Chapter 1

In the late afternoon of the month of Chaitra, the vast, dry Rarh land of Manteswar seemed to turn into an invisible fire-pit. The sky hung overhead like a copper plate burnt raw by an unskilled blacksmith, looking down without any mercy. As far as the eye could see, the rough, red-mud pathways were cracked into countless pieces, their open seams showing a deep, parched thirst. Standing in that wide, open landscape, the dry leaves of babool, shirish, and arjun trees rustled as if crying out in pain. When the restless wind of late spring blew over the bamboo clusters and date-palm tops, dry leaves swirled into the air with a crisp sound, only to fall back onto the hot sheet of dust. Behind the old, red-brick, two-storey building of Manteswar Sagarbala High School, the long afternoon shadows were slowly stretching out. The ringing echo of the dismissal bell had faded away long ago into the endless silence of the open fields. In the schoolyard, the hanging roots of an ancient banyan tree swayed in the lazy breeze, like a silent witness standing across ages to watch the entire history of this soil. When Animesh stepped down from the school verandah and put his foot on the pedal of his old bicycle, the leather bag hanging from his shoulder felt quite heavy. He was the history teacher at Manteswar Sagarbala High School. Nearly seven years had passed in this routine of white chalk dust, wooden dusters, broken classroom benches, and the loud shouting of teenage boys. Looking at his own life, he sometimes felt that he was just like the blackboard—dull, grey, and hard from the outside, but if

someone rubbed a hand over him, fine particles of sad memories and unspoken desires would drop right off. Having just crossed thirty-one into thirty-two, Animesh looked very calm and peaceful behind his thick-framed glasses. From the headmaster of the school down to any ordinary village farmer, everyone would describe him in a single breath as an ungreedy, quiet, and deeply polite mastermoshai. But who really knows about the dark, bottomless lake that stays hidden in the human subconscious—a place where sunlight never enters, and where all kinds of poisonous lotuses bloom in silence? The wheels of Animesh’s bicycle rolled forward, kicking up the red dust of the quiet mud road going toward Kusumgram. The light at the end of Chaitra had a strange, magical quality. Even though the heat of the sun had gone down, the air kept a sticky, humid warmth that brought out tiny drops of sweat on the skin. On both sides of the path lay the worn banks of a dry canal, with the occasional, lazy call of a dove from the branches of kadam and jarul trees. Such quiet surroundings always make a man’s inner thoughts sharper. As he pedaled, Animesh felt a strange, light trembling deep inside his chest. He knew that exactly

three kilometers down this road lay the old culvert, and that he might meet Sharmistha there again today. Sharmistha. The moment the name echoed inside his mind, his grip tightened slightly on the cycle's handlebar. At the same time, his blood seemed to run a little faster. Sharmistha was a teacher at a primary school in Kusumgram, and she also taught drawing to small kids in a tiny yard of her home. But her biggest identity—the one that served as juicy gossip in every idle tea-stall adda

across Manteswar and Kusumgram—was that she was a divorced woman. About three years ago, her three-year-old marriage to a businessman from Durgapur had completely shattered. What Sharmistha had gained or lost from that relationship was written down in court files and legal papers; the villagers only knew that this proud, self-respecting, and strikingly good-looking girl had come back all alone to her father's ancestral home. Society always looks at a solitary woman without a male guardian through suspicious, curious eyes. And if that woman happens to be intensely attractive, then people talk even more. Sharmistha was the kind of woman whose beauty did not depend on any makeup. Her skin tone was bright, like the fresh morning sun of early summer in Rarh. There was an unattached, deep sadness in her eyes that was bound to stir any sensitive man’s heart. There was an unbroken pride in the way she walked and talked, but behind that pride lay a bottomless loneliness. Animesh’s acquaintance with Sharmistha was not sudden. They had been classmates during their days at Burdwan University. Back then, Animesh was a quiet, shy student, while Sharmistha was the shining star of the university campus. Even in those days, Animesh used to look at her from a distance with admiration, but because of his poor family background and timid nature, he never had the courage to step close. By an irony of fate, when Sharmistha cut off all ties two years ago and moved into the old family house in Kusumgram, they met again at the Manteswar bus stand. That was where it began. In Animesh, Sharmistha found someone she could completely rely on. In this selfish world of predatory men, Animesh felt like a rare, selfless exception to her.