want you. Even if she did, do you think her family would accept a scholarship boy from a rented apartment?"

I dried my hands slowly.

"Are you done?"

He blinked. He had expected anger, maybe pleading, maybe a wounded expression he could carry back to Tara.

"I am saying this for your own good," he said, stepping closer. "Stop chasing. It makes you look cheap."

Behind him, the corridor door opened.

Tara stood there. Her eyes moved from Vihaan's raised hand to my face. For one breath, I thought she might finally choose the truth over her drama.

She did not.

"Vihaan," she said, taking off her shawl and placing it over his shoulders, "you are shivering. The AC is too high here."

Vihaan's shock melted into a victorious smile. He leaned toward her like a wounded prince. Tara guided him back into the room without another glance at me.

I stayed in the corridor until their footsteps faded. Then I laughed once, softly, because the scene was too perfect. I used to think being ignored by the person you love was the worst pain. I was wrong. The worst pain was realizing they saw everything and still chose to make you feel alone.

At midnight, rain smashed against the street so hard the city looked erased. Tara's driver arrived with a black sports car. Everyone crowded under the awning, complaining about cabs.

"Aarav lives near you, right?" one of her roommates asked. "Take him too."

Tara opened the car door. Vihaan was already inside, holding his gift box like a trophy.

"He has legs," she said. "He can go."

Before, that sentence would have split me open. I would have wondered what I had done wrong. I would have found a way to make excuses for her. That night, I only opened my ride app.

The car pulled away. Through the rain-blurred glass, Tara looked back once. I lowered my head and confirmed the cab.

It took two hours for a driver to accept. My shoes filled with water. My fever started before I reached home.

I lived on the seventeenth floor, across the hall from Tara. Six months earlier, I had rented the apartment because I heard she had moved out of the hostel. I used to leave breakfast outside her door. I used to wait for the elevator at the exact time she went to class. I used to know the sound of her keys better than the sound of my own phone.

At two in the morning, when I opened my door, Tara's door opened too.

She stood there in the same dress, hair still pinned, makeup still perfect except for the tiredness around her eyes.

"Your door lock is loud," she said. "Come earlier next time."

I looked at her clothes, at her bare feet, at the way she had clearly stayed awake waiting to hear me return safely. Once, that would have made me happy. Now it only made me tired.

"There will not be many next times," I said.

Her eyes sharpened. "What?"

"Nothing. Good night."

Inside my apartment, I changed out of wet clothes, took cold medicine, and opened a property app. The apartment was not mine, but I had paid a six-month advance to keep it. I messaged the agent and told him I wanted someone to take over the lease immediately, even at a loss.

Then I opened the calendar app and counted twenty-one days.

Tara had begun tearing pages from a gift she did not understand. I had begun tearing pages from a life that no longer belonged to her.



*Visual: The Wall of Love Letters*

### *Chapter 3*

## **The Wall of Love Letters**

*A crowd can laugh only until the person on stage stops begging for applause.*

The first public blow came three mornings later.

I reached campus with a low fever and a bag full of scholarship documents. The main path from the gate to the tech block was usually loud, but that day it carried a different kind of noise. People turned as I walked. Some smiled too quickly. Some whispered behind their hands.

My phone vibrated nonstop.

Naina, my lab partner, had sent fourteen messages.

Do not go to the old notice board.

Aarav, please reply.

I am serious. Turn back.

I did not turn back.

A crowd had gathered near the humanities steps. At the center of it was the notice board. Pinned across the cork in crooked rows were photocopies of my letters to Tara.

The letter from confession twelve, where I had written that the evening light made her hair look like a painting. The letter from confession thirty-nine, where I had

apologized for making her uncomfortable even though she had smiled when she rejected me. The letter from confession sixty, where I promised I would stop if she ever told me honestly that I had no place in her heart.

Someone had written a title above them in red marker.

THE MERIDIAN DOG'S LOVE ARCHIVE.

The laughter around me blurred.

"He actually wrote poetry."

"Brother, the secondhand embarrassment is killing me."

"Robotics genius? More like romance failure."

My hand rose before my mind caught up. I began tearing the pages down. Each rip sounded like a small bone breaking. People filmed. Nobody helped.

Then Vihaan's voice cut through the crowd.

"Why remove them? They are evidence of dedication. Tara should be proud."

He came down the steps with Tara beside him. She looked at the board. Her face changed for less than a second - not guilt, not shock, but fear that the game had gone too far. Then she hid it.

Someone shouted, "Tara, after seventy-seven confessions, how much do you like him? Give us a percentage."

Tara's fingers tightened around her notebook.

Vihaan laughed. "Be honest."

She looked straight at me.

"Zero."

The word was small. The damage was not.

The crowd exploded. Phones rose higher. Someone began chanting, "Seventy-eight! Seventy-eight!"

I held the torn letters in my fists until the edges cut my palms. For a moment, I wanted to ask her why. Why pretend to care at night and crush me at morning? Why collect my photos? Why save my number as Future Husband and stand here saying zero?

But a person who asks why is still hoping for an answer that can save them.

I was done being saved by Tara Malhotra.

I stepped onto the low stone border around the notice board. The crowd quieted, hungry for the next humiliation.

"Since everyone is so interested," I said, my voice steady enough to surprise even me, "you are all invited to my seventy-eighth and final confession. Meridian Lawn. Twenty-first of November. Nine in the morning. Bring your cameras. Bring your friends. I promise it will be unforgettable."

The announcement spread before lunch.

By evening, anonymous pages had turned it into posters. FINAL PROPOSAL OF THE CENTURY. WILL TARA SAY YES? WILL AARAV SURVIVE? Polls appeared. Memes appeared. Someone drew my face on a dog's body and placed a ring in its mouth.

Naina found me in the lab after sunset. She pushed a bottle of water into my hand and looked at the torn letters piled beside my laptop.

"Tell me you are not actually going to propose again," she said.

I smiled without looking up from the drone code on my screen.

"I said confession, not proposal."

She sat across from me. "There is a difference?"

"There will be."

Naina studied me for a long time. She had seen me at my worst. She had covered for me when I cried in the supply room after confession forty-three. She had once told me love should not make a person smaller. I had not listened.

"What are you planning?" she asked.

"A goodbye people cannot edit."

The lab door opened before she could respond. Tara stood there. She had never entered the robotics lab before; oil stains and solder smoke did not fit her carefully curated world.

Naina stood, anger flashing in her eyes, but I shook my head.

"Can we talk?" Tara asked.

"We are talking now."

She glanced at Naina. "Alone."

"No."

That one word seemed to unsettle her more than any accusation could have. She stepped inside anyway.

"The notice board thing was not my idea," she said. "I do not know who did it."

"I believe you."

Relief touched her face.

"But you still said zero," I added.

Her relief vanished. "There were too many people. You know how rumors start. If I had said anything else, they would have misunderstood."

"Misunderstood what?"

Her lips parted. For a second, the truth stood behind her teeth. Then pride dragged it back.

"Just do not make a scene on the twenty-first," she said. "If you embarrass me, I will be angry."

I almost admired the audacity.

"Tara," I said gently, "you should keep tearing the calendar pages. That is all you need to do."

She frowned. "What does that mean?"

"It means the gift is working."

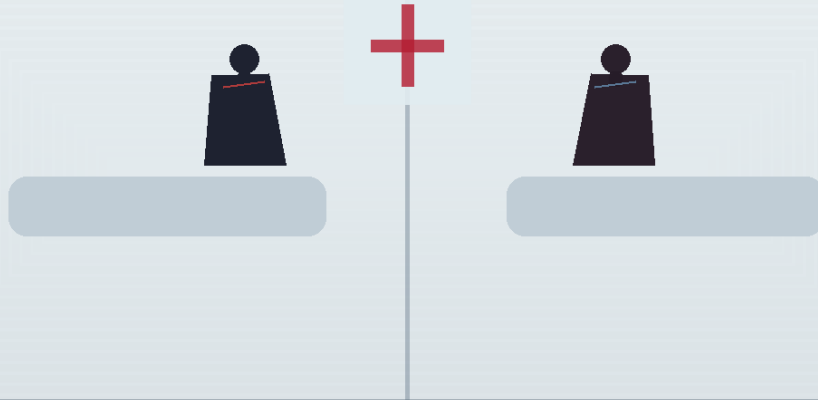
After she left, Naina leaned back in her chair.

"I do not know whether to be scared for you or proud of you."

I returned to my laptop. On the screen, a simulation of two hundred paper-sized drones rose into the sky and rearranged themselves into a sentence.

"Both," I said. "Both might be correct."

**Chapter 4** A hospital corridor, two stretchers, and the decision that finally killed hope.



*Visual: The Exam She Let Me Lose*

## Chapter 4

# The Exam She Let Me Lose

*The person who loves your suffering will always call it a small matter.*

The second blow came dressed as an accident.

Final assessments began a week before the lawn confession. My mechatronics design exam was the last requirement before the Kyoto exchange office could stamp my file. I arrived early, limping slightly because fever had settled into my joints. Tara and Vihaan entered together five minutes later.

Vihaan's right wrist was wrapped in a bandage. He held it up for everyone to see.

"Too much basketball," he announced.

Tara guided him to the seat beside mine even though half the room was empty. I moved my bag away from the shared desk. Vihaan smiled at the movement.

The exam started. For forty minutes, the only sounds were pens, pages, and the professor's shoes on the steps. Then, just as Professor Rao turned toward the back row, a folded slip slid across the gap between desks and landed under my answer sheet.

I looked down.

The handwriting was not mine. The formula on the slip was not needed for any question on the paper. The trap was so clumsy that it might have been funny if my future had not been sitting on that desk.

"What is that?" Professor Rao's voice cracked like a ruler.

I stood immediately. "Sir, it is not mine. Please check the CCTV."

The room held its breath.

Professor Rao took the slip. His face hardened. "The cameras on this floor are down since morning. Maintenance notified us."

Vihaan's eyes widened with fake concern. His bandaged hand covered the smile he could not fully control.

"Ask Tara," I said before anyone else spoke. "She was sitting right there. She saw it."

Every head turned to her.

For the first time in two years, I wanted something from Tara that was not love. I wanted truth. I thought even she would understand that there are games one does not play with a person's future.

Tara looked at the slip. Then at Vihaan. Then at me.

"It was not Vihaan," she said.

The room became very far away.

Professor Rao exhaled with disappointment. "Aarav Sen, your exam is cancelled pending disciplinary review. Leave the room."

I did not defend myself again. A person can survive mockery. He can survive rejection. But the moment someone you love watches you drown and calls it rain, something inside him stops reaching for the surface.

Outside the hall, Tara caught up to me near the staircase.

"Listen," she said, grabbing my sleeve. "Vihaan is sensitive. People already think he is useless because of his family situation. If this became public, he would break."

I looked at her hand on my sleeve.

"And I would not?"

Her face tightened. "You are stronger. Also, this is only one exam. Your credits can be adjusted. I will fix it later."

"Later," I repeated.

"Yes. On the twenty-first, I will give you an answer you will like. Let this go until then."

There it was. She believed my pain could be scheduled around her performance.

I pulled my sleeve free.

"Keep tearing the pages," I said.

That evening, the disciplinary notice went up online. CHEATING INVESTIGATION: AARAV SEN. By midnight, the same gossip pages that had posted my letters were calling me a fraud. Robotics dog cheated. Love failure became academic failure.

Professor Menon called me at one in the morning.

"Tell me everything," he said.

So I did. I told him about the slip, the broken cameras, Tara's testimony, Vihaan's expression. I expected disappointment. Instead, the old professor sighed like a man who had been waiting for students to become crueler than machines.

"Do not panic," he said. "Do you still want Kyoto?"

"More than ever."

"Then prepare to leave. I will handle the storm here."

The next day, while Professor Menon began collecting handwriting samples, the storm grew elsewhere. Vihaan and I were called to a club meeting, supposedly to clear the air. I went only because I needed the president's signature on my resignation form.

The room smelled of stale chips and cheap perfume. Tara was there, though she had never attended club meetings before. Vihaan sat beside her, wrist bandaged, face pale with theatrical guilt.

Someone suggested truth or dare to lighten the mood. I said no. They ignored me.

When Tara lost, her dare was to kiss a boy in the room for one minute. Everyone shouted Vihaan's name. Tara stood, turned off the lights, and in the darkness there was a shuffle, a gasp, then silence. When the lights returned, Vihaan looked stunned. Tara had not kissed him.

Her eyes were on me.

When I lost the next round, the same dare returned. I spun the pointer. It landed on a first-year girl who immediately froze. Before she could stand, Tara kicked her chair back.

"Enough," she said. "Break time."

Within ten minutes, every girl in the room had been sent downstairs for snacks. Only Tara remained.

I understood. She wanted to force a situation where I either kissed her or admitted I still wanted to.

I lifted the punishment glass from the table. It was full of the bitter club drink everyone avoided.

"The selected person is absent," I said. "So I will drink instead."

Tara watched me empty it without flinching. Her face darkened. For the rest of the meeting, she did not speak.

After I handed my resignation form to the president, Vihaan followed me to the stairs.

"You think you are clever?" he hissed, grabbing my arm. "Tara will still choose me when it matters. She always does."

I tried to shake him off. My head spun from the drink. His grip tightened. We struggled for one second too long.

Then my foot missed the step.

The stairs rose, folded, vanished.

Pain exploded through my leg. Vihaan fell with me, screaming. Students rushed over. Tara's voice cut through everything, sharp with panic.

At the Malhotra family hospital, the doctor said both of us needed urgent surgery. There was one orthopedic specialist available. Someone had to go first.

Tara stood between two stretchers.

I was conscious enough to see her looking at me. Her eyes were wet. Her lips trembled. I thought, absurdly, that maybe now the acting would end.

The doctor asked, "Miss Malhotra, decide quickly."

Tara closed her eyes.

"Vihaan first."

The hope in me did not die loudly. It did not scream. It simply turned its face to the wall and stopped breathing.

Chapter 5 Printed cards, torn memories, and the machinery of a public goodbye.



Visual: Sorting the Ashes

## Chapter 5

# Sorting the Ashes

*Sometimes healing begins with throwing away the proof that you once begged.*

I woke after surgery with my mother crying into her dupatta and my father pretending the window was interesting.

"Your leg is safe," the doctor said. "You were lucky. Another few hours and the damage could have been permanent."

Lucky.

The word followed me through ten days of hospital air, medication, and whispered campus gossip. Across the corridor, Vihaan recovered in a room full of flowers. Tara visited him every day. She brought soup from home, adjusted his pillows, argued with nurses about his pain schedule. My door remained open because of rounds, so I heard everything.

"You should not have chosen me first," Vihaan told her one afternoon, voice soft enough for me to hear. "Aarav will hate you."

Tara replied, "He will understand."

No. I would not.

When I was discharged, I returned to the apartment on crutches. The hallway smelled of fresh paint from a vacant unit nearby. Tara stepped out of the elevator

behind me, carrying a bag from the fruit shop I liked across town.

"I bought too much," she said, holding it out. "Take some."

The bag contained dried mango strips, the expensive kind that sold out by noon. Once, I had waited two hours to buy them for her. She had accepted the packet with a bored thank you and left it unopened on her shoe rack until ants found it.

I took the bag.

For one breath, she looked relieved.

Inside my apartment, I dropped it into the trash.

The lease transfer happened faster than expected because I priced the place low. The new tenant was a quiet data analyst who asked no questions. I packed while my leg throbbed.

Everything in my apartment had Tara's shadow on it.

The blue mug I bought because she once said the color calmed her. The extra umbrella because she always forgot hers. The scarf I had learned to knit from YouTube, then never dared give her. The model music box I had built for confession fifty-five; when wound, tiny paper cranes circled a cardboard moon.

I sorted them into three piles: donate, sell, destroy.

The scarf unraveled into a ball of yarn. The music box went under my screwdriver until the cranes fell apart. The letters that had not been leaked joined the shredded pieces from the notice board. I burned them in a steel bowl on the balcony, watching the ash rise in the evening wind.

Tara saw me from the hallway.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Cleaning," I said. "There was too much useless stuff."

She looked at the smoke, then at the empty shelves behind me. Fear moved across her face, but pride caught it before it became a question.

"You should rest your leg," she said.

I closed the door.

Two days before the twenty-first, I went to the print shop near the metro. The owner raised his eyebrows when I ordered ten thousand matte cards, each the size of a palm, each printed with the same sentence.

AARAV SEN WILL NEVER WAIT FOR TARA MALHOTRA AGAIN.

"Wedding?" he asked.

"Funeral," I said.

Then I called Naina and three hostel friends to the robotics lab.

They stood around the table while two hundred micro-drones slept in charging trays. Each drone had a thin clip to hold a stack of printed cards. My program would release them in waves over Meridian Lawn. The cards would fall like paper rain.

Naina read one and went silent.

"You are really leaving," she said.

"Tomorrow night. My flight is at two. The lawn event is after I land in Singapore for transit. You only have to run the program."

Raghav, my old roommate, slapped the table. "Beautiful. Cruel, but beautiful."

"Not cruel," Naina said. "Clear."

I smiled at her. "That is all I want to be."

On the morning before I left, a message from Tara's old group chat appeared. I had joined a year ago under a fake name to learn what food she liked, what movies she watched, whether she was scared of thunderstorms. I had forgotten to leave.

The chat was exploding.

Tara, show us the dress.

You are finally saying yes, right?

Our ice queen is nervous.

Tara sent three photos of white dresses laid on her bed. Then a message.

It is not about saying yes. Aarav and I were always going to end up together. He just needed to prove he would not give up. I like him more than anyone in this life.

I stared at the message for a long time.

If this was love, then love had learned cruelty from pride.

I blocked the group. Then I blocked Tara on every platform. Her number, her socials, her email. I left one thing unblocked - my memory. Not because I wanted it, but because healing is not deleting the past. Healing is reaching the place where the past can knock and you do not open the door.

At eleven that night, I carried one suitcase into the elevator. Tara's door stayed closed. Perhaps she was asleep. Perhaps she was choosing earrings for the answer she thought would save everything.

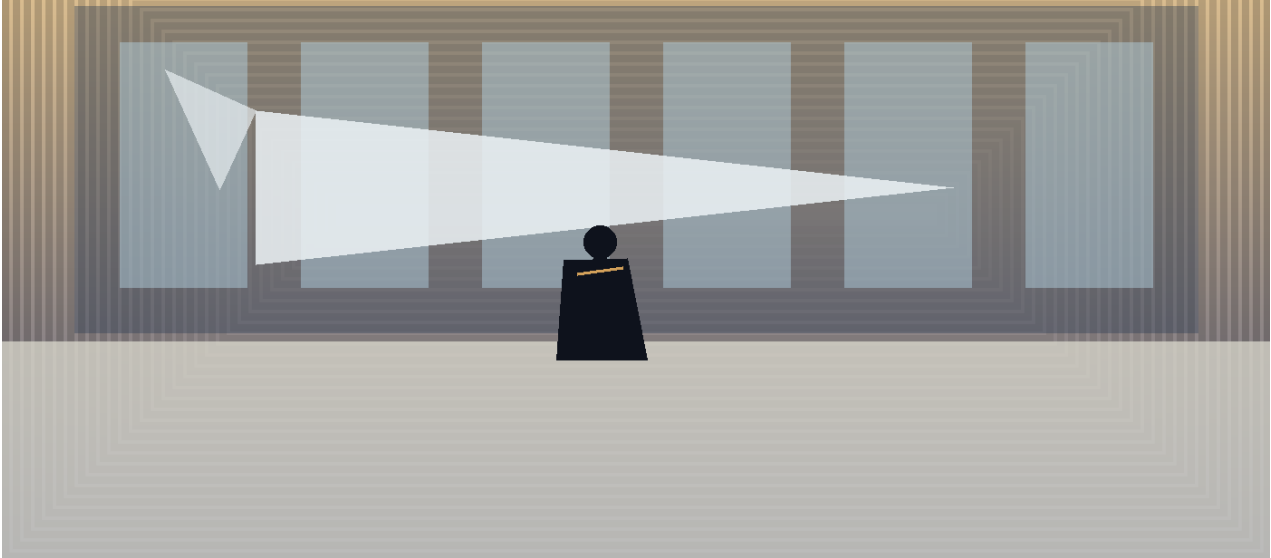
In the lobby, the security guard helped me into the taxi.

"Long trip, sir?"

I looked up at the seventeenth floor. The window across from mine glowed softly.

"Long enough," I said.

**Chapter 6** An airport window, a departing plane, and a confession happening without him.



*Visual: Nine in the Morning*

## Chapter 6

# Nine in the Morning

*The sky can hold a thousand cards, but only one truth needs to fall.*

At nine in the morning on the twenty-first of November, Meridian Lawn was so crowded that security had to put ropes around the fountain.

Students climbed benches. Faculty pretended not to care and watched from corridor windows. Gossip page admins livestreamed with titles like FINAL PROPOSAL: WILL SHE BREAK HIM OR MARRY HIM? Tara arrived at eight-fifty in a white dress under a cream coat. Her hair was pinned with tiny pearl clips. She looked calm to anyone who did not know her.

Naina knew better.

From the roof of the robotics block, she watched Tara touch the black calendar in her handbag. Only one page remained.

"Ready?" Raghav asked beside the drone controller.

Naina checked her phone. My message had arrived from Singapore five minutes earlier.

Landed. Do it.

She pressed start.

The drones rose from four corners of the campus, small black shapes against the pale morning. The crowd gasped. Tara's face lifted. For one shining second, hope made her look younger.

The drones arranged themselves above the lawn, not into a heart, not into her initials, but into a single straight line.

GOODBYE.

Then their clips opened.

Cards fell everywhere.

They spun in the air, white against the blue sky, drifting over the fountain, sticking to coats, sliding across the grass. Students reached up laughing, then fell silent as they read. The sentence traveled through the crowd in waves.

Aarav Sen will never wait for Tara Malhotra again.

Again.

Again.

Again.

Tara caught one card between both hands. Her smile froze so completely that she looked painted. Her roommates gathered around her, voices breaking.

"It must be a mistake."

"Maybe someone hacked the drones."

"Tara, call him."

She tried. The call failed. She tried again. Failed. Messages returned with red error marks. She opened my profile and found nothing. Blocked.

The crowd began murmuring.

"So it was not a proposal."

"He called us to watch him leave."

"Honestly? Good for him."

Tara's breathing turned uneven. She pushed through the cards carpeting the lawn and ran toward the robotics block. Students followed. On the roof, Raghav and the others were packing the controller.

Tara burst through the door, hair coming loose, eyes bright with anger and fear.

"Where is he?"

Raghav leaned against the parapet. "Who?"

"Do not play with me. Where is Aarav?"

Naina stepped forward. Her voice was softer, which made it sharper.

"He is gone."

"Gone where?"

"Kyoto. Exchange program. Three years."

The color left Tara's face.

"No," she said. "His program is under review. The cheating case-"

"Professor Menon cleared it last night. Vihaan's handwriting matched the slip. Your statement is being reviewed too."

Tara gripped the last calendar page in her bag so hard it tore.

Raghav could not resist. "Congratulations, Malhotra. You got the unforgettable confession you deserved."

The students behind her whispered openly now. Some recorded. Some stared with the hungry satisfaction of people watching pride become punishment.

Tara turned and ran.

At 10:30, she reached the apartment building. In the lobby, she saw the cleaning staff dragging away trash bags. For some reason, the sight of ash at the bottom of one bag made her stomach twist. She took the elevator with shaking hands.

On the seventeenth floor, my door was open.

A stranger came out carrying a box of books.

"Excuse me," Tara said, voice thin. "Where is the previous tenant?"

The stranger smiled politely. "He moved out before sunrise. I just took over the lease. Nice guy. Left the place spotless."

Tara stepped past him into the apartment.

It was empty.

No blue mug. No extra umbrella. No music box. No shoes at the door. No proof that a boy had once built his entire routine around the chance of seeing her for five minutes.

The stranger said something about needing the hallway clear for movers. Tara did not hear. She stood in the center of the room, holding a card with my sentence on it, and finally understood the purpose of the calendar.

Twenty-one pages had not counted down to her acceptance.

They had counted down to my disappearance.

Her knees weakened. She sat on the floor because standing required a future she could not imagine. She opened the last calendar page with trembling fingers. On it, I had written only one line.

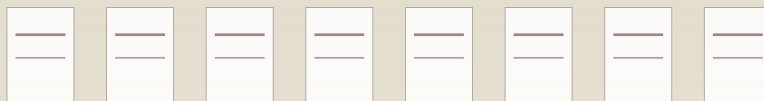
Thank you for teaching me that self-respect is also love.

For three years after, people would say that Tara Malhotra screamed in the empty apartment. They were wrong.

She did not scream.

She made no sound at all.

**Chapter 7** A room full of evidence, a professor with anger, and a truth dragged into daylight.



Visual: The Truth Arrives Late

## Chapter 7

# The Truth Arrives Late

*Regret is not love. It is the bill for cruelty that once felt free.*

Professor Menon did not forgive quietly.

By noon, he was in the dean's office with the handwriting report, maintenance logs, and a list of students willing to testify that Vihaan had joked about "ending the dog" before the exam. Tara was summoned before the disciplinary committee at three.

She arrived in the same white dress from the lawn, except now the hem was stained with mud and crushed grass. A card was still folded in her fist.

Professor Menon looked at her as if she were a failed machine he refused to repair.

"Miss Malhotra," he said, "you gave testimony that nearly destroyed a student's scholarship, reputation, and international admission. Do you stand by it?"

Tara's lips moved. No sound came.

The dean softened his tone. "Tara, we need the truth. Did you see Vihaan pass the slip?"

She closed her eyes.

"Yes."

Vihaan, who had been sitting with his bandaged wrist in a sling, shot up. "Tara!"

She did not look at him.

"He threw it onto Aarav's desk," she said. "I saw it. I lied."

The room changed temperature.

Professor Rao removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "Why?"

Tara stared at the folded card.

"Because I thought Aarav would forgive me later."

Professor Menon's laugh was bitter. "You treated a future like a toy and called forgiveness your backup plan."

Vihaan began crying. He said he had panicked. He said Aarav had always made him feel small. He said Tara had encouraged him by choosing him first in the hospital. He said he only wanted to protect what was his.

Tara finally looked at him.

"I was never yours," she said.

"Then why use me?" Vihaan shouted.

The question landed harder than he expected because it was not only his question. It was mine too.

Tara had no answer that would not make her uglier.

By evening, Vihaan was suspended pending expulsion. The cheating notice against me was removed and replaced with an apology written in the dead language of administration. Due to new evidence, the student has been cleared of wrongdoing. No mention of the videos, the laughter, the days I had walked through campus under a word I did not deserve.

Professor Menon called me as I waited at Kyoto immigration.

"It is done," he said. "You are cleared. Complete your reporting tomorrow."

For a moment, I felt nothing. Then my legs weakened, and I sat on my suitcase in the middle of the arrivals hall.

"Thank you, sir."

"Do not thank me. Build something better than the people who hurt you. That will be enough."

Back in India, Tara fainted in the dean's corridor. Her friends rushed her to the family hospital. The doctor said exhaustion, dehydration, stress. Her mother said drama. Her father said nothing, which was worse.

When Tara woke, the first thing she asked was whether I had called.

No one answered.

She borrowed her roommate's phone and dialed my number from memory. It rang twice before Naina answered.

"He is busy," Naina said.

Tara sat up too quickly. "Please. I need to apologize. Just give him the phone."

"You needed to tell the truth before he lost the exam. You needed to speak before he was cut open after surgery. You needed to care before ten thousand cards fell out of the sky. Now you need something from him, and suddenly your voice works."

Tara's breath shook. "Naina, I really do love him."

"Maybe," Naina said. "But you loved the power more."

The call ended.

For the next week, Tara tried every route. She wrote emails that bounced. She sent messages through classmates that I did not open. She went to my parents' house and stood outside the gate until my mother came out.

My mother had always been gentle. That day, she was not.

"Aunty, I made mistakes," Tara said, tears streaming. "Please tell Aarav to speak to me once."

My mother looked at the girl who had turned her son's love into campus entertainment.

"Mistakes are when you forget salt in food," she said. "What you did was a habit."

Tara folded her hands. "I will fix it."

"No," my mother replied. "You want him to fix how guilty you feel. That is different."

The gate closed.

Only then did Tara begin to understand that apologies are not keys. They cannot open every door simply because they are finally sincere.

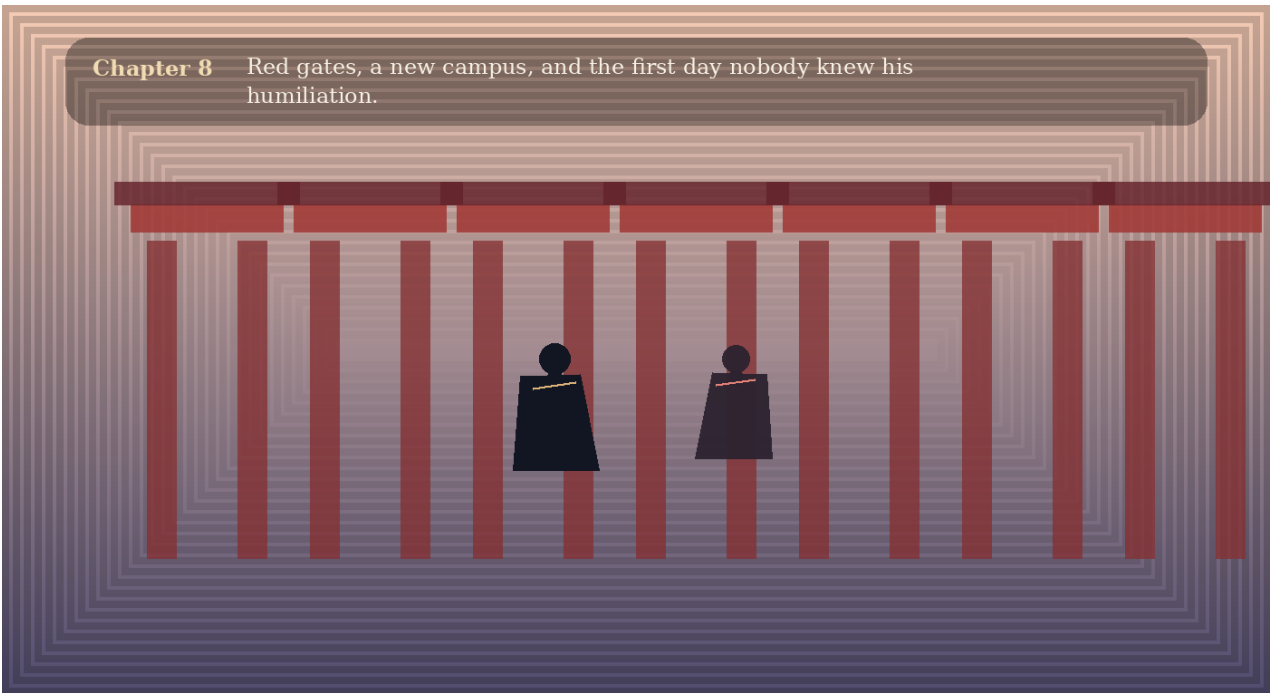
At night, she sat on her bedroom floor with the black calendar beside her. She had taped the torn last page back together. Around it lay every card she had collected from the lawn. She read the sentence until the words lost shape.

Aarav Sen will never wait for Tara Malhotra again.

For two years, she had believed my love was a resource that would refill no matter how much she wasted. Now she was discovering that even the deepest well has a bottom.

And I was already on the other side of the world, learning how peaceful thirst could be when it no longer belonged to her.

**Chapter 8** Red gates, a new campus, and the first day nobody knew his humiliation.



*Visual: Kyoto Without Apologies*

## Chapter 8

# Kyoto Without Apologies

*A new city does not erase heartbreak. It simply gives silence better scenery.*

Kyoto smelled different from every place I had ever known.

Not better. Different. Wet stone after morning rain. Roasted tea from narrow shops. Cedar wood, bicycle tires, warm bread, old temples holding their breath between apartment blocks. On my first morning, I stood outside the exchange office with my cane in one hand and my student ID in the other, and realized no one around me knew I had ever begged anyone to love me.

To them, I was just Aarav Sen, international student, robotics design track, apartment 3B near the eastern canal.

It was a kind of invisibility that felt like mercy.

My apartment was on the third floor of a narrow building with no elevator. Moving in became a comedy of bad planning. I dragged one suitcase up six steps, sweated through my shirt, and considered living permanently on the landing.

A voice behind me said, in careful English, "That suitcase is winning."

I turned.

A girl stood at the bottom of the stairs with a canvas tube on her shoulder and a bicycle helmet under one arm. She had short black hair, paint on her sleeve, and the

bright, direct gaze of someone who had not yet learned to treat strangers like threats.

"It is heavier than it looks," I said.

"Most things are."

She climbed the steps, took the handle before I could protest, and lifted. Together we carried the suitcase to my door.

"I am Hana Mori," she said, breathing hard but smiling. "Architecture. Same building, fifth floor."

"Aarav Sen. Robotics. Third floor, apparently forever grateful."

She held out her palm. "Gratitude is good. Phone number is better. In case your suitcase attacks again."

The line was so shameless that I laughed. Not the polite laugh I had perfected around Tara, but a real one. I wrote my number on the back of an old boarding pass and gave it to her.

For two weeks, life became a careful routine.

Classes. Physiotherapy. Grocery stores where I bought the wrong noodles twice. Video calls with my parents. Late nights in the lab, where machines obeyed logic and therefore felt kinder than people. Hana appeared often because she lived upstairs and because she had the social confidence of a small storm. She showed me the cheapest laundromat, the quietest study room, the vending machine that sold hot corn soup.

She never asked about the limp until I volunteered the story. Even then, I told only the clean version: accident, surgery, recovery. She did not push.

"People always think pain needs details to be real," she said. "It does not."

One Saturday, she invited me to a riverside cafe where students sketched the old bridge. I almost refused. Then I remembered I was allowed to go places without turning them into proof of devotion.

We sat under a red umbrella while rain tapped the river. Hana ordered matcha cake and made an expression of holy seriousness when it arrived.

"Food deserves attention," she declared.

I smiled into my tea.

"Someone taught you that?"

"My grandmother. She said if you eat while thinking of people who hurt you, they steal the meal too."

I put down my cup. "Your grandmother is wise."

"Terrifying, actually. But wise."

We became friends because friendship with Hana did not ask me to shrink. If I was quiet, she let me be quiet. If I talked about motor calibration for twenty minutes, she listened and then compared robots to buildings in a way that somehow made sense. She had opinions. She had boundaries. She said no easily, yes clearly, and sorry without making the apology feel like a favor.

In her company, I began noticing how strange my old life had been. Love should not require decoding every glance. Care should not arrive disguised as insult. A person should not have to become a detective to prove someone likes him.

A month after arriving, I won a small campus design challenge for an assistive walking brace inspired by my own recovery. The prototype was ugly but effective. Professor Ishida, my Kyoto supervisor, tapped it with a pen and said, "This has a future. You should enter the Asia Youth Innovation Prize."

The old Aarav would have wanted to tell Tara first. He would have imagined her surprise, her pride, the way she might finally realize he was worth choosing.

The new Aarav took a photo and sent it to my parents, Professor Menon, Naina, and the hostel group.

Naina replied: Look at you building legs for people after someone tried to break yours. Iconic.

I laughed so loudly that Hana, working across the lab, looked over.

"Good news?"

"The best kind," I said. "The kind that has nothing to do with anyone who left."

That evening, as I walked home beside the canal, my phone buzzed with a message from an unknown international number.

Aarav. I am in Kyoto. Please meet me once.

The river kept moving beside me, unconcerned.

For a full minute, I watched the message glow.

Then I put the phone in my pocket and continued walking.

**Chapter 9** A cafe table, an old wound, and the truth finally spoken without trembling.



*Visual: The Girl Who Crossed an Ocean Too Late*

## Chapter 9

# The Girl Who Crossed an Ocean Too Late

*A late apology can still be real. It can also still be useless.*

Tara found me three days after her first message.

Hana and I were at the riverside cafe again, arguing over whether a robot could be called elegant if its wiring looked like a plate of noodles. Hana said no. I said beauty was secondary to function. Hana said that was exactly what an engineer with bad wiring would say.

I was laughing when the cafe door opened.

Tara stood inside with a suitcase behind her and a scarf wrapped too neatly around her throat. She looked thinner than I remembered. There was a faint scar near her hairline, almost hidden by makeup. Her eyes found mine and stopped.

For a second, the old world pressed its face against the glass.

Then I turned back to Hana. "You were insulting my wires. Continue."

Tara walked over.

"Aarav."

Hana looked between us, polite but alert.

"Hello," I said.

Tara's gaze moved to Hana, to the shared plate of cake, to the ease between us. Pain crossed her face, then anger, then something she probably thought was dignity.

"Who is she?"

"My friend."

"What kind of friend?"

Hana's eyebrows rose. "The kind who was eating cake before being interrogated."

Tara ignored her. "Aarav, can we speak alone?"

"No."

That word again. It had become one of my favorites.

Tara's hands curled around the strap of her bag. "I came all the way from India."

"That was your decision."

"I apologized. I told the truth. I got Vihaan punished. I went to your house. I-

"You are listing repairs after burning the building."

Her eyes filled. "I know I hurt you. I know I was proud and stupid. But I liked you from the first week, Aarav. I did not know how to handle it. Everyone expected me to be unreachable. I thought if I accepted you too easily, people would laugh. Then your chasing became... familiar. I thought we had time."

I stared at her, finally hearing the confession I had once wanted more than sleep.

It felt like receiving medicine after the fever had already broken.

"Do you understand," I asked quietly, "how ugly that sounds? You liked me, so you humiliated me. You liked me, so you used Vihaan to make me jealous. You liked me, so you lied in an exam case. You liked me, so when I was injured, you chose the person who hurt me because you believed I would still forgive you. If that is your love, Tara, what would your hatred look like?"

Her tears spilled over.

"I was wrong. I am saying I was wrong."

"And I am saying it no longer matters."

She reached for my hand.

I moved it away.

The rejection struck her harder than any insult. Maybe because, for once, I did not look angry. I looked finished.

"Please," she whispered. "Give me one chance to make it right."

Hana stood. "He said no."

Tara turned on her. "This is between us."

"It stopped being only between you when you grabbed him in public."

Tara's pride flared. She stepped forward and pushed Hana's shoulder. It was not a hard push, but it was enough. Hana stumbled into a chair, regained balance, and slapped Tara across the face before anyone could move.

The cafe froze.

Tara touched her cheek, stunned. Then she lunged.

By the time the owner separated them and called the police, a vase was broken, two chairs were overturned, and my untouched tea had flooded the table.

At the station, Tara sat with her scarf crooked and her composure in pieces. Hana had a scratch on her jaw and the calm fury of a person composing a legal essay in her head.

The officer asked for my statement.

Both women looked at me.

Once, Tara had been asked the truth and had chosen Vihaan. Now the scene returned wearing another country's uniform.

I said, "Tara pushed Hana first. Hana reacted after that."

Tara flinched as if I had slapped her too.

"Aarav," she said in Hindi, voice breaking, "you are doing this because of the exam."

I looked at her. "I am doing this because it is true."

"If she had pushed me first, would you still tell the truth?"

I did not answer quickly. The old bitterness rose, tempting and sharp. I could have said what she once said to me: Hana is sensitive. You are stronger. Let it go.

Instead, I said, "Yes. That is the difference between us."

It did not comfort her. It was not meant to.

The cafe CCTV confirmed my statement. Tara received a formal warning and a fine. Hana was released with no charge. Outside the station, the evening wind smelled of rain and street food.

Hana looked at me. "I am sorry. I made your life messy."

"No," I said. "My life was already messy. You just slapped one part of it."

She laughed despite herself. Then her face softened.

"She loves you badly."

I looked across the street. Tara stood under a lamp, watching us with eyes that had finally learned helplessness.

"Bad love," I said, "is still bad."

Hana touched the scratch on her jaw. "So what now?"

"Now I go home, finish my prototype, and stop letting old storms choose my weather."

It sounded simple.

For the first time, it also sounded possible.

**Chapter 10** A river camp, a bonfire, and a woman learning how it felt to stand outside the circle.



*Visual: Her Seventy-Eight Promises*

## *Chapter 10*

# **Her Seventy-Eight Promises**

*When pursuit becomes punishment, even flowers can feel like chains.*

Tara did not go back to India.

She enrolled in a short design certificate at a private institute in Kyoto, rented a room twenty minutes from my apartment, and began appearing wherever my life had space. Outside the robotics building with coffee I did not drink. Near the canal with flowers I did not accept. At the grocery store, pretending coincidence while holding a basket full of things she clearly did not know how to cook.

The first time she blocked my way with roses, she said, "If you confessed seventy-seven times, I can confess seventy-eight."

A small crowd of exchange students gathered, curious.

I looked at the roses. Then at her.

"You turned my love into a public trial. Do not turn your guilt into public theater."

I walked around her.

She counted anyway.

One.

Two.

Three.

By the tenth confession, people in Kyoto knew her as the beautiful Indian girl chasing the robotics boy. By the twentieth, some classmates began warning me when she was waiting outside. By the thirtieth, even Professor Ishida raised an eyebrow and asked whether I needed campus security.

"Not yet," I said.

Hana and I remained friends, though the cafe incident had made both of us careful. She never used Tara to make me choose. She never treated my attention like a prize. That alone made her presence peaceful.

In early spring, our international student group planned a camping trip by the Kamo River. I almost refused because Tara had become a shadow at the edge of my days. Then I decided I would not let her exile me from my own life.

The camp was loud, smoky, and full of bad guitar. Someone burned the first batch of corn. Someone else fell into the shallow water while trying to take a cinematic photo. I laughed more that night than I had in months.

Across the river, Tara watched from behind a row of trees.

I saw her once when I went to refill water. She looked cold in a thin coat, arms folded tightly, eyes fixed on Hana laughing near the fire. I could have ignored her. Instead, I walked over because avoidance had begun feeling like another kind of leash.

"Go home, Tara."

She startled. "I just wanted to see you happy."

"No. You wanted to see whether you still mattered inside my happiness."

Her mouth trembled.

"I am trying," she said. "I know now how you felt. Every day, I wait. Every day, you reject me. Everyone laughs. I understand."

"You understand embarrassment," I said. "You do not understand what it was like to love someone who designed your embarrassment."

Tara stepped closer. "Then tell me how to fix it."

"You cannot."

"There must be something."

The bonfire cracked behind me. The river moved beside us, black and silver.

"There was something," I said. "You could have told the truth in the exam hall. You could have chosen me when I was bleeding. You could have said one honest word before I needed ten thousand cards to say goodbye. Those moments existed once. They

do not exist now."

She shook her head like a child refusing a diagnosis. "I will keep going. If you needed seventy-seven times, maybe I need seventy-eight. Maybe one hundred. Maybe more."

"That is not devotion. That is ego wearing flowers."

The words struck. Her face collapsed inward for a second, then hardened with desperation.

"You think Hana is better? She is not the one who loved you first."

"Love is not a queue, Tara. You do not own the front position because you arrived early and behaved badly."

I turned to leave.

She caught my sleeve. Not hard, but enough to stop me.

"Aarav, please. I do not know who I am if you stop loving me."

For the first time that night, I felt something like pity.

"That is exactly why I had to stop."

I removed her hand and walked back to the fire.

Hana looked up when I returned. She did not ask what happened. She handed me a paper cup of soup and pointed at the guitarist, who had begun singing confidently in three wrong languages.

"Emergency," she said. "We need a robot that can tune humans."

I laughed.

Across the river, Tara stood alone until the fire burned low.

After that night, her confessions changed. They became less decorative, more frantic. She sent handwritten apologies describing memories I had tried to forget. The day I brought her breakfast and she complained it was cold. The time I waited outside an exam hall with medicine because she had a headache. The confession where she had wanted to say yes but saw Vihaan watching and chose pride instead.

She remembered everything.

That was the cruelest part.

She had not been careless because she failed to see me. She had been careless because she had seen me clearly and believed I would never leave.

By summer, she had reached confession seventy-seven.

The same number where I had stopped.

She sent a message from a new number.

Tomorrow will be the last one. Please come to the old botanical garden at nine.

I looked at the message for a long time.

Then I replied for the first time in months.

Do not light candles. The weather is dry.

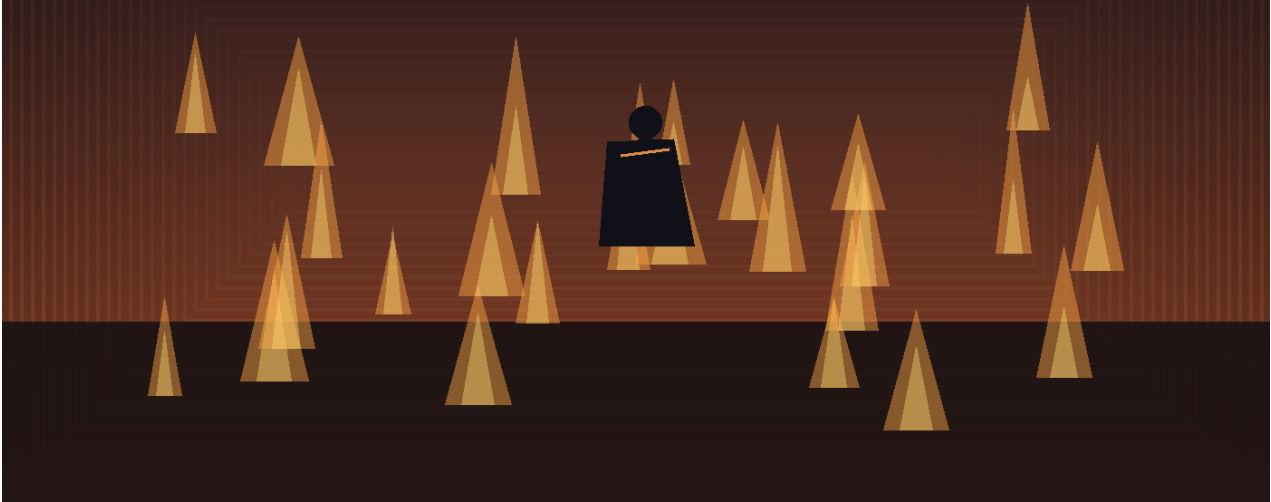
Her answer came instantly.

You replied. That means you still care.

I put the phone down.

Some people can turn even a warning into hope.

**Chapter 11** Candles in a dry garden, a phone call, and a hope that burned too long.



*Visual: The Garden of Smoke*

## *Chapter 11*

# The Garden of Smoke

*A grand gesture cannot resurrect a feeling that died quietly.*

The old botanical garden belonged to Kyoto University's art department. In spring, it was beautiful. In late summer, after weeks of heat, it was a field of dry leaves and thirsty shrubs waiting for one careless spark.

Tara rented it for the evening anyway.

She spent two days building her final confession. Students were paid to hang lanterns from branches. A pianist was hired. White candles lined the stone path in the shape of a constellation from the night we first met at Meridian's tech festival. At the center stood a mechanical installation I recognized immediately: paper cranes circling a cardboard moon.

She had rebuilt my music box from memory.

At eight-fifty, she stood in the garden wearing a pale blue dress instead of white. Her friends from India watched through a video call. The pianist tested a soft melody. The lanterns glowed.

I was not in Kyoto.

I was in Mumbai, presenting the walking brace at the Asia Youth Innovation Prize finals. The trip had been planned for months. Tara had not known because Tara had never learned to ask about my life unless it touched hers.

At nine, my phone rang with Naina's name. She had seen photos of the garden online.

"Are you there?" she asked.

"No. Mumbai."

Naina exhaled. "Good. Also, terrifying. She recreated your music box."

I closed my hotel curtains against the city lights. For a moment, grief moved through me, not for Tara, but for the boy who would have broken at such a gesture. The boy who would have mistaken imitation for understanding.

I called Tara.

She answered on the first ring.

"Aarav," she breathed.

Behind her, music trembled.

"I heard about the garden," I said. "I am not coming."

Silence.

Then she laughed softly, almost gently. "It is okay. You called. That is enough for tonight. I can do it again. I can do everything again until you believe me."

"No. You should stop."

"I cannot."

"Tara, listen carefully. I am in Mumbai. I won the innovation finals this afternoon. I am staying for investor meetings, then visiting my parents. My life is moving. You are standing in a garden built from a version of me that no longer exists."

Her breathing grew ragged.

"Are you with someone?"

The question was so small, so familiar, so completely her.

I looked at the trophy on my desk, at the prototype brace folded beside it, at the city where my parents were waiting to celebrate a future I had almost lost.

"I am with myself," I said. "For now, that is enough."

"Do you hate me?"

"No."

A sob caught in her throat, maybe relief.

"Then-"

"I do not love you either."

The line filled with a silence that felt physical.

"Please extinguish the candles," I said. "The weather is dry."

I ended the call.

In the garden, Tara stood with the phone in her hand while the pianist stopped playing. Her friends on the screen asked what happened. She did not answer. A dry leaf fell from a branch, twirling lazily until it landed on the rim of a candle glass.

It smoked first. Then caught.

Someone shouted.

The fire moved faster than anyone expected. It licked along the leaf litter, climbed the ribbon around a lantern, jumped to a branch. Students ran for water. The pianist dragged the speaker cable away. Tara remained still in the center, staring at the mechanical cranes circling their cardboard moon.

Maybe she saw me. Maybe she saw herself. Maybe she finally understood that the most dangerous fires are the ones people keep feeding because they mistake the heat for love.

Security pulled her out before the smoke took her completely.

No one died. Three trees were lost. A storage shed burned. The university filed charges for property damage and negligence. Tara's visa was revoked after a short legal process. Her family paid a sum large enough to build a new garden.

Before she was deported, she sent me one final email from an address I had not blocked.

I thought loving you meant proving I could suffer too. I understand now that I was still making it about myself. I am sorry. I will not contact you again.

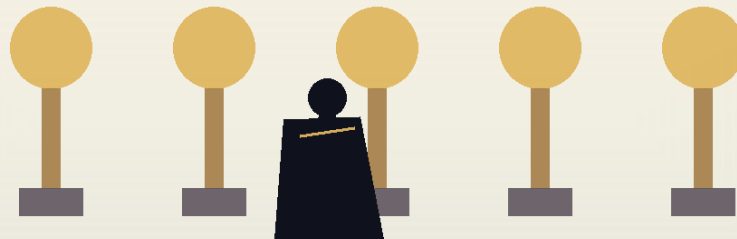
I read it in my parents' living room while my mother placed mango slices on a plate and my father argued with the television news.

For the first time, Tara's apology asked nothing from me.

I did not reply.

Some endings deserve silence, not because they are empty, but because they are finally complete.

**Chapter 12** A stage, a box of medals, and the quiet confidence of a boy who stopped begging.



*Visual: The Life After Waiting*

## Chapter 12

# The Life After Waiting

*The opposite of heartbreak is not another romance. It is becoming whole enough to choose calmly.*

Three years later, I returned to India with two suitcases, a healed leg, and a cardboard tube full of certificates that my mother insisted on calling medals even when they were printed paper.

At the airport, my parents waited with marigold garlands. Naina stood beside them holding a sign that said WELCOME HOME, FORMER CAMPUS DOG, CURRENT LEGEND. Raghav had added a badly drawn drone in the corner.

I laughed before I reached them.

"Disrespectful," I told Naina.

"Historically accurate," she said, hugging me carefully.

I had not become magically invincible. That is not how healing works. Some nights in Kyoto, a song from the old piano bar could still turn my stomach. Some mornings, while deleting spam emails, I would remember the red failed-message marks on Tara's phone and wonder if she had cried as silently as I once did.

But the memories had lost their authority.

They were chapters, not commands.

Meridian invited me back as a guest speaker for the annual innovation festival. Professor Menon insisted. He said students needed to hear about the walking brace, the design process, the international prize, the startup offer from a medical robotics company. He did not say they also needed to see that a person can outgrow the story others wrote for him.

The auditorium was full.

Some of the faces were familiar. People who had laughed at the notice board now clapped too loudly. People who had filmed my humiliation now asked for selfies. I did not hate them. Crowds are rarely brave. They move in the direction of noise. I had simply learned not to build my worth from their weather.

During the question session, a first-year student asked, "Sir, what was the hardest part of your journey? The injury or the false accusation?"

The hall went still. Everyone knew enough of the old gossip to lean forward.

I thought about lying politely. Then I thought about the boy standing on the notice board border, inviting the entire school to witness his final goodbye.

He had earned honesty.

"The hardest part," I said, "was admitting that someone could like me and still treat me badly. We often think pain proves love is deep. Sometimes pain only proves we stayed too long."

Professor Menon lowered his gaze, smiling.

After the talk, I walked through Meridian Lawn. The fountain had been repaired. The robotics block roof was locked now because of new safety rules, which Raghav proudly claimed we had inspired. Students sat in circles under trees, unaware that this grass had once been covered in ten thousand cards.

Near the old notice board, I saw Tara.

She stood alone, wearing a simple grey kurta, hair shorter than before. For a second, my body remembered panic before my mind reminded it of peace.

She did not approach quickly. She did not cry. She did not call my name like she owned the sound of it. She stopped a respectful distance away.

"Aarav," she said.

"Tara."

The years had changed her face. Not made it less beautiful, exactly. Made it less certain. Pride no longer sat on her shoulders like a crown. It rested somewhere behind her, heavy and useless.

"I heard your talk," she said. "Congratulations. Truly."

"Thank you."

A pause opened between us. Once, I would have rushed to fill it. Now I let it exist.

"I have wanted to say many things," she continued, "but I promised I would not contact you. So I will only say this once. I am sorry for the person I was with you. Not because I want forgiveness. Because it is true."

I looked at the notice board. New flyers covered it - coding club, theatre auditions, blood donation camp. No trace of my letters remained.

"I know," I said.

Her eyes glistened, but she smiled. "That is more than I deserve."

"Maybe."

For the first time, Tara laughed softly at something that did not protect her pride.

"Are you happy?" she asked.

The question was dangerous only if the answer depended on her.

I thought of my parents waiting near the car. Naina ordering too much street food for dinner. Hana's occasional messages from Tokyo, where she was designing disaster-resilient housing and still insulting my wiring. The startup contract in my bag. My healed leg. My quiet mornings.

"Yes," I said. "I am."

Tara nodded as if receiving a sentence. "Good. I am glad."

Then she stepped aside.

Not dramatically. Not like a martyr. Just enough to clear the path.

I walked past her.

At the edge of the lawn, a group of students were flying small paper planes. One lifted badly, dipped toward the grass, then caught a sudden current and rose higher than anyone expected. The students cheered.

I watched it until it disappeared beyond the auditorium roof.

For years, I had thought love meant waiting outside someone's door. I had thought devotion meant proving I could endure rejection, insult, and silence. I had thought being chosen by Tara Malhotra would turn me into someone valuable.

I was wrong.

Value is not granted by the person who finally stops hurting you. It is recovered the day you stop mistaking hurt for destiny.

My phone buzzed. Naina had sent a message.

Where are you? Your mom is threatening to feed your dinner to Raghav.

I smiled and walked toward the gate.

Behind me, the lawn remained full of noise, youth, foolishness, beginnings. Somewhere in that noise, my old self finally stopped waiting.

And for the first time in a long time, the future did not feel like a confession.

It felt like an answer.

# **THE END**

*May the next confession you make be to your own future.*