

Afifa

Where Love Defies Borders

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BlueRose ONE^{.com}
S t o r i e s M a t t e r
New Delhi • London

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

India | U.K.

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BlueRoseONE
S T O R I E S M A T T E R
New Delhi • London

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ISBN: 978-93-7825-486-4

Cover Design: Deepak Katheria

Typesetting: Manisha Rawat

First Edition: March 2026

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Fallen Sky

4:30AM, An orange blazing Sun rising over the oceans in the clear blue sky, an aero plane piercing the fireball, landed on runway 4, at Indira Gandhi international airport, Visakhapatnam, India. Sam (myself) a 24 year old boy, looks very languid, my shoulders drooped as low as possible, wearing a blue shirt with a torn pocket and cream color trousers which almost turned into black, a long beard might be one month old, bare footed, smelling like a rotten fish walked out of the plane, looks like it would take ages to walk out of the airport, absolutely flagging I lost all the energy in my body as all the fluids got dried up. I gathered myself and walked past the airport, went straight to the public telephone booth and dialed +92 323 431669 with my shivering index finger. I started getting more and more worried with each time I dialed the number. I tried some hundred times but all in vain as it was saying "this number is unavailable". I never wanted to give up, but person next to me was urging me for the phone. Finally I had to hang up the call and took a taxi to Atlantis Apartments, Road number 10, Opposite Sivaji Park. I reached home in around one hour, got down the taxi, dragged myself and knocked the door. My dad opened the door, on seeing me he shouted "Reena, Sam has come", my Mom on listening to my dad, ran from the kitchen very anxiously. They both yelled at me "Sam, what happened to you my son? Where were you all these days? You know how much we were worried about you, we even filed a missing case". I didn't utter one single word. I went straight into my bedroom and fell flat on my bed. Mon and Dad decided to give me some time and left me alone in my room. No one disturbed me till the next morning. As the Sun broke out, Mom brought an aromatic bed coffee to me and tried to wake me up calling " Sam, get up its already 9 in the morning, have a cup of coffee" I didn't get up as I was wide awake last night, thinking why that number was unavailable? Mom was back with coffee after an hour and still no

response from me. For the third time after an hour or so Mom came back to me again to wake me up, but I was already up and lying on the bed counting stars through the roof. Mom offered Coffee and said "go to washroom and get ready, your breakfast is waiting at the dining table". I took the coffee cup and sipped though not for taste but for the little energy I required to reach the washroom. I had a lazy bath and then ate some breakfast. I grabbed mom's mobile and started ringing the same number again and again, only to listen "this mobile is unavailable ". Dial and dial and more dial was the motto. With the increasing number of times I was calling the number my hopes of reaching it was diminishing. Time date and day has become irrelevant to me, it's been more than month since I saw the sun or the moon. Eating, drinking, sleeping have become frivolous to me, on my mom's resilient requests I was eating a meal in two days or so. I felt life in my corpse has no meaning and decided to take the ultimate step. I took a shaving blade from the shelf and cut my veins. Blood gushed out of my veins with it my pulse dropped and I went subconscious. No one noticed me the whole night in that state.

Next Morning

Sanhita screamed daaad dadddyyy

Come fast

Dad came running and found me flat on the floor in a pool of blood

They immediately rushed me to the hospital. Doctor cleaned the sticky blood on my arms which bled for more than an hour, and dressed the wound. After being put in ICU for a day and injecting two packets of blood and three packets of saline I was taken back home on Doctors advice. From then on my parents made a conscious effort to accompany me all the time.

One day, I was sitting beside Mama at the dining table, poking the bread omelet with the fork in my hand. Mama asked me, "Why don't you write the GRE, Sam, for which you have prepared with passion all these years?"

My concentration was suddenly drawn toward a voice I could hear very faintly saying, “Phari hoon main,” from Sanhita’s bedroom. The voice felt very familiar. Suddenly, I dropped the fork, pushed the chair back, and ran into Sanhita’s room with a sense of expectation, only to feel disappointed on seeing Aditi. She is a distant relative from my dad’s side. She did all her schooling in the valley region of Jammu and Kashmir and has come here to pursue her bachelor’s degree in Medicine at one of the colleges in the city.

Aditi was beauty personified, a masterpiece from Khajuraho. She wore dresses as if they were stitched onto her body. She was a perfect fusion of North Indian style and South Indian beauty. A Telugu girl who speaks more Urdu than Telugu because she was born and brought up in the Muslim-dominated valley region of Jammu and Kashmir. If there was anything that could give me a little peace and tranquility, it was Aditi’s voice. I felt peaceful whenever she was around, talking to me. Since no one at my home was comfortable with Urdu, Aditi spoke in English with them, but now and then Urdu words rolled out of her mouth involuntarily. That divine voice soothed my pain. Being someone who doesn’t like to live with a heavy heart, I was searching for solace in Aditi.

It was around 8 A.M. I was in bed when I was disturbed from my sleep. I came out to the lawn to check what was happening. Aditi, dressed in a pure white salwar kameez, came running toward me from my left side and shouted, “Sam, mooove!” On hearing her, I turned toward her, and before I realized what was happening, Aditi collided with me head-on and then ran past me undisturbed. Behind her, Sanhita and her friends were running. Some held balloons filled with Holi colors, and others had sprinklers. They burst the balloons and splashed colors on Aditi.

I stood there unmoved even after the collision. She came back toward me from my right side, her clothes now wet and yellow, and yelled at me, “Sam, it’s all because of you I got caught! Why do you stand so dumb, mannn?”

I could hear nothing. I had gone into a state of shock, looking at Aditi in her wet clothes.

Soon after, I forgot about that hit, but it had started working on Aditi. She couldn't forget that head-on touch. Whenever she closed her eyes, she could see that moment right in front of her. And eventually, that made Aditi like me or rather, fall in love with me.

The sun was already bright when Sanhita and Aditi finished getting ready, dressed in casual comfort with a splash of excitement. They stood near the front door, bags slung over their shoulders, ready to indulge in some long-overdue shopping.

Sanhita looked around and frowned.

"The driver's still not here," she murmured, stepping back in.

"Mom, how are we supposed to go?"

My mother, ever calm, answered from the kitchen without turning, "Ask Sam to drop you."

Sanhita sighed, already anticipating the effort this would take. She walked down the corridor to my room and peeked inside. I was lounging on his bed, flipping through a magazine with unreadable focus.

"Sam," she began, standing in the doorway, "the driver hasn't come. Can you take us out for shopping?"

I didn't even glance up. A dismissive shake of my head. "No," I said flatly.

She tried again, a bit softer this time. "Please, Sam. Just a couple of hours."

The response was identical, without eye contact, without emotion.

Sanhita was about to protest again when Aditi stepped forward, placing a gentle hand on her arm to stop her. Then, taking two steps towards my room, she spoke, not loudly, but in a voice that floated like music.

“Sammm,” she said, her voice playful and serene. “Please, can you come with us?”

Something about the way she said my name, like a gentle breeze brushing past a quiet lake, made me lose grip of the page I was reading. I looked up, hesitated for a second longer than usual and then spoke.

“Oh... sure,” I said quickly. “Please wait downstairs. I’ll change and come.”

Sanhita stood there, stunned. Her eyebrows rose as she slowly turned toward Aditi, who smirked knowingly.

“Phari hoon main,” Aditi said with a wink. “No one can reject me.”

They burst out laughing as they walked downstairs.

I joined them soon, dressed in my usual jeans and a casual tee. To Sanhita, I looked the same as always. But to Aditi, there was something inexplicably charming about me today. She couldn’t look away.

I took the driver’s seat. Sanhita settled next to me, while Aditi quietly slid into the back.

“Where are we going?” I asked, turning the key in the ignition.

Sanhita half-turned toward Aditi, as though seeking confirmation. “Take us to Shoppers Stop,” she said, subtly passing the message to both.

Aditi nodded with a faint smile. She wasn’t sure where else to go as Visakhaptnam was still new to her, and shopping wasn’t really on her mind.

Sanhita, however, was in full form. Her words bubbled over with excitement as she pointed out landmarks, malls, and favorite spots.

“Hey Aditi, look there! That’s Mehak the best for designer dresses. I bet you’d love it.”

Aditi didn’t respond.

“We’ll come here next time, okay?” Sanhita added, glancing at her friend.

Still nothing.

“Aditi? What say?”

Sanhita, still caught up in her enthusiasm, didn’t immediately notice. But as she turned to follow the reflection of a passing store in the car window, she caught sight of something else. Aditi, gazing at me through the rearview mirror. Her expression was unreadable, but her eyes were fixed on me like a puzzle waiting to be solved.

Sanhita smiled to herself and didn’t interrupt.

After a few minutes, Aditi broke the silence.

“Sam,” she said casually, leaning slightly forward. “Do you look at girls on the road while driving?”

I gave a short nod. “Yes,” I said quietly.

“What do you look for in girls?” she asked, teasingly.

I stayed silent.

“Come on,” she persisted. “What catches your attention? What interests you?”

More nods. A few more yes-no replies. Nothing revealing.

Their playful banter was cut short as Sanhita suddenly shouted, “Sam! Take a right and stop here.”

I hit the brakes, stopping just in time.

The girls stepped out, and Sanhita practically dragged Aditi into the store, even as Aditi kept glancing back at me, while I was parking the car.

Inside, Sanhita was lost in her world of fabrics and colors, while Aditi stood near the entrance, caught between racks of clothes and her thoughts about the man sitting outside. Torn between helping Sanhita pick dresses and the curiosity tugging at her heart, she

eventually found herself back with me, I was now seated on a bench facing the street.

When Sanhita went into the trial room, she left the both of us alone intentionally.

Aditi took a seat beside me. Over the next two hours, she tried to peel back the layers of my silence, asking question after question. But even after all that time, she walked away with little more than a few monosyllables and an even deeper curiosity.

Sanhita reappeared with two dresses in hand. But this time Aditi didn't want miss the seat beside me, she came running as I drove the car to them from parking. Actually Sanhita was close to the door but Aditi pushed her aside and sat in the hot seat. Aditi tried as much as possible to make me speak but all her efforts went in vain. The outing was over

Back home, everyone went their separate ways. I disappeared into my room, as usual. Aditi entered hers, disheartened and heavy with questions.

Later that night, after dinner, Sanhita and Aditi lay on their beds, lights dimmed and hearts quieter.

"Why do you look so dejected since we came back?" Sanhita finally asked, propping herself up on her elbow.

Aditi turned to her, eyes curious and lips ready. "Why does Sam look so... dumb? I mean, the guy barely talks, but look at his room, his style, his bike, he's clearly not what he pretends to be. He must have a story."

Sanhita's face softened. "How come you predicted that so well?"

Aditi shrugged. "Phari hoon main. Mujhe sab pata chal jaata hai."

"Okay, okay, enough with that," Sanhita laughed.

"Now tell me," Aditi leaned forward, serious. "What's his story?"

Sanhita sat up, her tone shifting. "I can tell you what he was like as a kid. As a brother, as a student. But... the story behind his

silence? He never shared it. Not with us, not with anyone. We're more worried than curious. Whatever happened... it broke something inside him. Reopening it might only make it worse."

Aditi nodded slowly. "Okay... let's leave that for now. But tell me everything else. I want to know him. All of him."

Sanhita smiled, moving closer. "Alright. Let me take you back to the beginning..."

Regarding his college and friends ...

They are fantastic four, Nilesh, Ravi Tej, Hafeez and Sam, they were a rock band, they even won many junior level competitions, Sam plays lead guitar, Nilesh is a drummer, Hafeez writes songs for them and Ravi Tej and my brother composes them. They are never short of energy. That is one reason why his room is so vibrant and the guitar that hangs is the one he plays.

As a student he is good, he is not very ambitious about career but dreams to live in US. He even writes short stories, he is mad of cricket more than anything else.

This is shortly about Sam

Wait I will show you a story written by him it's in my shelf

Sanhita handed aditi the story she took from her book shelf

Oasis

It is time to kiss good night and slip into dreamland for sandy. Night is so cold and winds are whistling past her ears from the window on her right touching her face ever so tenderly. The night is dark but sandy finds angelic light in her dream, sandy heard divine voice calling her as she turned her face she could see heavenly light showing her two ways.

One is a long winding metallic black top road with white rose gardens on either side, a red Audi parked at the blocks as she is staring through the way, she finds lots of horses, casinos, gold,

diamonds, color full people partying so much of joy and after a brief darkness she finds cars being dumped into hell fire people weeping gnashing teeth so much of bloodshed everywhere, brothers fighting with sisters and no one to hear them.

The other way looks very clumsy and narrow with thorny bushes, muddy roads, as the way passes by she finds green fields swaying like saying yes to everything, birds flying in serene blue skies and rivers flowing, people are looking very much disciplined with subtle emotions on their faces a satisfied kind but no freebies what so ever and after some silence she finds people very peaceful happy enjoying a sense of calmness and so on.

God gives her ample time to pick a way. Sandy after thinking hard day and night picks the way that looks best at the outset She is not worried about tomorrow her theory behind is live today and she opted out way two very easily.

Things that appear tempting, lucrative, and awesome may lead to endless sorrows. On the other hand, seemingly difficult things such as exercising self-control and sacrifice may lead to unimaginable bliss.

Aditi read it very carefully oh it's so intense he thinks very deep. I guess he is God fearing too. By the way did he ever fall in love Sanhi

Yeah that facet of his life I'm not very sure of, I heard like he is a lover boy kind, but don't know if he seriously loved anyone. It was already too late in the night so Aditi couldn't talk or ask much about me. Sanhita said good night and went to sleep. But Aditi spent her time on bed thinking about me.

Aditi incessantly tried to grab my attention and I was also happy spending time with her though not interested in making any relationships but to hear that angelic voice which sounded to me like George Benson's love song. I, though was not close to my normal, began to think about my career. Me and Aditi were doing combined studies though different subjects, but together we were

getting inspired and were also sharing some lighter moments to relax.

April 1st fools' day with a view to make pranks Aditi has poured some red color on her arm tied a white chunni over it and holding that part of her arm with other hand came into my room shouting Sammmmm, pretending to be in great pain. Just after finishing the bath, I came out of the washroom with my wet hair. Water drops were dripping from my hair onto the heavily built chest. Flowing, over my 6 pack abs and finally getting absorbed on to the towel on my torso. I am an absolute mancho. Aditi forgot what she came for. I didn't notice her hands but asked her with a gesture why she has come. Aditi took a pen from near-by side table showed me and went out. She went back to her room but with my mancho image locked in, which was not ceasing from her eyes.

In the evening Sanhi came back from the college. Aditi and mom were watching some sops very interestingly on TV. On seeing Sanhi

"Come and watch your favorite serial Jaldi aana Sanhi", urged Aditi

Sanhi didn't answer, but went straight into her room

After the program is over Aditi went to Sanhi with a coffee to offer her

"Hey Sanhi come let's have a coffee", pleaded Aditi

Sanhi got up and took the cup

"How is your day at the college", inquired Aditi

"Nothing special"! Said disheartened Sanhi

"Phari hoon main, I know everything, tell me the truth", teasingly said Aditi to make the weather light.

Sanhi spoke with a heavy heart.

“It happened like this. Rahul and I have been good friends since the day I joined engineering. We share our books, study together, watch movies together, and do all kinds of fun things. There has always been a rumor in our class that we are in love. I’m not even sure whether I ever truly had feelings for him. I always felt that he treated me as nothing more than a friend, so I never allowed myself to nurture any deeper emotions for him.

But this morning, while I was walking down the corridor toward the classroom, he came running up behind me and said, ‘Hey, San, I need to talk to you today. Please wait after class.’ I said okay and went inside.

After the first lecture ended, he stepped out, maybe to get some water and while passing by the window near my seat, he reminded me again. Varsha, who was sitting beside me, asked what Rahul wanted. I told her he had asked me to wait after class, saying he needed to talk about something.

She immediately began teasing me. ‘Maybe he’s going to propose to you today,’ she said.

I didn’t deny it. Somewhere deep inside, I had been sensing the same thing since morning. My mind was filled with thoughts of what he might say and how I should respond. And though I tried to remain calm, I felt a quiet happiness blooming within me. I found myself waiting... almost hoping.

During the lunch break, he reminded me yet again.

I waited for five long hours, wrapped in anticipation that seemed endless. When the final bell rang and the day was over, we girls began walking out first since we sit near the door. I deliberately slowed down, allowing the others to move ahead so that Rahul could call me easily.

I could sense him pushing his way through the boys in our class. Then I heard him call out, ‘Sannnn... wait!’

I turned and stood there as he made his way toward me. He let all our classmates pass by before coming closer. In his hand, I noticed

a small white envelope decorated with a red heart and tiny hearts scattered all over it.

My heart began to pound.

He handed me the envelope and waited for my reaction. I opened the cute little cover, my fingers slightly trembling. Inside was a small piece of white paper. I slowly pulled it out and turned it over.

There was a date written on it.

APRIL 1st.

For a moment, I didn't understand. Then it struck me.

Rahul burst out laughing, jumping up and down as he watched my tense expression crumble. It was an April fool's joke.

I had never felt so foolish in my life.

Maybe he didn't realize what I had been going through all day, the hope, the nervousness, the silent dreams I had built in just a few hours. I can't even say he was wrong. After all, it was I who had allowed my imagination to run too far.

I didn't say a word. I didn't want to reveal my feelings in front of him. I simply walked away and came home as quickly as I could.

Since then, I haven't been able to stop crying, more for my broken heart than for my foolishness.

"Ooh so very sad dear Sanhi! I'm very sorry about that", Aditi expressed her concern towards her

"No no it's okay by one or two days I will be back to my normal, but he has raised unnecessary hopes in me. Anyways I can live with it and we still can continue as good friends". Said Sanhi

Aditi felt the need to help Sanhi out of the situation so she floated the idea of visiting a near tourist spot Araku popularly called Andhra Ooty. Actually people visit this place between November

and February. Thought it is summer, my mom still liked her idea, because even she thought it's been a long time dad spent time with us and also it's more having quality time together rather than enjoying the environment. So we all went on drive and luckily skies opened and rains washed the leaves to a beautiful green color and the roads to pitch black with the wetness. The road to the resort winds over the mountains with over ten hair pin bends. One side of the road is a steep valley and the other side is huge mountains. The sky was a brilliant white blanket dotted with, and the weather turned out absolutely perfect for us. We have taken many snaps and played in the water falls. We had a good dinner with bongulo chicken (chicken roasted in bamboo sticks) which is a special in these area. It's truly delicious. We didn't book any room for night stay as we are very confident of getting rooms at will, as it is un-season. We went to take rooms at luxury in a nice hotel blue heaven restaurant and lodge but only one big room was available where we all can easily accommodate because some cinema people has booked all other rooms in and around that area. We had no other option but to check in. Anyways we were quite happy to stay in the same room, fortunately we had three beds.

The moon hung low and bright, casting a silvery glow on the quiet street as Aditi called out to us.

“Come for a walk, guys,” she said cheerfully.

But Sanhi, curled up in her blanket on the couch, shook her head. “I’m too tired, yaar. You two go.”

So it was just me and Aditi. We stepped into the cool night, the air filled with a soft breeze that carried the scent of jasmine and distant rain.

For a while, we walked in silence, the rhythm of our steps syncing with the faint chirping of crickets. I could feel her palm brushing against my hand light, intentional or maybe accidental, I couldn’t tell. Reflexively, I moved a little to the side. But even then, her touch seemed to linger, a warmth that refused to fade.

Aditi broke the silence. “Sam, the weather is so... romantic tonight,” she said with a dreamy smile.

“Yep,” I replied, stuffing my hands in my pockets. “Would be perfect if we had something hot to eat.”

“Sammmm,” she groaned, gently nudging my shoulder. “Stop talking about food! We’ve eaten enough all day.”

I chuckled but turned to look at her, curious. Her eyes, caught in the streetlight, shimmered with something unspoken. She wasn’t just talking about food or the weather.

Then, her voice softened into something nearly musical.

“Sam, what is love for you?”

I blinked. “Love? Uh... love is divine.”

She scrunched her nose. “I don’t want to hear those general expressions. Be specific.”

“What?” I said, caught off guard.

“Have you ever been in love?” she asked, her voice steady but her eyes searching.

“Yeah...” I said slowly, dragging out the word, my gaze dropping to the ground.

“I knew it,” she said gently. “Must be the reason behind your silences. Pyaar mein aksar log kho jaate hain.”

I looked at her, a little stunned. “How do you ..”

“*Phari hoon main,*” she said quickly, cutting me off with a playful sparkle in her voice.

And just like that, something lit up inside me. I could feel it, my face warming, my heart smiling. In the night’s quiet, even the stars seemed to pause.

“Why do you always say that?” I asked, half-smiling.

“My father used to say I’m his angel,” she said, her voice soft and proud. “Aur main apnaliya.”

“That’s... really lovely.”

She glanced at me sideways. “Sam, you always look so happy whenever I say *Phari hoon main*. Why?”

I paused, unsure if I could explain it. “Yeah... that line makes me really, really happy. I don’t know how to put it in words.”

“Then don’t hold back. Tell me the story behind it. And your love story too, everything,” she said, almost pleadingly.

“I usually lose control when someone asks me this,” I admitted, heart beating a little faster. “I’ve been wanting to tell you for a long time. But you’ll need to listen patiently. I... I don’t want to make it short.”

She stopped walking and turned to me fully, her face illuminated under a streetlamp.

“Come on, Sam,” she said. “I don’t mind if this whole night passes by listening to your story.”

I smiled. For the first time in a long time, I felt ready.

“Thanks, Aditi,” I said. And I began.

Where It All Began

It all started when the four of us, Nilesh, Ravi Tej (RT), Hafeez, and I got into GITAM, one of the most prestigious engineering colleges in Andhra. Though we landed in different branches RT and I in Computer Science, Hafeez in Mechanical, and Nilesh in Electronics, we were united in our excitement. We were living our dream. GITAM wasn't just a college; it was a wonderland of freedom, fun, and, let's be honest, stunning girls.

Except for Nilesh who somehow managed to top among us, our mid-sem results were disastrous. But who cared? The vibe of college life, the rush of independence, the parade of gorgeous girls passing us in the corridors, it was intoxicating. If I had been given the task of choosing contestants for Miss India from our campus, I could've easily picked ten. That's how glamorous the place was.

The only real fear was ragging. Those were wild times, and you never knew when you'd be picked on. Still, we survived first year with that burning desire in our hearts, to perform as a band. We had guitars, we had drums, and we had dreams. But we never got a chance to show what we were made of.

Then one day, my phone rang. It was Hafeez.

"Sam! Do you know this?" His voice was bubbling with excitement. "Our college announced the date for the Annual Day celebrations!"

"Oh, is it?" I sat up straight on my bed.

"Yeah, yeah! Since this is the 25th Annual Day, they're going big. Competitions all week music, dance, drama, you name it. And the winners get to perform on stage at a state-level event!"

"LOL! That's brilliant news!" I was already imagining the crowd cheering for our band.

"Yeah, it is... but there's a glitch."

"Glitch? What now?"

“The band needs to have a female singer. Mandatory.”

“Oh no!” I slumped back. “Alright, let's meet tomorrow 10 sharp in the canteen. We'll figure it out.”

The next day, I walked into the canteen straight from home. Hafeez was already there, scrolling through his phone.

“Hi Hafeez!” I said, giving him a high-five as I sat beside him.

“Hey Sam!”

“Where are RT and Nilu? Did you tell them?”

“Yeah, they're on their way.”

I pulled out my phone and called RT.

“Hey Sam, just a minute, we're at the gate.”

Hafeez and I headed out. RT and Nilesch arrived moments later on their bikes. More high-fives, a few laughs, and soon, we were sitting under the big neem tree outside the canteen, our unofficial meeting spot.

Hafeez stood up dramatically, like he was about to give a TED Talk.

“Guys, listen, this is our moment. We've been waiting since first year to perform. This **is** our shot to get famous in college. We can't let it go.”

“Yeah, but what about the female singer?” Nilesch asked.

“Let's ask our classmates, maybe someone's interested,” I suggested.

“Nah, Sam,” RT said. “Let's try with juniors. I think we'll be more comfortable asking them. Plus, we can act a little bossy, it might actually work.”

“Makes sense,” Hafeez nodded. “There's logic in that.”

I frowned. “But they just joined. Will they even agree?”

“Maybe not,” RT shrugged, “but we’ve got to try.”

“Yeah, let’s start with juniors. If that doesn’t work, we rethink,” Nilesh concluded.

So off we went, four hopeless dreamers turned recruiters, walking towards the juniors’ block, starting with Room 101, the junior Computer Science classroom.

As we stepped into the corridor, Nilesh suddenly grabbed my arm and whispered, “Hey Sam, look at that girl in red.”

“The one with the ponytail?” I squinted.

“No man, fourth bench. Loose hair.”

I looked. “Wow... okay, she’s stunning.”

“Yeah, buddy. That’s Noorie.” His voice softened. “She’s... she’s my heartbeat. I’ve had a crush on her for two years.”

“Oh-ho! Sister Red Riding Hood, eh?”

“Shut up, man. She’s mine.”

Inside the classroom, RT clapped his hands and raised his voice with confidence.

“Hey guys! Listen up! Our college is hosting silver jubilee celebrations this month. We’re participating in the music competition, and we need a female singer for our band. If anyone’s interested, please come forward. It’s a great chance to perform live on stage!”

We waited... one minute... two... five.

Nothing. No hands. No hopeful smiles. Just silence.

RT sighed. “Alright, think about it. Here are our numbers, call any one of us if you’re interested. Don’t miss this opportunity! Cheers!” He scribbled the numbers on the board.

As we turned to leave, Hafeez bee lined for Noorie.

“Hi Noorie! How are you? Do you remember me?”

She blinked and smiled politely. "Yes, sir. We were in the same EAMCET coaching batch."

"Yeah, yeah! Right! Hey Noorie, why don't you join us? I think we'll make a great band together. What do you say?"

She shook her head quickly. "No, sir... I'm not interested."

Nilesh immediately stepped in and pulled me away. "Not here, Sam. Let's not push. Let's go to the next class."

I nodded, glancing once more at Noorie, who was now hiding her face behind a book.

The mission had just begun and we were far from giving up.

Nilu pulled me back, don't start here now let's go to the next class

Noorie happened to be his tuition mate in class XI and XII, she made a second attempt to get into GITAM, Noorie was a reasonable singer but she didn't accept our request, actually none of my band wanted her to sing with us because she doesn't fit into our scheme of things but Hafeez pushed hard as he had crush on her.

We had made the same announcement in every junior section hoping, just hoping, that at least one girl would come forward, eager to sing with us. But to our surprise, not a single one showed even the slightest enthusiasm. Not even one.

We waited a whole week for someone to respond.
Nothing.

Just when we thought we did hit a dead end, an unexpected day arrived. Classes had been suspended due to a bandh, and we were all gathered in our classroom playing antakshari to kill time.

That's when I saw her.

Sita.

A chubby girl with a warm, sweet smile and a voice that caught my ears the moment she sang. There was something about her voice, sweet with just a hint of huskiness, like the breeze brushing through old trees. She wasn't loud or flashy, just natural. Effortless.

I nudged RT. "Hey... She's the one. That's the voice we've been looking for!"

RT barely glanced at me. "Hmm?" he murmured, pretending not to hear.

Later that evening, the four of us, me, RT, Nilu, and Hafeez gathered at Nilu's place. The minute we settled down, I couldn't hold back.

"Guys! I found the one. I mean it. Sita she sang during antakshari today. I'm telling you, her voice is just perfect!"

Nilu's eyes lit up. Hafeez grinned.

But RT? He remained quiet.

"You heard her too, right?" I asked, turning to him.

RT nodded slightly. "Yeah," he said in a low tone. "I heard her." He hesitated, then added, "But I don't think she'll sing with us. Even if she wants to, her parents won't allow it. She won't go against her dad."

"Why are you so sure, RT?" I asked.

RT leaned back, folding his arms. "I've known her since childhood. Her father's the headmaster at Pitapuram town school. That's where I studied."

"So what?" I argued. "We should at least talk to her. What's the harm in asking?"

RT shook his head. "I'm telling you, it's no use."

Nilu, who had been silently observing the whole conversation while lounging on a nearby chair, suddenly sat up straight.

“Wait,” he said, narrowing his eyes at RT. “Is this the same Sita you used to like in school?”

Me and Hafeez froze. Then we both leapt toward RT.

“Are you serious, man?” Hafeez laughed. “Come on, is it true?”

RT gave a reluctant nod.

That changed everything.

“Then we have to get her into our group,” I said with a grin.

Hafeez jumped in. “Exactly! So? Did you ever propose to her?”

“No,” RT said, shaking his head.

“Why not?”

He looked down. “We were good friends... since school. I never had the guts to tell her. And honestly, I never thought she’d say yes anyway.”

“Well,” I said, placing a hand on his shoulder, “by the end of second year, you’re proposing to her. That’s decided.”

“And why do you think we’re here, huh?” Hafeez added with a wink.

The very next day, Hafeez and I found Sita in the corridor and approached her.

“We have a small music group,” I started. “We’d love it if you could sing with us.”

Sita smiled politely and shook her head. “I’m really sorry, but I don’t think I can.”

Hafeez tried again, earnestly pleading with her. But the answer remained the same.

That moment, I understood. RT was right.

If we couldn’t even convince her to sing with us... how could we ever expect her to fall in love with him?

Some things, I realized, aren't about effort. They're about timing, fate... and a little bit of courage we sometimes never find in time.

After having a good dinner with Sanhi mom and dad I went to my room. Usually we eat dinner together as a family. We as a family always wished to eat breakfast at the same time but Dad eats too early, everyday mom has to feed Sanhi while she dresses up otherwise she would skip her breakfast and I would eat on the run most times.

Before sleep I would like to spend time chatting on my desktop, so I started chatting like any other day

SweetP: Hi Lol!

Sam4frenz: Hi what's up?? What do u like to chat?

SweetP: Your wish

Sam4frenz: Are you up for something Hottt?

SweetP: Anything dear

Sam4frenz: Oh good! Hey what r u wearing now?

Sam4frenz: Hieee Priya how r u?

Priyaluv: Hey Sammm

SweetP: Black tee, red shorts

Sam4frenz: Oh amazing my favourite colors

Sam4frenz: Priya missing u a lot darling

SweetP: Oh is it!!

Sam4frenz: Yep!

Priyaluv: Me too Sam

Sam4frenz: I love you love u love u love u

Priyaluv: Sam I love you da

SweetP: Crazy

Sam4frenz: Yep I love this

Sam4frenz: Priya I go mad when you don't come online yaar

Priyaluv: Please try to understand Sam

Sam4frenz: Wish I'm with you in your room

SweetP: Yeah Sam come please

Sam4frenz: I can't wait

One more window, Sam's getting lucky

Honey : Hi friend

Sam4frenz: Hi honey! What's up?

Honey : What's your name

Sam4frenz: Sam

(I felt she is too slow for my liking)

Sam4frenz : And you?

Priyaluv: Are you busy?

Sam4frenz : No dear I'm with you

Honey : Whatt do u do?

Sam4frenz: Second year B.Tech

Priyaluv : Why are you taking so much time to text?

Sam4frenz : Hey I can't wait, tell me dear

Honey: I'm in first year BTech, Which branch are you in?

Sam4frenz: Priya network issues I love you

Honey: Your future plans?

Sam4frenz: Computers, writing GRE and flying to US

Priyaluv: Don't go crazy Sam I love you too but

Honey : Oh great! I wish to write GRE but my parents don't like me leaving my house

Sam4frenz: Hey sweet you there???

Sam4frenz: It's sad honey dear,

Sam4frenz: Priya I know but still I love you

Priyaluv: Your wish I love you. Bye love

Sam4frenz: Why in such a hurry Priya please stay

Honey : Do you have friends online?

Sam4frenz : Yeah I do, hey what do u like to chat about?

Honey : Only friendly chat and nothing else

("oh! what a waste of time with this girl?" is what I thought in my mind)

Sam4frenz : Hey all4luv !!! How are you doing?

all4luv: Great lol !! You ?

Honey : Why do you call yourselves "sam4frenz"

Sam4frenz : Because I'm always up for friends

Honey : I like this attitude of yours

Sam4frenz : Thanks dear

Honey : Okay

Sam4frenz: Honey dear what's your name?

Honey : Afifa

Sam4frenz: Fine! What do you chat luv?

all4luv: Almost anything under earth

Sam4frenz : Oh great darling

all4luv: You married?

Sam4frenz: No but why?

Honey : Sam catch u later bye

Sam4frenz : Bye dear

Sam's chat with girls continues hotter n hotter till the ice breaks

It was a breezy afternoon, and the college canteen buzzed with its usual chaos, plastic chairs scraping the floor, plates clinking, and bursts of laughter rising above the chatter. I spotted RT and Hafeez already seated at our usual corner table, sipping tea and flipping through their phones.

I slid into the seat next to them.

"Looks like you slept late last night," RT said, raising an eyebrow.

I grinned, stretching lazily. "Yeah, man. Was up chatting with some girls."

RT leaned forward with a smirk. "Anything interesting?"

"Nothing new," I shrugged. "The usual: love, sex, dhoka... same old story."

Hafeez chuckled, setting his cup down. "Where's Nilu?"

Before either of us could answer, a familiar voice rang out, slightly breathless.

"Hey guyz!!!"

We turned, and there he was Nilu, jogging toward us with a grin that said he had something big to share.

"Think of the devil..." I muttered with a laugh.

I glanced at my watch. "Why are you late today? Some special class?"

Nilu shook his head, eyes sparkling. "No, man. Guess what?"

"You were probably busy running around Noorie," I teased.

RT and Hafeez broke into laughter.

Nilu waved us off, but his grin deepened. “Chill, guyz! I actually had a wonderful time with her... at the library.”

“Ooh?” RT leaned in, interested.

“I went there to pick up some textbooks,” Nilu began, “and found Noorie tucked in a corner, scribbling something for an assignment. I asked if I could sit with her and guess what? She said yes, smiling like only she can.”

We all listened, intrigued.

“So I sat beside her,” Nilu continued, his voice softening. “I asked if she remembered anything about me. She looked at me and just said no. Honest, right? I mean, she hardly knew me back then. It was more of a one-sided thing...”

There was a pause, and we could see him travel back in time.

“I thought it was my chance to make an impression,” he went on. “I told her everything, how I used to sit at the back benches just to catch a glimpse of her. How I admired her style... every dress she wore, the matching earrings, bangles, nail polish... even her flip flops. She always knew what looked good on her.”

RT narrowed his eyes. “Wait a minute... I know this story.”

Hafeez grinned. “Bang on! It's *Darr*!”

Nilu rolled his eyes. “Come on, dude. Maybe it sounds like that, but it's real. I genuinely remember all her outfits. I told her everything from the day we walked into her class to announce that singing competition, to every moment I admired her from afar during intermediate.”

Hafeez raised an eyebrow. “Okay, okay, cool. So how did she react?”

“She was surprised,” Nilu said, a bit sheepishly. “But I think I made an impression.”

I nodded. “That's good, man.”

Then, shifting the mood a bit, I added, “Hey, I’ve got to head to the passport office tomorrow. Anyone coming?”

Silence.

Not one of them said yes.

I stood up, brushing imaginary dust off my jeans. “Alright then, guess I’ll miss college tomorrow.”

Starting my bike, I waved. “Bye-bye, guyz!”

And just like that, the group scattered, leaving behind another memory in the corner of the old canteen.

The Beginning of Us

The next morning, I stood in front of the mirror in my room, fixing my collar and checking my reflection from every angle. There was a certain shine in my eyes, maybe it was confidence, or maybe just sleep still refusing to leave.

I flashed a grin at myself.

“Superrr Sam,” I whispered, giving a mock salute. “You’re a hero.”

Just then, Mom’s voice echoed through the house.

“Sam! Come for breakfast!”

“I’m already late, Mom! Got to go!” I yelled back, grabbing my wallet and phone off the desk.

In one swift motion, I dashed out of the room, snatched the bike keys from the center table in the hall, and made a beeline for the door. My shoes clapped loudly against the floor as I raced down the stairs.

Vroom!

The engine roared to life beneath me as I kicked the bike into motion. I sped out of our apartment block like a man on a mission.

Behind me, I heard the faint echo of my mother’s voice, rising with panic:

“Sammeee! Be careful!”

I was probably already a kilometer away by the time her words caught up with the wind. But I heard them anyway.

The passport office greeted me like every government building did, with discolored walls, peeling posters, and a long, winding line of tired faces.

I stopped dead in my tracks, staring at the crowd. "Oh God," I muttered. "Don't tell me I have to stand in this serpentine line."

Shoulders sagging, I joined the line, inching forward slowly like a zombie. My eyes did a quick scan of the people around me, nothing. Not a single girl in sight. The universe was cruel sometimes.

I sighed and leaned back slightly. For a split second, a face flashed through my mind.

Nisha.

A name I hadn't thought of in a while. Or tried not to, at least.

Nisha, my neighbor, my friend, my almost-everything back in Class 12... until we broke up. Or fell apart. Or just... stopped being "us." Since then, I'd trained my mind to skip her like a scratched music track. But for some reason, today, her face appeared uninvited, like a ghost from a half-forgotten movie.

"Why today?" I mumbled. "Why in the middle of a passport line?"

I shook my head and reached into my bag, fishing out my air pods and phone.

Time to connect with the only world that never breaks up with you, music.

Click.

Let the World Connector do its thing.

I pulled out my mobile from the front pocket of the skin fit blue jeans and opened chatting website

Lot of joy bubbling watching so many girls lining up online I Thanked God and whispered in me, "I can enjoy my time at least chatting in this never ending tedious long line".

Sam4frenz: Hi baby doll!! How are you?

Sam4frenz: Hi dreamzunlimited!! How are you?

Sam4frenz: Hiee lovely!!! How are you??

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Sam4frenz: Hi pooja!!!

Sam4frenz : Hi Sita!!!

Surprisingly adding to my woes of standing in the line, not one girl responded to me.

Honey : Hi Sam !

Sam4frenz : Hiee Dear honey! How are you?

Honey : Yeah fine, I guess you are pinging girls unsuccessfully for some time now

Sam4frenz : How do you know?

Honey : "Phari hoon main" mujhe sab kutch pata hojatha hai.

Sam4frenz : Oh wow great!!! These girls don't have manners, they don't even have time to respond, don't understand why they come online.

Honey : Okay

Sam4frenz : Honey dear do you have time to chat now.

Honey : No, I have some work, I came here only to check off liners

Sam4frenz : Oh honey don't say that, dear please please

Honey : Sam where are you now?

Sam4frenz : I'm in worst place possible, standing in a boring long line to apply for passport

Honey : So sad Sam

Sam4frenz : Hey what's your name dear?

Honey : I think I have told you

Sam4frenz: Did u?

Honey : Yep !

Sam4frenz : Okay let me think dear.

Honey : Ok

Honey : If u don mind, please don't call me dear, I'm uncomfortable with it

Sam4frenz : Oh I'm very sorry honey

By then I was sure she would not respond to filthy questions, so I have decided to be very careful in my line of questioning, if I had to pass my time instead of standing alone in the tiresome line. So I double checked before I sent her a message.

Sam4frenz : Honey tell me about your family

Honey : My family is a simple, sweet and small , Abbu, Ammi, Bhayya, Bhabhi and a cute angel

Sam4frenz : I hope it's you, I mean the angel

Honey : Exactly Sam

Sam4frenz : Hey honey how do your Abbu call u?

Honey : Gudiya

“Oh no how cruel! Why don't I get a clue”, murmuring with me

Sam4frenz: How do your brother call you?

Honey : Chutki

Honey : Sam I know your very smart, you can't make me tell my name

Sam4frenz : Oh caught!! You get to know everything.

Honey : “Phari hoon main”

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Meanwhile the clock struck 12 catching everyone's attention in that room striking all pairs of ears 12 times like a church bell, but I was undisturbed, I was happy doing what I'm doing,

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Sam4frenz: Honey what is your favourite dress

Honey: Jeans n tee

Sam4frenz: Hey great!

Honey : But I can't wear except in front of my mirror, even my bro has never seen me in such clothes

Sam4frenz : Oh but y? Is that you wear burka when you go out???

Honey : Yeah it's our tradition

Sam4frenz : Oh k, so if I ask you for a pic you will send me a burka

Honey : Sorry Sam, not even that

Sam4frenz : Why?

Honey : Not even 10 male has seen my face till date, that's how traditional we are.

Sam4frenz : Great dear,

Sam4frenz : Oh sorry, just great no dear

Honey : Hahaha okay okay good boy Sam

Sam4frenz : Tell me about you

Honey : I'm a very simple girl Sam

..... N she continuous

Sam4frenz : I'm very much impressed with you

Honey : What made you get impressed?

Sam4frenz : I never met such a simple down to earth girl in my life, you are a real "Phari"

Honey : Oh is it??

Sam4frenz : Yeah undoubtedly you are simply the best

Honey : Thank you very much Sam

At the counter

Clerk called me "hellooo sir"!

"Oh sorry"! I said

Stretching my hand into the counter I gave him the application

Sam4frenz : Honey please wait, I will be done in 5 minutes

Honey : That's ok Sam, it's already 4 hours since we started chatting today, bye, take care

Sam4frenz : Ok, take care but tell me when next?

Honey : 8PM Bye!

Sam4frenz : Bye!

Honey left the room

Strangely I felt very pleasant in spite of standing 4 long hours in the line, thanks to Afifa. Afifa's magic started working in me all involuntary and natural. After the work is done at the passport office, apparently I was driving in slow motion in the fast lanes, never bothering the blowing horns or speedy vehicles whistling past my ears, I was humming "pyaar tho hona hi tha". I didn't know what to say and how to express the reason for my happiness.

In the evening after finishing my dinner a little early since Afifa told me she will be online by 8PM. I opened the chatting website and was waiting for Afifa in the magical world of chat

SweetP : Hiee lol !!!! Are you up and ready Sam?

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Priyaluv : Hi love !!! Had dinner?

SweetP : I'm alone at my home to night

Priyaluv : Sam today I tried to tell my mom about you, I felt like she is okay with us

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Though reading messages I didn't respond, as I had no heart in talking chatting to them.

Sam4frenz : Honey hello you there ???

Sam4frenz : I'm waiting for you honey

Sam4frenz : Where are you?

Sitting in front of the system I started thinking about our first chat trying to recollect her name

It's almost an hour since I had dinner and sat online

Many girls have come and gone but I cared a damn for them

Oh suddenly her name flashed in my mind AFIFA oh yeah Afifa is her name

Thank God I got her hahaha. Never knew recollecting her name would give me this much joy.

Sam4frenz : Afifaaaaa hello

Seems like my scream reached Afifa

Honey : Wow great !!! Sam you know my name very impressive!!

Sam4frenz : Yeah I'm happy I could do this Afifa Afifa Afifa Afifa Afifa

Honey : Oh o Sam stop practicing now you will never forget I know that

Sam4frenz : Afifa I want to know every little detail about you

Honey : Sure Sam I will tell you

Sam4frenz : I want videos of your house and also would like to know about all members of your family

Honey : Sam I will do one thing tomorrow I will click pictures and send you to your mail I will also write all details in that

Sam4frenz : Afifa you have to make me see your home and family

Honey : Yeah done!!

Sam4frenz : Hey forgot to tell you I wish to see your dresses too

Honey : Crazy Sammm okay no worries

Sam4frenz : So how was your day?

Honey : Absolutely fine!

We continued chatting for hours Afifa slipped into sleep unknowingly

I tried to wake her up but all in vain, finally I too slept but not before Afifa ignited nook n corner of my heart.

As usual I got up very late and checked for the mail from Afifa, didn't find one, I thought she too might have woke up late, as both of us slept very late last night.

After my usual morning routine, I felt something unusual stirring within me, something more than just a good mood or a passing thrill. I was completely, irrevocably lost in Afifa's love. It wasn't something I could contain anymore. Her presence, even from a distance, had already carved a space in my heart too wide, too wild, to keep to myself.

So I decided: I had to share it. And who better than Hafeez, my closest friend, to multiply my happiness?

I pulled out my phone and dialed.

"Hey Haf, where are you?" I asked, trying to sound casual, though excitement bubbled underneath my words. "Come to Taj by 1 PM."

His voice came through, a little surprised. "Why now, Sam? I'm almost at my place for lunch."

"Come on, Haf! I need to tell you something. I can't wait—come fast."

"Why don't you come here instead? We'll have lunch at my place, chill a bit."

I grinned. “No, man. Today, my happiness can’t be contained within four walls. Don’t waste time. Just come. Quickly!”

He let out a resigned sigh. “Okay dude. I’m coming.”

I reached Taj early, parked my bike, and waited in the lobby, my foot tapping involuntarily. My heart felt lighter than usual, as if it were floating somewhere above the roof. A few minutes later, Hafeez walked in, his usual smirk in place.

We exchanged a quick high-five and made our way into the restaurant.

Hafeez slid into the seat across from me and eyed me curiously. “So, Sam. What’s the news? You’re glowing, man. What’s going on?”

I couldn’t help but smile. “Maybe... I’ve fallen in love, yaar.”

His eyes widened. “What?! With who? When did this happen? Wait, is it one of our juniors?”

I shook my head, amused. “Nope. All online.”

He stared at me. “Are you serious, Sam? Or is this one of your pranks?”

“Come on, Haf. Why would I joke about this? I’m dead serious.”

“Oh wow...” he leaned back, folding his arms. “Tell me everything. Who is she? What does she do?”

“Her name’s Afifa. That name alone is enough to make my heart race. She’s doing her B.Tech in an engineering college in Karachi.”

His jaw dropped. “Karachi?! Oh God, Sam, don’t tell me she’s... Pakistani.”

“Yeah, man. She is.”

He blinked in disbelief. “You’ve definitely lost it. You’re crazy!”

I laughed softly, not offended. “No, Haf. Love doesn’t care about borders. I don’t know how this will turn out, but I do know this,

there's a calmness, a fullness I've never felt before. Yesterday morning, within just four hours, everything changed."

"Sam..." he sighed, rubbing his temples. "It's not even a distant possibility. You know how complicated this is, right?"

"Maybe," I murmured, almost to myself. "But my heart doesn't care. It's already hers."

Hafeez sat there in stunned silence. He had always seen me as the practical one, the one with a level head. If this had happened to Nilesh, he might've laughed it off. But with me, it was hard for him to accept.

For the next hour, he tried everything like logic, reason, even guilt, to bring me back to what he called "reality." But I wasn't budging. This wasn't a crush. It wasn't fantasy. It was a feeling deeper than that.

After long conversations, a few arguments, and some heavy silences, we finally left the restaurant.

He still didn't understand. But I hoped... someday he might.

As soon as I reached home I checked for the mail which was at in box longing since 11 A.M

Hi Sam,

Just after I got up I did shoot all these videos for only you, to make it more interesting I'm writing you as a third person describing me, my house, and my family. Hope you will like it

Karachi , capital city of Pakistan looks to be an underdeveloped city, most of the lanes covered with white ash, pockets of areas compete with the best cities in the world and other areas wears a village look, land rates are very cheap at least cheaper than a sedan, even at the core of the city

In the suburbs of the city in a big lane with white ash roads an orthodox simple and small Islam family lives in a small bungalow,

Video 1

Looks very solid like a jail with vibrant purple and green walls and cement color metal gates. It's hard for the morning sun to pierce the walls and the gate in the east.

Video 2

As we enter the big gates and go in we can find a 15*4 open area with sap green grass lawns. A fierce brown tiger (oh not really a tiger it's a dog named as tiger) tied to one of the four orange colored poles in the portico sits beside Abbu, since Abbu doesn't like unknown people coming into the home. Every morning he talks with his customers who waits for him sitting in the very orderly arranged nice cane chairs dressed with rich gold colored cloth

Abbu: If you like the hand work done on the entire saree and the silver embroidery work on the hem we will deliver you by 19th April

Customers: That would be fine but a hint of gold along silver will add color

Abbu: Yeah, it will be done as per your wish

Video 3

As we enter there is a living room, braced with a black sofa set and a tampered glass center table placed meticulously at the center of the living room, a 48" LED TV placed in front of the beautifully painted sunrise orange walls.

Bhayya is watching news channel

T.V news reader: One more blast in the north Karachi since the unrest broke out, Taliban suspected. First round of talks between India and Pakistan sports ministers seems to be fruitful but adding to the woes of Pakistan

Bhabhi: Take tea before it gets cold don't involve too much into news

Ammi shouting from kitchen on the right, next to dining room

Video 4

Ammi: Afifa come down your nastha is ready

On the left there's a bed room for Abbu and Ammi

Video 5

And straight to main door there is a wooden staircase carved with meticulous handwork

Video 6

Leading to first floor on right Bhayya and Bhabhi uses the bed room and to the left Afifa

Afifa shouting from her bed room

Afifa : Coming maa

Video 7

Afifa's bed room wears pink color walls, pictures of mynah, parakeet, robin, peacock hanging to the walls

A koel breaking the doors above the pendulum of the wall clock n kuus every hour, as we open the doors leading towards the entrance there are so many birds in the cages chirping which shows her affinity towards birds

Afifa " Phari " studying first year B.Tech loves her family gets into arguments with Abbu regarding politics n girl freedom which she believes in and fights all day with Bhayya for little things all for fun, shares all intimate stories with Bhabhi and learns from Ammi, in particular she is dad's pet playing with birds is her favorite time pass, she listens to all kinds of English music right from eagles to lady gaga and sufi music pumps her blood reads romantic novels n she depicts herself into the character, carries the mood whole day, plays chess watches Hindi old melodies n

news too coz She is very much interested in politics of Pakistan and freedom for girls.

Above all She is God fearing follows all Islam rituals very strictly, very lovable even today not just her parents even all her aunts kisses her whenever they get a chance to. kind hearted, can't stop tears dripping watching a TV character in pain, very generous even her last rupee she don't mind to donate, always helps hands stretched towards her

Video 8

Some ten vibrant colored chudidhars with so much of work like bindis mirrors etc.,

This white dress is Afifa's fav

So how is this Sam about me my dresses my family and my home

This all you have asked for Sams

Sam4frenz : Afifa wonderful, magical, unbelievable I don't know how much time you spent on all this but you must be a writer!!! Great work!

You have a beautiful house, vibrant family, tiger is ferociously sweet. I loved every inch of your home, the way its decorated is just amazing,

Afifa about you, that was un parallel description I hope God had made only one perfect girl in you Afifa you are truly an ANGEL these are not just words to pamper you every word I spoke is true wish I'm a writer just to describe you the way you are!!

I was in no mood to shut down the system. I waited online for Afifa for more than three hours

Honey : Hi Sam !!!

Sam4frenz : Since Adam was boy many people have called me Sam some million times but I never felt this sweet, (may be because I waited for her for so long, I whispered in myself) u made my worthless name priceless. Oh my gracious God, thank you.

Honey : Come on Sam stop pampering me.

Sam4frenz : Oh no Afifa every word I spoke is straight from my heart.

Honey : Okay baba!!

Sam4frenz : Afifa can I ask u something

Honey : Sure Sam

Sam4frenz : Of course you sent me a video of your room but still I wish to have a closer look of your room, like how well you decorate your room, where do you sit and chat with me, where do you sleep I want every little detail. Can u do it for me?

Honey : Oh k, I like the way you think Sam, understandably very caring for the people close to your heart.

Honey : Jpg1, this is the entrance to my room

Sam4frenz : Wow, good work on the wood.

Honey : Jpg2, my beautiful bed, this is where I sleep n also chat with you lying on the bed when I feel tired.

Sam4frenz : Very pleasant and girly, baby pink shade bed sheets add serenity to the bed and room too. Nice place to relax and enjoy. It's simple heaven.

Honey : Jpg 3, this the wall opposite to my bed, those birds hanging are my favorite, and at the corner is my study table, the most interesting place for me.

Sam4frenz : Your study table yeah it's really interesting Afifa, can you send me a closer pic of that? I can't see every detail there.

Honey : Jpg4, a closer picture of my table, can u see now?

Sam4frenz : Wowiee superb great gorgeous, this angel in the photo must be you Afifa, am I right? You are absolute Goddess!

No response from her for around five minutes

Sam4frenz : Afifa what happened dear ???

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Sam4frenz : Afifa Afifa Afifa you there ???

Honey left the room ...

I was never the same again.

The Casanova in me, who once loved almost every girl on planet Earth, irrespective of caste, creed, or color, lost interest in girls altogether. I was searching for Afifa in every other woman. I was completely drenched in Afifa's love. Maybe I am not the first person to be soaked in her love, and definitely not the last. God made Afifa that way; it's a curse to mankind (only men) that whoever comes across her will automatically fall in love with her, but she cannot love all of them, however true their love might be. It is definitely not the fault of the Afifa Lovers' Union, but the beauty of Afifa, not just her looks, but her attitude. God has blended beauty and character perfectly, without a blemish, but her beauty is largely unseen because of her tradition, the burka.

Since then, I spent most of my time on the chat group waiting for Afifa. I completely avoided chatting with other girls because I was no longer interested in them. My eyes never got tired of searching for the name Afifa—God's own child. But when Afifa came online, my heart sang all kinds of love songs; my face became brighter than the early morning sun, and my smile reached my eyes.

Only a week away from the big day, the music competition and still we hadn't found a girl to sing with us. We were very well prepared; we only needed someone to lend her female voice. Any bathroom singer would do for us. No junior had turned up. Sita was as adamant as ever. Maybe we were left with only one option.

So I called Nilesh.

“Hi, dude!” my voice burst through the line.
“What’s up???”

Nilesh leaned back in his chair. “Relax. What happened now?”

I sighed, the frustration is clear. “We’re just a week away, man. A week. And not a single girl is ready to mix her voice with us.” There was a pause, then I added dramatically, “It’s all on you now.”

Nilesh raised an eyebrow. “On me? What exactly do you want me to do, Sam?”

I didn’t hesitate. “Nilu, you have to make Noorie sing with us, at any cost. By today.” my tone sharpened. “Before we meet in the evening, you have to make her agree.”

For a moment, Nilesh said nothing. Then a slow, confident smile spread across his face.

“Okay, Sam,” he replied calmly. “Leave it to me.”

As scheduled, we all met at our regular spot, which is on the way the juniors take to catch their bus back home. We sit on the cement slabs laid beside the Ashoka trees on either side of the road leading to the exit. It has been our habitual hangout place since we got promoted to the second year rather, since we attained the status of seniors in the college. We were a group of carefree boys who gathered almost every day between 3:00 PM and 4:30 PM, ragging the junior girls who passed by. This one and a half hours we spent gave rise to countless stories that we can tell for years.

“Good news, guys!” I burst into the room, my eyes gleaming.

“Noorie has agreed to join us!”

RT leaned back in his chair, exhaling. “Thank God.”

“Hey, thank Nilu first,” I added with a grin.

RT raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, thanks, flirt. This worked out pretty well for us."

Nilu smirked. "You're welcome, guys!"

Just then, RT nudged me. "Hey lol... look there, that tall, dark beauty."

I turned, and my jaw dropped a little. "Oh wow. Now that's what I call an appealing beauty."

Hafeez squinted. "I think that's Aishwarya, the Mech junior."

RT groaned. "Hey, you idiots, can we focus on the task at hand?"

"Come on, RT," I replied. "We're just killing time till Noorie shows up."

Nilu, already waving at the girl, called out, "Hey Aishwarya! Come join us!"

She hesitated for a second, then walked over reluctantly, perhaps because juniors don't usually say no when seniors call. Aishwarya (Ash), we'd start calling her, stood at around 5'9", with the kind of figure most campus boys wrote poems about her.

Despite the awkward start, we hit it off. She laughed easily, listened more than she spoke, and had a quiet charm that drew you in. But we all knew Nilu wasn't just interested in friendship. Not him. Then again, none of us were saints. Any guy would've wanted more from someone like Ash.

Hafeez, with no subtlety, invited her over to his apartment for a rehearsal meet-up. Surprisingly, she said yes. That kind of set the mood. We were pumped. She was one of us now.

"Hey lol! Noorie's here," RT suddenly whispered.

We all turned. She was walking toward us.

"Hi Noorie!" I waved.

"Hello, sir," she said politely.

“Come, sit with us,” he offered.

“Ash, meet Noorie.”

“Yes sir, I know her,” Noorie smiled.

“Hie Ash.”

“Hi Noorie.”

The two girls exchanged polite greetings. There was an unspoken scan between them, girls do that more sharply than boys ever will.

Nilu clapped his hands. “So, Noorie, we’re all meeting later at Haf’s flat. Come join us.”

“Yeah,” I added. “We’ll rehearse the lines.”

“My mom will bring her famous elaichi chai,” Haf beamed.

“Yeah yeah,” Nilu said. “Aunty’s a legend. Ash is coming too.”

Noorie looked at Ash, probably checking if she was comfortable.

Ash nodded.

Later at Hafeez’s place, we started the session. Noorie rehearsed her lines while RT helped her with the tune. Ash didn’t mind doing chorus; she knew she wasn’t the strongest singer and was okay with that.

After a while, Nilu and Noorie left. The rest of us, me, RT, Haf, and Ash stayed back, sitting in the terrace’s open area.

It was dark now. The air held that mix of post-rain cool and summer heat. Surprisingly, Ash wasn’t in a hurry to leave.

We learned a few things from her that night. She was an only child. Her parents, both doctors, were almost never home. She was used to being alone and maybe, just maybe, she was tired of it.

It felt like she was opening up. It also felt like we were all thinking the same thing, but none of us dared to say it.

The silence stretched. Our throats were dry. It was the first time a girl like Ash, so alluring, sat with us, especially this late into the night. We were nervous. Excited. Awkward.

And then Hafeez, of all people, took the lead.

“Hey Ash... can I ask you something?”

She looked at him cautiously, probably sensing something.

“Did you ever... drink? Or smoke?”

RT and I froze.

Ash blinked, then looked around. The tension was sudden and thick.

And Haf wasn’t done.

“Did you ever... date anyone?”

I swear, RT’s eyes were about to pop. We were in full damage control mode.

Ash’s expression darkened. You could feel the discomfort radiating from her.

Time to step in.

“Hey Ash,” I jumped in, trying to steady things. “Did you like the tunes we composed?”

She smiled faintly. “Yes, sir. They’re quite good.”

“Let’s be friends, then. You know what I mean?”

She nodded. “Yes, Sam.”

“Tell us about yourself. What do you enjoy?”

Ash opened up then, more relaxed. She shared stories, little things about college, childhood, how she spent time alone.

We ended up having a good time, despite Haf’s wrecking-ball intro.

Maybe he thought he needed to act all 'fast' to keep up with someone like Ash. But some girls need conversation, not confrontation.

After we dropped Ash home, me and RT walked back, laughing our heads off.

"Hey lol," RT mocked, "Did you date?"

"Do you smoke?" I added.

Haf was blushing but smiling. "Yaar, I didn't know what to ask! You guys were so silent, I thought I'd break the ice."

"Bro," I said, patting his shoulder, "the question was fine... just not in the first five minutes. And definitely not with all of us staring at her."

Haf shrugged. "Don't you think she has dated though?"

"Maybe," I said. "But even if she had, why would she say it? Anyway, it's late. Let's head home."

Little did we know, it was the beginning of something bigger friendships, maybe more. Time would tell.

Soon after reaching home, of course at 11PM I had a grub very quickly and was online

Afifa has sent me many off-liners so sad I missed her I sent her many messages optimistically waiting to get her online, but she might have slept, one night wasted and slept.

It was D-Day.

The air was charged with nervous excitement, the kind that makes your heart race even before the first note is sung. We were all ready no, more than ready. This was our moment. The rules were clear: one male solo, one female solo, and one group

performance. Out of the three, at least one had to be completely original, lyrics and tune, born from within us.

For my solo, I sang *Nothing's Gonna Change My Love for You*. As the familiar melody flowed through me, I felt strangely calm, as if the song itself was holding me steady. Noorie followed with *Every Night in My Dreams*, and the moment she began, the atmosphere shifted. Her voice carried more than music, it carried emotion, heavy and soaked with feeling. We could sense it, all of us. Nilu felt she was singing for him, and though we tried to brush it aside, a quiet doubt lingered somewhere between us.

Then came the group performance.

Shades of Love.

The song that belonged to us. Written by Haf and composed by RT and me, it was more than just a performance, it was a piece of our collective soul. As we sang, the crowd responded in waves. Applause, cheers, faces lit with excitement. By the time the final note faded, we knew something had shifted.

From that moment on, we were Page 3 people, at least within the walls of our college. Fame, sudden and sweet.

We won, and we won decisively. Hands down. The victory came with an invitation to perform at the next year's gala event, the inter-university competitions. We were floating somewhere near cloud nine, but reality quietly tapped us on the shoulder. The next level wasn't as tempting as it sounded. I had my GRE ahead of me. RT was preparing for the civil services. Nilu and Hafeez were aiming for GATE. We were standing at a tricky crossroads in life, where passion and ambition had to negotiate their terms.

That night, I shared every bit of my joy with Afifa. She listened patiently, delight shining through her words. I could sense her happiness, not forced, not polite, but real. She celebrated my success as if it were her own, and that gave me a deep, unexplainable satisfaction. My achievement felt more meaningful because she was part of it.

Life, at that point, was sailing smoothly.

My relationship with Afifa was growing stronger, deeper with every passing day. I shared my stories with her, both present and past and she listened with warmth and openness. She, too, trusted me with her stories, and I could feel how happy she was doing so. Somewhere along the way, we became each other's safe space.

In college, our band enjoyed a special status. We weren't just another group anymore. Nilu's relationship with Noorie seemed to be going well, and Ash, our ever-cool, common friend, remained unchanged, grounding us all in his quiet way.

Time moved forward. We cleared our second year. Ash and Noorie became seniors. And there we were, standing at an important juncture in life, busy shaping our futures, studying hard, planning ahead... yet never forgetting to make room for laughter, music, and the joy of simply being young.

We were sitting on the ground, doing nothing in particular, letting time drift by as we sipped our cold drinks. The evening felt ordinary, almost lazy, until someone rushed in with the news, Sita's father had met with an accident.

The air changed instantly.

RT and I didn't waste a second. We sped toward Sita's hostel, the road blurring beneath us as urgency pushed us forward. She was already standing at the gate, waiting for an auto, her face pale with fear and uncertainty. RT walked up to her, trying to steady her with words of comfort. He told her he wanted to come along, to be with her, to see her father, who also happened to be his school headmaster.

Sita barely reacted. She wasn't in a state to say yes or no.

And so, without another word, RT and Sita got into an auto and headed toward the bus complex. During the ride, Sita began to speak, softly at first, then through uncontrollable tears. She talked

about how deeply she loved her father, about the warmth of their family life, about moments that now felt painfully precious.

Her father, she said, was meticulous in everything he did. No matter how busy life became, he insisted that the family sit together for breakfast and dinner. Togetherness was non-negotiable. On weekends, he would drive them to movies, exhibitions, or shopping trips to Kakinada in their pearl-white old Maruti 800, simple journeys meant to break the monotony of routine.

Whenever Sita felt disheartened, he had a ritual of his own. He would take her to the banks of the Godavari around sunset. They would sit side by side, watching the river shimmer like molten silver under the moonlight. He would speak to her in a tone only she responded to, dissolving her worries one by one until her heart felt lighter again.

He was the most caring father she had ever known.

Sita cried through the entire journey, memories pouring out along with her tears. RT listened in silence, helpless, his own eyes welling up.

When they reached the town, they rushed straight to the hospital. Sita was taken into the ICU. RT stood outside, peering through the glass window, unable to step in, unable to look away.

Inside, Sita knelt beside her father's bed. His breaths were shallow, fragile. She kissed his temple, her tears flowing like a river that refused to dry. With the little strength he had left, he pulled her closer and whispered into her ear, the only unfinished wish he carried was to see her become an engineer.

He kissed her once more.

And then, quietly, he left this world.

Sita broke down completely. Outside the door, RT stood frozen, tears slipping down his face, powerless to do anything except witness the moment from a distance.

A day or two later, RT returned to college. He chose not to let emotions distract him. For him, his career came first, even before Sita. He buried himself in books, becoming almost unrecognizable, a man determined to shut out everything else.

I, on the other hand, found myself balancing between Afifa and my studies. I still made time to meet Ash and Haf whenever possible, sometimes at their residence, sometimes at a familiar hangout spot.

As for Nilu and Noorie, no one really knew what was going on. At times, they seemed inseparable; at others, distant and withdrawn. Even Nilu appeared confused, unsure of where they stood with each other.

Life, once again, was quietly shifting beneath our feet.

I was sitting in a soft-skills class at the coaching center where I attended my GRE preparation sessions, half-listening to the trainer while my mind drifted elsewhere. My phone vibrated. It was Haf. I quickly sent him a message saying I was in class. A moment later, another message came in, he and Ash were at my house, but the door was locked.

I replied, telling him to take the spare keys from our neighbor. My parents were both at work, and this arrangement was nothing unusual. Haf and the others often treated my place like their own, even when I wasn't around. We shared that kind of friendship, unquestioning, intimate, and trusting. My parents never objected to it either.

So Haf and Ash let themselves in.

They sat on my bed, leaning back against the headboard, the television murmuring in the back ground. More than two hours passed in silence. Haf, normally gentle and composed, found his thoughts betraying him. He tried to focus on the screen, but his eyes wandered despite himself. Ash sat beside him, relaxed and unaware, absorbed in her own world, watching television without a hint of concern.

The longer the silence stretched, the more uneasy Haf grew. His mind twisted with thoughts he neither wanted nor understood. Ash remained unchanged comfortable, casual, untouched by the storm brewing beside her.

It was a Saturday afternoon.

My mother returned home earlier than usual.

She stepped into my room and froze.

The scene before her shocked her sensibilities, Haf sitting stiff and nervous, Ash sprawled comfortably on my bed. To her, it looked inappropriate, unacceptable. Like any mother would, she was deeply upset. Before I even returned home, she had already given them a stern lecture and sent them away.

When I finally arrived, she asked me just one question.

“What is this, Sam?”

Her voice carried a quiet disdain that hurt more than anger ever could. I would have preferred shouting, scolding, anything but that single question loaded with disappointment. I stood there, unsure of how to respond, unsure of how to defend something I hadn’t even witnessed.

Haf and Ash stopped coming over after that day.

Ash was never the same with us again. Haf, however, was left confused and restless. He couldn’t understand what had changed. Was it my mother’s harshness? Or was it the fact that despite spending two long hours alone with him, he had done nothing at all? The questions lingered, unanswered.

Life moved on, but not gently for everyone.

After the traumatic death of her father, Sita’s world turned unbearably dark. She withdrew from her friends, distanced herself even from her roommates. Books lay open before her, but her eyes never truly read them. Her heart refused to stay in the pages. Nights were the hardest, she would suddenly wake up, sitting upright in her hostel room, crying alone in the silence.

Day by day, the signs of grief deepened. Dark circles framed her eyes. Her body grew thinner, her presence fainter.

One day, RT learned about her condition.

Without hesitation, he rushed to her hostel and took her on his bike to the seashore. It was early morning on a full-moon day. They sat on the sand as dawn slowly broke, the sea shimmering under a silver veil of moonlight.

RT spoke softly, carefully choosing his words. He reminded her of her father, of his final wish, his unfulfilled dream of seeing her become an engineer. He told her gently that life wasn't meant to end with those who passed away, but to continue by fulfilling the dreams they had seen for us. The only way to keep her father's soul at peace, he said, was to live with purpose and determination.

As he spoke, Sita stared at the ocean. The silver glow on the waves felt eerily familiar. It reminded her of evenings long ago, sitting by the banks of the Godavari with her father, watching the river shimmer beneath the moon. The coincidence felt divine. Comforting.

For the first time in weeks, her tears dried.

She looked at RT differently then, with gratitude, with intent, with something close to hope. He had brought a fragile tranquility back to her broken heart. He dropped her back at the hostel, but something had changed.

From that day onward, they met regularly. They studied together at the university library. Whenever despair crept back into Sita's mind, RT's words echoed within her, reminding her of her father's dream. Slowly, steadily, she found strength in fulfilling that wish.

And for that timely intervention, that quiet persistence, she would always be grateful to RT.

Meant to Be

Most of my days were spent at home, buried in GRE preparation. RT, Nilu, and Haf were also consumed by their own competitive exams, leaving little time for anything else. Our only reprieve came every Saturday, when we met for at least an hour at our favorite hangout, Sea View Coffee Shop, right by the beach. A cup of tea in hand, we would exchange updates, about girls, about our studies, about life, before we drifted back into our solitary routines.

Outside of books and exams, I spent my time with Afifa. Our conversations had grown longer, warmer, more frequent than ever. And I noticed something subtle but thrilling: though I often called her “dear,” she never minded. That small acceptance felt like a breakthrough, a tiny door opening between us. There was a difference, I realized, between simply calling her “Afifa” and saying “Dear Afifa.” The latter made her closer, made my heart swell in a way that words could barely contain.

I found myself speaking her name in every possible permutation, “Afifa,” “Dear Afifa,” “Afifa Dear” softly, repeatedly, in my mind. Even on paper, I couldn’t resist. Any scrap of paper, any page in my books, any corner of a newspaper, I would write her name or circle the letter “A” wherever I saw it. I had finished reading all the GRE words starting with alphabet “A” long ago, yet I read them every day without fail. That letter had become sacred, a symbol of my love for her. And with each passing day, my feelings deepened. It was no longer a quiet affection, it was a storm building inside me, impossible to conceal. I knew I could no longer wait. It was time. Now or never. I had made up my mind: I would tell her how I felt.

I tried to prepare myself, mentally and emotionally, for the moment I would pour out my heart. Nervous energy buzzed through me as I sat on the balcony, mobile in hand, waiting for

Afifa to come online. Outside, a soft drizzle fell, and the cool breeze brushed against my face, carrying the scent of rain. The wet black roads gleamed under the glow of a white LED streetlight.

Across the street, I saw a couple returning home, laughing, playing small pranks on each other as if the world belonged only to them. They didn't mind the drizzle, didn't notice the wet shoes or the cold air—they were lost in each other's love. Watching them, a strange warmth filled my chest. Maybe this was all anyone needed in life: a love so simple, so pure, it made every day feel blessed. My heart bubbled with the thought, but also with anticipation, as I waited for Afifa to appear on my screen.

And in that quiet, rain-kissed moment, I knew: tonight, everything could change.

Sam4frenz : Hi Afifa! Hello you there???

Honey : Hieeeee Sam !!! How are you? How is your day?

Afifa seems to be in a very good mood the way she addressed using so many eees after hi gives me a clue. I thought it's the right time for me to express my love. So I wanted to set up the congenial ambience first.

Sam4frenz : Afifa Dear, the weather in Vizag is very romantic.

Honey : Oh is it ??

Sam4frenz : Yep, it's drizzling here. Hey someone is playing Pyaar tho hona hi tha song nearby my room.

Honey : Great song, even I love it.

Sam4frenz : Do you agree with Ajay Devgan?

Honey : Yeah partly

Sam4frenz : Do you think you are an exception

Honey : Don't know Sammm !!

Sam4frenz : Afifa may be this is the time I need to express myself,
I can't hold back.

Honey : Whattt??

Sam4frenz : Afifa I know your family lives on tradition, I know
your Abbu is an orthodox man, I know you didn't even like me
calling you dear, of course finally you agreed to. I know your
country and my country are always at war, I know ,,,,,, this list
goes on and on, yeah I know all this, in spite of knowing all this
to my mind I don't know why my heart beats only for you, I....I
,,,,,, I can't stop myself from

Ok wait let me have a glass of water ..

(I took a deep breath,...)

Afifa I Love you.

Oh Godddd finally I'm relieved

After a brief silence

Afifa went offline.

Sam4frenz: Afifa hello Afifa wait wait

In spite of me requesting Afifa to stay online she walked out

As usual I was waiting for Afifa to come online but this time I was
deadly anxious, many questions are raising in my mind,

What happened to Afifa?

Will she accept my love?

Will she openly reject?

Will she come online again?

Will she chat with me? ???? ???

My heart and soul were burning with fire

I'm dying with so many unanswered questions lingering in my
mind.

I was praying "Jesus please help me, I know you are an all-powerful God.

Please bring back Afifa to me,

This was my prayer every day every hour

One full day completed. The day passed on like I was tied to a bulky time truck and asked to pull the minutes and hours hand. No signs of Her

Second day was even more heavier.....

Third day

Fourth

Fifth.....

Sixth.....

After a weak, on one fine day Afifa has come online

Honey : Hi Sam!! How are you?

At the sight of Afifa, Volcano in me got cooled

Sam4frenz : Hey Afifa ,, Hieeeee I'm so very happy to see you online

Thank you Jesus, Thank you very much

Honey : Why so much happiness Sam

Sam4frenz : Afifa you come and see me you will know what went through me all this week and what a great relief it is to see you again online

Honey : Sorry Sam, for keeping you waiting

Sam4frenz : Hey dear don't be sorry, I'm happy you are back, don't like to recollect past weak

(I was thinking in myself shall I ask her about my proposal

Shall I or no ?? I was getting mad whether or not to ask her, my hands were shivering, my knees were knocking and my palms were sweating)

Honey : Sam why are you silent?

Sam4frenz : How was your last week? How did it go?

Honey : Equally terrible

Sam4frenz : Why Afifa ? Had any problem at home? Is everyone safe there??

Honey : No darl !

Sam4frenz : Hey you called me "darl" oooh God I have to mark this day as the best day of my life. Afifa there can't be a better day for me in my entire life.

I have opened calendar in my phone n marked it with a red heart

Honey : Sam this madness of yours is killing me

Sam4frenz : What ? Afifa you are driving me crazy. Do that expression mean you love me too.

Honey : Why not Sam.

Sam4frenz : Oh God why are you so kind to me today Afifa. I may die of this happiness

(I jumped up and down on my bed I ran all around my room I was at the peak of my happiness I never knew I would behave like this when I'm over joyed. I was thanking God as many times as possible for making this happen)

Sam4frenz : Afifa I can't bliv what I'm reading here did u say "why not Sam" oh ho ho did you mean you are loving me

Honey :Yes Sammmmm yes I love you

Sam4frenz : Afifa I love you I love you I love you I want to say this 1000times and more even then I will not be satisfied

Honey : Sam I know you right from the day I have seen you online I know you are perfect.

Sam4frenz : Hey dear you have a story for me. Isn't it. Come on honey tell me I can't wait any more.

Honey : The very first time I have seen your name online I don't know why but I felt to make relation with you, I never knew how far it would go. But I know some divine power has pulled me towards you.

Sam4frenz : Oh God, and then ..

Honey : I know initially you thought I don't fit in your scheme of things. But someone in me was telling you will change. I have observed first signs when we chatted the day you stood in line for passport.

Sam4frenz : Afifa you are absolutely true. Your observation from across borders is phenomenal. I felt a kind of serenity depicted in me. After u went offline I was humming this same song " Pyaar tho hona hi tha" that day. Amazing dear!! How do you get to know all this?

Honey : You know " Phari hoon main ", actually I was wishing that you would propose me that day itself

Sam4frenz : Afifa frankly by then, even I don't know I was loving you. It's only after I was offline I started realizing. But you read my heart before me.

Honey : Yeah. But Sam when you asked me my name that day I was deeply disheartened

Sam4frenz : I'm very sorry dear

Honey : I know if it's God will you will recollect my name. Amazingly in our next chat you have called me by name main Allah ko hazaar bar shukriya adha kiya.

Sam4frenz : I felt so very happy by God's grace I could recollect your name

Honey : Do you know Sam I was jumping up and down in my room that day exactly like what you did just now.

Sam4frenz : Hey Afifa you are like you see me tumhe sab kuch paatha hojatha hai kyon ki Phari hona tum

Honey : Ha ha ha you are so sweet Sam you know I read you with heart, I know each of your moves

Sam4frenz : Honey you are truly amazing. How could you act so numb all these days?

Honey : Sam you know about our family and tradition. I'm not allowed to love. Not even a Pakistani Islam boy. I tried very hard to restrict myself from chatting with you. But Sam you are truly magical, I don't know how you made me love you so much. The more I was loving you the more I was getting sad, I know someday this has to vanish. This is the very reason why I go missing for some days. I go through a lot of pain refraining myself from coming online. But your love has always won over me. You always pulled me Sam. You are magnetic.

Sam4frenz : Yeah I know. I realized it very early in our relation. So I always tried to keep myself away from loving you. I always tried to be light hearted with you. But it was impossible

Honey : Same here Sam the more I tried to avoid you the more I loved you.

Sam4frenz : Afifa it's great listening to your side of love. I'm excited to hear more.

Honey : Sam when you asked me for videos in my room I knew your intentions behind. I wanted to show you myself as you are wishing in your heart, so I have purposefully put that pic of mine on the study table which usually would be in my Abbu's room so that you can see me.

Sam4frenz : You are spot on! And when I have asked for the closer pic of the table second time you knew I wanted to see you?

Honey : Yeah I knew and I was very happy not only for showing you my pic and also for you behaved exactly the way I read your mind.

Sam4frenz : Afifa why then did you send me that pic you are too young in age there. I don't think I can recognize you if I see you somewhere now

Honey : Come on Sam don't think too much you don't stand a chance to see me in our life time. I don't have any other pic also to show you, Sam even to send that I had to go through lot of stress as I was sending pic against the tradition of my family which I never likes to break.

Sam4frenz : Oh yeah I know! I can understand and respect your views. May be that's why I love you.

"Oh gracious God why have you given me this girl to love whom I can't even meet. Don't know where my love and life is heading."

Honey : Okey Sam it's too late now, let's sleep.

Sam4frenz : Afifa I hope this night never ends

Honey : This is not the last night in our life Sam keep faith in God who knows how many nights and days we would spend together

Sam4frenz : Afifa I have faith in love and my God.

Honey : Ok Sam good night!

Sam4friedz : Good night, sweet dreams !!!! And only me in all your dreams

Afifa went offline

Chat went on like a dream come true in my life probably they are the best moments I spent in my entire life thus far. Now my heart is wishing to meet her more than ever before.

"Jesus Christ will I get a day to meet Afifa in all the years I would live on planet earth

Immersed in Love

It was a breezy Saturday afternoon when the four of us gathered at our usual haunt, Sea View Parlor. The place wasn't anything fancy: a couple of rickety tables, the smell of fried samosas wafting through the air, and the familiar clink of glasses filled with overly sweet tea. But for us, it was tradition.

Sitting there with steaming cups in hand and a hot samosa being passed around, we did what we always did when we met after a few days apart caught up like no time had passed at all.

We traded stories, some exaggerated, others half-true. Everyone had something to say, but RT seemed to have more than usual. There was something different about him today. A glow. Maybe even a calmness.

I, on the other hand, kept my secret buried. I didn't tell them about Afifa. I knew how they'd react. They'd laugh, call it madness. They wouldn't understand. Not yet.

Hafeez was the first to break the rhythm with his usual dose of cricket news.

"Hey guys," he said, tapping his spoon against the glass, "did you know India's playing a bilateral series with Pakistan?"

Nilu perked up instantly. "Wow, great! That's gonna be intense."

I leaned in. "When? Where?"

"In Pakistan," Haf replied. "India's touring in February, if all goes as planned."

"Oh, okay," I nodded absently, but my attention was already elsewhere. My eyes narrowed on RT, who was unusually silent, his gaze lost in the distance.

“RT,” I said, nudging him gently, “what’s on your mind, man? How’s the prep going? You seem... lighter than usual. Come on, share something. Double your happiness by sharing with us.”

RT smiled an honest, glowing kind of smile. “I’m doing fine, dude. Confident I’ll get into one of the IITs.”

“Wow,” Nilu grinned. “That’s amazing, lol. No wonder your face is glowing like a halogen bulb.”

RT chuckled, then leaned forward, lowering his voice just enough to draw us all in. “Hey guys... I need to tell you something.”

We all looked at him.

“Me and Sita... we’re in love.”

For a second, no one moved. Then Haf jumped up and gave RT a full-blown hug while Nilu slapped his back enthusiastically.

“Great news, lol!” Haf beamed. “How? When? Spill the tea, man!”

“Superb, bro!” I said. “Why didn’t you tell us before?”

RT shrugged, a little shy but clearly happy. “I wanted to tell you all together. So I waited for today.”

“That’s fair,” Nilu nodded. “Big news deserves a proper audience.”

“Come on now,” Haf said eagerly, “don’t drag it. We’re dying to hear the full story!”

RT looked down at his tea for a second, then began.

“We started meeting more often after she came back from her village... after her dad passed away. I’d invited her for a small treat when our second-year results came out.”

“Oh-ho,” Nilu interrupted with mock irritation. “So you threw a treat and didn’t even invite us?”

I rolled my eyes. “Nilu, don’t be a dumbass. Boys don’t treat other boys for love stories. Shut up and let him talk.”

“Thanks, Sam,” RT smiled. “Anyway... you all know I’ve had feelings for her since forever. Since Adam was a boy, as they say. But I never really believed I’d get the chance to tell her. I mean... it was always just a dream.”

He paused, choosing his words carefully.

“But after her dad’s death, something changed. We spent time together, and I started seeing something in her eyes. Grief, yes, but also something that pulled her closer to me. It was like, in her silence, she was telling me stories I had always wanted to hear.”

We listened quietly, the kind of silence that isn’t empty but full of emotions, memories, and the knowledge that something real had just been shared.

For RT, this wasn’t just a love story it was something sacred. And we, for once, understood that.

RT continued...

The day had finally come, the day we planned to celebrate our results. The air was charged with excitement, and I wanted everything to be perfect. I took Sita to the Horizon Restaurant on the tenth floor of Dolphin Hotels. The place was bathed in red, an apt color for the mood I had imagined, passionate, intimate, and alive with love.

We were seated at a small table by the life-size glass window. A single red rose rested in a curvy wooden vase, delicate and elegant, just like the moment I had envisioned. Outside, the city sparkled beneath us, dazzling with countless lights. I had seen the city countless times before, but never like this not tonight. Tonight, it felt magical.

I had requested the live band to play my favorite song, “*You Are the Love of My Life*” by George Benson. As the soft melody wrapped around us, I looked straight into Sita’s eyes. Time seemed to pause. I took her right hand in mine, feeling the warmth of her palm, the steady pulse beneath her skin. My heart

thundered as I spoke the three words I had carried in my chest for so long:

“I love you.”

For a moment, she was suspended in the air, carried to some cloud far above reality. I could see it in her eyes, the joy, the elation, the surprise. Her smile bloomed slowly, radiantly, spreading across her face like sunlight breaking through clouds. That smile, I realized, was her answer. She neither spoke nor pulled away. That quiet acceptance was all I needed.

I thought back to how she would have reacted months ago, crying, overwhelmed, and perhaps running away. But this Sita, sitting across from me now, was different. Stronger, more open, ready to let love in. My heart swelled beyond measure, boundaries of happiness dissolving into something larger, something eternal.

It was a perfect day. The lights, the music, the city below, and the warmth of her hand in mine, all of it converged into a single, unforgettable moment. I was in love no, more than that. We were in love. Truly, utterly, completely in love.

Haf's eyes widened in disbelief, a grin spreading across his face. “Wowww, superb! We're really happy for you both,” he said, laughing.

I smiled and gave a relaxed nod. “Enjoy your time,”

After chatting for a while, we all went our separate ways. Later that night, I waited impatiently for Afifa to come online. The moment she pinged me, I told her about RT and Sita. She lit up instantly, sharing in the joy of their love story. Why wouldn't she? It was a sweet, little tale, simple yet heartwarming, and it warmed both our hearts to hear it.

Those were the days when my longing for Afifa had reached a desperate pitch. I wanted nothing more than to see her, to meet her, yet I could not imagine a way to make it happen. I prayed quietly, fervently, hoping God would guide me.

Perhaps He did.

Afifa wasn't online, so I idly checked my emails and browsed the web to pass the time. That's when I stumbled upon it, an advertisement for a state-level music competition, the "Inter-University Competitions," scheduled for December. Normally, we wouldn't have considered participating; with our careers demanding so much, it seemed impossible. But then I read the prizes: a cash award of one lakh rupees and tickets to watch the India-Pakistan cricket match in Karachi that February, the same match Haf had raved about at our last Sea View meeting.

"Oh God... thank you, thank you so much," I whispered under my breath.

It felt like a sign, a subtle nudge from destiny itself. Suddenly, this event wasn't just a competition, it was an opportunity, a chance to see Afifa, to bridge the distance that had been gnawing at me for months. God had given me hope, and I couldn't let it slip away.

From that moment, my prayer changed. It was no longer about how to meet Afifa. Now, it was about winning. If I could win this competition, if I could rise to the challenge, I could finally be with her, even if just for a fleeting moment. And perhaps, God would hear this second prayer too, the most important one, allowing me to be closer to the love of my life.

I immediately informed the rest of the band. As expected, Nilu and Tej refused to participate, they were focused entirely on their own futures. Haf agreed, along with Noorie. That left me with a problem: I needed a drummer and a guitarist. Haf could only manage lyrics and chorus vocals; Noorie could handle the female lead. That meant I would have to take on two major roles: lead guitarist and lead male vocalist. The responsibility was enormous, but I had no choice.

The next day, Haf and I went to college to scout for potential drummers and guitarists. Four juniors expressed interest, and we invited them to the den to see if they would fit into our bands dynamic. One fine morning, all seven of us met. We auditioned the juniors. Three were interested in drumming, and it quickly

became clear that Rocky was far and away the best. He had a natural rhythm, a raw talent that made our decision easy. Jai, the lone guitarist, was competent, and I figured I could make up for any gaps in skill myself.

And just like that, our band of five was ready. We scheduled to meet again in a week, each of us preparing lyrics and tunes.

The following week, Haf presented his lyrics while I played the tunes. But something was off. There was a clash, a mismatch between his words and my melodies. This had never happened before. Noorie, ever perceptive, observed the disconnect. Haf's lyrics encouraged students to grow, enjoy life, and make meaningful choices, essentially, a celebration of life itself. My tunes, however, were driven by love, a desperate, yearning love, fueled by the hope of meeting Afifa. The two were speaking different languages.

She explained it to both of us, gently, wisely. Once we understood the root of the mismatch, we agreed to adjust our approach. We would learn from each other, adapt, and try again. Another week later, we would meet to see if harmony could finally emerge from this collision of passion and purpose.

And in that waiting, that striving, I felt it, hope, determination, and the quiet thrill that maybe, just maybe, love and music could align perfectly.

We had all agreed, unanimously and with unspoken urgency that we'd meet again in a week. That time apart had reminded us just how much we needed each other, not just for the music or the plans, but for the comfort of being understood.

Two days passed, and I found myself thinking about the project again. The melodies were swirling in my head, but something was missing, words. I knew Hafeez was our best shot at penning something beautiful, even if he didn't quite believe it himself.

So I picked up my phone and dialed his number.

"Hey Haf!" I said as soon as he picked up. "How are you, man?"

“Cool, dude!” he replied cheerfully, as usual. Always the laid-back one.

I didn’t waste time. “Tell me honestly, have you written any lyrics yet?”

He sighed, chuckling. “Sam, no man... not yet.”

“Come on, Haf,” I urged. “Just write something. Try focusing on love... something simple, something real.”

There was a pause on the other end. I could almost hear him scratching his head.

“Maybe that’s not my cup of tea,” he said slowly, “but still... I’ll give it a try.”

I smiled. That’s all I needed to hear.

“Ok lol,” he added. “Let’s see what best we can come up with.”

“Cool,” I said. “We’ll figure it out together.”

“Yeah. Alright, man. Talk soon.”

“Bye.”

“Bbye.”

The call ended, and I sat there for a moment, feeling the quiet weight of our little mission. We weren’t just writing songs, we were building something bigger than ourselves. I lay still for a long moment, staring at nothing in particular. A strange thought kept circling my mind, when I am the one in love with Afifa, how can I ask Haf to write lyrics about love for me? It felt unfair, almost dishonest. This wasn’t a borrowed feeling. It was mine. And if the song was meant to carry my heart, then my heart should be the one to speak.

I decided then that I would give it a try myself.

I sat on my bed, leaning slightly toward the window beside me. Outside, the night was clear, the sky calm, and the moon hung quietly above, watching like a silent witness. Its pale light spilled

into the room, and in that stillness, my thoughts drifted naturally, inevitably toward Afifa.

I thought about what she meant to me. About how unlikely, how miraculous it felt to have her in my life at all. Gratitude rose within me, deep and sincere. I even found myself wanting to thank God, for her presence, for her existence, for choosing me to love her. Somewhere between those thoughts, a shape began to form. This will be the soul of the song, I told myself.

Hours passed. There were moments of struggle, long pauses where nothing came, followed by sudden flashes where ideas burst like sparks. Words began to strike, one after another, and soon the pen started moving on its own. I wasn't crafting poetry; I was releasing something I had been carrying quietly for far too long.

Everything I wrote came straight from my heart. Not a word was invented. Not a feeling exaggerated. Perhaps that was why it flowed so effortlessly, because none of it was fiction. When I finally put the pen down, the lyrics were complete, raw and unpolished, but honest in every sense.

I read them once more, quietly, then smiled to myself.

I knew what to do next.

I wanted Haf to read them, not to rewrite my feelings, but to understand them, to judge their rhythm, and most importantly, to translate those into Hindi blended with Urdu. I wanted the song to speak in the language closest to Afifa's heart. After all, this song was never meant for the world.

It was meant only for her.

It was just past midnight when I finished writing the lyrics. The words had poured out of me, raw, honest, dripping with emotion. I didn't know I was carrying. Maybe it was Afifa haunting my thoughts again. Or maybe the silence of the night had opened a door inside me.

Without thinking twice, I forwarded the lyrics to Hafeez with a message:

Verse 1

I found you in the strangest way
Since that moment, you eclipsed my days
When I'm awake, you're in my eyes
When I'm asleep, you fill my dreams

You have a heart as pure as snow
As gentle as a mother's soul
Every part of your heart is mine
It makes me the richest man alive

Chorus

I'm here, still waiting through the days
Holding on to just one hope
That day will come, I know it will
The day I finally meet you

Verse 2

The purpose of my life feels whole
The moment you stand before my eyes
When I hear your sweet voice near
Not through silence, not through lies

When I finally hold you close
When your heartbeat meets my own
Every broken night will end
Every lonely road will close

Chorus

I'm here, still waiting through the days
Holding on to just one hope
That day will come, I know it will
The day I finally meet you

Bridge

I will pour out all my love
I will drown you in my love
All this love I cannot hold
Burning deep inside my soul

Every prayer, every breath
Leads me only back to you
All I am and all I'll be
Belongs forever, only you

Final Chorus / Outro

I will pour out all my love
I will drench you in my love
Every heartbeat calls your name
You're my life, my truth, my flame

Afifaaaaa...
Afifaaaaa...

Sam: Hey Haf! Check them, yaar. And translate into Hindi in your own style.

I waited.

No reply.

Sam: Haf, you there?

Still nothing.

I stared at the screen for a moment, confused. What's with this idiot? I thought. Why isn't he replying?

So I did what any restless friend would do, I called him. The phone rang, and rang, and just when I was about to cut the call, he picked up.

His voice was groggy. "Oohkayy..."

"Hey Haf," I said quickly, "check your mobile. I just sent you the lyrics."

A pause.

"Okay," he mumbled, then hung up.

A few minutes later, my screen lit up with a new message.

Haf: Sam, are you out of your mind?

Sam: Wait what happened? You didn't like the lines?

Haf: I didn't even read them. Look at the time, man.

That's when I glanced at the wall clock to my right and froze.

4:00 A.M.

"Oh God..." I whispered to myself.

In a panic, I shot off an apologetic message.

Sam: Sorry, Haf. I didn't realize it's 4. So sorry. Good night. Sleep again.

No response.

I figured he must have dozed off again. Truth be told, I hadn't planned to stay up that late either. I'd started writing at around 9 P.M., and somehow the words just kept coming. Time had slipped away without warning.

I must've drifted off at some point, my head full of lyrics and Afifa. I didn't wake up until my mom called me for lunch.

Still groggy, I picked up my phone and checked my messages.

There it was Haf's reply, waiting for me like a gift.

Haf: Hey Sam! Great lyrics!! I always knew you could write, but I never imagined you could write like this. Amazing, man! Seriously! But now I'm sure you're in love. I can feel it. Love flowing like a river through those lines.

Anyway... who's the girl? She must be really beautiful. Am I right? When are you going to introduce me? I'm eagerly waiting...

Oh, and here's the translation you asked for may be not true to every word.

I smiled as I read it again, letting the words sink in.

He was right. Every word I had written last night... it wasn't just poetry. It was Afifa. Every line was a reflection of what I felt but hadn't dared to say aloud.

And Haf, in his half-sleepy, brutally honest way, had seen right through it.

Kuch aisi ajeeb haalat me humne tumhe paaya

Zindagi bas terehi khayalon ka basera hua

Khuli aankhon ko kayaal tere

Band aankhon ko sapnon ka saagar mayassar hua

Barf sa khaalis dil tera humdardi se bhara

Dilme tere baste hi hum

Ye khayal ne mujhe masroor kiya

Muddatse muntazir hi hum

Bas ek ummeed par

Charaag-e-zindagi raushan hogi

Tujhse roobaroo hokar

Maksad-e-zindagi mukammil hogi

In aankhon me teri soorat basakar

Aaghosh me tujhe bharkar baahon me chupakar

Saawan meri mohabbat ka barsadoonga aise

Ki bheeg jaoogi meri ulfat me ae meri jaan-e-wafa

Itna pyaar jo dil me simat nahi paata

Wo hi bas tere liye

Ae meri..... Afifaaaaa

Since you expressed love so well, my job is done very easily, Pen flew. Hopefully you will like this.

The lyrics were done. Finally. Haf had done an incredible job translating them into Hindi, weaving every emotion with his usual flair. I was stunned when I first read them, and I couldn't help but message him right away.

Sam: Wow wow wow!!! This is just wonderful. Great words, Haf. I love them. Thank you so much, yaar.

I paused, then typed again.

Sam: Hey Haf, maybe it's a good guess, but when I feel the time is right, I'll reveal everything. Not now, please.

Haf: Hmm.

I could feel the weight in that "hmm." But I didn't have it in me to bring up Afifa yet. Not to him, not to anyone.

With the lyrics done, my next step was to layer in the tune. I'd been working on a few melodies over the past couple of weeks, and now it was time to bring it all together.

That Sunday, we all met at our usual jam spot, the den.

High fives flew around. Hugs. Laughter. It was like walking into a rhythm, a pulse that connected us all.

"Come on guys," I said, reaching into my bag, "take these copies of the lyrics and tunes."

I handed out the sheets, carefully labeled and stapled, the product of long nights and quiet moments. Everyone took theirs eagerly.

Noorie scanned her copy and lit up. "Hey Haf! This is amazing work. Two cheers to you, lol!!" She laughed, reading a line aloud.

'Itna pyaar jo dil me simat nahi paata
Wo hi bas tere liye'

"Yaar, what a line! So much love, Haf?? Who's all this for, hmm?"

Haf's eyes went wide. "Noorie, wait, hold on. These aren't my lyrics."

"Don't mess with me," she grinned. "Come on, then who wrote this? Don't play me for a fool."

He turned to me, smirking. "Sam, tell her."

I sighed, rubbing the back of my neck. “Noorie, yeah... that’s partially true.”

Her eyes narrowed. “What does that even mean?”

Haf stepped in. “Actually, Sam wrote it all in English. I just translated. All those feelings? They’re from his heart.”

Noorie’s head whipped toward me. “Oooohh, Sam saayar, kab se? There’s definitely something behind those lines. And hey by the way, who’s Afifa? Why are we singing about her?”

I felt the blood rush to my cheeks. Haf looked at me, amused. I needed saving, and he knew it.

“She’s a character,” he said smoothly. “Sam’s writing a love story. The lead’s name is Afifa. These lyrics are from the story.”

Noorie raised an eyebrow. “So many surprises today! Since when are you writing stories, Sam? I’ve never even seen you reading one!”

I gave a sheepish grin and swiftly redirected. “Okay guys! Come on, let’s get to work.”

I stood up, ready to perform. “I’ll sing the song first, then we’ll all go through it together.”

As I began, the room went silent.

When the last note fell away, the silence lingered... then erupted into applause.

“Wow, sir!” Rocky called out. “That was amazing.”

“Awesome, sir!” Jai echoed. “We’re going to win this!”

Haf was beaming. “Sam, that’s the best thing we’ve done so far. Hands down.”

Then Noorie, grinning ear to ear, ran up and hugged me. “Superb, Sammmmm!”

I chuckled and thanked them all. The applause still echoed in my head.

“Okay,” Haf said, clapping his hands. “Now let’s refine it. We need to polish every note. This isn’t some college fest, we’re playing at a state-level competition.”

I nodded. “Rocky, Jai forget that senior-junior nonsense. We’re a band now. Friends. No more ‘sir’ business, please.”

“Yes, bro,” Rocky said with a grin.

“Haan, bhai,” Jai added.

“Alright,” I said, getting serious. “I’ll lead vocals. Noorie will add the female touch, humming some of the high points like she does naturally. Jai you’ve got the chords I gave you. Rocky, follow through with the drum arrangement.”

Haf raised a hand. “Aur main? What about me, bhai?”

“Noorie will guide you,” I said, handing her his sheet.

“Haf, come,” she said, beckoning him. “I’ve added a few aah-oohs where needed. I’ll explain.”

They huddled together, Haf asking questions and Noorie responding with playful eye-rolls. They eventually reached an understanding.

The rest of the day was smooth. We played, we laughed, and we corrected each other’s notes. The music was slowly becoming ours.

As the sun dipped low, Noorie stood. “Guys, it’s getting late for me. That was a great session.”

“True!” Rocky agreed. “Awesome!”

“Alright, call it for the day,” Haf said.

“Yep,” Jai added.

“Bye, everyone,” Noorie waved. “See you next week!”

“Cool. Alvida,” Haf said, stretching.

“Bye, sis. Catch you later, brothers!” Jai grinned.

We all split ways, tired but content.

As we gathered again, the first question came from Jai.

“Brothers... are we following any dress code?”

“We should,” Haf said, nodding. “What do you think, Sam?”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Hey Noorie, want to suggest some color combos?”

Noorie thought for a second. “Hmm... pink shirt and peacock blue denims for me. You boys can wear blue shirts with the same denim.”

“Decent combo,” Jai commented.

“Nooooo,” Rocky groaned. “Bro, that’s too dull for this kind of event!”

“He’s right,” I said. “It’s a vibrant day. We need something bold, something that reflects our theme. The theme is love, after all.”

“I agree,” Haf nodded.

“True,” Noorie said.

“For me,” I said, “red is the color of love. Can’t beat it.”

“I’m with you,” Rocky said. “Something shiny would be great.”

Noorie clapped her hands. “Wowww!! I love it. I’ll wear shiny red tops and a shiny black skirt. I’m settled!”

Haf raised his hand. “Okay, but what about us?”

“White shirts and black pants?” Jai suggested.

Rocky made a face. “Jai, we’re not going to a hotel management interview.”

“Okay, okay,” Jai chuckled.

“We’ll go with shiny black and red for us too,” I said, finalizing it. “Maybe throw in a black blazer to pull it together.”

“Wonderful, Sam!” Haf said, impressed.

“Yes, brothers!” Rocky chimed in.

And just like that, we were set. That very evening, we hit the streets and went shopping. Outfits, accessories, whatever it took to make sure we looked like the music we were about to play, bold, passionate, unforgettable.

As D-Day drew closer, our meetings became more frequent, our rehearsals more intense. Every session carried a new urgency, a sharper focus. Yet we enjoyed every second, because for each of us, music wasn’t just a passion, it was a way of life.

We knew moments like this didn’t come often, especially at our age. This was as big as it could get. So we poured our hearts into every note, every rhythm, and every imperfect repetition.

With each practice, our confidence grew. Mistakes faded, timing tightened, and belief settled in. We could feel it something special was taking shape.

Now, only one day remained. Just one more night before the grand finale.

It was a warm afternoon. The four of us Hafeez, Rocky, Jai, and I sat under a large banyan tree near the auditorium, seeking shade more from our anxiety than the sun. The murmurs of the crowd gathering inside reached us in faint waves, like distant thunder before a storm.

I checked my phone, then turned to Haf. “Haf, call Noorie, na. It’s getting late.”

“I already did, yaar,” he replied, lounging back with his usual casual air. “She said she’d be here any minute. Oh look at that. Talk of the devil...”

We all turned to see Noorie riding in on her scooter, sleek and steady. She parked, adjusted her sunglasses, and walked toward us with the kind of confidence that made even the breeze pause for a second.

“Hey Noorie,” Haf called, standing up. “You’re looking gorgeous!”

She rolled her eyes, grinning. “Aate hi shuru?”

“Come on, yaar kasam se!” he protested.

“Thank you, dear,” she replied, still amused.

I joined in. “Hey, angel. Come on, let’s get in. Time to feel the stage beneath our feet.”

“Hey didi!” Rocky piped up.

“Hieee, Rocky, Jai,” Noorie greeted warmly.

“Hello,” Jai said, nodding respectfully.

Together, we walked through the wide auditorium gates. The stage loomed before us big, blinding, breath taking. Bathed in vibrant techno lights, it felt less like a school event and more like a national concert. None of us had performed on something this grand before.

A silence fell over our group. That quiet, nervous kind that wraps itself around your chest.

Sensing the mood, I clapped my hands and spoke up. “Come on, people. We’ll rock this stage today. They’ll dance to our tunes.”

Haf grinned, eyes glowing. “We’ll own this place. Embrace it and win it!”

“Let’s sink into the moment,” I continued. “We’ll be tense for a few seconds, but then? The stage is ours.”

“Yeah!” Noorie cheered. “We’ll enjoy it! We’ll winnnn! Ohhh yeeeahhh!”

But Jai and Rocky remained quiet, visibly tense. Whatever storm was going on in their heads, they kept it locked inside.

The organizers made announcements, instructing all teams to sit in their assigned sections. Our performance was scheduled post-lunch, at 1:30 p.m. Change rooms would open 30 minutes prior. All we could do now... was wait.

By 10:30, the first performance lit up the stage Naughty Girls, as they called themselves. They burst onto the platform with unmatched energy, dancing and singing in perfect sync.

"Wowww, come on girls!" Rocky shouted, clapping hard.

"That's one hell of a performance," I admitted.

"They've set the standard straight away," Noorie murmured.

"I'm enjoying this," Jai said with a rare smile. "Yeeaahhh ooohh!"

One by one, groups dazzled the audience. But when Twisters, the seventh group, took the stage, the game changed. Their performance raised the bar so high, people stood and clapped for three full minutes. It felt like forever.

"This is... something else," Noorie whispered, a hint of doubt in her tone.

"Yeah," Haf agreed, a rare seriousness settling in.

"We've got to win this," I said, more to myself than anyone.

I closed my eyes, murmuring a prayer, pleading to God to carry us across the invisible line between effort and victory. I could hear Haf whispering his own prayer in Arabic, and Noorie too, her lips barely moving.

Jai and Rocky? Their tension had melted into excitement, carried away by the electric vibe of the hall.

At 1 P.M., we headed into the change rooms boys and girls separated. Jai and Rocky changed quickly, brimming with

enthusiasm. I was ready by 1:15 and waited with them outside. But Haf was still inside, as usual taking his sweet time.

“I bet Noorie’s ready before Haf,” I said, glancing at the door.

And as if on cue, Noorie appeared dressed in a shining red top and black skirt, radiating presence. For a moment, Jai and Rocky stood speechless, jaws practically touching the floor.

“Come on, yaar!” I laughed. “Close the floodgates before you drown in your own drool.”

Noorie laughed. “Hey Sam! Kaise hoon?”

“Ravishing!” I said, placing a hand over my heart dramatically. “Ye bhi koi puchhne ki baat hai?”

“Thanks,” she said with a wink. “Where’s Haf?”

Jai chuckled. “No idea. He’s still inside.”

Rocky grinned. “He pours kilos of powder onto the sheets, dips both palms into the pile, and then slaps it all over his body like its paint!”

“Interesting,” Jai nodded, deadpan.

I walked up and knocked hard on the door. “Haf! Come out, lol. It’s already 1:30!”

A voice called out from inside, “Two minutes!”

But we didn’t have two minutes.

At 1:28 P.M., a volunteer called out from the hallway.

“Friends group, get ready! You’re up in two minutes!”

Noorie knocked this time. “Haf! Come out fast the announcements are already on!”

At last, Haf emerged in all his powdered glory. We grabbed our instruments, nerves forgotten, and dashed toward the wings of the stage.

The anchor’s voice rang loud and clear over the mic:

“And now... please welcome our next performers Friends Group!”

The spotlight swung in our direction.

It was time.

From the stage, the auditorium looked far larger than it ever did from below. What once felt familiar now stretched endlessly before us, a vast sea of faces fading into shadows. The sound of thousands of palms clapping in unison was thunderous, almost overwhelming, and the stage lights burned so bright they blurred the crowd into a single glowing mass.

This is what it feels like, I thought, to stand here as a performer.

Goosebumps ran down our arms. Nervousness crept in, mingling with excitement, tightening our chests and quickening our breaths. One by one, we took our places.

Before the first note, I stepped forward and spoke.

“Dear audience,

It’s wonderful to be in the midst of you all. You are the most amazing audience I have ever witnessed. Thank you to our sponsors for giving us the opportunity to sing on this stage.

Come on, guys!

How are you feeling?

Is it rocking today?”

The response surged back like a wave.

“Let’s enjoy the freshness of love now.

Are you ready?

Are youuuuu readyyyyy?”

The roar that followed was deafening.

We launched into a high-voltage opening drums pounding, guitars screaming, and hard rock tearing through the silence. Then, suddenly, we stopped.

The auditorium froze.

A pin-drop silence fell, heavy and absolute.

Slowly, Rocky began tapping the drums, soft and deliberate. Jai and I followed, our fingers strumming gentle, sweet melodies that floated into the stillness.

I took a breath.

And then, I began to sing.

Kuch aisi ajeeb haalat me humne tumhe paaya

Zindagi bas terehi khayalon ka basera hua

Khuli aankhon ko kayaal tere

Band aankhon ko sapnon ka saagar mayassar hua

As the song goes on, the pitch increases with each line and ends on a high

Barf sa khaalis dil tera humdardi se bhara

Dilme tere baste hi hum

Ye khayal ne mujhe masroor kiya

Muddatse muntazir hi hum

Bas ek ummeed par

Charaag-e-zindagi raushan hogi

Tujhse roobaroo hokar

Maksad-e-zindagi mukammil hogi

In aankhon me teri soorat basakar

Aaghosh me tujhe bharkar baahon me chupakar

Saawan meri mohabbat ka barsadoonga aise
Ki bheeg jaoogi meri ulfat me ae meri jaan-e-wafa
Itna pyaar jo dil me simat nahi paata
Wo hi bas tere liye
Ae meri..... Afifaaaaa

Wo hi bassssss tere liyeeeeeeee
Aeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee
Meriiiiiiiiiiiiiii
Afiiiiifaaaaaaaaa

As I sang, not a single soul remained seated. Chairs scraped back, hearts surged forward, and the hall erupted, everyone shouting Afifa with me, as if the name itself had become a chorus.

I sang the final stanza once more.

The air grew electric. The crowd leaned in, louder, wilder.

So I sang it again.

And again.

And again until the song was no longer mine.

Only one sound filled the space: Afifa.

It echoed against the walls, spilled into the streets, and perhaps traveled miles beyond. Maybe people far away heard her name without knowing why their hearts stirred.

I don't know if Afifa could hear it.

I don't know if she would ever believe that her name had become a roar, a celebration, a rhythm pulsing through India.

I don't know if all the love I carry for her was reaching her.

But that night, the world was calling her name.

The final note hung in the air like magic refusing to leave. As the last echo faded, the auditorium exploded into applause.

We stood on that stage breathless, drenched in sweat, and yet high on something far more potent than adrenaline. For those five minutes, the world had stopped spinning for us. And now, we were gently stepping back into it.

As we walked down the steps from the stage wings, our hearts thudding with relief and joy, we immediately turned to one another.

Haf was the first to speak, his voice thick with emotion and disbelief. “Sam,” he said, throwing an arm around my shoulder, “we are the winners. Winners, yaar!”

We all burst into soft, stunned laughter. Still catching our breath, still unsure if it was over, or just beginning.

Noorie, her face glowing with pride, stepped closer. “Sam,” she said, her tone softer, more personal, “your love for Afifa... it was there in every word you sang today. You didn’t just sing that song. You lived it.”

Haf nodded firmly. “Yeah, man. Everyone felt it. There wasn’t a soul in that auditorium who wasn’t touched.”

Noorie added, “We could all feel it, Sam. That love you carry in your heart it filled the whole room. It was... pure.”

I didn’t know what to say. The applause still echoed in my mind, but their words those were louder. I swallowed hard, a lump forming in my throat that had nothing to do with nerves.

Haf placed both hands on my shoulders and looked straight into my eyes. “We’re winning today, bro. And not just because we sang well. It’s because of that truth in your voice. That honesty. That feeling. It’s what made everything else come alive.”

Rocky stepped in, fist-bumping me with a huge grin. “Congrats, brother,” he said. “We’re lifting that trophy. No doubt.”

I looked at all of them my people, my band, and my friends.

And in that moment, it didn't matter whether we won a trophy or not. What mattered was that the song, the story, the love... had found its voice. And it had been heard.

After the euphoria faded, we sank back into our seats, breathless and overwhelmed. Voices rose around us warm congratulations, cheerful laughter but they reached me as though from a distance. My heart was elsewhere.

Thank You, God, I whispered silently. You made this possible. Because of You, I will finally meet the love of my life. You are a wonder-working God. This moment exists only through your grace. Thank you more than words can ever say.

On stage, performances continued music, movement, applause but I sat unmoving, lost in my own thoughts. The world outside blurred as my mind raced ahead to what awaited me next.

What should I buy for Afifa?

What should I wear?

What would I ask her to wear?

What would we talk about?

What would be my very first word?

A sudden fear tightened my chest. Would I even be able to open my mouth when I saw her? Would my voice obey me or would it abandon me completely? Perhaps I would stand there, struck dumb, undone by her beauty alone.

Questions multiplied, circling endlessly, each one unanswered, each one louder than the last.

And there I sat, smiling outwardly while inside, my heart trembled caught between anticipation and awe waiting for the moment that would change everything.

The crowd was buzzing restless, eager. Rows upon rows of students leaned forward in their seats, eyes fixed on the stage,

hearts beating in unison. The lights dimmed, and the spotlight danced to the podium once more.

The anchor walked up, a beaming smile on her face, microphone in hand.

“And now,” she announced with dramatic flair, “I would like to call upon the upcoming superstar of Andhra cinema, a heartthrob to all young ladies here tonight... Mr. Vikram Reddy!”

The auditorium exploded. Applause, hoots, whistles, and cheers bounced off the walls like a wave crashing in a stadium.

“Vikraaaam! Vikrammmmm!” they screamed, phones flashing to catch a glimpse of the actor as he strode onto the stage with a confident wave, wearing a fitted black blazer and his signature smirk.

“Hellooo Andhra!” he shouted into the mic. “How are you???”

Thunderous cheers followed.

“It’s super exciting to be here tonight,” he continued, smiling at the sea of faces. “Watching students perform with this kind of passion and me, sitting here like one of you in the audience honestly, it’s been real fun. You guys blew me away. So thank you for the energy!”

A brief pause. Then he straightened, the grin widening.

“And now... let me announce tonight’s winners.”

He drew it out like a seasoned showman.

“The winnerrrrrrr is...”

A beat.

“Any guesses from the audience?”

But he didn’t even need to finish the question.

The entire auditorium was already on its feet, the chant erupting without a single prompt:

“Afifa! Afifa! Afifa!”

It was deafening. Electric.

Vikram raised his eyebrows in mock surprise. “Whoa! Okay then. Seems like you already know. Ladies and gentlemen, tonight’s champions, hands down, as unanimously chosen by the judges and by you...”

He lifted the envelope.

“Afifa Band!!! Congratulations!”

We jumped up. All of us. Hafeez, Noorie, Jai, Rocky, and me. A second ago we were shaking with nerves. Now we were sprinting toward the stage like children, laughter bubbling out of us uncontrollably.

Flashbulbs, cheers, music. It was like stepping into a dream.

The anchor waited for us with the golden trophy and a small white envelope in hand.

“And not just that,” she said. “This trophy comes with two special passes VIP tickets to the India vs. Pakistan match on February 15th, including travel for the two lead vocalists one male and one female.”

Cheers again.

“Before we give away the trophy,” she added, “any words from our winning team?”

Before I could move, Haf snatched the mic with the grace of a street performer.

“We’re all feeling so proud right now,” he said, grinning ear to ear. “Taking home this year’s Inter-University Best Singers Group trophy it’s a dream come true. First, I’d like to thank the jury”

Noorie muttered under her breath, loud enough for us to hear, “Lo, yeh shuru ho gaya. Mic milte hi...”

“Our amazing sponsors, the lovely audience,” Haf continued, totally unfazed, “my mom, my dad, and Pom.”

Noorie blinked. “Pom? Yeh Pom kya hai?”

I leaned in, unable to resist. “His neighbor’s dog. For letting Haf practice all night without barking at him.”

Laughter rippled across our group.

“Oh wow,” Noorie chuckled. “Kutte ko bhi thanks... Historic.”

But Haf was undeterred. “And of course, the crew and staff, from the tea boys to every single person behind the scenes.”

Rocky sighed and shook his head. “Holy crap, enough of this ‘thank you’ saga. Feels like listening to Amitabh or Shah Rukh at award shows. Half the people they thank don’t even know them. But hey, go on, bro, go on...”

Haf grinned and ended with flair. “Thank you all. Thank you once again!”

He handed the mic to me.

I stood there, holding it for a second longer than I needed to. The moment was weighty. I knew exactly what I wanted to say.

I looked out into the lights, into the darkness beyond them, and spoke quietly but clearly:

“Afifa... this song was for you. Every word, every note. This song was to reach you. Thank you for being my inspiration. Thank you... for being my all.”

I didn’t wait for applause. I didn’t need any.

I handed the mic to the others.

And together, we shouted at the top of our lungs:

“THANK YOUUUU ALLLLL!!!”

It echoed across the auditorium like a firework and with it, the night reached its crescendo.

The curtain fell. The lights dimmed. The show was over.

We returned home that night, holding our trophy close, not just in our hands, but in our hearts.

Because like all good things... this spectacular, musical, unforgettable night had come to an end.

But some songs never really end.

They just live on in echoes, in memories, and in love.

Soon after dinner, I told Afifa everything every detail, every fear, every miracle that had led me to this moment. It had been a long, exhausting day, yet not even a trace of tiredness touched me. My heart was too full for fatigue. I was overflowing with happiness, absolutely ecstatic. Afifa, on the other side, was just as excited, her joy mirroring mine. The dream we had once whispered about was now standing close enough to touch.

There was very little time left to pack my bags and begin my journey to my darling Afifa the journey I had wanted at any cost. This could only be divine will. Otherwise, meeting her would have remained impossible. I had always believed that with God, everything is possible, and now He was proving it by turning the unthinkable into reality.

The next task was sacred shopping.

I wanted to buy my first gift for Afifa. It had to be precious, heart-touching, something she could wear, something that would remind her of me every second.

Dresses? No. Something for her face? Impossible she always wore a burka.

Then what?

I debated with myself endlessly. Anklets or bangles seemed right. But doubt crept in again. If she wore long sleeves, bangles might

remain hidden. If she wore a long burka, even anklets might never be seen.

Confused, I decided to search for both.

I walked through shop after shop across the city. Hours passed. Nothing touched my heart. I was looking for something that carried meaning something with a heart, something that spoke my love. Ten long hours of searching yielded nothing. My body felt weak, my spirit drained, as if I had been on a treasure hunt that refused to reward me.

Standing at a junction, sipping a cold drink from a pan shop, my eyes suddenly caught a faint glitter from a small novelty store around the corner. Something stirred inside me.

This is it, my heart whispered.

I left the drink untouched and rushed into the store.

There they were.

The most beautiful bangles I had ever seen.

Diamonds were studded into them in delicate heart shapes. Fine lines wrapped around the design, and in those curves, I saw something no one else might notice, an *A* entwined with an *S*. Afifa and Sam. Whether it was real or imagined didn't matter. To me, it was destiny.

I bought them instantly.

These bangles were meant for Afifa. That was their purpose. I thanked God repeatedly for guiding me to them. Anklets no longer mattered.

The next day, I bought two dresses for her one blue, my favorite color, and one pink, hers. I bought two for myself as well, in the same colors. Buying a pink shirt wasn't easy I didn't want it to look feminine but love overrides embarrassment.

No one in my family or among my friends knew why I was going to Karachi. Some thought I was crazy. Some thought I was lucky.

My father's emotions were unreadable. My mother clearly disapproved. Sanhi was excited, believing I was traveling for cricket. Poor thing, she never guessed the truth.

Silent Ruins

The flight was scheduled for February 14th.

Valentine's Day.

While the world celebrated love, I was flying to meet mine. A divine coincidence.

I couldn't sleep all night. At dawn, I dressed carefully, blue shirt, cream trousers, brown belt, brown shoes. I hadn't dressed this formally in years. I sprayed deodorant, combed my hair like the good boys in Bollywood films.

Sanhi burst out laughing when she saw me, curling on the couch in uncontrollable amusement.

"Bro," she said between laughs, "are you attending an interview to be Pakistan team doctor?"

I said nothing.

At breakfast, my mother told me the cab would arrive in fifteen minutes.

The airplane crossed borders.

Beyond borders.

The plane was filled with blue Indian cricket jerseys, flags pinned proudly to chests. Excitement, nervousness, patriotism filled every face. Flying above the clouds, passengers marveled at the Thar Desert and the snow-covered Himalayas, as if God Himself had painted the Earth.

But my mind saw only one color.

Red.

The color of love.

I sat by the window, holding Afifa's bangles in my palm, rehearsing every possible moment, how I would greet her, how I would stand before her, how I would speak. My heartbeat raced faster than a Ferrari on a Formula One track.

Then came the announcement: "We are crossing the Wagah border."

The cabin erupted. Old men grew nostalgic. Others listened in awe. Before anyone realized, we had landed at Jinnah International Airport.

I rushed out, hired a taxi, and asked to be taken to Zainab Market, Saddar, near Avari Towers. With every passing second, my excitement surged. I was inches away from what many would call impossible.

The taxi stopped.

"This is the market, sir," the driver said. "The road ahead is narrow."

He pointed the way.

I paid him with gratitude deeper than words. I was moments away from Afifa.

Then....

White ash exploded into the air like a desert storm. A deafening blast tore through my ears.

Bombs.

My knees gave way. My chest hit the ground. My chin scraped the earth. My elbows and palms slammed hard. The bangles slipped from my hands and rolled toward a girl standing across the street.

Voices shouted. Questions rained down.

Water crashed onto my face.

I was surrounded by Pakistani military.

They searched every inch of me. Slapped me. Interrogated me in Hindi, Urdu, and English.

"I'm Indian," I whispered. "I came from Hyderabad to watch cricket."

A towering officer screamed, "Then why are you in Zainab Market?"

"I came to meet my friend... Afifa."

The officers left the room.

I was alone.

A concrete cell. A metal gate. No daylight. No time. Bread and milk each day. God. Love. Afifa.

They were all I had.

I prayed endlessly.

After a month, I was dragged out, placed on a plane, and sent back to India. Escorted until the flight took off.

They found the truth.

But they never gave me the chance to see Afifa.

Not even once.

This is all about the story behind my silence Aditi...

I don't know how many kilometers Aditi and I walked that night. Our feet moved on their own, as if the road itself was listening to my pain and pulling us forward. By the time we finally settled on the stairs leading to our room, the darkness had slowly surrendered to light. While I was finishing the last chapter of my painful love story, the sun had risen over Araku, painting the hills in gold. It was beautiful, cruelly beautiful.

Just then, my mother opened the door.

"Sam, it's already too late," she said gently. "Take this cup of tea and then get ready."

Aditi didn't say a word. She quietly went inside while my mother handed me the tea. Her silence was louder than any response.

After tea, I got ready and we headed out to Borra Caves. Sanhi was full of excitement, climbing rocks, laughing, completely lost in wonder. But Aditi had changed. She had grown quiet, too quiet. My mother asked her twice why she seemed dull. Aditi smiled weakly and said she was feeling sick because we hadn't slept all night.

I knew the truth.

Maybe I shouldn't have shared my story with her.

But I couldn't lie. And I couldn't give her hope either, because I knew, with terrifying certainty that I would never think of any girl except Afifa. Not in this life. And I didn't believe in another life. The Bible never spoke of one.

By nightfall, we returned home.

For the next two days, I didn't hear Aditi's voice in my house.

When I finally asked my mother about her, I learned she had left for her hostel the very next morning after we returned from Araku.

That was the end of Aditi in my life.

Defiant Soul

Six months had passed since I returned from Pakistan after that horrific bomb blast. Slowly, very slowly, I was showing signs of returning to normalcy. I buried myself in preparation for the GRE. It felt like my last hope of finding Afifa. Once, during one of our online conversations, she had mentioned her willingness to study in the US. I held on to that sentence as if it were a prophecy.

I wrote my exams in September and applied to universities where Pakistani students usually applied. When I received admission from the University of South Florida for the spring semester, it felt less like an academic achievement and more like destiny calling.

Classes would begin in January.

I planned to leave India after Christmas. My mother and Sanhi wanted to celebrate with me. I wasn't in the mood, but I didn't want to disappoint them. Deep down, I also knew I didn't know when I'd celebrate Christmas with them again.

Maybe this was the first sign of recovery from the heartbreak of losing Afifa, thinking about others' feelings, not just my own.

On December 26th, I began my journey to search for Afifa.

This was my second flight. The first had been to Karachi, to watch a cricket match. But the truth was, even then, my real purpose had been Afifa.

This time, the excuse was education.

But once again, my real destination was her.

I didn't know whether this quest would succeed.

But I knew one thing, I had to try.

I shared a room with a senior from my college. He was rarely around. Most days, it was just me, the silence, and my guitar. Music became my refuge. I wrote lyrics about Afifa. I composed

songs for her. I didn't care if they were good or bad. They weren't meant for the world. They were meant to keep me breathing.

I tried to befriend Pakistani students. In college, I spoke very little. In my room, I was almost mute. Whatever little I spoke was only to Muslim students, always hoping, irrationally, that someone might one day mention her name.

I left no stone unturned.

I visited hostels across Florida. On holidays, I traveled to nearby universities, asking strangers about a girl who existed only in my heart. The more I searched, the more disappointed I became. Yet I never gave up hope, because without hope, I couldn't survive.

Some people mocked me.

"Forget it, boss. It's just e-gen love."

Others exploited me, took money, lied to me, and claimed they knew her.

I didn't care about the money.

I didn't care about the exhaustion.

The only thing that hurt was not finding her.

A month passed after landing in the US. I had nothing. Not even a single trace.

Then one day, there was an announcement in class about Fresher's Day. I wasn't interested, until they mentioned a singing competition. Students from other universities would be attending.

My heart leapt.

This was my chance.

If I sang about Afifa, maybe someone would recognize the name. Maybe someone would know her. Or, if Jesus was gracious enough, maybe Afifa herself would be there.

The thought alone nearly killed me with joy.

I had two days to prepare. I went through all the songs I had written since arriving in the US and chose the sad version of *Ae Afifa*, the same song that once won me a ticket to Karachi.

On the day of Fresher's, I wore a black T-shirt and jeans. I didn't know if it suited the occasion. I didn't care. I wasn't there to impress judges or win prizes. I didn't even know if there was a prize.

I was there for my *phari*.

The competition had already started when I arrived. The auditorium was grander than anything I had seen in India. Lights shimmered. Flags of vibrant colors lined the road leading inside. As I opened the door, sound exploded into my ears and light blinded my eyes.

I sat in a corner, observing.

I searched faces, especially Muslim faces. I spotted around fifteen people, maybe five girls. But looks are deceiving. In today's world, anyone can wear a beard or a stud anywhere on their body.

Religion no longer announces itself.

As I was lost in these thoughts, I suddenly heard my name echo through the auditorium.

Unlike last time, when we performed as a group, this time I was alone.

I walked onto the stage with my acoustic guitar and my mismatched confidence. I stood near the microphone, wanting to speak, wanting to tell the audience about Afifa, about my desperation, my heartbreak, my search.

But no words came.

I stood there, frozen, for a few seconds that felt like eternity.

Everyone stared.

Then someone shouted from the crowd,
"Get down or sing, dumber!"

And in that moment, between humiliation and hope, I took a breath, held my guitar tighter, and prepared to let my pain speak where my voice could not.

Slowly I started playing guitar

Oooo ohhh ooo

Ooh ooh

Dear Afifaaaaa

Oh my Afifa

Come back to me

I lost you in the strangest way
Since that moment, night fills my days
I don't find you with open eyes
I don't see you in my wildest dreams

*(As I sing, the crowd falls silent
Maybe they feel my pain
My heart grows heavier
My vision blurs as tears gather)*

Oooo ohhh ooo

Ooh ooh

Dear Afifaaaaa

Oh my Afifa

Come back to me

Where is the heart of snow
I once believed was mine
Where is the gentle bow
That taught my soul to mime

Oooo ohhh ooo

Ooh ooh

Dear Afifaaaaa

Oh my Afifa

Come back to me

I'm still living this fragile life
Holding on to the same strong hope
One day God will end this strife
And pull me from this endless slope

Oooo ohhh ooo
Ooh ooh

Dear Afifaaaaa
Oh my Afifa
Come back to me

The purpose of my life is torn
The need to hear you feels so worn
I may never see you with my eyes
A life of chance, all zeroes on my dice

Oooo ohhh ooo
Ooh ooh

Dear Afifaaaaa
Oh my Afifa
Come back to me

*(Tears roll down my cheeks
My voice grows thick
Pain burns bitter in my throat)*

I wanted to pour my endless love
To drown you gently in my love
This love I carry, I can't control
And it will never, ever grow cold

Till I find you, my dear

Oooo ohhh ooo
Ooh ooh

Dear Afifaaaaa
Oh my Afifa
Come back to me

Till I find you, my dear

Oooo ohhh ooo

Ooh ooh

Dear Afifaaaaa

Oh my Afifa

Come back to me

Afifaaaaa...

Please come back to me.

With every line I sang, my pain deepened. Each word cut into me, reopening wounds I had never allowed to heal. By the time I reached the last note, my voice trembled, my eyes burned, and my chest felt unbearably heavy. I walked down from the podium, wiping my tears and my running nose with the back of my hand, not caring how broken I looked.

I could barely hear the applause.

Or maybe they weren't clapping at all.

Maybe they were singing *Afifaaa* too.

I wasn't sure.

I couldn't perceive anything around me. Sound, light, faces, everything blurred. For those few moments, I felt like the living dead.

I walked outside and sat opposite the auditorium stairs, on a slightly raised spot where anyone passing by could see me clearly. I wanted to be seen. I wanted someone, anyone, to come up to me and say her name. My eyes searched relentlessly, hunting for Afifa, or at least someone who knew her.

Minutes turned into hours.

I waited.

And waited.

And waited...

Five long hours passed. Luck, as always, refused to stand beside me.

At some point, exhaustion defeated hope. I slipped into sleep without realizing it. A sweeper eventually shook me awake and asked me to leave. I stood up, numb and hollow, and walked back home with a heart heavier than when I had arrived.

It was February 8th, almost a month and a half since I had begun searching for Afifa. And yet, I was still at square one.

That night, I prayed earnestly.

“God, show me a way. Please. Just one path to my girl.”

I believed sternly, desperately that He would.

Three days later, on February 11th, I was still lying in bed when the early morning sun began to wake me. Birds chirped loudly, joyfully. As I looked through the window, I saw flocks of white birds flying freely, circling the sky, bathing in the warmth of the sun.

Something felt different.

This morning wasn’t like the others. There was a strange serenity in my heart, a lightness I couldn’t explain. I tried to reason with myself, wondering where this sudden peace was coming from.

Just then, there was a knock on the door.

My heart skipped. I jumped out of bed and ran to open it, an unexplainable hope racing ahead of me.

When I opened the first door, I saw a thin girl standing outside, visible through the second mesh door—about 5’5”, dressed in a purple burka. The sunlight fell behind her, creating a glowing silhouette.

For a moment, my heart stopped beating.

Could this be Afifa?

The birds outside grew louder, as if the world itself was holding its breath. I hurriedly opened the second door, but the sun shone straight into my eyes, blinding me. I leaned slightly toward the shade on the right, trying to see her face.

The wind betrayed me.

Her hair flew forward, covering her face completely.

I failed again.

She spoke.

“Can I meet Mr. Sam?”

There was something unmistakable in her voice, a soft nativity, an Urdu accent tinged with Pakistan.

“Yeah... it’s me,” I replied.

She adjusted her hair, and only then could I see her face.

Stunning.

That was the only word my mind could form. But even then, I wasn’t sure if she was Afifa. I invited her inside and asked her to sit on the couch while I sat on the edge of my bed.

“Would you like some coffee?” I asked.

“No,” she said gently.

“Juice? Or something to drink?”

“I’m fine, Sam.”

“So...” I began, unsure how to proceed.

She broke the silence.

“Sam, I happened to see a video in my friend’s room. You were singing a song for Afifa.”

As she spoke, her eyes wandered around my room, walls filled with paintings of lonely girls, their faces deliberately obscure, unfinished, and lost.

“You know Af... Af... Afi—Afifa?” I stammered.

I had never stammered in my life. Not once. But her name tangled my tongue, as if my heart was running faster than my words.

“Yes, Sam,” she said softly. “I know Afifa. And I know the madness with which you loved her.”

Her eyes welled up.

I went completely speechless. I wanted to scream questions, to beg for answers, but my body refused to cooperate.

She continued, her voice trembling.

“Sam, I’m Ameena Afifa’s cousin.”

“Ameena... please,” I blurted out. “Where is Afifa? How can I meet her? She once told me she wanted to do her MS in the US. That’s the only reason I came here.”

I didn’t even acknowledge her properly. I didn’t ask how she was. I didn’t thank her for coming. I was selfish, consumed only by the thought of Afifa.

Ameena cried quietly and handed me a small slip of paper.

I looked at it.

It was Afifa’s address in Karachi.

Before I could react, Ameena had already stepped outside. I ran to the door, but she was walking away, slowly disappearing into the trees. I sat down at the doorway, clutching the slip tightly.

I was sure the handwriting was Afifa’s.

For the first time in my life, I was holding something Afifa herself had once touched. That tiny piece of paper carried more meaning than anything I had ever owned. It gave me a strange, long-awaited solace.

I packed my bags immediately and rushed to the airport.

This was my second attempt to meet my love.

This time, I didn’t care what I wore. I didn’t carefully plan my appearance like before. I didn’t even buy her a gift. All I did was pray silently, continuously.

“God, please show grace. Have mercy on me. Give me my Afifa.”

Tears flowed freely. I didn't stop them. I didn't want to.

I was in a subconscious state the entire journey. I don't remember boarding the flight. I don't remember landing. I don't even know if anyone else was sitting beside me.

As soon as I landed at Jinnah International Airport, Karachi, I ran out and hired a taxi. I showed the driver the slip Ameena had given me.

As we drove through the lanes of Karachi, Afifa's words echoed in my mind. She had described this city to me so vividly lanes covered in white ash, sudden bursts of grand construction, a city that shifted between modern elegance and village simplicity.

Everything looked exactly as she had said.

The driver stopped and said, "This is the lane. The house should be here."

I asked him to drive slowly. I was certain I would recognize it.

And then I saw it.

A small bungalow solid, almost prison-like. Once vibrant, now faded. The purple color Afifa had spoken of was gone, replaced by dull green walls. The metal gates were rusted and slightly open.

She had once said it was so tightly shut that even the morning sun struggled to enter.

Now it looked like a *purani haveli*.

I paid the driver and got down.

My heart was racing. Fear and hope collided inside me. I didn't know how Afifa would react. I didn't know how Abbu, Ammi, Bhayya, or Tiger would react.

But one thing was certain.

This time, I would not return empty-handed.

I whispered prayers incessantly as I stood there. Faith in God was my only strength.

And I gathered every ounce of courage I had ready to face whatever awaited me behind those gates.

I tried to peep through the massive gates. Beyond them stretched an open area, wide and empty, nearly fifteen by forty feet. Where Afifa once described lush green lawns, there was now only barren earth, dry, lifeless, stripped of memory.

Slowly, I pushed the gate open. I half-expected Tiger, the big brown dog, to bark fiercely and announce my arrival to the entire household. But there was no sound. No movement. Only silence. The portico stood naked, four bare pillars, their orange paint peeled away by time and neglect. Tiger was gone.

I remembered Afifa telling me how her Abbu used to sit every morning on neatly arranged cane chairs, draped in rich gold-colored cloth, attending to his customers with dignity. But now, that very place was eerily silent. There were only two and a half cane chairs left, broken and uncovered, as though even furniture had begun to mourn.

My heart sank.

The heaven Afifa once painted with her words looked as though doom had swallowed it whole.

I had imagined I would be stopped at the gate, questioned, perhaps even chased away. Instead, I walked freely through the deserted lawn and into the living room. Once, this room had been adorned with a black sofa set, a tempered glass center table placed with precision, and a forty-eight-inch LED television placed in front of a beautifully painted sunrise-orange walls.

Now, the sofa lay torn and defeated. The center table was gone. The television was switched off, lifeless. The sunrise-orange walls had been scraped bare.

No sign of Bhayya.

No Bhabhi.

Not even Ammi.

My doubts hardened into certainty something was terribly wrong.

The bedroom on the left stood empty, its door ajar. As I turned, I noticed a woman in a burka sitting silently on the wooden staircase that led to Afifa and Bhayya's rooms. Even the staircase looked broken in places. She did not look at me. She did not question me. She did not move.

I passed her quietly and moved left toward Bayya's room. The door was broken. No signs of life remained.

To the right was the room that could either give me heaven or destroy me.

The door was closed.

My heart pounded violently. Thousands of unanswered questions swirled inside me. But there was no turning back. My determination remained unshaken. I wanted answers. No I wanted Afifa. At any cost.

I moved toward the door. The silence was unbearable. I could hear even the fluttering wings of a mosquito. My hand trembled as I knocked softly but the sound echoed like thunder in my ears.

The door creaked open slightly.

I froze.

I could see someone's legs resting on the bed.

Afifa's bed.

My breath caught in my throat. On the far wall hung a red T-shirt and blue jeans torn, worn, yet displayed like precious artifacts. Then I saw it, the photograph. Little Angel Afifa. The first and last picture I had ever seen of her. I had no idea how she looked now.

My heart knew before my mind did.

That had to be Afifa.

Only her feet were visible bare, delicate, achingly familiar. I stood rooted to the ground, my legs refusing to move. Summoning every ounce of strength, I whispered, "Afifa."

She stirred immediately, as though she had been waiting for this call all her life. She turned toward me.

"Kaun hai?" she asked.

Her voice.

Oh God .. her voice.

This was what I had waited for all my life. Yet instead of joy, a strange coldness seized me. I should have been shouting, laughing, crying aloud. Instead, I was trembling.

"Afifa," I called again.

She began to cry.

"Sam," she whispered.

Tears streamed down my face. I was weeping uncontrollably. She stretched her hand toward me. I reached for it, holding her palm. In that instant, I found the solace I had been searching for since the day the bomb exploded before my eyes.

I sat beside her.

I wanted to ask a million questions, but no words came. My happiness was too overwhelming.

I finally whispered, "Tiger..."

She broke down completely.

"Tiger died, Sam," she said through tears. "He couldn't bear Abbu's death. He cried for days, refused to eat, and finally... gave up."

I stayed silent. Listening felt more important than speaking.

Afifa continued.

Sam, do you remember that day, the day we were supposed to meet at Zainab Market?

I stood just a meter away from our shop, rooted to the ground, carrying a million hopes in my heart and also the watch I bought for you. It had a silver dial and a red heart and a gold heart entangled on one another I was certain I would see you. Excitement bubbled inside me like a secret too big to contain. Abbu kept calling out to me, urging me to come inside the shop, but his voice fell on deaf ears. Every passing second only multiplied my happiness. I felt as if the universe itself was inching closer to granting me that one moment.

Then, after a while, a taxi slowed down and stopped nearby. My breath caught. Someone stepped out, an Indian, I was sure of it. My heart leapt. It had to be you.

But something felt off. He wore a blue shirt and cream-colored trousers. I knew you, Sam. You always preferred jeans and T-shirts. Still, my instincts screamed your name. I was just about to raise my hand, just about to call out to you...

And then the world exploded.

A deafening blast tore through the air, hurling me against an iron pole. Something hard struck the back of my head, and the ground rushed up to meet me. As I collapsed, the last thing my eyes caught was Abbu lying on the floor. In the blink of an eye, my entire world turned upside down.

A week later, faint sobs reached my ears. My mother's voice. I tried to open my eyes, but there was nothing, only darkness. Endless, suffocating darkness. I rubbed my eyes again and again, panic clawing at my chest. I searched the space around me with my hands, desperate to understand where I was.

Ammi held my hand, crying harder than before.

"Ammi," I whispered, fear trembling in my voice, "mujhe kuch dikhai nahi de raha hai."

Her words shattered what was left of me.

“Us bam visphotak mein tere aankhein chali gayi.”

That was when I remembered Abbu.

“Abbu kaise hain, Ammi?” I asked, already dreading the answer.

Through her tears, she said, “Abbu bhi usi mein chal base.”

We cried together, cries that had no end, no relief. Pain became our only companion.

Three days later, I was taken home. But grief had not finished with us yet. Ammi told me that even Tiger had died. He couldn’t bear Abbu’s death. In that tragic blast, every shop in the market was burned to ashes. Bhayya and Bhabhi tried relentlessly to get government permission to rebuild our shop the only source of our livelihood but their efforts failed. With no other choice, Bhayya left for Karachi in search of some small job.

And so, Ammi and I were left behind. Two helpless souls, abandoned by fate.

My life has never been the same since that day, Sam. Not a single second has passed without tears.

There was silence for a while. Then I continued, my voice trembling.

I lost my mobile in the blast. I could barely remember your number, I had written it on a piece of paper once. I didn’t even know if it was right. I tried calling again and again from Ammi’s phone, but each time the same cold voice answered: *This number does not exist.*

I didn’t know how to reach you. I had no phone, no computer. I couldn’t even step outside, you know my situation. I lived like a corpse, Sam, waiting for you to breathe life back into my bones. That was all I could do. Wait.

Then one day, Ameena came to me. She told me she was going to the US to pursue her MS. In that moment, a spark of hope

flickered inside me. I wrote my address on a small slip of paper and handed it to her. I chose to believe. I chose faith.

And Allah heard my prayers.

You are here now, standing right in front of me. You are my dream come true, Sam.

She wrapped her arms around me tightly. In that single embrace, I felt all her love, all her loss, and all the pain she had carried alone for so long.

I hugged her with all the love I had carried inside me for years and in that moment, words felt small. Still, I asked the one question that mattered.

“Shall we marry?”

She didn’t speak. She only nodded, slightly, shyly but that nod was louder than any promise. It was enough. More than enough. I knew then that the purpose of my journey had been fulfilled. For the first time in a long while, the life I was living had meaning again.

I lifted her in my arms and carried her out of the room, down the stairs, straight to Ammi. My heart was racing, but my voice was steady.

“Ammi, can I marry Afifa?”

She looked at us for a moment and then smiled. “Yes.”

It looked like even she was waiting for me to breathe life into Afifa’s life and hers too in a way and just like that, our journey together took flight.

I immediately called my mother.

“Mom, I’m coming to Vizag in a few hours.”

She sounded worried. “Why now? Is everything alright? Talk to your dad, I’ll give him the phone.”

“Nothing to worry about, Mom,” I said quickly. “Everything is good. We’ll talk once I reach. Bye for now. Take care.”

She paused, then said softly, “Bye. Come soon.”

Eternal Union

We took a taxi to the airport. By sheer luck, there was a flight to Hyderabad within five hours. From Hyderabad, we caught another flight to Vizag. Thanks to a common friend in the embassy, the journey that could have taken days was completed in less than one.

When the taxi stopped outside my house, Afifa and I stepped out together. I knocked on the door.

My mother opened it and froze.

Standing beside me was a girl in a burqa.

Surprise flickered across her face, followed by confusion, then concern. I smiled gently.

“Let’s go inside, Mom. We’ll talk.”

She didn’t ask anything. Maybe she trusted me. Maybe she sensed that this wasn’t the moment for questions.

I took Afifa to my room. After an hour, we all gathered around the dining table, Mom, Dad, Sanhitha, Afifa, and me. I knew they were waiting, anxious and curious, so I didn’t delay.

“Mom, Dad,” I began, “this is Afifa. She lost both her eyes in an accident, we’ll talk about that later. She’s from Pakistan. I want to marry her. After that, I plan to go to the US for further studies.”

I paused.

“I know I never spoke about the reason behind my suicide

attempt. I don't want to say Afifa was the reason but the situation back then made me believe I would never have her in my life. That thought broke me."

No one interrupted me.

My family listened in silence. They always wanted me to be happy. And because of that, they didn't say no.

Finally, Mom spoke.

"We don't have any objections to your marriage. But we need some time to arrange things properly."

"I want it low-key, Dad," I said. "A register marriage is enough for now."

Dad nodded. "I agree with Sam. Let's do it the way he wants."

Then Mom added gently, "Before the marriage, we should consult an ophthalmologist."

Dad agreed. "That would be wise."

I understood what they meant, but I said, "I don't mind whether she can see or not. I'd happily be her eyes."

Mom shook her head softly.

"Think of Afifa, Sam. She would want to see her wedding, to witness her life with her own eyes."

She was right.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't think of it that way. Let's see the doctor tomorrow."

The clock struck two by the time we finished talking. Exhausted but peaceful, we went to sleep.

The next morning, we went to the hospital. After examining Afifa, the doctor gave us a date for her eye surgery.

That news, second only to meeting Afifa, felt like a miracle.

We requested the doctor that the bandages be removed at home, surrounded by family. She agreed.

There were ten days before Afifa would see the world again and see me. I wanted that day to be unforgettable. I bought the same bangles I had lost during the bomb blast. I searched endlessly for the watch Afifa once wanted to gift me and somehow, fate smiled again. I found the exact same model.

The surgery was successful.

On the day her bandages were to be removed, we decorated the room softly, mostly beige, with touches of red, so her eyes wouldn't strain.

The doorbell rang. I ran to open the door.

"Good morning, Doctor."

"Good morning, Sam."

I led her to the room where Afifa waited, surrounded by family.

"How are you, Afifa?" the doctor asked kindly.

"I'm good, ma'am," Afifa replied softly.

"Now I'll remove the bandages," the doctor said. "Open your eyes slowly. Let them adjust."

I went closer, held Afifa's hand. I wanted to be the first thing she saw.

The doctor carefully unwound the cloth.

Afifa opened her eyes.

She looked at me, and suddenly cried out, "Sam! I knew it was you. I knew it!" That day on the bomb blast it was you whom I saw.

She was crying, laughing, trembling all at once. I wore the same color dress I had worn that day, just for her. So that she can easily identify me. And she did it amazingly

Sanhitha stepped forward with a box.

"Hi bhabhi. This is something Sam wanted you to give him."

Afifa held the box, smiled, and said confidently,
"Sam, this is the same watch I bought for you, right?"

We were stunned.

"How did you guess?" Sanhitha asked.

Afifa grinned. "Phari hoon main."

Everyone laughed.

Sanhitha glanced at me knowingly because Aditi used exact same words in the same accent too, and finally understood my past, my silences, my interest in Aditi during my darkest days.

Then I took Afifa's hands and slipped the bangles onto her wrists.

She looked at them, tears flowing freely.

"Thank you, Sam. Not just for the bangles, for giving me my life back."

I hugged her. I cried. We all did.

A week later, we registered our marriage.

Soon after, I flew to Florida.

Six months later, Afifa wrote her GRE, qualified, and joined the same college, as my junior.

Life moved forward.

And for the first time, it moved smoothly.

It was the morning of March 16th in South Carolina, the kind of morning that feels like the world has quietly decided to be kind again. We were sitting in the courtyard, wrapped in the gentle chill of early spring, watching the cherry blossoms and redbuds in full bloom. Soft baby pink and deep shades of purple filled the trees around us, delicate and hopeful just like our life had become after years of storms we thought would never pass.

The air smelled of fresh flowers and damp earth. Everything felt new. Peaceful. Earned.

Ammi came out just then, smiling the way only mothers do when their hearts are full, carrying two cups of coffee. She lives with us now, and somehow the house feels warmer because of it. She handed us the cups, her fingers brushing mine for a second, a silent blessing in that touch.

We sat side by side, our shoulders barely touching, sipping slowly and watching petals drift down like tiny promises. Between quiet laughs and comfortable silences, we started planning Afifa's birthday party for the evening, what decorations to put up, which sweets to make, who to call first. Simple things. Beautiful things.

And as she spoke, her eyes lighting up with every idea, I realized something.

This calm morning, these flowers, this home and this life we built
after everything

This is my love story with Afifa.