

When A Writer Falls In Love

Keshavraj Kalyankar



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please contact:

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

www.BlueRoseONE.com

info@bluerosepublishers.com

+91 8882 898 898

+4407342408967

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When A Writer Falls in Love

Keshavraj Uttamrao Kalyankar

For....AAI-DADA-

Whose love and blessing give shape to every dream I live

&

For my sisters — who always stood by me and became my
strength through every struggle.

For my wife,

Who once said, “Write, I’m right behind you.”

**Those simple words sparked the beginning of this
book.**

and changed the course of my life forever.

Preface

“What greater grandeur could I wish for when words themselves are a jewel-adorned throne for me”

After a decade I have finally picked up the pen again. Not to tell someone else's story, not to chase fleeting recognition, but to create a new world of my own—a world that belongs entirely to my thoughts, my emotions, and the quiet corners of my heart. Writing has always been a journey of self-discovery for me, and today, after a decade, I seek to rediscover the writer I had lost somewhere along the way.

This is my second book, following the poetry collection I published ten years ago. In the years between, I wrote extensively—but mostly as a ghostwriter. Sometimes for publications, sometimes for films, I breathed life into stories that were not my own. And in the process, while unraveling the worlds of others, I gradually felt my own emotional universe slipping away. My own voice had gone silent.

Putting aside all distractions, doubts, and fears, this book is my attempt to reclaim that voice, to return to myself, and to share it with you. The journey behind these pages—the long nights, the restless thoughts, the struggle to give shape to emotions—remains deeply personal. It is not something I undertake for applause or approval. As a writer writes first and foremost for oneself.

Yet, as I offer this book to you, I make a simple request: even if only in some small measure, accept me as a writer. Accept the voice that has finally found its way back to paper, the emotions that have waited silently for years, and the world I have painstakingly built from fragments of my own soul.

To those who read these words, I hope you see not just the sentences but the heart that beats behind them.

—**Keshavraj**

Pune, 2017

I. The Day You Became the Most Special

“There comes a day in every life...”

A day when you feel an inexplicable sense of completeness within yourself — when confidence no longer needs validation, when your steps carry a quiet grace, and your words seem to hold the weight of meaning.

Your eyes glimmer with a light that speaks of dreams yet to unfold, and in your gaze rests the calm assurance of a beautiful tomorrow.

In that rare moment, when you see your own reflection, you recognize the story behind it —

the silent battles, the sleepless nights, the countless moments when you almost gave up, and yet chose to rise again.

That day is not ordinary; it is a celebration of survival, of becoming, and of everything that once felt impossible.

Such a day arrives for everyone — once, at least — to remind us who we truly are.

It rained through the night, leaving the ground soft and fragrant. Morning arrived quietly, the sun still hidden behind drifting clouds, though now and then a golden ray slipped through to touch the damp earth. Dew clung to the blades of grass, glittering like pearls. A cool breeze brushed against my skin, stirring something deep inside me. Apart from the

gentle wind, the only sound was the murmur of the river ahead.

So much had changed in these years. Cities, people, even I was no longer the same. And yet, here at the boat club, silence had endured. Perhaps it was waiting for me.

Three years ago, this was where I belonged—under the wide shade of a peepal tree, on an old wooden bench nailed to its trunk, facing the Mula River. If I dangled my legs, the tips of my shoes would skim the water. I wondered now if that bench had survived the seasons, and my steps quickened, eager to know. The wet grass beneath my polished shoes reminded me of my village, where I once walked barefoot through fields after the rain.

The clouds thinned, letting the pale sun rise over the horizon. When I reached the riverbank, my reflection stared back at me—sharper, older, and unfamiliar. Often, we fail to recognize ourselves. The boy who once sat here so freely had been buried deep inside me. In his place stood a man in a heavy suit and suffocating tie. I had never liked such clothes, but the world sees what you wear before it sees who you are. So, I wore the costume it demanded.

And there it was—the bench. Still standing, though cracked and worn. Seeing it made me smile. Sitting on it was never easy; from the front, you had to wade halfway into the river, soaking your clothes. The first time I tried, I failed miserably and ended up in the water.

Maybe she would have looked at me that way — maybe she would have laughed at me, truly and fully. But she wasn't here. Never was.

Who is she?

Everyone has that one person with whom they paint a secret, perfect dream — a dream where she and I exist, wrapped in

such quiet that the beating of two hearts can be heard. Her world is separate from life's clamor — gentle, untouched.

Was she ever part of my life? Is she still? The questions hang, unanswered.

**Sometimes I wish people could be blessed to forget —
to let go of memories that hurt,
to erase the faces that keep coming back,
to forget the pain,
and finally find peace in silence.**

Back then, I could leap onto the bench in a single move. Today, burdened by stiff clothes and heavier thoughts, I hesitated. There was no one here to laugh if I slipped—except the river, the tree, the sun half-veiled behind clouds. They were my companions once. And perhaps poets are not born but made—by places like these. To ordinary eyes, a tree is just a tree, a river only water. But to a poet, everything breathes with meaning.

It was here, three years ago, that I first found this boat club. Part of a great old college in Pune—so vast it felt like a university. Its stone steps sloped down to the river like a ghat. Small wooden boats rocked along the edge, barely big enough for two people.

Evenings were my favorite. I would row into the fading light, drifting all the way to where the Mula and Mutha rivers met. The breeze was cool, the sky stained red, ducks bobbed across the ripples, and Sangamwadi's great bridge loomed above the waters. Afterward, I would return, drink hot tea in clay cups, and watch the river run in silence. I spent three years of my life that way. Three years here.

Today, the college was celebrating its seventy-fifth anniversary. They had invited me as a special guest. The program wouldn't begin until eleven, but I had come early—for these memories.

"Sir, we have to go. Deshpande is on the call," said Vijay from behind.

I nodded, leaving the river behind, and walked with him. Students had gathered near the entrance, stretching out notebooks and phones for autographs. The bouncers tried to push them back, but I stopped and signed what I could.

My car was waiting outside—a gleaming blue Audi. Blue has always been my favorite color. Before I could touch the handle, the bouncer rushed forward and opened the door for me. Strange, how the higher you rise, the smaller your tasks become, handed over to others. Opening a door—such a simple act, and now someone else's job.

I sat in the back seat as the car rolled toward the auditorium, banners of welcome lining the way.

As the car rolled past the college library, a wave of old memories came crashing back, pulling me into the shadows of a life I tried to leave behind.

Yes, this was the same library—the place where I had spent a large part of my youth, known only as a "library boy." From serving tea at every desk to sweeping the floors when no one noticed—I had done it all.

And yet today, as I returned to this college, not as a worker but as an invited guest, my eyes betrayed me. Tears welled up, unbidden, shimmering with both pain and pride.

Through the glass window, I caught my own reflection. Behind me stood the college staff, their faces quietly glowing

with pride—not for themselves, but for me. For the journey they had witnessed.

Because My journey was never easy.

When you're hungry but still full of dreams, sleep becomes something you can't afford.

**You walk alone, telling yourself you'll make it,
even when the world doubts you.**

But you keep going—because only you know your fire will never die.

On the seat beside me lay a book. Its cover showed a river, a half-seen boat, the sky ablaze with sunset, a flute on the sand, and a boy in his twenties watching the horizon.

He looks at the sun—

bleeding into the horizon,

yet leaving behind a promise of dawn.

The title read: **When A Writer Falls in Love**

I picked it up and opened it, letting the story pull me back to where it all began.

Nanded, 2009

2 First Rain, First Tea, First Love...

It was six in the morning on a rainy June day. The monsoon had poured through the night, and though the rain had eased, the sky remained heavy and gray, rumbling occasionally as if warning it could pour again at any moment.

My alarm had blared at five, jerking me awake. The sound of rain hammering the tin roof, mixed with that shrill alarm, made me wish I could stay in bed forever. I rushed to the balcony, hoping for a reason to skip tuition, but the rain didn't relent enough. I had come to Nanded for a dream: scoring 90% in my 10th boards.

Nanded – A City of Love and Memories,

Nestled along the banks of the Godavari, Nanded is not just a dot on the map, but a keeper of emotions, memories, and dreams.

On the ghats of Godawari River, when the evening lights shimmer,

the river sparkles like the tears in a lover's eyes.

Standing there, one feels — **“Countless unspoken words are hidden in these ripples.”**

At Kaleshwar Temple in Vishnupuri, where the gentle chant of “Har Har Mahadev” mingles with the river breeze.

There, love feels eternal — as if time itself pauses to watch devotion take the shape of affection.

Couples who visit find their hearts calmer, their bond purer — as if blessed by the divine union.

And then, the heart of the city — Hazur Sahib Gurudwara, where the eternal flame of faith burns bright beside the Granth Sahib.

In the hymns of kirtan, peace flows like the Godavari itself — soft, endless, and pure. Every bowed head carries gratitude, and every whispered prayer feels like love in its truest form — selfless and eternal.

At the Ratneshwari temple, the serene sound of bells resonates,

and in that resonance, two hearts unknowingly entwine. Love feels sacred there, touched by divinity itself.

On the old Nandagiri fort walls, the quiet footsteps of secret meetings still echo. Even the stones seem to whisper

that new love stories bloom on the shoulders of history.

Climbing Mahurgad, lost in the clouds, feels like a journey of hearts dreaming together. The blessings of Renukamata shine down,

as if every bond is being gently approved.

At the majestic Sahasrakund waterfall, sometimes it mirrors the surge of love, sometimes the tears of longing. Hidden in the mist is a magic that tingles like the first touch of a beloved.

On the banks of the Asana river, golden hues of sunset and cool evening winds carry emotions without names.

In the water, one doesn't just see their reflection —

but the shadow of a smile that belongs to someone special.

Nanded—a city carved by history, adorned by devotion, and kept alive by stories of love.

My village school had been small, government-run, but now, in the city, every mark mattered. My father had paid 20,000 rupees for admission to the famous IIC Classes, and I rented a tiny room in Yashwant Nagar for 1,500 rupees a month.

The room was on the second floor, a corner of a terrace, mostly constructed with tin sheets to store old junk. The landlord—some distant relative I could never fully understand—called him “uncle.” He warned the room might leak once the monsoon arrived. Luckily, I had arrived early, in April, for foundation classes, so I was prepared.

Now, it was 6:10. I packed my books and set off on my cycle. The roads were wet, my red T-shirt and blue pants damp from the drizzle, but the thought of skipping tuition didn’t cross my mind. Not with boards looming.

IIC was a three-story building in the Srinagar area. I parked my cycle and hurried inside. My first class, Sadhana Miss’s, had already started. I tried to slip in quietly, avoiding eye contact. Her gaze could pierce right through you, beautiful but intimidating—half the students had secretly written her name in essays as their favorite teacher.

“Mitochondria is the powerhouse of the cell...”

The words barely registered. My mind was on the heater I might have left on at home.

Then Pandit Sir entered, smiling that mischievous, almost shy smile. He often visited Sadhana Miss’s classes, but today was different. Today, he had a reason.

“Excuse me, madam, sorry to disturb...” he began.

“No problem, sir,” Miss said, forcing a polite smile.

A ripple of “Oooohh...” went through the class. Pandit Sir glanced around, a little embarrassed. Then he announced:

“Students, we have a new admission — Preeti Desai.”

And then I saw her.

She walked in behind him, quiet yet radiant, carrying herself with the sort of natural grace that made everything else fade. I don’t think I have ever seen anyone so beautiful in my life. For ten whole minutes, I couldn’t hear anything else, couldn’t see anyone else. The world had narrowed down to the girl stepping softly into our class.

She’s like a soft rose petal floating in the wind — gentle and pure.

The way her fingers move feels like a quiet song.

When she walks, it seems like even the earth stops to watch her.

She’s so beautiful that you just want to keep looking at her, until you forget yourself completely.

Because truly, nothing can be more beautiful than this.

“Krishna! Sit down, Krishna...”

Vishal’s voice dragged me back. A piece of chalk pinged against my forehead—Pandit Sir’s impeccable aim.

“What are you doing, Krishna? Where were you planning to go?”

“I... I wasn’t standing,” I stammered, though I had been. My eyes betrayed me; I had been staring.

Kajol, sitting nearby, shot me a sharp glare. I hurried to sit down. My cheeks burned, but Preeti... she smiled. A shy, sweet smile, like the first sun of a rainy morning.

She introduced herself softly: "I'm Preeti Desai. I was in VIDYADAN Classes before and scored 96% in 9th grade. Thank you."

The boys whispered, some even clapped. I don't know why—it wasn't the first time someone had scored well—but it didn't matter. She had entered the room, and the world felt different. Even Kajol, normally loud and chatty, was thrilled at Preeti's arrival.

And I? I had already written a poem in my head. Not on paper—yet—but it flowed naturally:

"Whenever I try to write about your beauty, words fail me—

for no words are exquisite enough to capture you."

Poetry, perhaps, belonged to another world. But in that instant, it belonged to her.

The monsoon poured outside. The sky was a heavy gray curtain, making the classroom feel darker than it really was. But I didn't notice. My mind was entirely on Preeti. Her laugh, her shy glances, the way she sat next to Kajol—it all anchored itself in my heart, making the lessons about mitochondria fade into background noise.

I had come to study, to make my parents proud, to chase numbers and marks. But that morning, sitting in Sadhana Miss's class, I realized some lessons are far more powerful than any syllabus.

In my heart I became her Krishna, and she, my beloved Radha divine...

The flute's sweet whispers turned into the breath that keeps me alive."

Today, for the first time, I just couldn't focus on my studies. I kept glancing at the clock, thinking, "I hope tuition ends late today." But strangely, time seemed to be racing like a wild horse! One class ended, and the next began instantly. Honestly, only the teacher knew what was being taught—because from 7 to 10:30, all I did was stare at Preeti.

My eyes were glued to her the entire time, and Kajal kept giving me those angry looks now and then. I'm sure she had figured it out—yes, I had fallen for Preeti.

It was love at first sight.

Yes, really! Imagine this—I had left home worried about the heater being on, and by the first lecture, I was already imagining marrying Preeti. If only life were as simple as we imagine.

I was just fifteen when I experienced this "love at first sight."

What does it take for love to bloom? A beautiful heart... a few unspoken moments... feelings deep within... dreams reflected in the eyes... colors that brighten life... She... and I... a lingering gaze... a tender smile... the melody of a flute... a rose... and a gentle, lingering touch... That's all... what more could one need?

Class ended, and I stepped out slowly. A crowd of a hundred students from class 10-B poured out, and among them, graceful and gentle, Preeti was adjusting her bag, trying to make her way through the crowd.

Kajal had already become her friend. Girls make friends easily with other girls, but why not with boys?

Are all boys the same? Maybe. I mean, look at me—a simple, shy guy acting like this all day!

It was still raining outside. As Preeti walked out, all the boys followed her.

“Hello Preeti, this is your water bottle—you left it in class,” said Shubham with a wide grin, right in front of me.

My heart skipped a beat. I wanted to hear what she would say.

“Thank you,” she said simply and walked away.

“Welcome... I’m Shubham,” he added, trying to shake her hand.

She just smiled and walked down the stairs toward the parking lot. All the boys laughed at him because he had failed in front of the entire class. I felt a little happy seeing that.

I followed downstairs. Preeti was standing under a shade, getting splashed by raindrops. She looked like a soft flower, with water droplets on her face.

Red skirt, cute ribbon, curly hair, sharp eyes, fair face, red socks, white shoes—she looked like a little doll, stretching her hand to feel the rain.

“Didn’t you bring a raincoat?” Kajal asked her.

“I did, but I thought the rain would stop... but it doesn’t seem like it will,” she said, checking the rain again.

I secretly wished the rain would never stop. Let her stay there under the shed, and I would just keep watching her all day.

But this heater in my head wouldn’t let me be. I wanted to rush home to check if I had left it on. What if the house had caught fire?

While I was lost in these wild thoughts, one by one, students left. Some wore raincoats, others carried umbrellas. The parking lot was empty now, except for my cycle—waiting for me in the rain.

Preeti wore her cute Barbie-pink raincoat and left, riding her cycle slowly like a heroine from a romantic film. Slightly wet, a bit cold, pedaling away...I couldn't take my eyes off her.

If only I had a raincoat, maybe I could've followed her.

Anyway, I finally left as the rain slowed down. I reached VIP Road and saw her again—she was standing alone.

Her cycle chain had slipped.

She didn't know how to fix it. Of course, no girl ever knew this. Why would Preeti?

I looked terrible—soaking wet, messy hair, oily face, dirty pants, a T-shirt sticking to my body.

How could I go and stand in front of her like that?

But she was just standing there, doing nothing. I wanted to help, but I didn't want to seem desperate.

In my mind, I imagined making a hero's entrance—like saving her from bullies. But now it was just about fixing a cycle chain.

Finally, I walked toward her, wiped my face with a handkerchief, and tried to act normal.

She looked at me. My heart started racing like crazy. I wanted to say something cool, like "Hi Preeti, need help?" but nothing came out.

"My cycle chain slipped. It's not moving," she said.

I sighed in relief. At least she spoke first. I bent down to fix it. My hands turned black from the oil, and the rain kept falling. She had a raincoat, I was fully drenched.

She looked worried for me. I could see it on her face.

"You don't have to... I'll call my brother. You can go," she said softly.

“No, it’s okay... just some mud in the chain,” I replied, avoiding eye contact.

Water dripped on my face, but I couldn’t wipe it. I tried on my shoulder but my shirt was already soaked.

She noticed everything. And then... she took out a napkin.

At first, I thought she was going to give it to me, but she came closer and gently wiped the water off my face herself.

That moment... my entire body froze. My heart stopped. My mind played a Hindi romantic song “Pahala Pahala pyarhai...pahali pahli bar hai...” in the background. It felt like I was flying.

She didn’t even know my name, and here I was, dreaming of a lifetime with her.

She softly moved her hand on my cheek again. I fixed the chain and spun the cycle wheel dramatically like a film hero.

“Thank you,” she said with a sweet smile and extended her hand.

I awkwardly showed her my dirty hand and smiled. She laughed. So beautifully—like a toothpaste advertise heroine.

Then she poured water from her bottle onto my hand and washed it. She gave me her printed napkin to wipe.

I wiped it... in my pants pocket. Childhood habit.

Suddenly, loud thunder! Lightning flashed! Preeti screamed loudly—more than the thunder, I was shocked by her scream!

The rain started pouring heavily. I was completely soaked.

There’s a profound bond between rain and love... how it arrives at the perfect moment, stirring excitement in the most beautiful moments of love... and sometimes, even when least expected, out of season.

“OMG! You’re all drenched. Where’s your raincoat?” she asked.

“I forgot it at home,” I lied. Actually, I didn’t even have one.

“But it was raining in the morning too, how did you come?” she asked.

“By getting drenched,” I replied. She laughed, thinking it was a joke.

She then grabbed my hand and pulled me to a nearby tea stall under a tin roof. My heart skipped again at her soft touch.

My mind played “*Rimjhim gire sawan...*”

We both stood at the tea stall. Rain pouring, tea boiling, her wet face shivering slightly, and then, she sneezed.

“Sorry, I always catch a cold when I get wet,” she said, wiping her nose with my napkin.

She was so delicate. I smiled.

“Want to have tea?” I asked.

“You drink tea?” she said, surprised.

“Only when I’m standing in the rain with a pretty girl,” I said playfully, brushing a few raindrops off my sleeve.

The truth was, I drink tea every single day — but this one felt different. Some moments don’t need explanations.

She smiled, eyes glinting beneath the drizzle. “So this is my first tea with you,” she said softly, lifting her cup, “guess that makes it special.”

For a moment, the rain, the steam, and her voice blended into something that felt almost like love.

This tea isn’t just tea when shared with her...

It's the soft, quiet beginning of first love, the very first—like a tiny sprout breaking through the soil, almost unnoticed.

And yet, she was still only my friend...

And still, I found myself calling her my beloved...

I guess I've always been hopelessly, recklessly hopeful.

The tea guy poured tea into small glasses—spilling half of it. Why are they always in such a rush?

Anyway, I gave her one cup and asked, “Where do you live?” “Here in Kailash Nagar,” she replied. “It feels so amazing, right? Freezing drizzle and hot tea,” I said, enjoying the moment.

“Sorry, what’s your name again?” she asked suddenly. I was shocked. I’d been dreaming of marrying her all day, and she didn’t even know my name!

“I’m Krishna. Same class—” I said. “I’m Preeti,” she smiled, offering her hand. “I already know,” I said. “Preeti Desai. 96% in 9th grade. Class topper. Dad’s a government engineer, mom’s a professor, one brother, one sister, from Kandhar, mobile number...”

“Wait, wait... what! I didn’t tell you all that. How do you know?” she laughed in surprise. “Well, boys find out everything about pretty girls very fast,” I smiled.

When a boy loves a girl, he notices everything about her — her smile, her tears, the people who make her happy, the memories that touch her. He starts living in her little moments, as if understanding her becomes his only silent purpose.

She laughed again. That sweet, innocent laugh.

But I had to leave. Just then, Shubham saw us at the tea stall. He rolled down the car window and stared at us like aliens had landed.

Of course, in our Nanded, a boy and girl having tea together is big news.

I quickly paid for the tea with a wet note, but the tea guy refused it. "I'll pay," she said, handing him ₹10.

Rain falling, hot tea in hand, Preeti next to me—I had never imagined such a perfect day. All I wanted was this kind of life forever.

She took her cycle. "Thank you again," she said.

She stopped again. "Krishna, you are a nice person," she added, smiling, and disappeared into the rain.

And me? I just stood there at the tea stall, staring at the rain, still thinking of her.

Today, everything felt like the first—

The first gentle rain,

The first warm cup of tea,

The first quiet stirrings of love...

A flutter in my heart,

A whirlwind in my mind,

Everything was new,

Everything... just the first, the very first.

I read the first chapter of my book and then closed it, letting the words linger in my mind like the last drops of rain clinging to a windowpane. A quiet smile tugged at my lips—

perhaps even after ten years, my mind was still drenched in that rainy afternoon with Preeti.

The first sip of tea at the stall, the curl of steam brushing past her lips pressed to the rim of the glass, delicate as a rose petal—everything felt achingly the same. I could almost hear the rain tapping on the tin roof, the soft murmur of the street around us, the way time had once stood still in that moment.

I made my way from the car to the college auditorium, the polished tiles reflecting my steps. A stamp on the corner of my book proclaimed: “*1 Million Copies Sold.*” I traced the letters with my thumb, still not quite believing it. A million readers. Over the past year, my home had become a quiet museum of awards, gleaming plaques that seemed to whisper of recognition, though their meaning often felt distant.

Perhaps awards are proof to the world of one’s worth, I thought. I had watched countless brilliant writers whose lives revolved around their fame and fortune, yet whose hearts seemed untouched by it.

“What do you do?”

“I’m a writer.”

And inevitably: “But how do you make a living?”

A pen can spark revolutions, yet it rarely fills the belly. That is the question everyone wonders.

Who is a writer?

A writer is someone who cannot hold back the tide of their emotions — someone who feels an inner storm and must pour it into words to find peace.

The world gives them names — writer, poet, artist — but in truth, they are simply souls trying to make sense of their own chaos through language.

History may celebrate the pen as a weapon of revolution, but I have brought no revolution with my words. I write quietly, simply, for hearts to recognize themselves.

Who am I? What is my existence? What is the purpose of life—society, revolution, philosophy? I had always dreamed of writing something profound, something that could shake minds. And yet, when I take up the pen, the mind grows heavy, and what emerges is simple—direct, heartfelt, and unadorned.

The flow of a child's mind...

The innocent current of love...

Or the delicate threads of human relationships, woven with subtle touch...

Or what I am writing now—*Sankav*—like a wooden bridge over a river, quiet and unassuming, carrying the emotional journey of siblings in its fragile planks.

I often wonder why such simplicity touches millions. Perhaps it is the people who live simple lives who truly appreciate the revolutions of history.

Today, I entered this college as a guest. Yet this same place had seen my struggle—walking in worn-out shoes, scraping by while brushing the floor that I now tread upon in polished leather. Even gazing at my own banner, I had endured humiliation quietly, silently.

Even now, climbing the auditorium stairs, I remember the dust beneath my fingers, the low hum of cleaning, the way every step had once felt heavy with invisibility.

They say that when the colors of success fall over old wounds, the pain softens. Yet deep wounds hurt more, and in that pain, the act of healing becomes infinitely more meaningful than celebration.

This story is simply my journey... love and separation, dreams and struggle, failure and triumph... from clay stoves to gas burners, from cow-dung heaps to polished floors, from leaking roofs to ceilings above, from empty stomachs to carefully measured meals.

I stepped into the college auditorium and slowly made my way toward the stage. The sound of applause cracked through the air, echoing from every corner. *"We love you, Krishna!"* voices roared, filling the hall.

My chest felt heavy. Over the past year, I had traveled to many colleges, stood on countless stages, attended events, accepted awards, and heard the applause of strangers. Yet today felt different.

Because this college has seen me grow. It had watched me struggle. My friends were still here, somewhere in the crowd. My colleagues, who had once worked beside me in service to this very place, were now living my success as if it were their own.

Three years ago, I had left home for the first time, searching for my own existence. In truth, I had almost forgotten who I was. But I carried with me one unshakable belief—that someday, the world would know my name. Perhaps it was that very belief that carried me this far, that placed me here today, standing on this stage.

Once again, the thunder of applause swept over me, louder, deeper, almost like the heartbeat of the moment itself.

"I roam through paths unknown, in search of something true.

If nothing is found, will my journey cease,

Or will I drift forever, lost in endless wandering?"

2014 · Pune

3. When Life's second

Chapter begin....

The train had just started pulling away from Nanded station when I came running after it—like Kajol in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*. Except, there was no Raj waiting with a hand outstretched. If I wanted to get inside, I had to do the running all by myself.

I somehow managed to jump in, panting hard, clutching my old black bag. One zipper was broken, so Aai had stitched it from inside. Since she didn't find black thread, she used white. Now a zigzag scar ran across the bag like a stubborn reminder of her jugaad.

“A thought keeps circling in my mind — every person on this Earth is, in truth, living a life of JUGAD.

Some are broken by the heart, some by money, some by honor, and some by fate.

Some hold themselves together with courage, some with humanity, and some with emotions, relationships, or friendship.

And yet, on every face, there is but one mask —a mask of pretense, of society's expectations, of survival's compromises.

In one way or another, we are all, essentially, JUGAD of life...”

For a moment, I thought, *What if people notice and laugh?* But then I consoled myself—*Who even cares? People are too busy with their own lives to stare at my bag.*

I dropped it near seat number 67 in S1 and collapsed onto the berth. That's when an elderly man across from me looked straight at the bag and said, "That white thread should've been black."

I forced a smile. *As if I hadn't thought of that already.* Instead of answering, I picked up my water bottle and turned to the window.

"Chai, chai! Garam chai!" came a voice from the aisle.

"Hey, chaiwala!" I called out, pushing the bottle aside.

He poured the watery mixture into a flimsy paper cup. Too much water, too little milk, sugar barely there. Still—I sipped it, because it was less about tea and more about routine.

Outside, the August rain had just stopped. The platform glistened wet.

The old man gave me a soft smile.

"Going to Pune?" he asked.

"Yes. And you, kaka?"

"Yes. My son lives there. Sometimes he calls me when he misses me. Health isn't good, but... for children, we go."

I nodded politely.

"Wherever you settle in life," he added, "keep your parents with you. Don't send them away."

I didn't reply. Just smiled faintly.. I climbed to my upper berth.

No one belongs to anyone, not even till the very end. A mother aches, always,

for a glimpse of the life she carried within her womb.

The journey of a soul never ends—they never truly rest at home.

A child is absent at the feet of a weary mother.

A hand is missing, from the grasp of a tired father.

Who wrote this fate, that no one belongs to anyone till their final breath?

I traced a single word on paper...and finally, drifted into quiet sleep.

When I woke up, it was 6 in the morning.

Pune, a city embraced by winding lanes and gentle shades of green,

Where the whispers of ancient buildings mingle with the hum of modern life.

At the foothills of the Sahyadris, calm yet alive, Carrying the fragrance of history, of kings, generals, and forts long past.

Cultural peaks rise in every corner—grand old mansions, temples, and bustling squares, Where the language, the attire, the soft laughter of people still breathe through time.

The heart of learning pulses here, from the narrow lanes of the old city

To the sprawling grounds of Savitribai Phule University, Filled with the light of curiosity and the dreams of countless students.

Modern IT hubs rise like glass-and-steel monuments, Their energy blending with streets that glitter with enterprise, Where every step seems to echo with new ideas, new hopes, new beginnings.

Pune feels like a gentle fusion of past and present, A living poem written across history and greenery, Where the excitement of learning, the rhythm of progress, And the quiet calm of parks and gardens coexist in harmony.

And here I am, stepping into this beautiful city for the very first time, Awed, eager, and ready to let its stories sweep me away.

The platform was alive with noise—announcements, crowds, luggage trolleys rolling. I hurried out, balancing one bag on my shoulder and another in my hand. My eyes were swollen from the poor night's sleep.

Outside the station, the real chaos began. Auto drivers swooped in like vultures. One even tugged at my bag.

"Sinhagad Road," I said.

"Two hundred!"

"What? I came from Nanded to Pune for 150!"

"Then go back to Nanded," one muttered.

Finally, after a messy tug-of-war, one agreed at 120. He shoved my bag inside, then me, and off we went.

As the rickshaw rattled past Bhavani Peth, I got my first glimpse of Pune's old city. Wooden balconies leaned over narrow lanes, ancient wadas stood tired but proud. For a moment, I felt as if I was leafing through the pages of history.

Then, the road turned toward Budhwar Peth. Women stood along the street in bright saris, dark lipstick, blouses half open. Some leaned on walls, some just stared blankly, waiting. I had heard about this place, but seeing it with my own eyes was different.

The driver noticed me looking.

"You're not getting down here?" he asked casually.

Startled, I said, “No!”

“Don’t worry, they’re friendly. But at night—it’s more fun.”

He chuckled, spitting tobacco out of the window. I turned my face away.

Soon we passed over a bridge. A signboard said *Mutha River*. But what flowed beneath was no river—it was a giant sewage drain. I felt disappointed. Pune, the city of culture and history, letting its own river rot like this.

We crossed Alka Chowk, then Sarasbaug. The rickshaw finally hit Sinhagad Road.

“How much longer?” I asked.

“Ten minutes,” he said, spitting again. Some droplets splashed dangerously close. I wiped my pants quietly. Nobody ever complains.

At Rajaram Bridge, my phone rang. Rajesh.

“Are you touring the whole city? I’ve been waiting ages.”

“Almost there. Where should I get down?”

“Vadgaon bus stand. Don’t climb up, I’ll wait below.”

When I told the driver, he grumbled, “Extra twenty.”

“I don’t have extra,” I said honestly. “Please take me there.”

He muttered curses under his breath but drove on.

Finally, I spotted Rajesh waving near the stand. I got down, paid the fare. The driver wanted two rupees more, but I shrugged—“I don’t have it.” He made a face and sped away.

Rajesh hugged me tightly. We hadn’t met in three years, though we often talked on the phone. Seeing him in person felt different, grounding.

He was in shorts, slippers, and a faded T-shirt

I laughed, “Arrey, looking like a true Puneekar!”

“Please! Nobody in Pune dresses like this,” he shot back.

I handed him a bag. “Is your place nearby?”

“Two kilometers. I jog here every morning.”

I groaned, dragging my heavy bags. “We should’ve taken the auto.”

“Come on! Walking stretches your legs,” he said with a grin.

And so, half-asleep and half-excited, I followed Rajesh into Jadhav Nagar.

My first steps into Pune. The city that would soon teach me more than I had ever imagined

Rajesh was in his second year of dental college. His Sinhgad campus stretched wide and beautiful, like a small city of its own. I had never seen a college so big before.

That morning, I reached his room and freshened up, but I still hadn’t decided if I was going to stay there.

In Jadhav Nagar, down a narrow lane, stood a four-storied building named *Sarang*. Each floor had two blocks, each block had two beds. A simple bed-sharing system — ₹3000 per person, with nearby messes taking care of food. Rajesh had kept one bed vacant for me.

The room was plain, yet comforting. My side had a neat table, a cupboard, and a bed waiting. At first, I felt I wouldn’t survive in that closed space — suffocated. But then I stepped out onto the small balcony.

Behind the building, there was nothing but open land. Vadgaon sat higher than most of Pune, and from there the

entire Sinhgad Road spread below like a silver line. The city stretched out in the distance. A cool breeze brushed my skin, and in that moment, the thought of suffocation disappeared.

There was a wooden chair on balcony. Rajesh sat on it, sipping his protein shake.

“So, how do you like Pune?” he asked.

“I just arrived. How can I say so soon?” I said, breathing in the cold air.

He grinned and pointed at the road below.

See that road? That’s Swargate straight ahead — the same one you came by.”

I noticed the shake in his hand. “Heading to the gym?”

He laughed, stood up, and flexed.

“Don’t you see a change? Not the skinny Nanded boy anymore. Look — six-pack abs!” He lifted his T-shirt proudly.

I pressed his arm and teased, “More ribs than packs. But yes, you’ve filled out. Keep it up.”

He shrugged, still smiling. “Breakfast?”

“What about the room?” I asked.

“If you’re in, we’ll pay the landlord today.”

“I’ll take a short walk first, then decide,” I said, stepping back inside.

When I asked about the deposit, Rajesh said, “₹3000 deposit, ₹3000 rent.”

I opened my wallet. “I’ve only ₹5000.”

“Give it now. We’ll manage the rest later.”

“But then I’ll have nothing left until I find work.”

“Forget it for now. Let’s eat first.”

“I followed Rajesh to the canteen. The lane outside was still damp from last night’s rain. I wondered if Pune’s mornings always carried this chill, so different from Nanded’s dry air.”

Rajesh called out the moment we entered.

“Swami! One idli, one poha!”

The man who came bustling forward could have been straight out of a play — tilak on his forehead, saffron scarf around his neck, a loose vest and pants hanging about. This was *Swami*, and everyone knew his canteen more for his jokes than his food.

“Try the idli,” Rajesh said. “You can eat poha anywhere.”

“Just poha for me,” I replied, still watching Swami dart between tables. He caught me staring and lifted one eyebrow — only one — and smiled.

Swami served our plates himself. “New admission?” he asked.

“No, he’s my friend. Come here to try your special idli,” Rajesh said.

“Then let him eat it! Why are you eating?” Swami tapped Rajesh playfully on the head and walked away.

I laughed out loud. Rajesh rolled his eyes. “Ignore him. Now seriously — what’s your plan?”

The truth was, I had none. A few nights earlier, I had called Rajesh at 11 p.m. and said only this: “*I’m coming to Pune. Find me some work. I can’t stay in Nanded anymore.*” And now here I was, sitting in front of him, unable to explain further.

"I'll tell you everything when the time is right," I said, tasting the poha. It was sweeter than expected. Too much sugar. Typical Swami.

"For now, I just need a job."

Rajesh nodded. "I've asked a couple of friends, but it won't happen overnight. Give it time."

"I can't keep asking my family. Everyone from our batch has moved ahead — you're becoming a doctor, Sameer's at COEP, Dinesh got MBBS. And me? Nothing. Three years wasted since 12th. I'll explain someday... but first, I need to earn."

"You will. Don't stress," he said, and his calmness steadied me a little.

After breakfast, we stepped out. A girl smiled at Rajesh, but because I was there, he ignored her and walked ahead.

That day passed in small talk and old memories. By evening, we sat on the balcony again, sipping the tea he had made. The Pune skyline glowed in the fading light.

Rajesh set his cup down, looked at me, and asked softly —

"So..."

"Where is your Preeti?"

Rajesh's casual question ripped open a fresh wound in my chest. The world went still for an instant. Pain welled up and streamed down my eyes.

What could I say? I had no answer — words lodged and froze in my throat.

Some memories are like crimson thorns that rub at you forever.

I stood there, speechless... Then, without a word, I turned and walked away.

The streetlights had faded into a dim glow. Only the echo of my footsteps broke the silence.

Preeti's name pulsed in my heart... but my lips stayed closed.

Even after all these years, her memories could shatter whatever calm I tried to build within me.

I kept walking—each step dragging the shadows of the past behind.

Rajesh's simple question had, in truth, searched for the answer to my whole life—

and even now, I have none.

4 In World of Pune

I was standing across from Sancheti Hospital, right in front of the Yashwantrao Chavan memorial, trying to call Sameer.

“The number you have dialed is out of coverage, please try again later,” the lady’s sweet voice said.

Her voice, normally so pleasant, grated on my nerves. I was tired—bone-deep tired—and couldn’t understand why Sameer was always unreachable. To make matters worse, I didn’t even know exactly where this college was.

A big blue sign caught my eye: *“COEP Hostel.”* I thought, if the hostel is here, the college must be nearby.

I walked toward the hostel gate and tried calling Sameer again.

Same message. Same sweet voice.

I shoved the phone into my pocket, irritated.

“Where is COEP College?” I asked a security guard politely.

“Go straight, cross the bridge at the square, and you’ll see the college gate,” he replied, courteous and brief.

“Thanks,” I said, and walked on.

Back in front of Sancheti, I saw the bridge—but it split into three directions. I asked another man, “Where’s COEP College?”

“Go straight on this bridge,” he said without even hearing *mythank you*.

Fine. Forget courtesy. I didn't want to hear that sweet voice again anyway. I didn't call Sameer.

Ten minutes later, I arrived at the college. It was massive. How on earth would I find Sameer in this labyrinth?

Just then, my phone rang—it was him.

"Where are you, bro?" he asked, sounding as though he'd been searching for me all morning.

"I'm in your college," I said, trying to keep calm.

"Where in the college?"

"Near the gate."

"Which one? There are many gates. Ask a security guard nearby."

I put him on hold and asked a nearby guard, "Uncle, which department is this?"

"Civil department," he replied lazily.

I told Sameer, "I'm at the civil department."

"Come to the Boat Club. I'm here."

He said it like I was born knowing where the Boat Club was.

"Where's the Boat Club?" I snapped.

"Go straight, take a right, cross the underpass, then left and right again. You'll reach it," he said, as if it were in front of me.

"Okay, I'm coming," I said, hanging up.

Sameer and I were old friends from our coaching class. We'd shared everything—from pens to emotions.

He came from a very rich family; his father was a big contractor. Now, he was studying engineering at COEP and had ranked second in CET across Maharashtra.

Back in 12th, he wore plain clothes, oiled his hair, wore Paragon slippers, and rode his bicycle to class. No one would have guessed he was rich or exceptionally smart.

Now, he looked completely different—long hair tied back with a band, ripped jeans, a T-shirt, and a blue jacket.

When he saw me, he jumped up and hugged me tightly.

“Krishna! Bro, it’s been so long!”

“Are you really Sameer?” I asked, surprised at his transformation.

He laughed, gesturing to a chair, and I sat across from him.

The faint smell of cigarette smoke lingered in the air—he’d smoked earlier. His tired eyes told me he hadn’t slept much.

We sat in the Boat Club canteen, which was bustling with students.

I couldn’t help looking around. One guy was touching a girl’s foot under the table, and she smiled back flirtatiously. She wore shorts so short they barely covered her, and a tiny top that left little to the imagination. My eyes instinctively glanced at her fair legs—and then I quickly looked back at Sameer.

I thought, *As cities grow bigger, why do clothes get smaller?*

No one had taught me to be “broad-minded” yet. Apparently, being broad-minded meant accepting short clothes.

The girls—all fair-skinned, wearing ripped jeans, smoky eyes, makeup, and revealing tops—seemed like a completely new world. They were beautiful. Not just in looks, but in the way they carried themselves—the way they walked, talked,

smiled. Even the girls who weren't naturally graceful had learned to appear so.

The boys, on the other hand, were a mix of sleepy-eyed, toothpaste-stained shirt-wearers and messy-haired fellows. Some hadn't even bathed, just sprayed on perfume to meet their girlfriends, who sat opposite, blushing like tomatoes.

I was new to this world, and these college girls seemed like angels.

"Where's your attention?" Sameer asked, tapping my head.

"Speak up, man," I replied.

"Did you have breakfast?"

"Yeah, I had it in the morning. Did you?"

"No, but I'll have tea."

"I'll join you."

The place had "Self-Service" signs everywhere. He came back with tea in clay cups.

"Here—COEP Boat Club special tea!"

I sipped.

"Hmm... it smells like actual soil!"

"That's why it's special," he said.

"Why is this called the Boat Club? Some fancy club?" I asked.

"No! There are boats here. The Mula River flows right ahead," he pointed. "Come, let's go there."

The Mula River stretched wide, and across it lay an old stone temple, half-ruined. Downstream was the Sangamwadi Bridge, where the Mula met the Mutha River, forming the Sangam.

Sameer went down the steps, got into a wooden boat, and rowed across the river. I was scared of water, yet I felt drawn to the river, the boat, the college—and even to this strange, new version of Sameer.

He seemed to be showing off in front of some girls nearby. I stood awkwardly, feeling out of place, though probably no one noticed me among the thousands of students.

I wore a black T-shirt, blue jeans, shoes, curly hair, glasses, a watch, and a blue side-bag. Inside it was my diary, a pen, some notes, and my glasses case.

“Nice, huh?” Sameer said, sitting beside me, wiping sweat from his forehead.

He was drenched. He took off his T-shirt and sat shirtless on the bench.

I was shocked—so many girls were around and he was sitting like that! But perhaps, people here were advanced. I needed to learn this too.

“So, Krishna... what’s your plan now?” he asked—the same question Rajesh had asked yesterday.

Three years after 12th, everyone had a plan, a college, a career. And I... I was here, staring at fair girls and trying not to feel lost.

“To be honest, I have no plan,” I admitted. “That’s why I came to Pune. I came chasing the dream of becoming a doctor. But I got lost. Now I just want to do something different.”

“Why don’t you take admission in my college?”

“In engineering?” I asked, shocked.

“No, there are other options beyond being a doctor or engineer.”

"I don't want admission now. I need a job," I said calmly.

"A job? Why?"

"To at least survive in Pune. That's why I came to meet you."

"Do you have a degree?"

"No. You know everything—I repeated 12th, stayed home for two years, and now I'm standing here."

"Then get a degree, Krishna," he said.

"I'll do anything—waiter, compounder, labor... anything."

He went silent. Finally, he said, "Okay. We'll find something. Don't stress."

He lit a cigarette.

"Want one?"

"No thanks."

"Come on, have one. You'll feel better," he said, blowing smoke.

"Where are you staying?"

"With Rajesh."

"Your school friend? What's he doing?"

"BDS."

"Nice! Come, let's eat something," he said, putting on his jacket as we walked back to the canteen.

I wanted to say so much to Sameer. My mind was chaotic. I felt restless.

Samir ordered pulao and pav bhaji for both of us. I was starving, but had lied about my hunger to avoid being a burden. We quickly finished everything.

“What’s your plan for today? Where are you going from here?” he asked, breaking the bread with both hands.

I didn’t know anyone else in Pune. If I went anywhere, it would be back to Rajesh’s place. But Rajesh wouldn’t return until evening, and being alone made me suffocate.

“I have no plans. I just came to meet you. If you have something to do, go ahead. I’ll head back to the room,” I said.

“No yaar, I’m free all day,” he said, washing his hands at the basin and ordering two kulhad teas.

I got up to pay the bill, but he waved it off.

“Bro, you came all the way to visit me at my college and you’re going to pay the bill? No way!” he laughed.

He brought two clay cups of tea from the nearby stall, and we headed back toward the Boat Club

The evening sky was painted in shades of orange and fading gold, as though the sun had spilled itself generously across the horizon before retreating. The Mula River stretched wide in front of us, flowing quietly, carrying within it the weight of countless evenings that had passed before ours. Its surface shimmered faintly, touched by the last glow of daylight.

Samir and I sat on an old wooden bench by the riverside, teacups warming our hands. The smell of chai—ginger, cardamom, and milk boiled together—rose softly with the steam, but neither of us tasted much of it. We were quiet, each trapped within our own thoughts. The silence between us was not heavy, not awkward—it was the kind of silence that comes only between friends who know each other’s unspoken words.

Finally, I found myself breaking it. “Sometimes I feel,” I said, taking a sip of tea that had already begun to cool, “we think so much, but life doesn’t care. It just flows on, like this river.”

Samir’s gaze lingered on the water. His voice, when it came, was calm but edged with something deeper. “You’re right. But sometimes, I feel we don’t think deeply enough. That’s why life slips out of our hands.”

I turned to look at him. The same Samir who, only this morning, had been like a restless tide—talkative, alive with energy—now seemed transformed into something quieter, steadier, like the deep current of the ocean beneath the surface. His stillness unsettled me.

Even he was hiding something.

Perhaps we all were. Everyone, I thought, is lost in some way. Everyone is searching for themselves.

“You want the truth?” Samir asked suddenly. His eyes didn’t leave the river. “This engineering, this college, these clothes... they’re just masks. Proof for the world that we are ‘well-settled.’ But late at night, when I lie in bed, staring at the ceiling... I ask myself only one question: *is this really what I want to do?*”

His words echoed against the silence of the riverbank.

I lowered my eyes to the cup in my hands. The tea had gone lukewarm, a thin film forming on its surface. “I too dream of something different,” I admitted quietly. “But dreaming isn’t enough. You have to walk toward it. And somewhere along the way, I stopped. I let the world’s weight press me down. I gave up.”

Samir shook his head gently. “Getting lost doesn’t mean it’s over, Krishna. Sometimes, it’s only after being lost that we truly begin to find ourselves. Do you know... in my first year,

I wanted to take Architecture. I loved the way buildings could breathe, the way spaces could shape lives. But my father said, 'Civil is practical, Civil is what you need for contracting.' So I agreed. I buried my dream. And I began chasing him"

A bitter smile touched my lips. "At least you had a father full of dreams. And I... I am just a son who has lost his own."

Samir turned toward me then, his expression clear, his eyes steady. "Krishna, you can still move ahead. You have everything it takes. But first, you must decide what you truly want. Why did you come here? Are you ready to find yourself?"

The question pierced through me. My heart quickened, caught between the urge to confess and the fear of being misunderstood.

"I'm ready," I whispered, my voice almost lost to the sound of the river. "But I'm scared. Scared of failure, of choosing the wrong path. What if all these dreams are just... illusions? How do I make them real?"

Samir gave a faint smile, almost fatherly. "What do you think failure is?"

I stared at the river, searching for an answer in its endless flow. "Failure," I said finally, "is running very fast in the wrong direction. And success... success is walking slowly, but on the right path."

A boat passed by then, its oars cutting silently through the water. The ripples spread outward, breaking the reflection of the orange sky into fragments of gold and silver. For a moment, we both just watched, the silence between us growing softer, more accepting. The breeze had cooled, carrying the smell of wet earth and distant smoke from the tea stalls.

Samir placed his hand on my shoulder. His touch was firm, reassuring. “Tell me the truth, Krishna. Why did you come to Pune?”

I hesitated, then lowered my voice. “Because I have a real plan. I’ve decided to become... a writer.”

Samir blinked, taken aback. “A writer?”

“Yes,” I said, this time with more strength. “Doctor, engineer, lawyer—those are the world’s voices. But my dream is mine. I want to write. I want to look into people’s hearts and bring their hidden lives onto paper. I want to be the one who tells their stories.”

From my blue side-bag, I pulled out an old, yellowed diary. Its corners were frayed, its pages thick with ink stains, its spine bending under the weight of years. I handed it to him. “This... has been my world for the last 4 years.”

He opened it carefully. His eyes moved slowly across the pages—poems scribbled in uneven handwriting, fragments of stories, dialogues half-finished, dreams half-caught, questions with no answers. I watched his expression change—first curiosity, then surprise, then something deeper, almost reverence.

He was lost in my words.

When he finally closed the diary, he held it with both hands, as though it were a fragile treasure. His voice was soft, almost reverent. “Krishna... you wrote all this? You carry a whole universe inside you, and yet you say you haven’t found your path?”

I slipped the diary back into my bag, my heart heavy. “This is just my inner world, Samir. A world of imagination and emotion. I don’t have the courage to show it to the real world.”

He shook his head, his voice steady. “Listen to me. You are already a writer. **Writers aren’t made by workshops or degrees—they are born out of life.**

What you’ve lived, what you’ve felt—that is literature. You don’t need anyone’s permission. You’ve already begun. If you write, Krishna, you might help thousands find themselves. Tell your story. Let the world hear it.”

His words lit something inside me—a flame I hadn’t dared to touch.

“I’ve written another story,” I said, almost shyly. From my bag, I brought out another diary, its cover marked by time. “It’s about a boy’s unspoken love... about memories along the Godavari... about searching for the girl he lost.”

Samir opened it. He smiled as he read the first page, his eyes shining with something unspoken. “You are the hero of your own story, Krishna—hero, writer, seeker.”

On the page, my words stared back at me.

**Today, I search for her through every line,
trying to keep her alive on these blank pages.**

Nanded, 2009,

5, Our Story, From The very first Chapter

“Why do you come an hour early every day? Class doesn’t even start until seven. What’s the point of being here at six?”

Sameer asked, pulling out a book from his bag.

I didn’t answer. Instead, I quietly let my eyes rest on Preeti—and somewhere inside me, a smile unfolded.

“There’s too much to study. I’ll use the time for that,” I finally said.

“What kind of studying do you even do here at six in the morning? I’ll start coming too, from tomorrow,” Vishal teased.

“Don’t. There’s no use. Anyway, I won’t come either now,” I replied hastily.

Because that one hour in the morning was mine—the only hour when Preeti would arrive early, sit in silence, and let her drawing book bloom with the colors of her world.

The day I discovered her little secret, I began keeping the same secret myself.

Just her and me... an empty classroom... the soft hum of the fan above... a half-lit dawn... still air... nothing else.

I would sit there only to watch her. To watch her fingers stained with paint, to lose myself in the way she disappeared into her own quiet universe.

After that first meeting in the rain, nothing much had happened. And yet—everything had. Because from then on, she came early, and so did I.

And slowly, those mornings turned into a ritual. She arrived, I arrived, and even if the classroom remained empty, time itself seemed fuller, more alive.

I never sat beside her. I didn't need to. Just watching a tiny droplet of color fall on her skin, watching her eyes drift into thought, the curve of her smile, the tilt of her head as she traced a line—every detail felt like the most beautiful thing the world could offer me.

Once, Sameer had asked, "So... you only like watching her?"

I had only smiled. Worlds would have been too small. Because she, and her quiet world—and me, just a fleeting guest within it—was something far greater than words could hold.

Sometimes, watching the colors merge on her page, the way her imagination took shape in silence, a gentle warmth stirred in me. And in those moments, I felt as if this stillness, this emptiness, this little classroom at dawn—existed only for her, and for me to witness her.

Since that first rainy encounter, not much had happened. Yet everything was happening, quietly—those fleeting moments, those secret glances, that hushed air around her—all of it gathering softly in my heart, like the sweetest memory I had ever known

Slowly, I lost count of the time it took me to journey from a silent, unspoken hour to the gentle warmth of her sweet smile.

Sometimes, if I arrived a little late, she would wait for me downstairs — and the moment I realized this, that hour grew even more precious.

I often wondered, as I came for her, did she come for me too? Yet, I never found the courage to ask.

It was only her presence — and that alone, quietly, almost imperceptibly, blossomed into the tender bloom of friendship.

To be honest, nothing much happened in that one hour. We hardly spoke. Sometimes she showed me her homework, sometimes she scolded me. And sometimes, when her hair was still damp, she would shake the drops on me and laugh,

“Feeling cold, right?”

I only nodded. How could I tell her that those were the warmest, most beautiful moments of my life?

Since Preeti came, I was lost in her. I had forgotten why I even came here, what my goals were, what I dreamed of.

It took me a whole month after that first meeting to finally call her a friend. I still remember the first time she smiled at me. That single smile... it awakened the poet inside me.

I didn't have the courage to say much to her, so I began to write.

Kajal lived in the same lane as me. We often met, and I would always steer the conversation towards Preeti—what she liked, what she did, what she said in class. Kajal understood quickly.

Every day, I wrote something new in my diary—

a line about her eyes,

a verse about her smile,

**a thought about the rhythm of her walk,
a sketch of her innocent nature.**

One afternoon, Kajal walked into my room while I was writing. She carried a stack of books, but before I noticed, she leaned over my table. Startled, I shut the diary too fast, spilling tea across the wood.

“Why do you always enter like a ghost?!” I snapped.

“I *am* a ghost,” she replied sharply, giving me the books along with a playful pinch.

“Why pinch me?” I asked.

“So you don’t forget I returned these.”

I laughed and offered her a chair. But she had already spotted the diary.

“Tell me honestly, what do you keep writing all the time?”

“Just... random thoughts,” I muttered.

Before I could stop her, she snatched the diary and flipped it open. Her eyes widened as she read—the first poem, the rain, the tea, the first smile. All of it was there.

“You’re a poet?” she said, her voice bright with discovery.

“Not really... just things from the heart,” I said, reaching to take it back.

“Who is this girl, Krishna?” Her eyes sparkled with curiosity.

I tried to hide it. “No one... just imagination. That’s what poets do.”

“I know who she is,” she said slyly.

“Who?” I asked, pretending to be annoyed.

“The new admission girl—Miss Preeti Desai, right?”

Her excitement amazed me. I never understood why girls got so thrilled about someone else's love. The boys just smiled and said, "Cool, nice," and that was the end of it.

I stayed silent. Because in my diary, I had only written *her* — never her name.

"Can I take this to read?" Kajal asked, holding it tight.

"No," I said firmly.

"Thank you!" she grinned, and before I could stop her, she dashed off with it.

"I'll return it tomorrow in class!" she shouted, disappearing down the lane with my heart in her hands.

Kajal has always been a very good friend of mine. I first met her when I came to Nanded, and because our houses were close by, friendship came easily, almost naturally.

But today, she did something that cut right through me.

My diary!

The one place where I had hidden all my secrets... my life, my heart. And what secrets could there be at this age, except one—love.

Between those fragile pages lived everything about Preeti—our first meeting in the rain, the laughter tucked in her eyes, and every heartbeat of that one cherished hour we shared in class.

But what if Kajal showed it to Preeti?

What if Preeti grew angry with me?

Or worse... What if she stopped coming to class altogether?

The thought alone sent shivers racing through me. My heart thudded so loud I could hear its echo in my ears. I was almost

certain—Kajal would place that diary right into Preeti's hands.

That night, I tossed restlessly on my bed. Books lay open before me, but I couldn't read a single word. Even food wouldn't go down my throat.

Only one question kept circling in my head—what truth would tomorrow bring before Preeti?

The night dragged on without sleep. I turned from side to side until at last my eyes gave in and shut for a while.

Because no matter what, I had to go to class in the morning.

And what awaited me there... only tomorrow would reveal.

Morning came far too quickly.

The alarm rang, but I was already awake. My eyes felt heavy, yet my mind was racing faster than ever. I got ready for class, each step weighed down with the thought of facing Preeti... and Kajal.

On the way, I clutched my bag tighter than usual, as if holding onto it would somehow steady my heart. Every turn of the road, every familiar wall of Nanded felt strange, like it was silently watching me walk toward disaster.

The hours dragged on as usual, one class after another. I kept stealing glances at Kajal, silently begging her to return my diary, but she refused to even meet my eyes. A knot of fear sat heavy in my chest.

"Not feeling well today?" Vishal asked, resting his palm on my head with concern.

"I'm fine," I muttered.

“Then why do you look like this? Just look at yourself,” he pressed.

“Leave it. This is how I look,” I snapped, my irritation slipping out. My mind wasn’t in the right place.

Vishal didn’t push further. He knew me too well—whenever I went quiet, it usually meant something was wrong.

“Did your landlord scold you again?” Sameer asked.

It wasn’t an unreasonable guess. I was always complaining to them about the man, and looking as restless as I did, they were bound to think the same today.

“No, nothing like that,” I replied quickly. But then, as I thought about it, that excuse seemed easier to lean on.

“Actually... yeah. He was nagging me again this morning about the rent. Two months overdue.”

“Did you pay him?” Vishal asked.

“Soon. Dad’s sending money from the village. As soon as it comes, I’ll clear it,” I said, keeping my voice calm.

The truth was worse. I hadn’t paid in two months, and just two nights ago the landlord had cut the electricity on purpose. I spent the night in complete darkness, swarmed by bloodthirsty mosquitoes.

Meanwhile, Kajal still wouldn’t look at me. My eyes kept pleading, *Please, just give me back my diary*. But she remained stubborn.

Finally, the last class ended.

“Shall we grab some samosas?” Sameer asked cheerfully.

Everyone nodded, except me. I shook my head no—my pockets were empty. Sameer noticed immediately, as he

always did. He slipped his hand around my shoulder, gave it a reassuring squeeze, and said with a smile,

“Today, the treat’s on me.”

Everyone has that one friend—not just a companion, but a soul who loves you deeper than a brother.

The one who scolds you when you stray, and lifts you up when you fall.

He laughs in your joy, stands firm in your sorrow—a Krishna guiding your chariot, a Karna fighting by your side.

Everyone has one...that one *friend*

After class ended, everyone was scattered in their own groups — laughing, gossiping, teasing.

But Preeti was sitting alone on a bench, her bag beside her, her eyes lowered.

I was walking with Sameer towards the canteen, already dreaming of hot samosas.

But halfway, my eyes drifted to her.

Something in me froze, and my feet refused to move.

Sameer noticed nothing; he went ahead, already debating which chutney would be tastier today.

Just then, Kajal came from behind and tapped Preeti lightly on the shoulder.

Preeti flinched, as if waking from a thought.

“Hey, come on... let’s go for a walk,” Kajal said, her tone cheerful but carrying a quiet warmth.

Preeti gave a small smile and stood up. The two of them walked towards the open ground behind the classroom.

The grass there was still damp from the morning dew.

A soft breeze moved, carrying the last traces of evening chill.

The sky glowed with the kind of pale gold light that always felt like a secret hour.

Kajal looked at Preeti, her eyes unusually gentle.

“Do you know something? Krishna writes really well,” she began.

“I showed you his diary once, remember?”

Preeti didn’t answer. She only kept her gaze fixed on Kajal, waiting.

“I’ve read his diary,” Kajal continued, her voice careful, as if unwrapping something fragile.

“And I feel like... the ‘she’ he writes about isn’t just some random girl.

It’s you.”

Preeti’s lips parted slightly, but no words came.

“He’s written so much about you,” Kajal added softly. “So many poems... and you’re there in all of them.”

Preeti blinked, a tiny, almost shy smile tugging at her face.

“Poems? About me?” she whispered, her voice so light it almost dissolved into the air.

Kajal smiled knowingly and recited a line:

“That day everything was the same — class, board, benches, teacher, and me.

But then she came, and everything changed.

It felt like a poem had come to life.

Everyone was looking at her,

But I... I was trying to understand her.

And I realized — maybe love is this: when no one says anything, but the heart understands everything...”

For a second, Preeti forgot to breathe.

Kajal lowered her voice.

“He wrote this after that rainy day... when you both had tea together for the first time. Remember?”

Preeti looked down, her fingers nervously plucking at a blade of wet grass.

Her cheeks flushed pink, betraying what her lips could not.

Kajal leaned closer and added another line:

“When she’s in front of me, she feels like a part of me.

And when she walks away, I turn into her shadow and follow...”

Preeti’s eyes shimmered with unshed tears. She turned her face slightly, as though hiding from her own heart.

Kajal asked gently, “Do you want to know anything?”

There was a long silence. Then, almost like a child afraid of the answer, Preeti whispered,

“Does he... really write all this for me?”

Kajal only winked, a mischievous smile spreading across her face.

“I won’t answer that. You’ll have to find out for yourself.”

The two of them walked back slowly, one carrying the first fragile stirrings of love in her chest, the other silently guarding her friend’s secret.

Meanwhile, I was still at the canteen with Sameer —

complaining loudly,

“Why are these samosas always cold by the time we get here?”

And Sameer, with his mouth already full, grumbled back,

“Because you keep stopping on the way!”

Kajal had unknowingly become the bridge between me and Preeti.

Sometimes she would lean in and whisper,

“Preeti didn’t say anything, but while reading your diary, her cheeks turned pink.”

That was enough for me. I could carry an entire day on the strength of just that one sentence.

After class, I never went straight home. Instead, I found myself quietly trailing behind Preeti, all the way to her house. If she turned right, I turned right. If she paused to glance at the flowers by the roadside, I too stopped, pretending to notice the same blossoms.

It felt as if I was walking inside the shadow of her shadow.

And I think she knew. Because whenever I lagged too far behind, she would slow down her bicycle, circling around with some casual excuse, as though waiting for me to catch up.

Was this love?

Perhaps.

But it felt like something beyond love — *a soft, fragile journey of two hearts, chasing dreams that were never destined to be fulfilled.*

Whatever name it deserved, one thing was certain: those moments were achingly beautiful.

6, A Little Friendship, A Lot More

That day, the air was strangely cool.

August was almost over, yet the drizzle hadn't stopped.

I reached class early, as always.

The breeze carried a soft chill, and the trees outside stretched their long shadows across the damp ground.

I opened my diary and let my pen wander, words flowing without thought.

And then — she entered. Early, like me. But something was different in her eyes that morning.

Not the usual shyness, not the teasing glance.

It was a quiet confidence, steady and searching.

Every time I tried to look away, I found her already looking at me.

My heart stumbled. I bent lower over the page, pretending to write.

Class ended. Students ran outside, laughing, umbrellas colliding, escaping the rain.

I stayed behind, as always, slowly packing my books.

That's when I heard it —

"Krishna... wait."

I froze.

She had never called my name before.

The sound of it in her voice was enough to stop the rain for me.

She stepped closer.

Her face was calm — neither smiling nor stern, but carrying something deeper, something searching.

“You... write about me in your diary, don’t you?”

I gripped the notebook tighter.

My throat refused to open.

“W-what?” was all I managed.

“Kajal told me... you write. Sometimes she shares it with me.”

She looked into my eyes.

“I read everything... and I think it’s all about me.”

I lowered my gaze.

Raindrops slid down the window, one of them falling onto the corner of her dupatta, darkening it.

The room felt silent, the air heavy.

“Even if it’s not true, I won’t be angry,” she whispered.

“Just tell me the truth. I want to know.”

I closed my eyes.

In an instant, the past two months rushed back —

that first sight of her in the rain,

the stolen hour at dawn just to see her,

the verses and half-poems born in her silence.

She had become less of a person, more of a rhythm in my days.

When I opened my eyes, I couldn't lie anymore.

"Yes," I whispered.

"I write."

The words left me trembling, emptied.

I didn't dare look at her.

She sat beside me.

For a moment, there was nothing in the world except my heartbeat.

I forced myself to speak —

"I write... but it doesn't feel like me.

It feels like... you sit inside my mind,

and my hand just moves on its own."

Her lips curved into the faintest smile.

I couldn't hold her gaze, so I looked down.

"I read what you wrote," she said softly.

"But through it, I felt something I had never read before.

As if you wrote my own feelings, the ones I couldn't say."

She paused, then added —

"While reading your diary, I had only one question...

Who is this 'she' in your poems?"

Is that really me?

Or just a girl from your imagination,

shaped the way you want her to be?"

I asked, almost in a whisper,

"So... did you find the answer?"

Her eyes held mine. “Yes. I think I did. And yet... I still have questions. But I’m not in a hurry to find the answers.”

There was something guarded in her gaze,
something she wasn’t ready to let the world touch.

“What is this... between us?

Should we give it a name?” she asked.

I smiled faintly.

“No. If you name it, it ends.

Let it remain like this —

wordless, shadowed, quiet... but forever.”

She didn’t reply.

But the way her eyes softened told me she understood.

Outside, the rain still fell.

The sunset glowed faintly through the clouds, blurring in the drizzle.

And in that silence, between her question and my answer,

something unnamed began to live —

something that felt like love

***Sometimes a bond remains unspoken, without a name,
without definition.***

***A little beyond friendship, yet quietly resting
on the threshold of love.***

There, words are not needed.

The silent language of eyes is enough.

In the calm heartbeat,

The bond keeps searching for its own meaning.

Even though the rain had lifted today, the clouds remained heavy and gray.

I walked slowly toward the classroom, memories of yesterday's conversation spinning in my mind. Each step felt deliberate, weighed down, as if the ground itself carried a secret burden.

When I entered, she was already there. Not in her usual seat, but by the window, gently touching the raindrops with her fingers. She didn't glance at me, standing quietly, absorbed in the moment.

I took my seat, quietly.

"Good morning," she said softly, without turning toward me.

"Good morning," I replied silently, letting the words linger in my mind. The tension in my chest eased just a little.

There was something different about the classroom today. The usual chatter, the rustle of notebooks—none of it mattered. Only a gentle, unusual rhythm lingered, like music drifting from afar. Our eyes met briefly, then she looked away, and yet, we both understood the unspoken stirrings in each other's hearts.

We spent the first period in silence. Her usual spread of paintings was absent. Her hands weren't stained with color today. Perhaps her mind was still lost in the pages of my diary.

Gradually, students trickled in, and eventually the class ended. My attention wasn't on what had happened in class at all.

My thoughts kept returning to her—her shoulders' gentle curve, the golden sunlight in her hair, the lingering fragrance of rain in the air.

When the last bell rang, she packed her bag slowly, deliberately, with none of her usual haste. Her mind wasn't ready to leave.

I gathered my books, heart racing. After our meeting in the car, we hadn't spoken all day.

She left the classroom quietly, casting a fleeting glance at me. I followed.

Outside, the scent of wet earth and jasmine filled the air. Some students ran past; others opened umbrellas and hurried off. But we walked slowly, side by side, a small, careful space between us—drawn by shyness, curiosity, and the fear of naming what existed between us.

She retrieved her pink bicycle but didn't ride it. She walked alongside it.

I mounted my own and walked with her. For a long stretch, we walked in silence. **She was quiet, I was quiet—but our emotions seemed to speak louder than words.** Our breathing fell into a subtle rhythm.

Then her voice broke the silence.

"Yesterday..." she said suddenly, soft and hesitant.

"What?" I asked quietly.

"I..." she paused, fingers fidgeting.

"I don't even know how to say it, but... it felt really nice, reading your diary."

I smiled faintly.

"I was nervous yesterday," I said calmly.

"I thought you might think I was crazy, or laugh, or worse... just walk away without saying anything," I continued.

She smiled softly, like the whisper of wind through leaves.

"And yet I'm here, walking with you, not walking away in anger," she said gently.

We kept walking slowly, our bicycles rolling beside us. The road was quiet, only the sound of birds and our footsteps.

After a few seconds, she said, "**You write so honestly... it felt like I was reading your heart.**"

I blushed a little. "That's because it *was* my heart."

She looked at me for a moment and then smiled. "You're different, Krishna."

"Different good or different weird?" I asked, pretending to be serious.

She laughed softly. "Different... sweet."

I grinned. "I'll take that as a compliment."

"It is," she said, brushing her hair behind her ear.

We walked a little more. Then she said, "Next time you write something... will you let me read it first?"

"Only if you promise not to laugh," I said.

"I promise," she smiled. "Unless it's *meant* to be funny."

We both laughed. For the first time, it didn't feel like silence between us — it felt like comfort.

The sun was dipping low, painting the sky orange and pink. Her bicycle bell jingled softly as she pushed it over a small stone.

"Do you always write in that diary?" she asked.

“Mostly when I can’t say things out loud,” I replied. “It’s easier to talk to paper sometimes.”

She nodded. “I get that. Sometimes I write too... but I never show anyone.”

“Maybe one day, you’ll show me?” I asked gently.

She smiled, shaking her head. “Maybe... when I trust you enough.”

I pretended to act hurt. “Ouch. So you *don’t* trust me yet?”

She laughed. “I do! Just... not *that* much.”

I grinned. “Okay, challenge accepted.”

“Challenge?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah,” I said playfully. “To make you trust me enough to read your secret pages.”

She laughed again — that soft, sweet laugh that made everything feel lighter.

“Let’s see if you can,” she said, walking ahead.

I followed, smiling to myself. For the first time, I didn’t need to write anything.

That moment itself felt like a page from my diary — already perfect.

We reached a small courtyard where rainwater had gathered under a big banyan tree. The evening sky shimmered in the puddles, and right beside it — two small, wavy reflections of us.

Preeti bent down, touching the water gently. Ripples spread outward, breaking our reflections into little pieces of light.

“Do you ever wonder,” she said softly, “if the things we feel... ever change with time?”

I looked at her for a moment. The question hung in the air like the soft rustle of leaves.

"Maybe everything changes," I said quietly. "But some feelings... they stay. Like this tree — no matter how many rains come and go, its roots stay deep."

She looked at me, eyes calm but filled with something I couldn't quite name. For a few seconds, we didn't speak. We didn't need to.

Then she smiled — that shy, uneven smile that always made my heart feel strange.

"Let's see how far this... silent friendship goes," she said.

I smiled back. "Even if it has no name?"

She nodded. "Even then."

Something inside me whispered that for her, it was friendship — but for me, it was already love.

We stood there for a while, just watching the ripples fade.

Then she said, **"You know... you'll write a book one day. And when you do, I'll paint the cover for it."**

I laughed softly. "Why do you think I'll write a book?"

She shrugged playfully. "Because your words already sound like one."

Her words stayed with me, quiet but powerful. As we walked back, the wind brushed against the wet leaves, carrying that moment with it — like a promise only the two of us would ever understand.

The classroom was heavy with silence, broken only by Tayde sir's sharp voice.

“You didn’t even get this simple math problem right? This was the easiest paper! And a smart boy like you scored this low?”

The answer sheet in my hands shook me to the core.

Thirty marks out of fifty. Thirty marks!?

A number so small, it felt like a weight pressing me down. Not just a disappointment for me — now it was a spectacle for the whole class. Heads turned. Laughter burst here and there.

“If you score so low again, I won’t tolerate it! Remember that!”

His words rang in my ears long after he had turned away.

I stayed frozen, staring at the floor. Heat spread across my cheeks. The paper in my hands felt heavier than iron. I could feel the whispers, the giggles, the silent judgments — every eye in the class weighing me down.

And yet... There was one pair of eyes that didn’t mock me.

Preeti’s.

She sat at the back, quiet. She didn’t smile, didn’t whisper with her friends. She just looked at me — a look that said everything she couldn’t speak aloud.

After the class, as everyone left, I lingered by my desk, hesitant. Preeti was packing her bag slowly, as if waiting.

“Krishna...” she said softly, almost a whisper.

I froze. My heart thudded. “Yes?”

She came closer, lowering her voice so that only I could hear “Don’t... let this get to you. It’s just one paper. You’re smarter than the marks say.”

I blinked in surprise. Nobody had ever said something like that to me before. I wanted to laugh, to protest, to hide... but her calm presence made it easier to breathe.

"I... I don't know why I did so badly," I admitted, voice low.

"Sometimes it's not about being smart," she said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "It's about... focus. And maybe stress. You looked... tense in the exam."

I nodded, feeling my chest lighten just a little. "Yeah. I guess I panicked."

She smiled faintly, a soft, quiet smile that reached her eyes. "Next time... don't let it shake you. You'll get it."

I wanted to say more, to thank her, to tell her how much that look in class had stayed with me. But all I managed was a nod.

"See you tomorrow?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said, almost automatically, hoping she didn't see how much those few words meant.

As she walked away, I realized something. In a room full of laughter and whispers, her eyes had given me more courage than anyone else ever could.

And somehow... that was enough to make me believe I could do better.

The next day, I walked into the classroom, still feeling the sting from yesterday's marks. Heads turned briefly as I entered — some snickers, some murmurs.

But I didn't care. My eyes automatically scanned the room, and as always, I found hers first — Preeti, sitting at the back, looking calm as if nothing had happened.

During the break, I gathered enough courage to approach her.

“Hey... Preeti,” I said, my voice unsure.

She looked up from her notebook, eyes meeting mine. “Hey, Krishna.”

I hesitated, then blurted out, “Thanks... for yesterday. For saying... what you said.”

She tilted her head slightly, as if weighing her words. “It’s nothing. I just... didn’t want you to feel bad.”

“Most people... they laugh,” I admitted, glancing at the empty desks where my classmates had been. “It... it really got to me.”

“I know,” she said softly. “I saw it on your face. You were trying so hard, and then...” She shrugged lightly. “Marks don’t always tell the whole story.”

Her words struck me in a way no one else’s had. I wanted to ask her how she could see me so clearly, but I just nodded instead.

For the rest of the day, we found little moments. Like in math class, she scribbled a small note and passed it to me: *Don’t let numbers scare you. You’ll get it.* My heart jumped when I read it. I looked at her, and she just smiled lightly, as if it was the most ordinary thing in the world.

By the time the bell rang, I realized something strange — I wasn’t dreading tomorrow’s test as much. I wanted to do better, not just for the marks, but because... she believed I could.

Next Day, another round of exams. Math again. But my focus was gone. My friends Vishal and Samir noticed it right away. Something had shifted. They teased me at first — about how

I looked at Preeti, how I smiled at nothing. But Samir stopped laughing. He grew serious.

One evening, as the sun dipped low, painting the sky with tired orange light, we sat together on a bench. Neither of us spoke for a long time. I thought of yesterday's humiliation, still burning in me like fresh fire.

Finally, Samir broke the silence.

"Krishna... Can I ask you something?"

"Sure," I whispered.

"Why are you here? For the boards? Or for falling in love?"

His voice was sharp, cutting. I dropped my gaze. I couldn't answer.

"My marks are slipping, I know it," I said instead. "I don't even know where I'm going wrong—"

"No 'but' now," he interrupted, his hand clenching on the bench. "Your focus is only on Preeti. You sit in class, but your mind is trapped in her smile."

"I'm trying to focus, Samir... but I can't," I admitted, my voice trembling.

"Really? Then what about your marks? Do you remember you topped 9th grade? And now look at you."

I stayed quiet. Each word of his felt like a weight pressing down.

"Is this the age for love, poems, memories?" he went on. "Do you remember what your father said? '10th is the turning point of life.' Why did he send you here? Will you give him poems for Preeti in return?"

The words struck deep, deeper than Tayde sir's scolding ever could.

Samir stood up, his shadow long in the evening light.

"I'm staying away for a while. No more tea, no snacks, no chatting. Nothing. When you return to your goals, I'll return too."

Without another word, he walked off.

I sat there, stunned. Watching him disappear down the path. My best friend. The only one who knew me inside out.

He was right. I knew it.

But knowing didn't make it any easier.

The sun sank fully, leaving me alone in the gathering dark.

"Boys and girls — one answer sheet per bench. One boy, one girl together," Sadhana Ma'am announced, her voice cutting through the restless chatter in the classroom.

My heart skipped a beat. I glanced across the room, and there she was — Preeti.

She came and slid onto the bench beside me with effortless grace, her bag neatly placed on the floor. My stomach tightened, but not in fear of her. No, this wasn't about her presence. It was the paper, the formulas, the looming red ink of failure that made my hands clammy.

The question paper landed on my desk with a dull thud. I gripped my pen, my fingers trembling slightly, and stared at the first question. My mind went blank. Lines of formulas danced mockingly in front of my eyes.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw her pen move. Just slightly, but enough. It pointed to the bottom corner of the

page — a neat, complete solution already written there. My heart skipped again, this time in quiet relief.

The next question came, and she leaned a little, her handwriting perfectly angled so I could see it without her noticing. No words were exchanged. No whispers. No hints beyond the delicate sway of her pen. Only answers.

I copied, my hand shaking, my chest tight with guilt and gratitude. Yet, somehow, her silent presence steadied me. Each question became less intimidating, each formula less of a monster. She was my unseen strength, the quiet force keeping me afloat. Question after question, page after page — I clung to her trust like a lifeline.

Finally, the mock exams ended. I exhaled deeply, the tension in my shoulders loosening slightly, though a nagging guilt lingered. I had survived — barely — but it wasn't entirely my effort.

Two days later, the results were announced. The entire class held its breath as the names were read aloud.

“First rank — Preeti Desai.”

A murmur of admiration rippled across the room. And then...

“Second rank — Krishna Kalyan.”

The room froze. Even Tayde Sir looked momentarily stunned.

“Second? Krishna?!” he exclaimed, his eyebrows knitting together in surprise. He strode over and patted my back. “Well done. Keep working hard.”

I nodded mechanically, but inside, shame burned like fire. This wasn't my victory. It was hers. All of it. Every solution I had written, every question I had answered, had been guided by her. And yet here I was, celebrated, while she — the real hero — quietly held her first rank.

I didn't look at Sir. I didn't look at the class. I only looked at her. Preeti's gaze met mine for a fleeting moment. She didn't speak. She didn't need to. Her faint, almost shy smile carried a message that only I could understand — a mixture of reassurance, forgiveness, and quiet triumph.

And then... my eyes wandered to Samir. His expression was unreadable, but in his gaze, I wasn't the Krishna he once knew — the boy with big dreams, the boy who wanted to shine on his own. I lowered my head, feeling the weight of my choices, my reliance, my silent betrayal.

The room buzzed with congratulations, laughter, and gossip, but I felt utterly alone. Alone, yet strangely connected — to Preeti, to the quiet strength she had offered me, and to the shadow of the boy I had been, lost somewhere between ambition and gratitude

After the results, I found myself wandering to the canteen, avoiding everyone's congratulations. I spotted her sitting at the far end, quietly sipping her tea. Gathering courage, I approached.

"Hey..." I said softly.

Preeti looked up, her smile calm. "Hey, Krishna. You did well."

I sank into the seat opposite her, staring at my hands. "Did... did I?" I asked quietly. "It doesn't feel like it. I mean... you helped me so much... I shouldn't even be second."

She tilted her head slightly, studying me. "Krishna... I didn't do it so you'd feel guilty. I just wanted you to try, to not give up. You worked too."

I swallowed hard. "But... every solution I wrote, I copied from you. I didn't earn it."

Preeti's eyes softened. "Earning isn't always about doing it alone. Sometimes, it's about having someone trust you, someone give you a hand when you falter. And you... you trusted yourself enough to keep going."

I looked up at her, trying to read her expression. "I don't even know how to thank you."

She shrugged, a small smile tugging at her lips. "Don't. Just... promise me one thing."

"Anything."

"Next time, trust yourself first. I'll still be there, but... don't forget you're capable too."

For the first time, I felt a weight lift off my chest. Her words weren't just comfort — they were a gentle push toward becoming someone I could be proud of. I nodded slowly, silently promising.

We sat there in silence for a while, sipping our tea, sharing the small comfort of companionship without words. Outside, the canteen buzzed with chatter and laughter, but for that moment, it felt like just the two of us — a silent understanding, a bond formed not in spoken confessions, but in trust, help, and quiet strength.

I stepped into the library, and the familiar smell of old books hit me, warm and comforting. Outside, the October wind had been chilly, but here, everything felt calm, cozy.

I couldn't help looking for her Preetu. Ever since the results came out yesterday, placing us first and second, I hadn't stopped thinking about her. And she had this habit of hiding away in the library after class. I always ended up following.

She spotted me and waved me over to a table by the window. Sunlight poured through, making the dust float like tiny stars.

“Sit here,” she said, pulling a chair.

I dragged it back, and it groaned loudly. She just smiled.

“I’ll bring the books,” she said, walking away. I couldn’t stop watching—the way her hair fell over her face, the little jingle of her anklet. I had to remind myself I was here to study.

She returned with a stack of books. “Let’s start with the tough ones,” she teased. “This time, you’ll actually have to think.”

I muttered, “Fine... only because you said so.”

I wasn’t a bad student, but with her around, it was impossible to focus. My eyes kept wandering—her smile, the pen she held between her teeth, the faint crease of her brow. Every little thing made my heart beat faster.

“You actually know your math,” she said finally, grinning. “Not as useless as I thought.”

“Is that a compliment or an insult?” I asked.

She laughed, and warmth spread in my chest. “You’re strange sometimes. But... I like that.”

“You look smart when you study,” she went on. “Then why do people think you’re dumb?” She poked my arm, teasing.

I lowered my head, smiling shyly.

“Aww, how cute,” she whispered, pinching my cheek.

“Cute? Really?” I asked, heat rising in my face.

“Yes. You’re... different. Special,” she said softly.

Time slipped by while we studied, laughed, and teased. When she finally closed her notebook, the sun was high, golden on the library walls.

“You’ll come again tomorrow, early like always, right?” she asked.

“Of course,” I said, without thinking.

Outside, a breeze blew, but I didn’t feel the chill—not while she walked beside me.

At the street corner, Kajal smirked. “Studying together? Looks like our ranks are in danger!”

Preeti laughed, cheeks pink. “If you want peace, Kajal, this is the place.”

I smiled, knowing the real reason I loved coming here was her.

Sameer appeared further down the street, smiling at Preeti but not looking at me. A pang of guilt hit. Was I losing my best friend?

“What’s wrong?” Preeti asked softly.

“Nothing. Just thinking,” I said, forcing a smile.

Her mischievous eyes sparkled. “Thinking? About studies... or something else?”

Before I could answer, she added, “Never mind. Your eyes already tell everything.”

We parted ways soon after. On my walk home, leaves danced across the street, clouds drifted lazily, and my mind was caught between two thoughts: Preeti’s smiling face and Sameer’s quiet disappointment.

7. A Little beyond Friendship

It was 6 a.m. when I arrived at class. An hour still remained before it officially began. Outside, the world was cloaked in the faint gray of dawn, and the October cold bit sharply through my thin jacket. The only reason I had dragged myself out of bed this early was Preeti.

I switched on the lights and made my way to the last bench, settling down with trembling hands. My fingers were so cold I could barely hold my pen. My homework wasn't done yet, but I tried anyway, forcing myself to start on the math problems.

That's when I heard her footsteps. Preeti walked in, her brown sweater hugging her, a woolen cap perched on her head. She looked adorable — like a little girl up to some mischief.

"How long have you been here?" she asked, dropping her bag beside me.

"Just now," I replied, closing my notebook. "Why are you late today?"

"You haven't done your homework again? Why do you always do this? Do you enjoy getting punished by Bela Ma'am?" she asked, frowning.

"There was no electricity last night," I muttered.

"Oh come on, you must have an inverter," she said lightly.

She had no idea I hadn't paid my rent for three months, and my landlord had deliberately cut the electricity. She didn't

know how many nights I had studied under the dim glow of my mobile flashlight. I just smiled faintly.

"I'll finish everything on time from now on," I said, trying to change the subject.

She fell quiet for a moment, maybe noticing the worry etched on my face.

"Is something wrong?" she asked softly, placing her hand over mine.

"No, everything's fine. I just didn't sleep well last night," I said, rubbing my eyes. But I couldn't tell her the rest — the struggle, the sleepless nights, the little hardships I hid from everyone.

"Here, copy my homework — but do it fast. If Bela Ma'am comes, we'll get caught," she said, placing her notebook in front of me, her wide eyes sparkling.

A smile crept onto my face without me realizing it.

"Why are you so nice to me?" I asked, even as I copied her work.

"I don't know," she laughed.

"Don't copy everything exactly. Use your own brain a little!" she teased, tapping my head lightly.

"There's no time! How can I use my brain in just half an hour?" I joked.

"You really are brainless," she laughed again — and in that moment, she was breathtaking.

"You always come late. Today you're early — there must be a special reason," she said, tilting her head.

I looked out the window. A soft light spilled across the classroom. Her voice, her laughter... for a moment, I forgot everything else.

That special reason... is you, Preeti.

I told myself this quietly, in my mind. Saying it aloud felt impossible. She wasn't ready to understand, and maybe I wasn't ready either.

We leaned over a notebook, elbows brushing now and then. No words were spoken, but the silence was sweet, full of trust. I liked it. I liked her. More than anything, I liked her. To me, she was the most beautiful girl in the world.

"You know," she said suddenly, pausing her pen, "some people... we like them not because they say a lot, but just because they're special. Their presence says everything, even if they don't speak."

I looked at her, confused.

"Like who?" I asked, trying to read her innocent eyes.

She smiled softly. "I'm not saying I like you... but..."

We laughed, and for a moment, everything felt perfect. Her eyes held a pure innocence that I longed to be a part of, one day. Maybe, just maybe, I hoped, she would someday see me as that 'special someone'.

That morning, we wrote the first page of a relationship — unnamed, undefined — but soft, true, and beautiful.

After the bell rang, we sat outside under the old neem tree, the morning sun warming the chill away. Preeti leaned back, her fingers playing with the hem of her sweater, eyes distant as if thinking aloud.

“So... Krishna,” she began softly, “have you ever thought about what you want to become someday?”

I scratched my head nervously, unsure if I should say what was really on my mind. “I... I think I want to be a doctor,” I said finally, trying to sound confident.

She tilted her head, looking at me with a teasing sparkle. “A doctor, huh? Saving lives, curing people...” She paused, then laughed lightly. “But I think... you’ll end up doing something else.”

I frowned. “Like what?”

“You,” she said with a smile, “will become a writer.”

I blinked, startled. “Me? A writer? I don’t even know if I can... you know... make stories people would care about.”

She shook her head, her brown eyes serious now, but still warm. “No, really. You already do it. **You write emotions, Krishna. You notice little things people miss.** You make them feel something without even trying. That’s what writers do, isn’t it?”

I laughed awkwardly, feeling my cheeks heat up. “You think so?”

“I know so,” she said firmly. “One day, everyone will read your words and... feel like you’re speaking to them, even if they don’t know you. That’s special.”

I looked down at my hands, unsure what to say. Her belief in me... it felt heavier than any homework or exam, but also lighter, like a secret I could finally hold close.

“You really think I could?” I asked quietly.

“I don’t just think it,” she said, nudging me gently with her elbow. “I know it. You’ll be the best writer, Krishna. And I’ll be your first fan.”

Her words made me smile, the kind of smile that starts in your chest and spreads to your eyes. For a moment, the chilly October morning didn't matter, the unfinished homework didn't matter, and the world beyond the school walls didn't matter.

"I'll... I'll try," I said, feeling more courage than I had all week.

"You better," she said, sticking her tongue out playfully, "because if you don't, I'll haunt you in every story you ever write!"

We both laughed, and I realized that maybe dreams weren't just about the future. Sometimes, they began right here, in quiet mornings, with someone who believed in you more than you believed in yourself.

8, A Cup Of Tea, Rain And Love

“You’re early again,” she said softly, taking a breath, the squeak of her bicycle brake punctuating the quiet morning.

“I... well, you’re early too,” I stumbled over my words.

Preeti smiled, her cheeks lifting, and went to park her bicycle. We came an hour early before class, ostensibly to study, but in truth, it was just a reason to be near each other.

It was 6:08 a.m., and the sky was heavy with clouds, hinting at rain. I waited outside the school gate, and as if on cue, a light drizzle began. Preeti ran lightly through the mist, her dress damp at the edges, hair sticking to her forehead, tiny raindrops tracing her cheeks.

“Did you forget your umbrella again?” she teased, dabbing her face with a napkin.

“It’s October...Who even carries an umbrella in such unseasonal rain?Beside, I simply love getting drenched.” I said.

“Then let’s walk together,” she suggested.

We strolled along the wet pavement, away from the bustle of the classes. The puddles mirrored the cloudy sky. The silence between us wasn’t empty—it was comfortable, a quiet understanding that needed no words.

At a bend in the road, she stopped abruptly.

“Shall we... just watch the rain here?” she asked, tilting her head upward. Small drops clung to her eyelashes. I watched her, quietly happy.

“This... it’s all so beautiful,” I murmured.

“What’s beautiful?” she asked, stepping closer.

“Is it the rain?” Her wet hair flung back, sending tiny droplets onto my face.

“No... not the rain. You...” My voice caught, and the words refused to come out.

She looked at me, eyes wide, and I felt my heart hammering so loudly I could hear it.

“Do you always say things like this?” she asked softly, a spark of curiosity in her tone.

“I mean it,” I said. My words felt heavy, as if I were revealing a secret.

“You... you’re really beautiful... you make even the simplest moments feel special,” I confessed, pouring out everything I had been holding since our first meeting.

She said nothing, only watched me, a shy smile brushing her lips.

“I... I really like the way you talk,” she murmured, almost to herself.

A sudden gust of wind brought heavier rain. We took shelter under a shop awning, our shoulders brushing lightly. The closeness felt inevitable. I wanted to ask so much, to say everything I had held since that first rainy morning—but the words stuck in my throat.

The rain eased. We walked side by side. The silence was no longer awkward—it was shared, comforting. That quiet, rainy morning, I understood that love doesn’t always need

declarations. Sometimes, it simply exists—in the brush of hands, the meeting of eyes, the gentle habit of shared quiet. And for now, that was enough.

The drizzle slowed, and we continued walking. By the roadside stood a small tea stall, its warm aroma inviting. Preeti seemed a little tired.

“Shall we have some tea?” I asked.

She smiled. **“Just one cup, alright?”**

“And me?” I asked.

“I’ll get one for you... I’ll just sip from yours,” she said casually.

But that **one sip felt intimate, like sharing a secret.** Memories of my sister’s words about love growing through shared food flickered in my mind, and I smiled, ordering a cup.

Inside the warm stall, we sipped tea. Outside, the drizzle persisted. I felt the space between us shrink.

“I wish our mornings were always like this... you, me, and a cup of tea,” I said softly, offering her the first sip.

She smiled, took the cup, and as her lips touched it, my heart raced.

“Yes... I feel the same,” she said, returning the cup.

The tea vendor watched us quietly; perhaps he sensed something unspoken between us.

Soon, the rain stopped, and soft rays of sunlight spilled onto the wet streets. We stepped out together, walking back to class. I realized then that we were no longer just friends—we were two hearts quietly exploring the first stirrings of tender love, a connection delicate, unspoken, and profound.

*A cup of tea we shared,
our lips brushing the same rim...
Rain soaked our bodies through,
while music rose within our hearts.
Tell me—will these fleeting moments between us truly
live forever?*

We walked side by side, our shoes splashing softly through the shallow puddles left behind by the rain. The street smelled of wet earth and distant chai stalls, the whole city feeling quieter, softer, like it too was holding its breath.

“Do you ever feel,” I asked, glancing at her, “like small moments... can feel bigger than life?”

Preeti tilted her head, brushing damp strands of hair behind her ear. “What kind of moments?”

“Like this,” I said, gesturing at the empty street, the glimmering puddles, the sunlight breaking through clouds. “Just walking with you. Laughing. Sharing tea. It feels... bigger than it looks.”

She smiled, her eyes flickering with amusement. “I think I know what you mean. It’s like... even when nothing dramatic happens, it feels like everything’s happening.”

I chuckled softly. “Exactly. That’s it.”

There was a pause, just long enough for the world’s sounds to melt behind the rhythm of our footsteps.

“You know,” she said, **“I sometimes wonder if people even notice the tiny things. Like how someone’s smile changes when they’re thinking of you... or the way fingers brush by accident.”**

I stopped for a heartbeat and turned to her. "I notice. I notice everything about you." My voice came out lower than I expected. "Even the things you don't think matter."

Preeti's cheeks warmed, and she tried to hide the smile spreading across her face. "Even when I spill tea on myself?" she teased, nudging me lightly.

I laughed, my heart swelling. "Especially then. Especially when you do something that makes me want to take care of you."

She lowered her gaze, biting her lip. Then, almost shyly, her eyes rose to mine. "Krishna... Do you think two people can feel close... even without saying it out loud?"

"Yes," I said without hesitation. **"I feel close to you all the time. Even when we're just silent.** It's like the world fades, and it's just us."

She let out a soft, almost trembling laugh and then reached out, her fingers brushing mine. Before I could react, she slid her hand fully into mine. Warm. Sure.

"You make me feel like that too," she whispered.

"It's strange... I don't even know how it happened, but it feels like I've known you forever, Krishna."

I squeezed her hand gently. "Maybe some connections don't need time to grow. They're just... there. Waiting."

She looked at me, eyes shining, and for a moment neither of us moved. Then she said, barely audible, **"Do you think this is love?"**

I took a small breath, heart hammering. **"I don't just think, Preeti... I know."** My thumb brushed over her knuckles. **"I love you."**

She blinked, a tiny gasp escaping her lips. "Krishna..."

“I’ve loved you quietly,” I continued, my voice trembling now. “In little moments — like this street, this tea, this rain. I didn’t know how to say it, but... I love you.”

Her fingers tightened around mine. A slow, radiant smile spread across her face. “You fool,” she whispered, eyes wet but glowing. “I was waiting for you to say it first.”

For a heartbeat, everything was still. Then she took a step closer, resting her forehead against mine. “I love you too, Krishna,” she said, voice like a soft secret.

The world blurred — puddles, sunlight, the smell of rain — until there was only us. I felt her fingers curl into my palm, warm and sure, like she’d been holding on forever.

“I like this,” she murmured. “Not rushing. Just... slowly becoming something that lasts.”

I smiled, my heart light, my chest full. “Slowly, but forever,” I said.

She tilted her head, shy but glowing, and then — with a little nervous laugh — **she kissed me softly on the cheek. The simplest, quietest kiss, but it felt like a sunrise.**

We continued walking, hand in hand, hearts louder than the city around us. Every glance, every laugh, every brush of her hair against my shoulder felt like a secret written just for us.

As we reached the corner where we had to part ways, she looked up at me with that shy, lingering smile.

“See you tomorrow?” she asked.

“Tomorrow,” I said, my heart fluttering. “And every tomorrow after that.”

She squeezed my hand once more before turning down the street, and I watched her go, already counting the moments until our next walk.

The next morning, I woke up with a strange flutter in my chest — a mix of excitement and nervousness. The memory of Preeti's shy smile and the warmth of her hand lingered like sunlight trapped in my room.

By the time I reached school, I was already replaying our walk from yesterday in my head. Every detail, every glance, every brush of our fingers... I couldn't stop smiling.

When I entered the classroom, I saw her already there, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, her eyes scanning the notebook in front of her. The sunlight through the window hit her just right, making her hair shimmer. I felt my throat tighten.

She looked up, and our eyes met. That shy, secret smile — the one we had both been holding back — appeared again. I waved slightly, and she waved back, barely moving her hand, as if even a full motion would be too much for the moment.

During the first period, we sat across from each other. I couldn't focus on the teacher's words; instead, I found myself tracing patterns on my notebook, imagining drawing her smile on every page. She caught me staring and nudged her pen toward me across the table. A tiny piece of paper slid over.

"Good morning, sleepyhead. You've been thinking too much, huh?"

I grinned, grabbing a pen and scribbling back:

"Only about you. Stop distracting me with your smile."

The paper returned almost immediately:

"Not my fault you noticed it. Can't hide forever, you know."

A soft laugh escaped me. The teacher looked up, frowning, but I didn't care. Preeti had this effortless way of turning a normal class into a private world for just the two of us.

During the break, we walked together to the small courtyard behind the school. The sun was warmer now, and the shadows of the trees stretched across the ground like gentle fingers.

"So," she began, twirling a strand of hair around her finger, "now that we've... confessed... what happens next?"

I shrugged and tried to act casual. "I guess we just keep being really happy together?"

She rolled her eyes but couldn't hide her smile. "Really happy, huh? Sounds perfect."

We spent the next few minutes teasing each other about silly things — like who would win in a race to the canteen, or who made the better chai yesterday. Her laugh was contagious, and I found myself laughing until my stomach hurt.

Then, suddenly, she stopped and looked at me with a mischievous glint in her eyes. "Hey... let's make a promise."

"What kind of promise?" I asked, curious.

"That we'll notice the little things. Always. Even when the world gets loud, or school gets stressful... we'll still notice the small moments. Like today."

I nodded, smiling softly. "I promise. Always. Especially the small things about you."

Her cheeks turned pink, and she reached out, taking my hand. "Good. Because I'm not letting go of these moments either. Not ever."

I squeezed her hand back, feeling a warmth that had nothing to do with the sun. "Not ever."

As the bell rang and we headed back to class, I realized that life had changed subtly but beautifully. It wasn't about grand gestures or dramatic moments. It was about tiny shared secrets, quiet laughs, and stolen glances. And somehow, just knowing that Preeti was there — beside me, hand in hand — made every moment feel like a world of its own.

And in that little world, I knew we were just beginning.

The class day felt longer than usual, but in a good way — every minute I stole a glance at Preeti, every small shared smile made time stretch and shrink all at once.

Finally, the last bell rang, and we walked out together. The afternoon sun was warm, and the streets still smelled faintly of rain.

“So... where are we going?” she asked, a playful lilt in her voice.

I hesitated, pretending to think. “Somewhere... secret. Somewhere just for us.”

She raised an eyebrow, smiling. “Secret, huh? Sounds fancy.”

We wandered through the quieter streets of the city, our hands brushing against each other until, slowly, I slid mine into hers. She didn't pull away; instead, her fingers intertwined with mine, light and sure.

Soon, we reached a small tea stall tucked in a corner, steam curling from the kettles. It wasn't fancy — just a wooden table, a couple of benches, and the smell of boiling chai — but somehow, it felt perfect.

We sat across from each other, knees almost touching. I watched her stir her chai, her tongue peeking out slightly as she concentrated. I couldn't help teasing her.

“You take this very seriously, huh?” I asked.

She looked up, mock-offended. “Of course! Making tea is an art.”

I laughed. “An art, huh? Then I must be the lucky gallery to witness it.”

She giggled, and the sound made my chest warm. “Flatterer,” she said, smiling shyly.

We sipped our tea in comfortable silence for a few moments, letting the aroma and quiet chatter of the stall wrap around us. Then she leaned forward, resting her chin on her hand.

“Krishna... I like this. Us. Just... sitting here, doing nothing special, and yet... it feels like everything.”

I nodded. “Exactly. This is the kind of thing I’ve always wanted. Just simple. Just us.”

Her eyes met mine, and I felt my heartbeat thump like a drum. “You know... I was a little scared yesterday About... saying how I felt.”

I reached across the table, brushing a wet strand of hair from her cheek. “Scared? Why?”

“Because... I didn’t know if you’d feel the same,” she admitted, cheeks flushing pink.

I smiled softly. “Preeti... I’ve felt this way for a long time. I just didn’t know how to say it. But now... I don’t have to hide anything.”

She smiled shyly, biting her lip, and I leaned slightly closer. “Then... Can I do something?” I asked, voice gentle.

She nodded, barely breathing.

I took her hand in mine and squeezed it softly. “I love you, Preeti. Not just in words, but in every little thing. In

your laugh, in the way you sip your tea, in the way you notice the small moments. I want... all of it. All of you."

Her eyes glistened. "Krishna... I love you too. I think... I've been feeling it for a while, but I didn't know if you... felt the same."

I smiled, feeling a rush of warmth and relief. "Well... now you know."

She laughed softly, hiding her face in her hands for a moment. "You big dork," she whispered, then looked up, eyes shining. **"Promise me we'll keep having moments like this. Just... little moments, over and over again."**

I nodded, squeezing her hand again. "I promise. Every single one."

We finished our chai slowly, talking quietly, laughing at small things, and sharing stories. Every glance, every touch, every laugh felt like a secret world we were building together.

And when the sun began to dip behind the buildings, casting golden light across the wet streets, I realized that this — just this — was the start of everything.

The late afternoon sun cast a golden glow over banks of Godawari river near Kaleswar temple. The river flowed gently, reflecting streaks of orange and pink as the city slowly prepared for evening prayers. I reached the banks of river first, my heart fluttering nervously.

A few minutes later, I saw Preeti walking down the steps, her hair catching the sunlight, her eyes searching for me. When she saw me, her face lit up, and I felt my chest tighten.

"Hey," I said softly, walking toward her.

“Hey,” she replied, a little breathless, smiling shyly.

We sat on one of the lower steps, our feet dangling just above the water. The gentle lapping of the river and the distant sound of temple bells made everything feel calm and suspended in time.

“You came early,” she said, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear.

“I wanted to,” I admitted, “so I could watch the sunset with you.”

She tilted her head, mock-serious. “Oh... trying to impress me with sunsets now?”

I grinned. “Maybe. Or maybe I just like sitting with you.”

She nudged my shoulder lightly, laughing. “Smooth, Krishna. Very smooth.”

We watched the river in silence for a moment, the water reflecting streaks of pink and gold. Then she turned to me, eyes soft.

“You know... I like this place,” she said. “It feels... peaceful. Like nothing else matters for a while.”

I nodded. “Yeah. And somehow, it feels like the perfect place to... talk about everything we haven’t said yet.”

Her cheeks warmed. “Everything we haven’t said... huh? That sounds... serious.”

I reached over, gently brushing her hand with mine. “Not seriously scary. Just... honest.”

She smiled, her fingers intertwining with mine. “Okay... then I’ll start. I’ve been thinking about you a lot lately.”

I laughed softly, heart racing. “Really? That’s... shocking. I’ve been thinking about you a lot too.”

Her eyes sparkled. “Especially... little things. Like the way you notice puddles, or the way you get shy when I tease you.”

I blinked, suddenly aware of how close she was. “And... I notice everything about you. Always. Even when you think I don’t.”

She leaned closer, resting her shoulder lightly against mine. **“Krishna... do you think... we’ll always have moments like this?”**

I smiled, brushing a stray hair from her face. **“I hope so. I want a million moments like this.***Just... us, quiet, simple, together.*”

She looked at me, eyes shining. “I like the sound of that. A million quiet moments. Just us.”

We sat there for a while, talking softly, sharing stories, laughing at silly things, letting our hands stay intertwined. The sun dipped lower, casting golden reflections across the water.

Then, almost shyly, she leaned her head on my shoulder. **“Krishna... you make me feel... really safe.** Like I can just... be me.”

I smiled, wrapping an arm gently around her shoulders. “That’s because I love you, Preeti. And I’ll always want you to feel safe... with me, with us.”

Her smile was soft, her eyes closing for a moment. “I love you too, Krishna,” she whispered.

The river flowed quietly beneath the ghat, carrying away the day, while we stayed on the steps, hands entwined, hearts quietly speaking in a language only we understood. The city faded around us, leaving just the golden river, the evening sky, and the beginning of something that felt like forever.

The morning air still carried a trace of rain, fresh and quiet.

“Did you like yesterday’s evening?” she asked, her smile lighting up her face, her eyes glimmering softly.

“Yes... very much. Honestly, I enjoy every moment with you,” she replied, her voice carrying a shy sweetness.

By six, as always, I was at class. Preeti was already there, bent over her notebook, scribbling something. I felt as though her eyes still carried the fragrance of that rainy morning we had shared together.

“Krishna, you’re staring again,” she said softly, looking up with a teasing smile.

“I... am not,” I muttered, though my heart betrayed me with a quick beat.

She laughed lightly. “Yes, you are. Admit it. You always do.”

“I just... like noticing things,” I said, trying to sound casual. “Like how you write. Or how the morning light falls on your hair.”

Her cheeks warmed slightly. “You’re impossible. But... I like it.”

Soon, our conversation drifted to exams, teachers, and homework.

“Mid-terms are coming,” she said, tapping her pen thoughtfully. “I hope I don’t mess up this time.”

“You won’t. You’re always at the top. And I... I’ll try not to lag too far behind,” I said, forcing a smile.

She glanced at me, eyes soft. “Krishna... you know, it’s okay if you don’t always come first. Just... try your best. That’s enough.”

Her words lingered in my mind. “I know. But I want to... surprise myself too. Make everyone see I can do it. Even Sameer,” I added, a little bitterly.

Preeti reached over and tapped my notebook gently. “Don’t worry so much about what anyone else thinks. Focus on what makes *you* happy. That’s enough for me.”

Her words were simple, yet they carried a weight I couldn’t ignore. Somehow, just hearing her say it made the fear of exams, the nagging of friends, the pressure of family—all of it—fade into the background.

We drifted into small talk again, laughing over trivial things: a teacher’s funny habit, a classmate’s clumsy antics, our shared plan for Diwali sweets. Every word, every glance, felt wrapped in a quiet magic, as if time slowed for us alone.

Later, walking home together, we paused at the roadside tea stall. The steam from the cups mingled with the soft sunlight that danced on the wet streets. She smiled, brushing a stray hair from her face. “It’s silly, isn’t it? How do these little moments feel... so important?”

“Not silly at all,” I said. “These are the moments I’ll remember. Every single one. The laughter, the walks, the tea... everything.”

She looked at me, eyes shining. “Then let’s make sure there are a lot more. Even when things get tough. Even when exams come.”

I nodded, feeling my chest tighten in a way that wasn’t about fear, but something warmer, something I hadn’t yet named aloud. “Yes... a million little moments. Just like this.”

And as we walked on, side by side, the city waking around us, the day felt quietly beautiful. Each small laugh, each shared glance, each whispered word—it all became a memory I knew I’d carry forever.

9 Days Of Study Lost In The Flow Of Love

“God, please... let these exams go well. After Diwali, I swear I’ll study hard.” I whispered as I broke a coconut at the Jagrat Hanuman temple in Yashwant Nagar.

Maybe faith in God was the only thing left for me now because the truth was, I hadn’t studied the way I should have.

It had been fifteen days since I last saw Preeti. She was buried in her books. Sometimes I called Kajal to study with me, but even she had started losing patience.

“You never focus on studies. You only talk about your stories and poems. I’m not studying with you anymore,” she had said before walking away.

The day I finally opened my books, it hit me—I hadn’t even started. Nothing stayed in my mind. While everyone else was busy revising, I was only beginning to understand the basics.

Rajesh, my old schoolmate, was one of the smartest students I knew. We weren’t in the same class, but we’d shared a bench back in school. At coaching, we hardly talked, but I often shared class stories with him—mostly as an excuse to talk about Preeti.

He lived in Ganesh Nagar, near Yashwant Nagar.

“Rajesh, yaar... exams are just eight days away—both school and coaching—and I’ve studied nothing,” I confessed, slumping at his house, my face full of despair.

“Then start now at least,” he said firmly. “You’re smart, but brains alone won’t help. You need hard work too. Stop wasting time.”

From that day, I started studying with him.

Even then, Preeti and I barely spoke. Soon, the half-yearly exams began.

Morning papers at coaching, school exams in the afternoon. The rush had begun. My preparation was nowhere near enough.

At coaching, Preeti and I never sat next to each other for a single paper. After every exam, she would meet me for just a moment, say softly, “Study well,” and hurry away for the next test. We hardly had time for words anymore.

Finally, the exams ended. But my fear had only grown. I hadn’t managed to complete a single paper properly. I knew—I had fallen short. Coaching might still adjust marks, but in school... the truth would be laid bare.

And it was.

Two days before the Diwali break, the results were announced. I had barely scraped through every subject.

Samir came first. Kajal secured second rank. Even Preeti stood third.

And me? My rank wasn’t even worth mentioning. Worse, the students with low marks had been asked to bring their parents for a meeting after Diwali. My name was on that list.

The class was buzzing with joy. Preeti glanced at me again and again, but I couldn’t lift my head.

Samir was awarded a pen as a prize. The room echoed with applause. I clapped too, though my eyes stayed fixed on the ground. I could still feel Preeti’s gaze on me.

Silently, I picked up my bag, walked out of the room, and spoke to no one,

As soon as I stepped out of the classroom, Preeti rose too and followed me.

Instantly, the class erupted in teasing, “Ooo... ho ho...”—because everyone knew why. Preeti was going after me, silently offering comfort.

Talk of “us” had already been making rounds in the class. In Nanded, after all, a boy and a girl can never be just friends.

I stood by my bicycle in the parking lot, my heart pounding like never before. I could still feel Father’s trembling hands when he handed me the fees. I could still see the dreams shining in Mother’s eyes as I left home. And now... such low marks.

I came here to study—what have I achieved?

“Krishna... are you okay?”

Preeti’s delicate hand rested gently on my shoulder.

I turned back. My eyes blurred with unshed tears.

“Are you crazy? Who cries over a few marks?” she whispered, softly wiping my eyes.

“I didn’t even study, Preeti... I’ve messed up badly. What will I tell my parents? How will I show them these marks?” I said, tension gripping my voice.

“Don’t stress so much. It’s not over yet. This was just a semester; the boards are still ahead. Start preparing now—I’m here for you.” Her voice was both gentle and firm.

I stayed quiet. For a moment, I wanted to tear the mark sheet to pieces. But I didn’t. Slowly, I calmed down.

“Preeti... I’m going home. We’ll meet tomorrow,” I said, unlocking my bicycle.

“Alright, but shall we meet at Sweet Mart tomorrow? There’s no class anyway.” She smiled.

“Oh right... I forgot. Diwali holidays start tomorrow.”

“Then it’s settled—tomorrow morning at ten.”

I rode away, and Preeti stayed there, watching, her presence lingering in the crisp evening air.

I cycled around the, but my mind wasn’t on the road. Every bump under my tires reminded me of the failure, every turn of the wheel a reminder of my own mistakes. By the time I reached home, the sun had dipped behind the horizon, and the streets were bathed in the soft glow of evening lights.

Inside, the house was quiet. I dropped my bag in the corner and sat on the bed, staring at the fan. My mark sheet lay on the table, mocking me. I thought of Preeti—her calm, steady presence, the way she didn’t panic, didn’t blame me, just held me together when everything else seemed to fall apart.

The night passed slowly. I stayed up, reviewing my mistakes, making a plan, trying to convince myself that one bad semester wouldn’t define everything. Preeti’s words kept echoing in my mind— I’m here for you.”

and somehow, that was enough to stop the panic from swallowing me whole.

10. One Meeting Before the End

“Were you really calling bread khari a samosa?” Preeti asked, bursting into laughter.

“Yes! Back in my village there was this shop where they sold khari, and the shopkeeper used to call it samosa. I’d never actually eaten a real samosa when I was a kid, so I just thought that’s what it was,” I explained.

She laughed even harder.

“So, when did you finally eat a real samosa?”

“I don’t even remember...” I said, biting into a big, steaming piece.

After nearly twenty days, Preeti and I had come to the old *Chhappan Bhog Sweet Mart* just to eat samosas. Classes and school exams had ended, and the ten-day Diwali holidays had begun. I was still sulking over my poor marks. The coaching classes had given me a few grace marks, just to protect their own reputation, but in school I was far behind. All that stress had been weighing on me—until I met Preeti today, and suddenly, everything felt lighter.

The hot samosas here were her favorite.

“Dada, chutney please,” I said, sliding my plate forward.

Preeti had already finished hers and was sipping water from her bottle.

“Why don’t you take another one?” I said, licking the chutney off my finger. A little bit of it stuck to the corner of my lips. She leaned in and wiped it gently with her napkin.

“Eat slowly, silly. I’m right here,” she said softly.

Why did Preeti always create these filmy moments? Everything had been perfectly ordinary until her hand touched my lips. Suddenly, my quiet heart was racing.

“Wait, I’ll pay,” I said, reaching into my pocket.

“No, let it be. I’ll do it. Uncle, how much?” she asked, pulling a tiny pouch from her bag.

The shopkeeper wiped the glass counter with a black cloth before answering, “Two samosas? Fourteen rupees.”

“I’ll pay,” I insisted again, though it was just for formality.

In truth, I didn’t have a single rupee. Last night, I had tried calling home from a coin box, but the line had cut before I could finish talking to my mother. Her last words still echoed: *I’ll tell your father to arrange money in two days and send it.* And then, just the hollow tone of the dead line.

“Come on, where should we go now?” she asked, wiping her mouth with the same napkin she had used on me. I just looked at her, feeling quietly grateful.

“Anywhere... wherever you say. With you, I can go anywhere,” I replied.

From our first meeting to this one, our journey had already reached this point—*anywhere with you.* We were the closest of friends now. And if there was something more than friendship, perhaps it wouldn’t be wrong to give it a name—not for me, and maybe not for her either.

We rode off toward Kaleshwar Temple, two bicycles, side by side, in the same direction...

“Krishna, do you think some people are meant to be with us always... like, every single day? That if we don’t meet them

even for one day, it feels like something's missing?" she asked, dipping her feet into the cool water.

We sat by the banks of the Godavari, near the Kaleshwar temple. The wide river stretched endlessly before us, flowing calm and quiet. The October air was sharp with winter's chill, and both of us were wrapped in sweaters. Our half-yearly exams for tenth grade had just ended. We went to the same coaching class, but our schools were different—she was in Navniketan, I in Indira Gandhi High School.

My results in class hadn't been good, and in school I was falling badly behind. Yesterday, my father called. Tomorrow, I was expected to return to the village. The thought of facing home with such poor marks terrified me. Preeti, meanwhile, had told me she would be celebrating Diwali here in Nanded.

I looked at her. Her face was serious. Before I could answer, she went on,

"You'll be gone for ten days starting tomorrow... All day today I felt strange. I've gotten so used to seeing you that now, the thought of not meeting you even for one day feels unbearable."

Something trembled inside my chest. I stayed silent for a while.

"I feel the same," I finally admitted, quietly.

"Liar! It doesn't matter to you at all," she teased, tapping my cheek playfully.

"Really, Preeti... whenever you're not in class, it feels incomplete—like class is just a mess of chairs and benches. I keep searching for you at your desk the whole day. And now... ten whole days without seeing you? How will I manage that?" I said with a forced, gloomy face.

She smiled, and for a few moments, our eyes locked.

“Krishna... do you think rivers ever get tired of flowing?” she asked, flicking a small stone across the water.

“I don’t know... maybe they do,” I said with a grin. “But I think they keep going because they have somewhere to reach... someone to meet.”

Her eyes sparkled as she looked at me. “So... you’re saying... I’m your river destination?” she teased softly.

I laughed, a little nervous under her gaze. “Exactly... you’re the reason I keep coming here... and everywhere.”

She nudged my shoulder playfully. “Cheesy! But... I like it.”

There was a pause. The river’s calm mirrored the fluttering in my chest. She looked at me seriously, and my heart skipped a beat.

“Krishna... I... I love you,” she whispered. “I can’t even imagine a single day without you... not one.”

Time seemed to stop. I reached for her hands, feeling the warmth of her fingers against mine.

“I’ve always loved you too, Preeti,” I admitted softly. “More than words can say. You’re... everything.”

Her lips curved into a shy smile. “You really mean it?”

“Every single word,” I said, moving a little closer. The golden light of the sunset wrapped us like a gentle blanket, the air around us charged with quiet anticipation.

Then, in a heartbeat, we leaned closer. Our lips met, soft and tender at first, exploring the emotions we had held in silence for so long. There was laughter in that kiss too—quiet, breathless laughter—because it felt both new and inevitable.

We pulled back slightly, foreheads touching, smiling at each other.

“Promise me something?” she whispered.

“Anything,” I said immediately.

“Promise... that even if we are apart... even for one day... you’ll always... always think of me?”

I held her face gently, brushing a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “I promise. You’ll never be without me, Preeti... not for a single heartbeat.”

She laughed softly, resting her head on my shoulder. “I think... I could stay like this forever,” she murmured.

“Forever sounds perfect,” I replied, wrapping my arm around her, feeling her warmth settle into mine.

After a moment, she peeked up at me with a mischievous glint in her eyes. “So... Krishna... who’s going to kiss who next?”

I raised an eyebrow, smiling. “Well... that depends on who dares to start it.”

She leaned closer again and, before I could say anything, pressed her lips gently to mine. The world melted away—the soft lapping of the river, the cries of distant birds, even the golden sky—everything became a backdrop for this perfect moment.

We laughed afterward, slightly breathless, holding hands as we walked along the riverbank. Every now and then, she would poke me playfully, and I’d pretend to scold her, but secretly I cherished every second.

The sun disappeared behind the horizon, leaving a soft twilight glow. Even in the dimming light, our hearts were bright, full of the quiet magic of a love finally spoken, finally shared, and finally alive.

For the first time, I realized that no place in the world could ever feel as right as this—walking, laughing, and stealing

little kisses with her at Godavari river bank, our hearts learning the rhythm of each other.

The next morning, the sky was pale with the first light of dawn. I had barely slept. My bag lay half-packed on the chair, books and clothes spilling out, as though even they didn't want to leave.

Didi's words from last night echoed in my mind: ***"Come home. It's Diwali, and the whole family is waiting."***

I pedaled slowly through the quiet lanes of Nanded, my bicycle creaking under the weight of my thoughts. The shops were still shuttered, only a few early vendors setting up for the day. Every turn reminded me of yesterday—with Preeti, the laughter over samosas, the silence by the river.

At the coaching class gate, I stopped. Preeti was already there, leaning against her cycle. She had tied her hair in a loose braid, her sweater slightly oversized, sleeves covering her palms. When she saw me, her face lit up, though her smile carried the shadow of something unspoken.

"So... you're really leaving today," she said softly.

I nodded. "For ten days," I added, though to me it sounded much longer.

"I... I don't want to leave you," I blurted out, my voice barely audible.

She looked down, twisting her braid between her fingers. "Krishna... I wish you didn't have to," she whispered. "But... you have to. I know."

I stepped closer, lowering my voice. "It's just ten days... but it feels like forever."

Her lips curled into a small, sad smile. “Forever... is exactly what it will feel like without you.”

I hesitated, then gently took her hand. Her warmth seeped through my fingers, grounding me, making the world outside disappear.

“Promise me something?” I asked softly.

“Anything,” she breathed.

“Don’t forget me. Not for a single day. And... think of me when you laugh, when you study, when you—”

“I’ll think of you,” she interrupted, a small laugh trembling through her voice. “Every moment.”

We stood there, the town waking around us, and I felt the weight of the moment settle in my chest. I brushed a loose strand of hair from her face, lingering just a second too long. Her eyes met mine, wide, unguarded, holding every unspoken word.

“I... I need to say goodbye properly,” I murmured.

Her heart skipped, and she nodded, barely able to meet my gaze.

I leaned closer, and in that quiet morning, I kissed her. It was soft, lingering, the kind of kiss that held all the words we couldn’t say. Her hands found mine, gripping tightly, and for a moment, the world shrank to just the two of us.

When we finally pulled away, our foreheads rested together.

“Go,” she whispered, voice trembling. “But... come back soon.”

“I will,” I promised, pressing one last lingering touch to her palm. “I’ll always come back to you.”

I swung my leg over the bicycle, heart aching, and started to pedal. Her figure blurred behind me, the braid swaying, the sweater oversized, and the faintest smile still playing on her lips.

That day, each turn of the wheel was heavier than the last, every breath felt borrowed, and every heartbeat called her name. I realized then, with a quiet, sharp clarity, that some goodbyes don't really end—they echo.

As I walked away,

my heart felt heavy and uncertain.

I wanted to turn back, but one question stayed in my mind —

will the bond between us last?

Was it destiny that brought us together?

What future waits for our love?

Will she stay with me till the end,

or is this where our story ends?

Can I live without her...

or will this longing take over my whole life?

II THE VILLAGE CALLS

“Eat properly. You’ve gotten so thin,” Mom said, setting another roti on my plate.

I sat on the kitchen floor, back against the wall, listening to the steady drip of rainwater through the tin roof. The plaster was streaked with damp, proof that the monsoon had turned our old house into a leaky ruin.

Pimpalwad, my village, lies about three kilometers from Nanded. Small. Ordinary. At the far end, on a gentle hill, stood our ancestral home—lime and stone, built by my grandfather.

and Aai Malti, Baba Ramdas, were farmers. Day in, day out, they labored in the fields, returning at night to a simple meal and sleep. Five or six acres of farmland might sound like enough, but it barely kept the household afloat. And now, my education has added another layer of worry.

My sister, Suman, was pursuing a B.A., staying at home. Her studies were manageable, but Mom had recently hinted at starting the search for her groom.

The wood stove crackled. Bhakarhis hissed over the fire. Even with our gas stove, nothing tasted as good as food cooked on the chulha.

“Krishna, did you bring your exam papers? Baba was asking,” Suman said.

“No, maybe they haven’t been checked yet. Exams just ended. How would they be ready so fast?” I broke a piece of bhakri.

“Then why are you shouting?” she asked sharply.

"I'm not shouting," I lied. But my voice had betrayed me. The papers had been checked, and I'd failed. I hadn't wanted to show them.

"I brought the tuition test papers—they've been checked," I added, as if remembering.

"Let me see," she said, reaching into my bag.

She glanced at the marks and scoffed. "These tuition scores are fake. Everyone gets high marks. It's just a business."

"You don't understand," Aai said, stirring the food. "He worked hard. He got full marks. And you call it business?"

"Let's see how he tops the board exams," she added confidently.

I looked down, ashamed. I knew I was at fault. For months, I'd barely studied. The board exams loomed in four months, and the syllabus felt insurmountable.

I finished my food quietly and stepped outside. The porch was small, empty. Baba hadn't returned. Cool air brushed my face, carrying the scent of wet earth. My eyes kept flicking to the phone charging on the wall.

I had given Preeti my sister's number. I didn't own a phone. Sometimes, my parents borrowed the neighbor's to call me.

Something told me Preeti might call today. I waited, heart racing.

Then the phone rang. I sprinted, barely breathing. Suman watched, puzzled by my sudden rush. The call cut.

I'd told Preeti: "Just give me a missed call when you can talk. I'll call back." She didn't have a phone either; we could only speak when her father was home.

"Why did you run like that? Some special call?" Suman asked.

“No... Sameer said he'd call when he reaches his village. Must be him,” I lied.

“Hmm... is this the number?” She checked the screen. I scribbled a letter “P” in my diary. The number matched.

“Yes! That's it. Give me the phone,” I said, trying to grab it.

“Wait. Let her call again. No balance,” she said.

Panic clawed at me. If Preeti called again and Suman answered... it would be unbearable.

“I'll get a recharge,” I said.

“Oh! You have money now?” she asked, suspicious.

“Just a little. ₹25 talk time,” I said.

Finally, she relented. I ran to the shop, bought the recharge, and returned, heart pounding. Suman had probably guessed something. I haven't been honest lately. Months had passed since we last spoke on the phone. She could sense it.

I slipped up the narrow stone staircase to the attic. Wooden floorboards groaned under me. Dust hung in the air. This upper room stored old memories—boxes of forgotten things.

“Why go all the way up? Just talk here!” Suman's voice carried up from below.

“Wait. Once Dad's back, I won't be able to talk,” I muttered, irritated.

I cleared a corner, sat down, cradling the phone. My voice wouldn't carry downstairs. A mix of guilt and excitement churned in me. I knew this was wrong, yet I couldn't stop myself.

Time stretched. Then the phone rang again. Joy exploded inside me. This time, she was calling.

“Hello, Krishna,” her voice—soft, calm—sent a jolt through me.

“Hello... Preeti,” I whispered.

“You took so long. Thought you didn’t have a phone.”

“I don’t... I borrowed my sister’s and came upstairs.”

“Why hide so much?” she asked, a sweet, scolding note.

“I can talk to friends... but a girl? Baba wouldn’t allow it. Aai doesn’t interfere, but... some things you have to hide.”

“Hmm...”

“Hmm what?” I asked.

“You’re scared in class... if I ask to meet outside, you say, ‘what if someone sees us?’ And you avoid me sometimes.”

I was silent. She was right. I wanted to say so much, yet words failed me. My life wasn’t hers.

I looked at the cracked walls around me. “My life isn’t like yours... just pressure—studies, marks... nothing else.”

She softened. “It’s okay. Everyone has struggles. Everyone has their own life.”

Silence. Just a few seconds, yet infinite. I heard her breathing.

“Krishna...”

“Hm?”

“Sometimes I can’t sleep... my mind keeps racing. But talking to you... I think I’ll sleep peacefully tonight.”

“Me too... We should meet soon. Not for notes... but for us. For our hearts.”

“Good night,” she whispered.

“Good night, Preeti,” I replied.

The call ended. I sat alone in the attic. And for the first time that night... I didn't feel alone.

12 When Diwali Lost Its Lights

“No, I haven’t received the money,” Baba said, lowering the bundle from his head onto the cracked, dusty floor.

“The moneylender says he gave you thirty thousand two months ago... and you promised to pay the interest every month. But you haven’t shown your face since,” he added, his voice tight with worry.

Baba’s faded white shirt clung to him, and his pajama, rolled up to his knees, was streaked with mud. That morning, he had trudged to the moneylender, trying to borrow money for Diwali.

This year, the rains had mercilessly destroyed the soybean crop. Every plant in the field lay flattened, rotting in the mud. Baba was already drowning in debt, and for months he hadn’t been able to send me a single rupee.

When I went to my cousin uncle in the city, asking for just two thousand rupees, he pressed five hundred into my hand and said,

“Keep this for your expenses. Don’t think of it as a loan.”

I felt humiliated, but I had no choice. Not a single rupee was left.

Even the landlord had scolded me two or three times over unpaid rent. Yet, because we were distant relatives, he hadn’t kicked me out... yet. But he had warned,

“Vacate the room after your board exams.”

“Let it go. Don’t stress,” Aai said gently, handing Baba a glass of water. She sat beside him, her hand resting on his shoulder.

Outside, the evening had begun to breathe. Lights flickered on slowly in the neighborhood. The distant pop of firecrackers echoed faintly. But our home’s Diwali remained in darkness, silent and cold.

“Sume, at least turn on the lights,” Aai called softly to my sister.

Even though the festival of lights had arrived, there was nothing sweet to eat at home. Our family had been living under the shadow of debt for months. Baba’s burden weighed heavily, and even the money for my tuition had been borrowed.

“How can I not worry? Shouldn’t a festival bring at least a little sweetness to the house? Even God shouldn’t test us this much, Sume,” Baba said, his eyes lingering on Aai’s torn saree.

“You don’t even remember the last saree I bought you,” Aai whispered, tears spilling silently. She didn’t know whether to comfort herself or him.

Trying to shift his attention, she handed him my exam papers.

“See, Krishna brought his papers for you to look at.”

Baba’s eyes softened as he scanned the pages, pride quietly shining through the exhaustion. I stood silently, head lowered, wishing I could disappear.

My sister moved among the lamps, lighting them carefully, her gaze fixed on me. She knew the storm inside me. She had stayed silent these past two days because she had overheard my conversation with Preeti. I remembered her angry glare.

She hadn't told Aai or anyone else—she didn't want to hurt our parents.

"Did you come first in class?" Baba asked, his voice trembling with excitement.

"No, Baba... I came second," I muttered, my eyes still on the floor.

No one could understand what I felt. I had ruined everything.

Aai's eyes reflected hope, a bright future she imagined for her son. Baba's heart seemed a little lighter, lifted by the small success. But my sister... she just stared at me—at the lost, broken Krishna.

"Then who came first?" Baba asked again.

"Preeti Desai," she said simply.

My chest tightened. My heart pounded painfully. I braced myself for words I didn't want to hear...

But she said nothing more. She simply walked away, leaving me hollow.

With her departure, all my strength drained. Everything I had—every dream, every hope—felt like it was slipping through my fingers. I wanted to slap myself. Memories of my failures surged in my mind, relentless. Samir's words echoed.

The dark Diwali in our home. Empty tins in the kitchen. Smoke curling from the stove. Aai's tired eyes. Baba's burdened heart. The weight of everything spun around me.

I wanted to run... burn the diary, the poems, the love... and just exist.

Just live.

Live this life asking yourself — "*Who am I?*"

A small, flickering flame trying hard not to fade away...

Born in a poor farmer's family,
fighting each day just to survive,
yet still carrying dreams that refuse to die.
Even when life feels uncertain,
you keep walking — tired, but hopeful —
trying to find meaning,
trying to understand your own purpose in this vast world.

13, Between Heart And Hunger

13 Missed Calls "A missed call again?! What should I do? Should I call Preeti and talk to her?" my sister asked, handing me her phone. The device was old—the buttons stiff and unyielding, working only if pressed hard enough.

I had saved Preeti's number simply as "P."

Since that day, I hadn't felt like talking to anyone.

For five long days, I had been trapped in a silence of my own making, sitting on the porch while the world celebrated Diwali. Fireworks cracked in the distance, lights flickered across neighboring homes, and I watched it all with the weight of despair pressing down on me. In front of me, my stack of practice exam papers smoldered in the fire, curling and blackening like burnt hopes.

"What kind of drama is this?" my sister's voice pierced through my fog of numbness as she snatched the papers from the flames. Some were half-burnt, their edges charred, their purpose destroyed.

I felt empty. Hollow. Broken. The realization that I had lost my way gnawed at me. But there was a part of me that understood—the heavy truth of our family's struggles.

I picked up the phone. Thirteen missed calls stared back at me. Without thinking, I put Preeti's number on the blocklist.

She didn't know. She couldn't possibly know the storm raging inside me. She must have been worried, calling again and again, and yet I couldn't summon the strength to answer.

My mind was crowded with other faces—the faces of my parents, the silent dreams they had stitched into my future.

“Krishna... Can we talk?” My sister sat down beside me, her presence breaking through the haze.

“Yeah... go ahead,” I muttered, barely above a whisper.

It had been a week since she had spoken to me.

“I know what’s happening,” she said, her voice steady but edged with anger. “Sameer told me. You’re not focusing on your studies. You barely go to class. No one knows where you are the rest of the time. Do you understand our family’s situation?”

“Yes... I know,” I replied, trying to sound calm, but my voice betrayed me.

“No! If you really knew, you wouldn’t act like this! Dad has already taken loans—for fertilizers, seeds, water, electricity... and now your fees and expenses too, all on borrowed money. Mom fasts and prays for you every day, and you don’t even notice!”

Her voice rose, sharp and trembling.

“I’m studying, Didi...” I whispered, almost pleading.

“How long will you keep lying to yourself?” she said, anger turning into frustration. “People in the village talk. ‘Ramdas can’t even feed his family, yet he’s sending his son to the city like a king.’ Your parents stay silent, but I hear everything. All they see is your future shimmering in front of them, and you’re wasting it.”

“I’m sorry, Didi... I want to talk, I really do... but I... I don’t know how,” I choked, tears brimming in my eyes.

“Do you know what Aai dreams of?” she said softly, the anger fading into sorrow. “She says, **‘My son will become**

someone great one day—wearing a suit, driving a fancy car.

One day, this broken house will turn into a big bungalow.' That is her faith in you. And Baba... even in his worn-out clothes, he dreams of your bright future while toiling endlessly on the farm. And you? You're lost in thoughts of Preeti's calls."

"My mind is scattered, Didi... but I want to change. I promise... I'll try seriously," I murmured.

"This dream isn't just Aai and Baba's, Krishna... It's ours too. If you study well, everything will change. Aai won't worry about the leaking roof, Baba won't need loans. And me?"

I gave up my own dreams so you could chase yours. I won't let yours stop. You are the one who will change our lives."

"If Preeti's love is true... she'll want to see you chase your dreams, not chase her on a bicycle," she said, rising to leave.

"Love has its own time, Krishna... but now, when your life is being built, love is just a mirage. The real love—the love that matters—is the one you give to your family and your future."

I sat there as she left, the echoes of her words settling deep inside me. Fireworks exploded in the distance, but I barely noticed. For the first time in days, my mind felt lighter. The path ahead was still unclear, but I knew what I had to do.

When there is no 'bhakar "at home, does the question even arise—hunger or love?

What weighs more—mother's dreams, or a lover's tender affection?

Father's worn-out hands... or the soft, rosy glow of a cheek?

Tears in my sister's eyes... or the songs trembling on her lips?

So many questions—should one feed the hunger first, or the heart?

14. Return To Nanded...

“Are you crazy? It’s been eight days since you last came to class. What happened, Krishna?” Kajal barged straight into my room, the urgency in her voice tightened my chest

I slouched on a chair, surrounded by a battlefield of books. On the stove, khichdi simmered lazily, filling the room with its faint aroma.

Since Diwali, I had stopped going to the mess. For eight days, this khichdi had been my only companion.

The money Baba had given me was still untouched. After paying the rent, the landlord had reminded me once more to vacate the room after the board exams. The mess had become too expensive for the little I had left. Cooking seemed like the only way—but apart from khichdi, I didn’t know how to make anything.

“Sit quietly. Why are you acting like you’re riding a horse?” I muttered, offering Kajal a chair, then got up to check the khichdi.

I was starving. The streets were empty; school was over for the day. The practice exams were approaching, and I had to study. After Diwali, I had stopped attending classes altogether. I didn’t even plan to sit for the practice tests as the syllabus was nearly complete, and only revisions were left undone.

And I couldn’t face Preeti. I didn’t know what would happen if I saw her. I couldn’t let myself get lost in emotions again. **I had returned to Nanded with one firm decision: focus, survive, and distance myself from her.**

I moved the plate, checked the khichdi, tasted it carefully, and served it.

“Do you want some khichdi?” I asked, in a low voice.

“Are you mad? I didn’t come here for khichdi!” she snapped, her eyes blazing.

“Let me eat first. I’m starving. Then we’ll talk,” I said, lifting a spoonful to my mouth.

Kajal dragged the chair noisily and sat, her glare sharp. I didn’t reply, my focus was on finishing my plate. When I finally leaned back, a long, tired burp escaped.

“Okay... now talk. What happened?”

“Why didn’t you come to class? Everyone is asking,” she pressed.

“Everyone? Who exactly?”

“Everyone—Samir, Vishal...”

“Anyone else?”

“Preeti?”

“No. Preeti hasn’t said a word,” she said softly, a shadow of sadness in her eyes.

“What happened between you two? Is everything okay? She’s not talking, and you’re not coming to class. Am I not important enough for either of you to tell me what’s going on? Maybe not... but as a friend, I have the right to know what happened between two people who used to be inseparable,” Kajal said, locking her gaze on mine.

Her eyes were full of questions. Naturally. I hadn’t spoken to Preeti. We had been crazy about each other, meeting every evening at the riverbank, dreaming aloud.

“One day, we’ll build a house near this river,” she had said once, hugging me tightly. I will never forget that warmth.

Our bond had gone far beyond friendship. I had truly fallen for her. And now... I was so far away.

“I’m sorry, Kajal,” I whispered. “I wanted to tell you everything, but I wasn’t in the right frame of mind. A lot has happened at home. I didn’t come here to lose myself in love or poetry. My world... It’s different from yours. A world full of struggle.”

“There’s food only if I earn. Dreams in my eyes, but survival first.”

Tears stung my eyes. The room was a mess—the landlord’s things piled in one corner, the kerosene stove half-filled, rice and lentils scattered in a bag. Kajal could see it all.

A few bites of khichdi, and she understood. This wasn’t hunger for love. This was hunger for survival.

Her eyes glistened with unshed tears.

“What did you say to Preeti?” she asked, her hand trembling on my shoulder.

I handed her a crumpled piece of paper—the letter Preeti had thrown away. Kajal took it carefully, her fingers brushing mine. The letter I had written for Preeti, a fragment of my heart, now lay in her hands.

Her gaze lifted to mine, silent understanding passing between us. No words were needed. She understood.

15, Almost in Love, Almost Not

"You didn't even return my call once! Do you know what these ten days felt like for me?" Preeti's voice cracked as she lightly struck my arm.

I didn't answer. My eyes followed the swans gliding across the river, their reflections rippling in the golden light. I hid my tears, letting the world remain unaware of the storm inside me.

I had been sitting there since morning. Tomorrow, I was meant to study seriously—but today, I needed this moment with Preeti. I needed to speak, to unclench my heart, though I couldn't summon the courage to meet her eyes.

The letter I had written lay folded in my pocket—a fragile bridge between us. I had known she would come here. Somehow, this riverside had become our quiet meeting place.

Her reflection danced on the water before she did. I watched, silently, as her presence filled the space around me.

"Krishna, are you even listening? What's wrong with you? I can't live without you. These ten days were the worst of my life," Preeti whispered, resting her head on my shoulder.

I shivered under her touch, and my voice broke when I spoke: "Preeti... look at those swans. Do you know... if one dies, the other often gives up its life too?"

"Why... why are you saying this now?" she asked softly, confused and hurt mingling in her gaze.

"No reason," I muttered. "Just... just seemed right."

She sighed. "You didn't come to class today. Everyone shared stories about their holidays... everyone, except you. I kept looking for you," she said, her voice trembling, making me feel I had missed something precious, something fleeting.

I didn't answer. I rested my head against hers and breathed in deeply. Like the calm river, our bond flowed quietly—deep, hidden, eternal.

The sun dipped lower, painting the riverbank in molten gold. We stood in silence. There was distance between us, yet a tempest churned in both hearts. Preeti seemed angry but weary, as though something sacred was slipping away. I wasn't the boy she had known.

She held my hand gently, and I felt my own grasp loosening. Part of me wanted to hold her forever, kiss her endlessly, drown in her presence and forget everything else: dreams, family, the world.

But I didn't. I pulled the letter from my pocket and handed it to her. My eyes, silent and pleading, begged: *Please... understand.*

She held the letter, unsure. Slowly, she unfolded it.

Dear Preeti,

It's hard to explain why I am writing this. Sometimes, I think you will understand even if I say nothing. But today, I need to be honest.

I couldn't say this face to face, so I am writing.

You called for days, and I didn't pick up—not because I was angry, but because I was lost. My love for you hasn't faded. But reality struck me hard, and I froze.

My heart is lost... yet I don't want to forget you. I only need to pause for a while.

You came into my life like the first monsoon rain. But now... love cannot be my priority. Responsibility must come first.

Aai fasts every day. Baba works tirelessly. My sister gave up her studies—all for me. And me? I only waited for your calls, wrote your name in my diary, and lost myself in love.

But now, I must stop.

I am not forgetting you, Preeti. But I need to find myself. My goals, my family, their dreams—this is my love now.

One day, if I succeed, maybe you'll remember this letter. Maybe then you'll say: Yes... Krishna really became something.

Until then, stay happy. Study hard. Perhaps we won't be together. Perhaps love won't remain. But our dreams were pure.

I made a mistake. Forgive me, if you can. From tomorrow, I won't even be around. That's why I am leaving the class.

Yours,

Krishna

Preeti held the letter as though it were a fragile bird, her tears glimmering in the sunset light. She looked at me, really looked, for the first time—not with love, not with anger, but with silent, aching questions.

She could have shouted, slapped me, asked who gave me the right to do this. She could have hurt me with her words.

But she didn't. Her tears said everything.

She crumpled the letter and let it fall onto the wet grass, rain droplets glinting like scattered diamonds.

I stood frozen, as if part of me had already died, quietly accepting the weight of it all.

Preeti walked away slowly, her silhouette fading into the evening mist.

And I... I stayed, tears slipping silently, letting the pain wash over me. The river shimmered under the silver moonlight. The campfire crackled nearby, flames dancing like memories.

And I remained there... for a long, long time.

The day I gave her the letter. My hands trembled as I folded the paper, my heart heavy with every word I had written. Each line felt like a knife cutting through my own chest.

I told her I couldn't continue... that love had to wait. That I had responsibilities—toward my parents, toward the dreams they had built out of sweat and sacrifice.

It wasn't that I stopped loving her. In fact, that was the problem—I loved her too much. So much that I feared losing myself in that love. I knew what awaited me at home: the dim light of our single bulb, the unpaid bills, the quiet sighs of my mother, the tired eyes of my father who worked beyond his strength. Every day I looked at them and told myself, *"Krishna, you don't have the right to fail."*

So, I gave her the letter.

I didn't have the courage to look into her eyes when I did. She stood there, her hair gently swaying in the breeze, her eyes soft and filled with questions. I couldn't speak. I just handed it to her and walked away. Every step I took felt heavier than the one before. I could hear her voice calling my name in my mind, but I didn't turn back. I couldn't.

That night, I didn't sleep. I kept thinking of her; her laughter echoing in the tuition class, the way she tucked her hair behind her ear when she was nervous, the way her eyes used to search for mine when the teacher asked a question. I

wanted to erase her from my thoughts, but love doesn't obey reason.

I buried myself in books, pretending that equations and history dates could fill the void she left behind. My friends said I looked quieter these days, distant. They were right. There's a kind of silence that follows heartbreak, an invisible weight you carry everywhere.

Every time I opened my notebook, I saw her handwriting on the corner of my pages—tiny doodles, hearts, or her name written once, playfully. I'd stare at it for minutes, sometimes hours. How do you unlove someone who became part of everything you do?

Sometimes I told myself it was for the best—that one day, when I'd become something, when my parents could finally rest without worry, maybe I'd see her again. Maybe she'd still remember me. But deep down, I knew time changes everything. Maybe she'd move on. Maybe she already had.

And yet, every evening, when the sun dipped low behind the rooftops of Nanded, I'd feel her presence in the fading light—as if she was somewhere nearby, feeling the same ache.

I realized something then: love doesn't end with distance. It just changes shape. It hides behind silence, behind responsibilities, behind a smile you force when your heart is breaking.

I chose duty over love. But in doing so, I lost a piece of myself that no success could ever bring back.

Sometimes, when I look back, I wonder—

Was I brave for letting her go... or was I a coward for not fighting for her?

And every time, the answer remains the same—

I did what I had to... but not what my heart wanted

16, For Your Dreams and Goals

“Are you stupid or what? At least appear for the tuition practice papers. How will you manage in the actual exam?”

Sameer’s voice cracked like a whip. Beside him, Vishal was half-bored, half-amused, gnawing on his nails. “Yeah,” he said lazily, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

During Diwali, Sameer called to wish me. He spoke to my mother first, then to my father and sister, and finally, he spoke to me and extended his wishes. That’s when the chapter of our friendship reopened.

Among friends, disagreements may seem superficial, but at heart, they remain deeply connected.

I glanced around my room. Vishal had his legs stretched across my study table, and Sameer had claimed my chair like it was his throne. I didn’t want to just stand there and look scolded, so I flipped my bathing bucket upside down and plopped onto it. A throne for the king of procrastination, perhaps.

Truthfully, they had come here only to lecture me. I’d stopped going to tuition after Diwali. Home-study has become my fortress against distractions. I was determined to top the board exams. Most of the syllabus had already been done; tuition now was just repetition and practice papers. Better to spend that time in my own controlled chaos.

Kajal used to deliver the tuition papers to me, and I’d solve them at home. The school practice exams were in January, and I’d planned to appear for them. That, I thought, would be enough.

But boredom has a funny way of turning friends into missionaries. Sameer and Vishal had come armed with papers and study material, ready to “rescue” me from my self-imposed exile.

After Diwali, I had stopped talking to Preeti. When Sameer found out, he had hugged me, patted my back, called me a “good boy,” and immediately forgiven my two-month sulking streak. That’s **friendship, sometimes a single hug fixes years of unspoken grievances.**

Sameer was my anchor. He just didn’t want me to drift away from my studies. And I was not drifting. But now, he also wants me to attend tuition regularly.

“Krishna, doing papers at home and doing them with everyone in class is different. Trust me,” Sameer said, munching on the potato chips I had left out.

“Yeah, who knows—you might be cheating at home,” Vishal added, mouth full, like I had suddenly become capable of global academic conspiracy.

“What? Are you crazy? Why would I cheat? I’m trying to top the board at my own house!” I snapped, glaring at him.

“Whatever it is, you’re coming to class. That’s it,” Sameer said firmly. “By now you must’ve finished studying anyway. Just go, give the papers, sit for revision. And hey, now the batches are mixed—no girls from our batch around. You’re safe.”

Ah. That was his subtle way of saying: You won’t run into Preeti.

“Alright, I’ll think about it. Exams start in January. I’ll manage both. I still have some syllabus left,” I said, gesturing helplessly at the pile of books in my room.

“What are you even studying so much for? Feels like you’re aiming for first rank!” Vishal teased, flipping through my scribbled notes.

Sameer and I laughed.

“Bro, just doing moneylending won’t help you. You need to study too,” Sameer said to Vishal.

Vishal’s family owned a jewelry shop and a trading store. He often said, “I don’t have dreams. If I pass, I move ahead. If not, I’ll happily run the shop.”

Sometimes, I envied their simple lives. No money troubles—life must be so... light.

“Have you really not met Preeti for two months?” Sameer asked, hand resting on my shoulder.

We walked toward the tea stall near my house. Vishal had left on some errand, so it was just me and Sameer.

“For the last two months, I’ve stayed in my study room or this tea point in the evenings. Haven’t met her. Haven’t even called. Honestly, I don’t even miss her, Sameer. All I see is the board exam,” I said.

I lied. I couldn’t forget her. Every time I passed a practice paper, I’d linger far from the class, just to catch a glimpse of Preeti, then slip back home. I wanted distance, not forgetfulness. After the boards, I planned to meet her, to cry, to hug her until words weren’t needed.

“Uncle, two cutting teas, please,” I said as we reached the stall. The tea uncle poured two steaming glasses and slammed them on the table.

Sameer reached into his pocket to pay. I stopped him. “They don’t take money here.”

“Why? Is he your father-in-law or something?” Sameer laughed.

The uncle shot us a sharp look. And there was a reason—he had a beautiful daughter, who occasionally came out from the house behind the stall. Our eyes had met before. Sameer had just made it awkward for me to come here again.

“You want Samosa Uncle makes the best ones!” I called out, loud enough to sound casual.

“Uncle, two awesome Samosas, please!” Silence. My heart skipped. I didn’t really want Samosa. I just wanted to know if the father-in-law joke had crossed a line.

No response.

“He probably heard us. Maybe he doesn’t want you as a son-in-law,” Sameer joked, tugging my arm. “Let’s go.”

I quietly handed over the money. Just then, his daughter stepped out. My heart thudded. I fumbled for cash in my pocket, face burning.

Uncle smiled and said, “Slow down, why are you in such a hurry?” That single smile eased the tightness in my chest.

“You’re a good boy. Why hang out with such useless friends?” he added, glancing at Sameer. Sameer froze, caught staring at the girl, and so did I.

“Next time I won’t bring him,” I said, handing over the cash. We left.

“I think I’ll go home now. Not coming to your room,” Sameer said.

“Okay, come later,” I replied, shaking his hand.

“See you at the Sunday practice paper. I’ll wait,” he said before leaving.

I nodded and walked back to my room. That evening, I sat alone on the balcony, books open, mind wandering—should I really go back to tuition class?

The night passed quietly, and I was lost once more in my studies... but Preeti lingered, like the soft glow of a distant lamp I could neither ignore nor reach.

“Krishna is here, Krishna is here! Hehehe...”

Vishal’s voice boomed across the classroom. I quietly tiptoed in. Students from the A, B, and C batches were crammed together like sheep in a pen.

It was my first day in class after three months—since Diwali. Next month marked the most important turning point of our lives: the 10th board exams, our first—and the most crucial. Just two days ago, the Latur board had released the timetable.

For the past three months, I had been immersed in studying, day and night, giving my everything. The thought of the early months of 10th grade lost to distractions still pricked at me. That’s why I have become extremely serious now.

This was the third session of the class’s practice papers. I had missed the first two, but this one I had to take. At school, I had been diligent in practice tests, scoring well, yet there was a huge difference between school practice and board exams. I needed more. That’s why I came.

As soon as Vishal shouted, half the class turned. They stared at me as if I had dropped in from another planet. Samir smiled, happy to see me.

Then, Shubham, in a teasingly loud voice, started singing,
“Baharóphoolbarsáo, meramehboobaayahai,
meramehboobaayahai...”

Everyone in the class knew about my “friendship” with Preeti. Some of Shubham’s friends joined in, glancing at her. She kept her eyes glued to her book, pretending not to notice.

I stole a quick glance. She looked flustered. Shubham’s off-key singing became background music, and for a fleeting moment, I truly felt like “the beloved had arrived.”

Preeti wore an olive-green kurta, a half-jacket over it. Winter hadn’t completely passed yet. That soft jacket, her hair tied up in a bun with a matching ribbon, her slightly trembling hands—she was either writing something or pretending to—but all I noticed was how intensely she had been staring at her book for the past ten minutes.

I lingered at the doorway—maroon T-shirt, side bag, glasses, messy curly hair—searching for a seat.

“Come on, everyone, let’s give Krishna a big round of applause!” Sadhana Miss entered.

I felt a pang of embarrassment and quickly sat down, though the class still clapped.

“Stand up, Krishna,” Sadhana Madam said sternly.

I got up, head bowed.

“For three months, you haven’t even shown your face. Two practice sessions, absent for revision classes... what do you think? Will you pass the 10thboards like this?”

A few students laughed. I said nothing. I had come only for the paper. Samir had warned me that no one really spoke during these sessions—just take the paper and leave. But here, it had turned into something else.

I wanted to leave but was stuck. I stood quietly, ignoring Madam’s scolding.

Kajal was watching me. I smiled. She widened her eyes, as if to say, “*She’s scolding you, humiliating you—and you’re smiling?*”

“Sit down, Krishna! Where’s your attention?” Madam barked again.

My gaze drifted to Preeti. Three months apart, and yet I could sense the turmoil she had been holding inside.

“*Just two more months,*” I thought. “*Once the exams are over, this distance ends.*” That hope kept me going.

I sat down.

“Alright, boys on one side, girls on the other. One boy and one girl per bench,” Madam said, rearranging the seating. They thought it would prevent cheating. I secretly hoped Kajal would sit next to me.

“Done studying?” Vishal nudged me.

“Yeah, I’m done,” I muttered, though what mattered wasn’t whether I’d studied—these past two months had only been practice papers.

I glanced at the gold chain around his neck and his family’s shop in mind. He didn’t need my lecture on studies, so I stayed silent.

“Come sit here, Krishna,” Madam called. I picked up my bag, and my heart raced as I walked toward the bench—and there she was. Preeti.

Each step felt slow, like in a movie. Samir, Kajal, Vishal, Shubham—everyone’s eyes followed us. Samir gave me a helpless look: “*I can’t do anything now.*”

I didn’t know if I had come for the practice paper or something else entirely. Sadhana Miss looked like Miss Briganza from *KuchKuchHota Hai*.

I sat down. Preeti shifted slightly. The pounding of our hearts—something only we understood. Honestly, no one else was writing their paper; all eyes were on us.

The paper began. I tried to focus. Preeti edged to the side, her full attention on her work.

“How does it feel?” Vishal whispered.

“How do you think it feels?” I replied with my eyes.

“Perfect pair,” he mouthed, drawing a heart on paper, writing my name on one side when—

“Stand up!” Madam snatched the paper. “You’re showing him your paper?”

Vishal hadn’t even started. I was nearly done.

“Ma’am, I was drawing a diagram,” he stammered.

“In Marathi paper? Let’s see.” Madam opened it. A heart with my name on one side.

“What is this, boys?” she said, showing the class.

“Krishna’s heart, Madam!” Shubham shouted.

Madam crumpled the paper and tossed it. “Do you come here to study or to draw hearts?” Her gaze landed on me, sharp and disappointed, like a bright student wasted in love.

The paper ended. I was still seated when—

“Excuse me,” Preeti said, asking me to move.

How do girls suddenly get that dramatic accent? Six months of being crazy in love, and now—“*Excuse me.*”

I said nothing, moved aside, and let her pass.

Preeti quietly submitted her paper and left, not once meeting my eyes. In three hours, she hadn’t looked at me. Today, in her gaze, I was in the wrong. And perhaps rightly so—

planning to walk together through life and then letting go halfway was unbearable.

I slowly walked out after her.

One by one, the classroom emptied. In the parking area, she was still there.

The sadness on her face was evident. For three hours, she looked at me like a stranger. Now, the dam of her emotions seemed ready to break. Her eyes spoke volumes without a word.

We stood apart—me by my cycle, her a little distance away. I had left nothing unsaid, so I remained silent.

Gradually, the parking lot emptied. She unlocked her cycle. Hanging from its chain was a Barbie doll I had given her.

She took it off, placed it on another cycle, and left without looking back.

I understood. I picked up the doll and walked out, my eyes tracing her fading figure

**I could give up everything for you,
but never you. Even if you are gone,
I stand on your path every day—
beneath the tree, among the flowers,
just to see you,
just to feel you pass.
Even if you never return,
I will keep coming,
searching,
watching,**

**loving—
in silence,
in shadow,
always.**

The room was dim, shadows stretching across the walls as if mirroring the heaviness in my heart.

Only the soft flicker of the bedside lamp broke the darkness, casting a pale circle over the open diary lying in front of me. I tried to focus on my studies—books spread across the table, notes carefully highlighted—but nothing could hold my attention.

Every word on the page blurred into insignificance because my mind kept wandering to her.

Her laughter, her voice, the subtle tilt of her head when she listened... all of it replayed relentlessly in my thoughts.

I tried to close my eyes and push the memories away, but they clung stubbornly, refusing to let me forget.

The pain of longing had a sharp edge tonight; it was unbearable, a quiet ache that throbbed with every heartbeat.

I picked up the pen, hoping to write down my thoughts, hoping that putting them on paper might ease the burden. But the diary only reflected what I already knew—I couldn't escape her. Each line I wrote felt like tracing her absence, each word a reminder that no amount of study, no amount of distraction, could fill the emptiness she left behind. And so, I sat there, in the dimly lit room, diary open, heart heavy, surrendering to the memories I could neither hold nor release.

17. The Letter Left Behind

“Krishna, you’re coming to the send-off, aren’t you?” Kajal asked, her voice light as she popped another chip into her mouth. We were sitting on her terrace, the evening sky fading into a soft, pale blue.

“I haven’t thought about it yet,” I said, taking a slow sip of Coke.

It had been months since we’d sat together like this. With practice papers for both school and coaching finally over, Kajal had invited me for dinner at her place. Before the meal, she’d ordered Coke and chips — her idea of the perfect evening snack.

The winter air was crisp, and from where we sat, the red neon letters of SRTM University, Nanded, glowed faintly in the distance.

Somewhere far off, a train whistled, its rumble steady and faint. Behind her house stretched an open expanse of land, letting in a cool, unbroken breeze.

I had done well in the practice papers — far better than I had dared hope. Months of relentless study had finally paid off. I had pushed Preeti’s memories into a locked corner of my mind, refusing to let them distract me. The result was exactly what I had hoped for. But the real test — the board exams — still lay ahead.

It was the first week of February. Our first paper, Marathi, was at the end of the month. Everyone was deep in revisions, their final preparations in full swing. I, too, felt confident. For

once, I had the marks to prove myself. All that remained now was the wait.

“You are coming, right? Did you hear me?” Kajal asked, giving my arm a playful smack.

I stayed silent.

“Hey, it’s our last day at class. Who knows where we’ll all end up after tenth grade? Friends we see every day might be scattered across different cities. Everything will change, Krishna. This could be the last time we’re all together.”

Her words made sense, but I couldn’t bring myself to return to the class... not when it meant seeing Preeti again. Whenever my eyes found hers, my world lost its shape.

“No, Kajal,” I said quietly. “I’ve decided. I’m not going. I don’t want to meet anyone.”

“Not even Preeti?” she asked, looking straight into my eyes.

I froze. Over the past month of practice papers, Preeti hadn’t once looked at me. Not even by accident.

“No,” I replied.

“And what if Preeti wants to meet you?”

My chest tightened instantly, my pulse quickening. Meet Preeti? Why now? I had written her everything in that last letter. Since then, she has erased me from her life.

So why would she want to see me?

Two days later was the send-off.

“Did she actually say my name? Did she tell you, ‘I want to meet Krishna’? Does she... think of me?” My questions tumbled out faster than I could stop them.

“Slow down, will you? You’ll drive yourself mad,” Kajal said, smiling faintly, as if she’d expected this reaction.

That single thought — Preeti wants to meet me — lit something in my chest I had long tried to smother. Yes, I had been the one to push her away, but the distance in her eyes had hurt more than I could admit. I didn't know what that look had been — indifference? rejection? But I wanted to see her one last time. To tell her I was sorry.

"I don't know if she really wants to meet you," Kajal admitted, "but yesterday, she did ask about you. She said, 'Is Krishna coming to the send-off?' That's all."

"I'll be there," I said quietly. "One last time... to see her."

The snacks lay forgotten between us as we went downstairs for dinner. Kajal's mother had prepared a feast, ending with my favorite — soft, syrup-drenched kala jamun.

Later, I walked home through the still night.

On my balcony, I tried to study, but my eyes kept drifting away from the page. In two days, I will see Preeti again. I had so much to tell her, so much to unburden. *Forgive your Krishna*, I wanted to say.

I opened my diary and wrote her one last letter, then slipped it into the pocket of my new shirt — the one I'd wear that day. The shirt she had given me on my birthday.

"Oh man, you're really shining in that blue shirt!" Vishal teased, tugging at my sleeve.

"Careful! The crease will come out. I've already fixed it four times this morning," I said, swatting his hand away.

"You look like a proper hero today! Who are you trying to impress on the last day?" Sameer said, sizing me up.

Why is it that whenever someone does something different, friends don't praise them—they tease?

It was the last day of our class. By eleven, we had all gathered on the ground. Everyone seemed excited. From here, we'd be going our separate ways—maybe forever. That's why today felt so important.

But my eyes were searching through the crowd of girls. I was looking for Preeti. More than anything, seeing her today mattered to me. Yet she hadn't arrived. I glanced at Kajal, silently asking if she knew where Preeti was, but she shook her head.

The program was about to start—some speeches by teachers, a few student talks, prizes for top scorers in practice papers. For me, it all seemed meaningless. Preeti hadn't come yet.

"Where's your attention? Who are you looking for all morning?" Sameer asked, handing me one of the two glasses of Thums Up he carried.

"There are snacks too. Want me to get you some?" Vishal asked.

I was hungry—I hadn't eaten anything this morning—but I didn't care.

"No, I'm fine," I said, still staring at the gate.

"Waiting for someone, Krishna?" Sameer asked again.

"Yes... I want to see Preeti one last time," I admitted.

"But why?"

"I don't know. Just once... maybe the last time."

He stayed silent.

Then the mic crackled: "Mic check, mic check..." It was Pandit Sir.

"Everyone, please take your seats. The program will begin shortly."

Some ninth-grade girls started singing a welcome song. I didn't even notice. My mind was elsewhere. I only came back to the present when the crowd clapped.

"Yaar, why isn't she here yet?" I whispered to Vishal.

"She'll come... patience, child. Patience always bears sweet fruit," he said, pretending to be wise.

Then Surale Sir began his speech. His Marathi words flowed like sweet syrup.

"My dear students, I wish you all a bright and prosperous future..."

And then, as if on cue, a gentle breeze drifted through the gate—soft, rosy, like the murmur of a flowing stream—and with it, as delicately as a falling rose petal, Preeti appeared.

She looked like a dream. A pure white dress, matching sandals, anklets jingling, her hair loose, carrying only a tiny pouch. Soft pink lips, kajal-lined eyes... She was more beautiful than words could describe.

That first day, that first meeting, that first spark of love—it all rushed back. My heart raced. I had fallen for her all over again.

On stage, my name was being called repeatedly. But I didn't hear it.

"Krishna Desai, first rank in the tenth practice papers..."

"Go, Krishna! They're calling your name!" Vishal pinched me hard to pull me back to reality.

I brushed the dust from my pants and walked toward the stage. Preeti had arrived. I was first in my batch. Pride swelled in my chest. But the real battle still awaited—the board exams.

I received the trophy while everyone, teachers included, looked surprised. But my eyes searched only for her. She didn't even glance at me.

Then another announcement: "And now, the overall topper among all three batches is... Preeti Kalyan!"

What? Preeti? My Preeti?

I froze. She had not only topped her batch—she had beaten everyone. The biggest trophy, a certificate, and ₹5,000 were handed to her.

A storm of emotions hit me at once—happiness, pride, and a quiet pang of pain. She had been studying tirelessly, losing herself in books. Meanwhile, I had foolishly imagined her missing me, crying for me... I had underestimated her strength.

Yet when her eyes finally met mine, all confusion vanished. One look—that was all I had been waiting for.

I couldn't hold her gaze. My chest pounded. I lowered my head. Time seemed to stop. Music, noise, laughter—all faded. Just her and me, suspended in that fragile moment.

The program ended. Snacks were served, people laughed, danced, and cried. I stayed in one corner, still watching her. She looked at me too. But neither of us moved.

I knew I had lost her. Yet a small hope lingered: maybe next year, when we meet again, I could hug her once, ask forgiveness—for every mistake, for every moment of pain. But not today. Today, I could only watch and wait.

I pulled the letter from my pocket and slipped it toward her tray.

The Letter

Dear Preeti,

I have so much to say... yet no words remain. That's why this last letter.

I don't even say your name anymore. Whenever someone asks, "What happened between you two?" I have no answer.

Sometimes I wish you'd come back. But then I remember—I was the one who stepped away.

I didn't lose because I didn't name our love. I lost because I wasn't strong enough to carry it. I admit that.

I don't know if forgetting you is a punishment. But every day, I punish myself in the name of responsibility.

You're no longer in my smile. You live in my silence.

You remain in my diary—on that last bench, quietly sitting, stealing glances at me.

Today, I study—for my mother, father, sister... and maybe for you. But you are no longer my inspiration. You are the memory I lost in the struggle.

You are my first and last love. But my life isn't easy enough to have you in it. I chose to build my life instead of choosing you. Yet I didn't realize that without you, my life feels empty. Too late, Preeti.

Even today, I look for you at every place we once meet. I cannot prove my love, yet you live inside me completely, even in your absence.

If you wonder, "Why did Krishna act like that?"—just know, I never left. I stayed there, where we last met. But I wasn't brave enough to hold on to love.

*Forgive me,
—Krishna*

Preeti held the letter. Her fingers trembled. She looked up. Our eyes met. For two seconds, the world froze.

"Preeti... There's so much I want to tell you.

But I don't even know where to begin.

The love I feel... I can't even bring it to words.

What do you feel?

What do you want?

How much... Do you love me?

I don't need answers.

I just need you to know what's in my heart.

But even today, the words escape me...

And here I stand.

*Speechless. Uneasy. Restless... right in front of you."**

Then, tears filled her eyes. She let out a deep sigh and, without reading further, let the letter fall. It landed softly on the ground, yet inside me, it thundered.

A single tear slid down her cheek, proof of what we had shared. She gave me one final look. Her lips moved as if to speak, but no words came. Slowly, she turned and walked away. Maybe never to return.

I stood frozen—hands empty, eyes full, heart still beating only for her.

Maybe... forever.,,,,,,,,,,

18. The Exam Days

The moment the 10th board exam timetable was pinned to the wall of my study room, my pace of study quickened. All the practice papers at school and in coaching were done. Only one month remained for the final exam. The first paper—Marathi—was scheduled in the very first week of March. And with February offering just twenty-eight days, it felt as though we had already lost two precious days.

For five months, I had devoted myself entirely to my studies. I had scored well in every practice paper. If I managed to secure a good rank in the final exams, I would be granted a concession in the 11th and 12th standard fees. That mattered a great deal to me. The expenses of pursuing science were far beyond what my father could afford.

I wanted to become a doctor. I knew it wouldn't be easy. That's why, even in the 10th itself, I had thrown myself into studies with complete dedication.

It had been nearly a month since I had last seen Preeti. Since then, she hadn't made the slightest effort to meet me. Whenever I asked Kajal about her, Preeti would joke—"Who's Krishna?" I could never understand how girls managed to hold on to anger for so long.

Even though I had pushed her away, my love for her remained unchanged. Not a single day passed without me thinking of her. Yet, in spite of all that, I never allowed myself to drift away from my books. This final month was too crucial.

My writing, my poetry, my love, even the pain of separation—I put it all aside and gave myself wholly to studies. That month passed before I even realized it. And finally, the first week of March arrived. On the third, our very first paper—Marathi—was upon us. Six months of relentless effort had come down to these six exams.

It was a March morning. I was revising before leaving for the exam, but my heart was pounding with nerves. The very first paper was Marathi. Early that morning, my sister called on the landlord's phone.

"Krishna," she said, "write calmly, don't rush. You've studied enough, now just focus on writing well."

She handed the phone to Mother, who said, "Eat something before you leave, don't go on an empty stomach. Write well, son. Here, talk to your father."

Father said, "Once your exams are over, come back to the village. And take good care of your hall ticket."

I just kept saying "yes, yes." Honestly, I was waiting for the landlord to take back his phone. The moment he did, I hurried back to my room, got ready, and left. My hall ticket and a writing pad were all I needed. I touched God's feet, pulled out my bicycle, and left. My exam centre was Pratibha Niketan in Srinagar.

When I reached, there was a crowd at the gate. Students were frantically flipping through notebooks till the last moment. I had come empty-handed. Many had their parents with them.

"You didn't bring anything to revise? There's still an hour left!" Kajal asked. Her centre was the same as mine.

“What’s the point of reading now? Whatever had to be done was at home. Here, we just need to stay calm and write,” I replied.

She burst out laughing—maybe to hide her nerves, maybe not. I couldn’t tell.

As my eyes scanned the crowd for familiar faces, suddenly Preeti appeared. She stood with her mother, calm and composed. For the first time, I saw the woman who could one day be my mother-in-law. For a moment, I wanted to walk up and take her blessings. But ever since our send-off day, Preeti hadn’t spoken to me or even tried to meet me. I couldn’t tell if she had seen me or not. Something stirred inside me, but I quickly pushed it away. Today, the exam was bigger than love, anger, or memory.

The bell rang. Everyone rushed into their classrooms. I sat at my desk, placed my pen carefully, and received the question paper. As I read the very first question, my heart skipped a beat—this was the true test of all my effort.

When the exam ended and I walked out, students were asking each other, “How was it? How many marks will you get?” I stayed quiet. My paper had gone well, but my eyes were searching only for Preeti. She stood with Kajal. But once again, she didn’t meet my eyes, and then she walked away.

The second paper was Sanskrit. Before it began, Kajal and I were joking around in the corridor.

“If I just pass Sanskrit, that’s enough for me!” she laughed.

Her mother gave her a sharp knock on the head. “Is that what I paid fees for? Just to pass?” she scolded.

“Aunty, she’s only joking,” came Preeti’s soft voice. She was beside Kajal with her mother. Once again, she passed me without saying a word. But for a moment, our eyes met—and in that glance, I felt there were words unsaid, emotions hidden.

That paper went well too. Back home, I buried myself in study again.

The third paper was Mathematics—the toughest one for everyone. I trembled as I read the first question. It looked impossible. But then a voice inside me whispered—“Calm down, breathe. It’s not that hard. You can do it.” Those few words gave me courage. By the end of the paper, I thought—“One more step taken toward my dream.”

The papers were going exactly as I had hoped.

The fourth was Science—my most important subject. I had spent the night revising diagrams. The paper went well. And when I walked out, I saw Preeti smiling too. After so many days, that smile felt like sunshine. For a brief moment, my stress vanished.

The fifth was History and Geography. The hall was silent. When I saw the questions, I smiled—they were exactly what I had expected. As I finished, I thought—“I’ll surely score full marks here.”

Outside, Preeti was chatting with Kajal. For the first time, she turned to look at me. Her gaze lingered for a few seconds... then she left.

The last paper—English. The tension had finally lifted. Everyone was laughing, shouting, “Hey, the holidays start

now!" I too was smiling, but deep inside there was only one question—Now that exams were over... What about Preeti and me?

I waited outside the centre for her. I wanted to talk to her today.

I knew what I had done earlier was selfish. If I had let myself get carried away in love, I might have failed. And if I failed, my parents' dreams—and my future—would have collapsed. That was the only reason I had pushed her away.

But now everything has gone well. I wanted to see her once, one last time. To apologize. If I went to the village without meeting her, my heart would never be at peace.

I loved Preeti—truly, deeply.

Slowly, she came out of the exam hall. I stood behind the compound wall and called out, "Preeti..." My voice carried a strange pain.

I don't know if she heard, but she didn't stop. I called again, "Preeti, please wait for just a minute."

I ran after her. She stopped, turned, and looked straight into my eyes. She stood silently.

"I need to talk to you," I said.

"I have nothing to say. I'm getting late..." she replied and turned away.

"Please, just one last meeting... I'll wait for you tomorrow at Kaleshwar. Please..."

She walked away without a word. But as she left, I saw tears in her eyes. My heart swelled. I wanted to tell her everything—that I had been wrong, that I truly loved her.

But I stayed silent and went home.

From a coin-box phone, I called my parents. I told them all my exams had gone well. Father asked me to return to the village.

But I couldn't leave without meeting Preeti.

Would she come tomorrow or not? That question kept me awake all night.

19. Maybe Our last Goodbye

I stood on the banks of Kaleshwar, waiting for Preeti.

The morning sun had long risen; the summer heat penetrating into my skin. I stood beneath a lone tree, its shadow trembling in the river's reflection, An hour had passed. My heart fluttered with doubt — would she come, or had I already lost her forever?

And in the company of the tree's reflection, she appeared;—quietly, almost like a dream—standing behind me.

I turned.

There she was.

Preeti—dressed in red, her curly hair left free to dance with the wind. Before us stretched the vast Godavari, gliding gently toward the horizon. The Kaleshwar temple shimmered in the distance, its bell faintly echoing across the water. We stood there on the same bank, saying nothing—just two hearts that had once known each other deeply, now trapped in silence.

I sat down, letting one foot slip into the cool water. The river brushed softly against my leg. My trousers were half-soaked, but I didn't care. I often came here to watch the sunset, but today the air itself felt heavier—filled with the ache of something unfinished.

It had been six months since we'd last stood here together. Six months of distance, silence, and regret. This meeting meant something. I could feel it in her eyes, in the way her hands trembled. She still loved me—I could sense it. But I

had hurt her, pushed her away, spoken harshly when all she needed was understanding.

Yet here she was. Because I had asked her to come.

“Preeti...” I whispered.

She only said, “Hmm...” and kept staring at the quiet river.

I couldn’t read her thoughts. I never could. She had never said ***I love you in words—but there was always something in her eyes that spoke more than words ever could.***

I moved a little closer. She didn’t react. She only shifted her bag to the other side. In her hand, she held a folded letter. I didn’t know what it contained. I reached out, gently touched her hand. A shiver ran through her. Still, she said nothing.

And then, I pulled her into my arms.

The world went still.

The river seemed to pause mid-flow. The wind quieted. From far away, the temple bells rang softly. **My heartbeat pounded in my ears. She rested her head on my chest, silent.**

For a long time, she stayed there—her tears soaking my shirt, my own eyes burning with unshed ones. After six long months, we had finally found each other again.

“I’m sorry...” I whispered, my voice breaking. “I’ve been awful. Selfish. I hurt you when you least deserved it. When we stood on the edge of love, I just... left. But I was helpless, Preeti. Please forgive me.”

She lifted her face slightly, eyes glistening.

“Krishna,” she said softly, “I’ve loved you more than you’ll ever know. But how could I claim your love by pulling you away from your dreams?”

I can't live without you—that's true. But I wanted to see you succeed, to see you become who you're meant to be. That's why I stayed away. But even if we're apart, I'll always be with you. Even in my last breath—it will be you. Only you. I love you, Krishna... and I always will."

Her words broke me. I held her tighter, kissed her forehead gently.

"Preeti," I murmured, "I'm so sorry..."

"Can I ask you something?" she said after a pause.

"Whatever we have... will it stay this way forever? You'll stay with me, won't you? You won't push me away again?" Her voice trembled. "I can't live without you. You are the only reason I exist, Krishna."

Her eyes were full of innocence, her hand trembling in mine.

Months ago, I had told her to leave me—to go far away. Because I thought love was a distraction, a weakness. **Because poverty doesn't leave space for romance. When there's no food at home, what meaning does love have?**

But the truth was simple: I loved her too. More than anything.

We had just finished our tenth-grade exams. Life was just beginning. She dreamed of IIT; I wanted to become a doctor. Her world was of comfort and privilege—daughter of a government officer. Mine was a world of debts and droughts—the son of a struggling farmer. Love between us was real, but the distance between our worlds was greater.

I stayed quiet, swallowing the lump in my throat. I wanted to shout—*Preeti, I've loved you from the moment I first saw you!*—but I couldn't. Tears filled my eyes, but I held them back.

“Krishna?” she said again, lightly shaking my shoulder. “You’ll stay with me, right? For life?”

Her voice cracked on the last word.

My heart pounded. My soul screamed *yes*—but my lips refused to move. Because I knew the truth: **my real battle was yet to begin. I had dreams to chase, a family to lift from darkness. Love had no place in that war.**

Finally, I forced the words out.

“Preeti,” I said quietly, “I’ll always be your friend. But love... it’s not meant for us. Our love has no future. I can only be your friend. Forgive me.”

Preeti’s fingers slipped from mine. She stared at me, her lips trembling, her breath breaking into uneven gasps.

“Friend?” she whispered, the word cutting her own heart. “After everything, just a friend?”

I lowered my eyes. **“Sometimes love isn’t about holding on—it’s about letting go.”**

Her tears rolled faster now, splashing onto the back of her hand. “And what am I supposed to do with the heart you woke up in me?”

I clenched my fists. **“A dream can survive without sleep, Preeti. But love... love dies without hope.”**

She took a step back, shaking her head. **“You gave me hope, Krishna. You gave me a world. And now you’re burning it down with your silence.”**

My throat closed. **“Silence is kinder than promises I can’t keep.”**

Her voice cracked. “You taught me to fly. Why clip my wings now?”

I swallowed hard. **“Because your sky deserves the sun, Preeti. And I’m only a passing cloud.”**

She covered her mouth, sobbing. “Then why did you ever call me here? To bury what’s left of me?”

I stepped closer but didn’t touch her. “To give you truth, before lies destroy us both.”

Her knees seemed to falter. “Krishna... do you even understand what you’re doing to me?”

I whispered, my voice breaking, “I’m destroying myself so you can be whole.”

She stared at me for a long moment—eyes red, face pale. “You’re not just breaking my heart. You’re killing the part of me that believed in forever.”

Her words cut through me sharper than any blade. I felt the weight of every heartbeat pressing against my ribs, begging me to take it all back.

“Preeti...” I said, my throat tight, “if there was another way, I’d take it. If there was a world where love alone could build a life, I’d stay.”

She shook her head, tears streaking down her cheeks. “Don’t talk to me about worlds that don’t exist. Talk to me about this one—the one where you’re walking away.”

I stepped forward, just enough to see her trembling, but still not enough to hold her. “In this world, I can’t give you what you deserve. Not now. Not while my parents’ dreams are hanging on me like stones. Not while my promises are heavier than my heart.”

Her eyes searched mine, desperate, furious, breaking. “Then why make me dream at all, Krishna? Why give me mornings, and secrets, and all those silent moments, if you were going to leave me standing in ruins?”

I closed my eyes for a second, forcing air into my lungs. **“Because you were the only thing that felt real in a life full of pretending.** Because you were my escape, my hope, my reason. And that’s exactly why I have to let you go. Before I drag you into the same darkness that’s swallowing me.”

She drew a shaky breath, voice low and trembling. “You think you’re protecting me. But you’re not. You’re turning me into a ghost while you’re still alive.”

I opened my eyes again, meeting hers, my own vision blurring. “If being the villain in your story saves you, then I’ll wear that. Hate me. Forget me. But live, Preeti. Live bigger than me. Brighter than me.”

Her lips quivered. “And you?”

I almost smiled—a hollow, broken thing. “Me? I’ll survive. That’s all I know how to do.”

She took a step back, wiping her tears, her voice cracking like dry earth. “You’ll survive, Krishna. But you won’t be alive.”

The silence that followed was a grave between us.

In truth, I had come here to tell her the opposite—to tell her how empty my life was without her, to promise her forever. But I didn’t have the courage to fight for love.

I wiped her tears, but she turned away. Slowly, she pulled her hand from mine and held the letter tightly against her chest. Silence fell again.

We sat like that for a long time—two souls tied by feeling, separated by fate.

“When will we meet again?” I finally asked, my voice barely a whisper.

She didn't answer. Her tears had dried; only emptiness remained.

"Where will you take admission for eleventh?" I asked, trying to sound normal. "Results will be out soon."

Still, silence. She only stared at the river, lost in thoughts I could never reach.

At last, she said quietly, "I should go. It's getting late. Mother must be waiting."

She looked at her watch and took out her bicycle.

"Wait, Preeti," I said, catching her hand.

She smiled faintly through her tears. "It's late, Krishna. You'll achieve what you want. You'll become a great man one day. But I won't be there..."

Her voice trembled, and for a moment, time stopped. She had come today to give herself completely—and once again, I had failed to hold on to her.

"Just five minutes... please," I begged. My heart raced as I held her hand.

But she shook her head. "Goodbye, Krishna."

She placed her bag on the bicycle carrier and rode away, without once looking back.

I stood there, watching her fading silhouette until it disappeared beyond the trees. My tears blurred everything—the temple, the river, the sky. I could feel her pain inside me.

Once again, I had lost.

The chapter of love had closed. Ahead lay only the silence of separation, though I didn't realize then how deeply it would stay with me.

The sun had set. Moonlight rippled across the water. I stepped slowly out of the riverbed. When I turned back, I saw the flute and the peacock feather she had left for me—her silent farewell.

But the letter in her hand—the one she had clutched so tightly—I never got to read it.

And perhaps, some questions are meant to remain unanswered forever

Why did our paths diverge, leaving only shadows behind?

Why did we meet, if not to be lost again?

Is love always just a fleeting echo,

A moment meant to vanish before we understand?

How does one breathe in the absence of what once was?

How does one forget a presence that shaped the soul?

At dawn, you will be elsewhere,

And I—still here—

Counting the spaces where we once existed.

Pune 2014..

20 ,When The Diary Ends....

Samir closed the diary. Darkness had settled over the Boat Club, and the faint glow of the streetlights on the Sangamwadi Bridge shimmered softly on the waters of the Mula River below.

Tears welled up in Samir's eyes. Though he had been my companion through all these moments, he had no inkling of the love that had quietly existed between Preeti and me.

"What happened next, Krishna? Did Preeti come back into your life?"

He looked into my eyes, seeking an answer I did not yet have.

I remained silent.

"What happens next in your story?" he asked again, his hand resting gently on my shoulder.

"One day, I will tell it," I whispered. "But for now... my story is only half-told. Unfinished."

"You've written something extraordinary. This... this is the story that will make you a bestselling author. Publish it, Krishna. I'll help you every step of the way," he said with a quiet certainty that made the air around us feel lighter.

I said nothing. The very thought of a book, of publishing, felt impossibly distant. Life had swallowed me whole. Samir had no idea of the battles I had fought in the past five years, the struggles he had never witnessed.

“Shall we... publish it?” he asked once more, as if reading my hesitation.

We were alone at the Boat Club. The remnants of kulhad cups lay scattered beside us, and the distant honks of traffic drifted across the Sangamwadi Bridge.

“Yes... let’s do it, but—”

“No. Nothing else matters. This is final. This book will be published,” he said with unwavering confidence.

Everyone should have a friend like Samir—someone who guides you toward a new horizon when you are lost. My heart felt steady, yet my mind was weighed down with questions. How would I survive in Pune?

Home was in chaos. My sister’s wedding loomed ahead. My father was crushed under a mountain of debts. They had sent me to Nanded with the hope I would become a doctor, and I had failed to meet their expectations. I had achieved nothing. Yet, somewhere deep inside, I believed I was destined for something extraordinary. One day, I would do something great—something that would make my father proud.

“Samir... I need work. I don’t even have money to stay here,” I said, my voice heavy with the weight of my reality.

“Don’t worry. Come to college tomorrow. I’ll arrange something. You’ll manage,” he said, his voice calm and reassuring.

A faint relief settled over me. My mind felt lighter. Samir had been with me through some of the toughest paths I had walked.

“Alright... I should go. It’s late,” I said, taking the diary from his hands and slipping it into my bag.

He pulled out his bike, and we rode toward Shaniwar Wada. From there, I caught a bus to Sinhagad-Wadgaon and made my way back to my room.

Darkness had deepened. Returning to Pune, the city felt heavy yet alive—shoulders brushed against mine in the crowd, all carrying the invisible burdens of responsibility. Faces, weary from the day's work, still bore the longing for home. The conductor moved through the bus with a metallic "tick-tick," issuing tickets.

"One Wadgaon ticket, please," I said.

The bus jolted forward, rattling along the uneven road.

"How was your first day in Pune?" Rajesh asked.

"Absolutely amazing," I replied, smiling despite my exhaustion.

Walking through Jadhav Nagar,

The lanes of Jadhav Nagar twisted like a labyrinth beneath the soft glow of streetlights. Rajesh and I made our way from our flat toward the hill near his college, our footsteps echoing faintly against walls that leaned against one another like old friends. It was past nine, and the air carried the quiet hum of the city at night. We had just finished dinner at Shiv Sagar Mess, and this slow climb was meant to shake off the heaviness of the meal—but perhaps also to make room for thoughts that had no place inside four walls.

Rajesh led the way toward his college, while I followed slowly, each step heavier on the steep incline.

"Did you meet Samir?" he asked, glancing back.

"Yes. We spent the whole day together. His college is great," I said.

“And you two... do you go to 11th grade together?”

“Yes, but his math group and my biology group are different, so we don’t meet as often,” I explained.

“And Preeti... was she with you on the 11th?” he asked, pausing at the edge of the hill.

I said nothing. Since our last meeting, I had never been able to answer where Preeti had gone. Samir, Vishal, and now Rajesh—they all asked, and I could give no answer.

Seeing my silence, Rajesh let the question drop.

“This is where the bus stops,” he said as we reached the top. Pune stretched below us like a tapestry of lights, scattered like fallen stars across the earth.

“Wow... it’s incredible,” I murmured, taking in the view.

“I told you. It’s breathtaking,” he said, his excitement contagious.

We had climbed nearly two kilometers. He picked up a rock and placed it in front of me. “Sit here,” he said.

I obeyed. We sat in silence, letting the stillness of the night wash over us. He spoke no words, and I felt the quiet embrace of Pune’s nighttime calm.

“You never told me...”

“What?” I asked.

“Did you meet Preeti again, or not?” Rajesh’s voice was gentle, yet persistent.

I remained silent. My eyes filled with tears.

Before me were the nights after Preeti had left. I had sat alone in my room, clutching the flute and peacock feather. Her laughter seemed to echo in every corner. I could still hear the sweetness of her gentle words, and remember the

curls that fell across her forehead. Touching the names we had carved into the flute, I felt her presence as if she were still there.

On my birthday, Preeti had given me a drawing along with a shirt. In it, I sat alone by the riverside, a wooden boat beside me, watching the river flow. On the sand lay a flute and a peacock feather. Seeing it had filled me with a quiet joy. That day, I realized she was an artist.

I stepped out of my memories and opened the diary again. The painting lay there. Holding it in my hands, I resolved—if Samir is right, and this book is published, this painting will be its cover... because once, Preeti had said she would design the cover of my book.

Some dreams remain unfinished...

Some memories linger quietly in the corners of the heart...

Some spill over as tears from the eyes...

Some become words, etched forever onto paper

This morning, Sameer called early.

“Can you come to college today?”

Half-asleep, I picked up the phone, my mind still tangled in dreams.

“Yeah... I can. What’s up?”

“Nothing, just be here by nine,” he said, and the line went dead.

Half an hour later, I was already on my feet. It was past eight-thirty. In a flurry, I got ready, grabbed my bag, and caught the Shivaji Nagar bus. My heart thumped with a

strange mix of excitement and nervousness—after three months of wandering, could this finally be the break I was waiting for?

Outside the college, Sameer was waiting, pacing slightly.

“Hey! You’re late. I said nine,” he scolded, though his voice held more worry than anger.

“Just ten minutes,” I replied with a small smile, but inside, I felt the weight of my struggles pressing down.

“Don’t you know Sindhikar sir? Our librarian... he’s strict. I barely managed to get a slot with him yesterday,” Sameer said, shaking his head.

“Oh... for what?” I asked, my pulse quickening.

“For a job. You’ve been wandering for three months. Found anything yet?”

“No... nothing,” I admitted quietly, feeling the familiar pang of frustration.

“Well, maybe today’s the day,” Sameer said, giving me a reassuring nod before heading inside toward the library.

I waited outside, my hands clenched in my pockets. Every moment felt heavy, every breath tight with anticipation. When Sameer returned, he pointed toward a man and beckoned me inside.

“These are Sindhikar sir, the librarian of our college,” Sameer introduced me.

“Hello, sir,” I said politely, my voice steadier than I felt.

“Sir, this is Krishna. He’s been in Pune for three months but hasn’t found a job yet. I heard there’s a vacancy here, so I called yesterday,” I added, my heart beating fast.

“Yes, there’s a position as a library assistant. But can you stick with it?” Sir’s eyes measured me carefully.

“Yes, sir. I’ll do whatever is needed. I really need this,” I said, my voice firm, though my stomach twisted with both hope and fear.

“You’ll have to do everything—sweeping in the morning, cataloguing books, other college tasks, even tea and coffee... everything,” Sir said, his tone serious.

“Yes, sir,” I nodded. Sameer’s eyes flickered toward me, carrying a strange sadness, but I felt a quiet determination settle inside me. I would do it. I had no choice but to hold onto this opportunity.

“Sir, I thought it was just library work... tea, cleaning?” Sameer asked.

“Everything. If you can handle it, then go ahead,” Sir said, his voice firm but fair.

“No problem, sir,” I said quickly, my mind already racing through how I’d manage everything. The library meant time to read, time to write, a small window of control in the chaos of my life.

“And the salary?” I asked softly, almost afraid to hope.

“Five thousand to start. We’ll see about an increase based on your work,” Sir replied.

Sameer’s face fell a little. Perhaps he never imagined me doing this—the top scholar from our school, now working as a library assistant in a college. But I felt a spark of relief, a glimmer of hope. I finally had something I could hold onto.

“Bring your Aadhaar card tomorrow,” Sir said.

“Yes, sir,” I said, and we walked out of the library.

Sameer stayed quiet for a while, and I let him. Honestly, my life had felt impossible for the past three months. The money I had brought from home ran out in the first month. I'd been living in Rajesh's tiny room, scraping by. I didn't have any money, and I couldn't call home—the situation was too fragile. Debts piled up, my father lay in the hospital, my mother's worry never ceased...

I had been sent to become a doctor, but that dream lay in ruins. My sister's marriageable age had come, yet there was no money at home. Pune felt like a strange city, unfamiliar and unkind.

Before Rajesh arrived, I would eat a few biscuits at night, fall into a restless sleep, and spend the day searching for work. From Swargate to the small eateries near the Swami Samarth Bhakari Center, I kept walking, hoping for some opportunity. Three months had passed. Nothing.

If I had a job, I could have worked on my book. I still remembered Preeti's words, echoing in my mind: "You may not be a doctor, but you can be a good writer." Maybe that was my future. Maybe this struggle, this constant fight, was shaping me. My pen was sharpening, and my story was waiting to be written.

After a day of fruitless searching, I would read at night, write in my diary, and let the small hope of the next day keep me alive. And now, Sameer's call, the library, this small job—it felt like a golden chance. I accepted it without hesitation.

As we walked toward the college canteen, Sameer wanted to speak, but I stayed silent. I had work to do. I had hoped to cling to it. And maybe, just maybe, I was finally on the path where my life and my dreams could meet.

The college canteen was alive with chaos. Plates clattered, students jostled past each other, and the smell of freshly fried vada pavs mingled with the sharp scent of strong tea. Samir's voice cut through it all, "Two vada pavs and tea, please!"

I wasn't sure the waiter even heard him. My stomach gave a low growl. I hadn't eaten anything since morning—rushing out of the house had left me with barely a sip of tea. Normally, I was used to going hungry, but there was something about the aroma of hot sambar, samosas, and vada pavs that could awaken even the most disciplined hunger.

Samir leaned closer, concern flickering in his eyes. "Tell me, Krishna... was it really necessary for you to take this job? That Sindhikar is already so... grumpy. And now tea, cleaning, sweeping... how are you going to manage all of it?"

I smiled faintly, a quiet calm settling over me. "I understand what you're feeling. But don't worry, Samir. I'll manage everything. Right now, I need this job. Work... it's like Lakshmi. It feeds your hunger."

He studied me for a moment, as if trying to measure the depth of my resolve. "I get it... you need it. But still..."

Before he could continue, the waiter appeared, dropping the plates on our table with a loud clatter. "Two vada pavs and tea—these are yours, right?"

"Yes... thanks," Samir said, almost distracted, glancing at the plates but clearly absorbed in worry.

"How long will this go on, Krishna?" he asked again, his voice softening. "Haven't you decided what exactly you want to do? Otherwise... Why not take admission in Pune University? At least get a degree..."

I pushed a vada pav around on the plate absentmindedly. "Once the job starts and I have some money in hand, I'm

planning to enroll in night college for English Literature,” I said.

“And your book?” Samir’s voice had that teasing, gentle push that only he could manage. “What about it? Finished writing it yet?”

“Almost... but I can’t seem to find the ending,” I admitted, looking away. **“I’m thinking of submitting it to a publisher in January 2015... but that too... it’s going to be a struggle.”**

“I’ve read everything you’ve written, Krishna. It’s brilliant. But... **just write how you and Preeti met again. That will give it a happy ending,**” Samir said, a small, hopeful smile tugging at his lips.

I didn’t reply. Silence settled between us like a heavy curtain. Before I realized it, tears welled up in my eyes, threatening to spill.

“What’s wrong?” Samir asked gently, placing a hand on my shoulder.

“Nothing,” I said, hastily wiping my eyes.

“What happened next, Krishna?” His voice softened, leaning closer. **“That day... after Preeti left for the last time... did you ever meet again? You never told me.”**

I couldn’t speak.

“What is it? What are you thinking?”

I let out a slow breath. “Samir... I think... The ending of my diary... It will be the end of my book too. I can’t... I can’t write beyond that.”

“But why? Readers should know... how it ended between you and Preeti. **Was it a happy ending?** Did she come back? At least give them closure... don’t leave it incomplete.”

I looked down at my hands, tracing the edges of the plate as if answers were hidden there. **“Because... I will remain incomplete all my life, Samir. That’s it.**

Final decision. This... this will be the ending of my book. Preeti and I... at that Kaleshwar river ghat... we drifted apart from each other.”

Samir was quiet for a moment, the canteen noise filling the pause. Then he asked softly, “And the title?”

I felt the weight of every word I had written, every memory, every sigh, every unsaid sentence. **“When A Writer Falls In Love,”** I whispered.

The words hung in the air between us, heavy with memory and longing. And in that moment, I realized that some stories... some love... I don’t need a happy ending to live forever.

I took a bite of the vada pav, the warmth and spice grounding me to the present, while my heart lingered on the past. Samir sat beside me, silent but understanding, as we let the noise of the canteen fade into a backdrop for the quiet ache of memory.

Some endings are final, some stories remain unfinished—but the imprint they leave is eternal.

Nothing new had really begun in my life. Calls from my parents came once a week, and it had already been nearly seven months since I had moved to Pune from Nanded.

Time slipped by, and before I knew it, January 2015 had arrived. There was a quiet certainty in my mind that the new year would bring something different—something I hadn’t yet seen or felt.

The work on my book was finally complete. I had sent it to a friend of Sameer's to check it for grammar, to polish the words I had poured so much of my heart into.

"Man... she literally cried while reading your book," Sameer had said over the phone, and I remembered the pause after his words, as if he was struggling to express the weight of her emotions.

I believed it. Even if my love story with Preeti remained unfinished in reality, I had captured it beautifully within the pages of that book. I had relived each moment while writing it—the soft brush of her lips, the tiny tremor in her hand when she laughed, the subtle glances we exchanged in silence. Every fleeting, tender detail had found its way onto the page.

Even our tears from the last meeting had left traces in my words, quietly testifying to the depth of our love.

I opened my cupboard and retrieved my diary. Alongside it was the last painting Preeti had given me—she had once said she would design the cover for my book. Now, that very painting would serve as the book's face when it reached the publisher. My heart fluttered at the thought.

"Seeing this cover, she'll be happy, right?" Rajesh asked softly, his voice carrying the warmth of understanding.

He held my final draft, the book I would submit to the publisher in a few days. Sameer had been tirelessly emailing the top publishing house in India for updates, but there had been no reply yet. Still, I had faith. One day, that call would come, and I would be ready. I meticulously prepared for every eventuality, every small detail, because hope needed action to feel real.

It was Sunday, and both of us were at home. Over the past four months, my life has settled into a steady rhythm. The

college library had become my refuge. Hours passed like minutes as I immersed myself in work, and the monotony of study was softened by the quiet hum of students around me, the turning of pages, the distant echoes of conversations blending into background music for my thoughts.

Syndhikar Sir, who was known for being strict with everyone else, treated me kindly. After the first month, he increased my stipend to eight thousand rupees. After covering my own expenses, I sent three thousand home. It felt good to contribute, to show that their faith in me was not misplaced.

And then there was my sister. She had been my anchor. It was because of her that my parents trusted me, letting me navigate this new city. She had slipped some money into my pocket before I left, whispering words I could never forget:

“Go in a way that when you return, you won’t have to introduce yourself in Nanded. Your work will speak for you.”

Her words still echoed in my mind, a quiet rhythm beneath every thought, every decision, even now. I could almost hear her voice in the silent library, in the rustle of pages, in the hush of my own heartbeat.

And somewhere in that quiet, I felt a flicker of anticipation—of the unknown, of life waiting to unfold in ways I could not yet imagine.

21. The Bestseller Journey

The next few days passed in a quiet blur of anticipation and preparation.

I had sent the manuscript and Preeti's painting to the publisher and now, all I could do was wait. Every email notification made my heart skip a beat, every phone vibration made me hope it was the call I had been waiting for.

Sameer checked in constantly, his messages full of cautious optimism. *"Krishna, they'll reply soon. Just give it a couple of days."*

But each passing hour stretched longer than the last, and I found myself replaying the book in my mind, turning over every word, every scene.

At night, I would lie on my bed, staring at the ceiling, running my fingers over the corner of her painting on my desk, tracing the curves of the brushstrokes, wondering if the cover would do justice to her delicate touch.

The publisher had a reputation for being meticulous.

Sameer had explained it in detail over the phone: the editorial team would check every sentence, suggest changes, format it for print, and finally, the design team would integrate the cover art.

There would be rounds of proofing, approvals, and negotiations before the book even saw a single reader. The process could take weeks.

It was both exciting and excruciating. I kept myself busy at the library, organizing notes, reviewing drafts, and

sometimes just staring blankly at the rows of books around me. Each rustling page, each quiet cough from a student nearby, felt amplified, as if the library itself was waiting with me.

One evening, I got an email from the publisher. My hands trembled as I opened it, holding my breath. It was just a polite acknowledgement of receipt, a promise that the manuscript was under review. Nothing more. Yet, I felt a surge of relief. It was the first real sign that my story was being seen.

Later, Sameer called. “Bro, they’ve received it. That’s the first step. Now we wait for the editorial feedback. But it’s good. This is good.” His voice carried a mix of reassurance and excitement, and for a moment, I let myself imagine the book in print, my story reaching others, and Preeti smiling when she finally saw it.

Each day, I checked my email obsessively, sometimes refreshing the inbox dozens of times, sometimes sitting quietly with the book beside me, reading passages aloud just to hear the words come alive again. The waiting was a test of patience, a slow build of anticipation that seemed endless.

But in the quiet moments, I reminded myself: *This is not just about publication. This is about preserving what we had. This is about giving our story a life of its own.* And that thought made the long hours bearable, made the silence of waiting feel almost sacred.

Evenings became my favorite time. I would sit by my desk, the room dimly lit, listening to the hum of the city outside, writing notes for possible promotional ideas, thinking about launch events, and imagining conversations about the book. Each detail, though trivial in itself, made me feel connected to the world I was about to enter as a writer.

And all the while, Preeti's presence lingered—not physically, but in the brushstrokes of her painting, in the memory of her laugh, in the quiet corners of every page. I wanted the book to reflect that, to carry her essence into the hands of readers, even if she was no longer with me.

The publication process had begun, and with it, a strange mix of impatience, hope, and quiet joy. I realized then that this was more than a book—it was a bridge between the past and the future, between love lost and love remembered, between me and Preeti.

A week later, I finally received a more substantial email from the publisher. My hands shook as I opened it, afraid of disappointment yet desperate for confirmation. The words on the screen were careful, professional—but kind. They had begun reviewing the manuscript. There were notes about grammar, sentence flow, and a few suggestions to clarify certain passages. Nothing drastic. Nothing that changed the soul of the story.

I exhaled slowly, a weight lifting off my chest. Sameer called immediately.

“Bro! This is good news. They’re actually reading it!” he said, excitement breaking through his usual calm.

I smiled, running my fingers over the corner of Preeti's painting. *They're reading it... she would be happy.* The thought gave me a warmth I hadn't felt in months.

Over the next few days, I went through the publisher's notes carefully, making minor edits here and there, trying to respect their suggestions without losing the authenticity of the story. Some passages felt raw when I re-read them, and I often paused, remembering the moments I had lived with Preeti—the subtle tilt of her head, the quiet softness in her

voice, the shy smile that would make my heart lurch. I wanted those details to remain untouched.

The cover design was the next hurdle. I sent Preeti's painting as a high-resolution image, hoping the publisher's design team would preserve its delicate charm. Every time I imagined their digital alterations, a flicker of doubt passed through me. *Will they respect it? Will they capture the essence of her strokes, the emotion behind them?*

Then came the first draft of the cover. I held my breath as I opened the attachment. There it was—her painting, framed perfectly, the title of the book elegantly integrated without overshadowing her art. My chest tightened. It was exactly as I had imagined.

I leaned back in my chair, staring at it for minutes, letting the realization sink in. The book wasn't just words anymore—it was becoming tangible, a creation that could exist outside my memories, outside my thoughts. Preeti's presence lingered in every corner, in the curves of her brush, in the spaces between the sentences, in the story itself.

Sameer and I discussed possible changes with the publisher over calls and emails, small tweaks in font, positioning, and layout. Every tiny decision felt monumental. I knew it wasn't just about the book—it was about preserving the authenticity of the moments, the emotions, the story that belonged to both of us.

Nights were the hardest. I would sit at my desk long after the library had emptied, the dim glow of the lamp painting shadows across the room, reading the manuscript aloud to myself, whispering Preeti's lines as if she were there beside me.

Sometimes I paused, letting memories flood me, and my eyes would sting with unshed tears. But then I smiled, because

this—this process, this labor of love—was keeping her alive in my world, in words that could reach beyond memory.

Weeks passed. Each email from the publisher was a heartbeat in the slow, steady rhythm of the publication process. Minor corrections, layout approvals, design confirmations—it all felt like a slow dance between patience and anticipation. I learned to wait with a quiet intensity, my mind often drifting to the day the book would finally be in my hands, printed, tangible, alive.

And in those moments, I realized something profound. The book was no longer just my story. It was ours. It carried fragments of laughter, moments of silence, whispered words, and even tears. Every proof, every email, every tiny adjustment was a step closer to immortalizing our story.

For the first time in months, I felt a serene kind of excitement—a feeling that life, even in absence, could still be beautiful, still leave traces that matter. And I waited, patiently, for the next step: the day the publisher would finally give the green light, and our story would be ready to meet the world.

Finally, the day came. I received an email from the publisher with the subject line that made my heart thump: ***“Final Approval – Ready for Print.”*** I stared at it for a long moment, hardly daring to believe it. Then, with trembling hands, I opened it.

Every detail had been checked, every suggestion incorporated. The manuscript was approved. The cover, Preeti’s painting, untouched and radiant. The book, my labor of love, was ready to take its first breath in the world.

I sank into my chair, the room suddenly quiet around me. It felt unreal, like a dream I was too afraid to wake from. I

closed my eyes and let the memories flood in—the late nights in the library, Sameer’s constant encouragement, my sister’s quiet support. Every moment, every glance, every small smile was now immortalized in this book.

A few days later, the first printed copy arrived. The moment I held it in my hands, I felt an almost electric surge of emotion. The paper felt solid and real beneath my fingers; the weight of it was tangible, yet so delicate. The cover glowed under the soft light of my room, and I traced Preeti’s painting with my fingertips, as if trying to touch her presence through the canvas.

I opened it to the first page, inhaling deeply. The familiar words, once my private confessions, now stood bold and alive on the paper. And for a moment, I allowed myself to imagine Preeti there beside me, reading it, smiling at the memories we had shared, feeling every emotion I had poured into it.

I sat back and held the book close, my chest tight with a mixture of joy, nostalgia, and longing. It was more than a book—it was a testament. A bridge between the past and the present. A reminder that some stories, even if incomplete, could be eternal.

Sameer burst into my room shortly after, unable to contain his excitement. “Bro! This is it! You did it! It’s real now!”

I nodded, smiling through the lump in my throat. “It’s real,” I whispered. “And she’ll see it. She’ll know... everything.”

For hours, I just sat there, turning pages slowly, savoring every line, every memory, every tear captured within the story. In the quiet of my room, surrounded by the hum of the city outside, it felt as if Preeti’s presence was there, quiet but unmistakable.

Holding the book, I realized that even if life moved on, even if paths diverged, this creation would remain. Our moments,

our love, our laughter, our tears—they were no longer fleeting. They were frozen in time, ready to touch anyone who opened its pages.

And in that realization, I found a strange kind of peace. The book was no longer just mine. It was ours. And somehow, in the process of letting it go into the world, I felt closer to Preeti than I had in months.

The publication process, with all its waiting, editing, and approvals, had been more than a journey to print—it had been a journey through memory, emotion, and love. And now, at last, it was complete.

Two months later, everything changed. What had begun as a quiet, almost private labor of love had exploded into something I could never have imagined.

My book—our story—had become a bestseller. Millions of copies sold, readers from across the country holding in their hands the moments I had lived, the emotions I had bled onto paper.

I remember sitting in my small room, the first printed bestseller list in my hands, my heartbeat erratic, my hands trembling.

My eyes skimmed over the numbers, the ranks, the glowing reviews. And then I laughed—half in disbelief, half in joy—because somehow, in all of this, Preeti was there with me. Not in body, but in every word, every memory, every tear captured in the pages that readers were now treasuring.

Calls, messages, and emails poured in from readers, friends, and even strangers. Some wrote to say they had cried reading it, some said they had laughed aloud, and some said they had remembered their own lost loves, their own fleeting

moments. It was overwhelming, humbling, and beautiful all at once.

Sameer couldn't stop grinning. "Bro... bro... can you believe it? Millions! People are reading *your story*! People are feeling what you felt!"

Rajesh was struck with sudden shock; he couldn't make sense of what was happening. Krishna, who had arrived in Pune just a few months ago, had transformed so unexpectedly... Tears of joy streamed down his eyes.

I smiled, my fingers brushing over Preeti's painting on the desk. "It's not just mine, Sameer. It's hers too. Every bit of her is in here."

Even amidst the chaos of fame, interviews, and book tours, I found myself retreating to quiet moments in the library, in my room, with the book in my hands. I would turn the pages slowly, savoring the words, reliving the memories, remembering her laugh, her soft voice, the shy tilt of her head.

And sometimes, late at night, I would imagine her reading it. I pictured her sitting somewhere, her eyes tracing the sentences I had written for her, a small, fond smile playing on her lips. That imagined moment gave me more warmth than any accolade, any bestseller rank, or any media attention ever could.

The city around me seemed different now. People I had never met stopped me to congratulate me. Students in the library whispered my name in awe. Yet, in all of this, I felt a quiet detachment, a sense that the real reward was intangible. The real success was knowing that our story, fleeting and fragile as it once was, had found permanence.

Millions of copies sold. Reviews hailed the emotional depth, the raw honesty, the love that lingered even in absence. But

for me, the numbers, the rankings—they were secondary. The real triumph was that Preeti's presence, her spirit, her story, lived on in the hearts of readers. And somewhere deep inside me, that was enough.

I kept the first copy I had received, the one that had felt heavy in my hands when I first held it. Now, it felt sacred. I touched her painting on the cover lightly, as if I could feel her through the paper. And I whispered softly, almost to myself, "This is for you. We did this... together."

Even in the whirlwind of success, I knew one thing for certain: our story would remain—eternal, alive, and untouchable by time. And in that quiet certainty, I finally felt a sense of peace.

A few weeks later, the publisher sent me the first royalty check. I stared at it for a long time, hardly daring to believe what I was seeing. It was... enormous. One **crore**. My heart thudded in my chest, a mixture of disbelief, joy, and an almost surreal pride.

I held the check in my hands, imagining how my Aai and Baba, my sister, and even the Nanded would feel when they knew.

This wasn't just money—it was recognition, validation, proof that something beautiful could emerge from our lives, from our struggles, from the love that I had once thought was ephemeral.

Sameer was the first to see it. His eyes widened, and then he laughed, a loud, uncontrollable sound of pure happiness. "Bro... this is insane! One crore! Just like that!"

I nodded slowly, still holding the check close. “Not just me,” I said softly. “This... all of this... it belongs to them too. To Aai, Baba, Didi... to You Sameer and Preeti.”

The thought of my parents swelled my chest with pride. I imagined their faces, the quiet sacrifices they had made, the faith they had placed in me when they sent me to Pune.

My sister’s words echoed in my mind: “***Go in a way that when you return, you won’t have to introduce yourself in Nanded. Your work will speak for you.***” Now, I had lived up to that promise. I had made them proud.

The advance checks for my next book arrived shortly after. Even larger sums, even more responsibility, and yet a thrilling sense of possibility.

I had crossed a threshold I had only dreamed about—a young man from a small town, holding in his hands the fruits of his creativity, his memories, his heart.

I couldn’t help but imagine the reaction back home.

Nanded, a city I had left behind months ago, would hear my name now. And I would return, not as a boy searching for identity, but as someone whose work had left a mark.

I felt a deep, almost sacred pride—not for fame, not for wealth, but for the recognition of effort, love, and authenticity.

I placed the checks carefully on my desk, alongside Preeti’s painting and my diary. I could almost hear her voice whispering encouragement, reminding me of why I had written the book in the first place.

In that moment, wealth wasn’t just money. Richness was the feeling of having made my family proud, of honoring the sacrifices of my sister, of bringing a piece of Nanded into the

wider world. It was the sense that my story, our story, had mattered. That it had resonated. That it would live on.

I leaned back in my chair, letting the enormity of it sink in. My life had changed in ways I had never imagined, yet the essence of it—the quiet joy of creation, the memories of love, the pride in family and hometown—remained untouched, eternal, and beautiful.

And for the first time in months, I smiled freely, unburdened, knowing that all the waiting, all the struggle, had been worth it.

Pune 2017

22, Back From The Story

The applause reverberated through the auditorium. I stood at the podium, microphone in hand, heart pounding.

The very same library of a Pune college where I had once worked as a library boy... and now, two years later, I was standing on its stage as a special guest. The hall was packed—my readers, students, journalists, and news reporters—all eyes fixated on me.

“This is my story... the story of Preeti and me,” I began.

I poured my heart into every word and brought my tale to a close.

From the crowd, a voice rang out. “Sir, I’ve read your book. You’ve captured the innocent journey of your love with Preeti so beautifully. It doesn’t feel like a book—it feels like a gentle, silent stream of love. But... Why leave it unresolved? What happened after your final meeting?”

Another hand went up. “Sir, where is Preeti today? Has she returned to your life?”

And yet another: “Sir, the book feels incomplete... Will there be a sequel? Did Krishna and Preeti reunite? Is this really your story? We want to know the ending... Where is Preeti?”

I froze. Darkness seemed to cloud my vision. I couldn’t process what was happening. A strange ache gripped my heart. Tears spilled from my eyes before I could stop them. My body trembled, drenched in sweat.

Suddenly, a few organizers appeared on stage, forming a protective circle around me. Somehow, I pushed through the crowd and stepped outside.

Unanswered...

My car was waiting. I slid into the seat.

Evening had fallen. The city of Pune blurred past as the car headed toward Nanded. I sank into the back seat, rolled down the window, and took a deep, shuddering breath. For days, one question had echoed endlessly in my mind: “***Where is Preeti?***”

Tears still clung to my eyes.

Beside me lay my other diary—the one that held the true ending of my story, the part I had never included in the book. I opened it...

23. The Last Page Of Diary

“Check this number, bro...” I said, pushing my hall ticket forward through the crowd at the net café.

“Hey! At least take care of your hall ticket, ... what is this mess?” The attendant snatched it from my hand. There was a faint stain on it—probably a little water from when Aai had handled it at home.

Behind me, kids were huddled over each other, checking their results. Some laughed and strutted out, proud and carefree, while others had tears welling in their eyes. My own heart was pounding like crazy.

By now, the “best of five” system was in place. Only the top five subjects counted for the cut-off percentage, and the one with the lowest marks was omitted.

As he typed my number into the computer, my heartbeat thudded faster with every keystroke.

“Krishna Kalyan... who is it?”

I hurried forward, barely able to contain myself.

“97%! You’re first in the district...”

I froze. Shock, disbelief, and joy crashed into me all at once. Tears blurred my vision. I couldn’t even process it. A strange, electric energy surged through me.

The students around me clapped, congratulated me, extended their hands—but I barely noticed. I had no awareness of anything else.

I grabbed the printout and rushed outside, calling my parents.

“I knew it! My child came first!” Aai’s voice cracked with pride and emotion.

“When you come home, bring sweets,” Baba had told my sister over the phone. “Congratulations, Krishna,” she added, giving me her blessings.

I hung up, my heart still racing.

I needed to know how Preeti had done. The student from Pratibha Niketan was second in the district, and a girl from Mahatma Phule High School had secured third place.

I already had Preeti’s hall ticket number from Kajal. I ran back to the net café and checked. 95%! She was in the top ten.

I couldn’t help smiling. I wanted to see the pride and happiness in her eyes when we met, her subtle acknowledgment that she was proud of me, and maybe a little of her own achievement too.

I tried calling her from the coin box, but no one picked up.

With a heavy but hopeful heart, I boarded the bus back to my village. By the time I reached home, it was late. Mom and Dad were waiting, their eyes shining with pride. Seeing them happy gave me an overwhelming sense of fulfillment.

I had chosen their dreams over my own—and now, I had fulfilled them. But the battle of love awaited me, and this was one battle I could not afford to lose.

From this moment on, whatever life had in store, I would face it with Preeti by my side. With that certainty, I drifted into sleep, convinced that tomorrow, when she saw my photo in the paper, Preeti would call—because somehow, I just knew she would.

The next morning, I woke up before the sun had even kissed the fields. My heart was still pounding from yesterday's news, and my mind wouldn't stop racing. The first thing I did was grab the newspaper—and there it was, staring back at me: my name, my photo, my marks... bold letters screaming, *First in the District!* I nearly dropped it, my fingers trembling. And then... a flicker of hope. Preeti would see this. She had to.

I wanted to call her immediately, to hear her voice, to share it all. But I stopped. Maybe... maybe I should let her call first.

Breakfast passed in a blur. Aai fussed over me, hovering like a shadow, while Baba tried to play it cool, but the grin spreading across his face betrayed him. Each spoonful of food felt tasteless, like I was chewing air. My thoughts were tangled, spinning around only one thing—Preeti.

By mid-morning, I had rehearsed every possible scenario in my head a dozen times. Would she tease me? Laugh with me? Congratulate me? Or, would she just... stay silent? I couldn't stand it any longer. I picked up my phone. Dialed her number. Only the trilling of the phone greeted me but not Preeti.

I tried again. And again. And again. Each time, the phone rang and rang before going to voicemail. My chest tightened. Frustration prickled like fire under my skin. Why wasn't she picking up? I had wanted—needed—to hear her voice, to share this moment... but it felt like she was slipping away just when I needed her the most.

I walked through the village, restless, unable to sit still. Every message went unread. Every call went unanswered. Anger bubbled up, mixed with worry. I was happy, yes—but the silence from Preeti cut sharper than any joy.

By evening, I found myself sitting on the steps outside my house, staring at the empty road, phone in hand. Why isn't she answering? The thought circled my mind relentlessly. My triumph, my parents' pride, all of it felt incomplete without her. I muttered to myself, "She knows how much I wanted to talk to her ... so why isn't she there?"

The sun dipped behind the trees, stretching long shadows across the village. And I realized, no amount of pride or recognition could fill this gap. This... this was a different kind of battle. One where love and patience mattered more than marks or medals.

And even though anger simmered inside me, a small, stubborn part of me held onto hope—tomorrow, I told myself, surely Preeti would call.

23. If a Writer Falls in Love With You.... You Will Never Die

After waiting for so many days, not a single call came from Preeti. She didn't even pick up mine. Somewhere deep down, I understood why. I had wounded her, insulted the love she had given me so selflessly.

Regret gnawed at me like a fever. I wanted to talk to her, to apologize, to start life over with her. I wanted to fight—for my dreams and for our love. Since we parted, not a single dawn had broken my heart without her, and her memory tearing me up.

After our last meeting at Kaleshwar Temple, I sat there all night, alone under the temple's worn out stone arches. I could feel something precious slipping away, yet I was powerless to stop it. The thought that I could not follow her, could not hold her close, burned inside me like fire.

The next day, I returned to the village. Lost in thoughts of her, I forgot myself completely. I punished myself with her absence. But she would never know the extent of my suffering. To her, I was nothing more than a failed lover who had betrayed her heart.

From the village, I sent her letters—pages filled with proof of my love, apologies, and promises that we could be together again. But she didn't forgive me. I didn't even hear back once.

And today, well today was one of the most special days of my life. Yet she hadn't called or replied even once. I understood

her anger, but even so, I had hoped... today, at least, she would be with me.

After a few days in the village, I went to Nanded. Admissions for the eleventh grade had begun. Surely, she would at least come for that.

Early that morning, my heart pounding with hope, I left for Nanded. I checked every college's admission list. Her name wasn't there.

My heart sank. The rain of early June drenched me completely, yet my feet refused to carry me back to my room. A strange fear settled over me—a premonition I couldn't shake.

I knew the address of her house in Kailas Nagar. I took my bicycle and rode there. It was seven in the evening, the rain had eased to a drizzle.

I stopped outside her house. A faint light glowed from within. I stood beneath a tree across the road, hoping to catch a glimpse of her at a window. I waited, the rain soaking me, but she didn't appear.

I looked for her bicycle. Even that wasn't there. I waited for what felt like an eternity, but I couldn't stand still any longer.

Gathering every ounce of courage, I pushed open the gate. The screeching sound pierced my ears. Softly, I called out, "Preeti..."

No answer.

The door was slightly ajar. I stepped inside. The hall was large and dark. On the sofa sat a woman—surely her mother.

"Preeti..." I called again, my voice trembling as I stepped further in.

"Who's there?" came a wary voice.

My chest was pounding like a drum, yet I forced my voice steady. “It’s me... Krishna.”

Two months had passed. I had finally come to see her. I wanted to scold her, hold her close, apologize. I wanted to take her to the banks of the Godavari, kiss her lips in the rain, and promise I would never leave her again. I could not live without her.

As I entered, her mother switched on the hall light. A shiver ran down my spine.

“Who do you want?” she asked.

“Auntie... I’m Krishna. Where’s Preeti?”

Before I could finish, a sharp pain ripped through my chest. Darkness clouded my vision. I collapsed to the floor.

Her mother rushed to me. “Krishna...” her voice trembled with anguish.

And then I saw it. A photograph of Preeti on the wall. Beautiful, serene—and garlanded.

I screamed her name, “Preeti!” My voice echoed through the house as I sobbed uncontrollably, throwing my arms toward the garlanded photo. “What happened? Where is she?”

No... this can’t be real.

Preeti... she’s gone?

How can those words even make sense?

The world around me suddenly feels hollow, unreal —like someone has ripped the color out of everything.

That photo on the wall... her photo —the same smile that once lit up my world, now trapped in a frame, surrounded by flowers meant for the dead.

My hands tremble as I look at it, my chest feels tight, as if the air itself has turned against me.

My mind keeps whispering, “No, *she can’t be gone... she can’t.*”

But the garland hanging around her picture tells the truth my heart refuses to accept.

I can still hear her laughter in the corners of my mind,

feel her voice echoing somewhere deep inside me —and yet, the house stands silent...only her memory remains, breathing where she no longer does.

Everything had ended

Tears streamed from her mother’s eyes as she tried to comfort me, silently knowing everything that dawned upon me, what passed between us.

On the nearby table, the letters I had sent her fluttered in the breeze. I sank to the floor, broken. Preeti had left me forever.

After our last meeting at Kaleshwar temple, she had ridden home, crying, lost in thoughts of how to endure life without me. She had held in her hand a letter she had written for me—but my choices had prevented her from giving it to me.

And in a tragic instant, riding her bicycle, she missed the truck coming. And, in a heartbeat, everything was gone.

My Preeti... had left me forever, leaving me with a lifetime of pain and separation.

“Here... take this,” her mother said, placing a blood-stained letter in my hands. “This was the last thing she held.”

My heart throbbed as I took it. I opened it, tears flowing freely, unable to stop the flood of grief.

Krishna,

I want to tell you something today...

I have loved you with everything I am.

*After God, if anyone has a place in my heart, it's you —
my Krishna... and I, your Radha.*

*That day... the first time I saw you,
drenched with me in the rain —*

I fell for your clumsy, innocent self right then.

Before you ever wrote me into your diary,

I had already drawn you into my sketches.

You filled my life with colors.

*You pulled me out of my world of imagination
and showed me how beautiful love can be in real life.*

Your first touch... our first meeting...

that first rain, that first cup of tea...

*and the first time my lips touched yours —
those moments are what I want to live for,
again and again, all my life.*

*I want to lose myself completely in your world, Krishna —
in your dreams, in your goals, in your future —*

I want to carve a place for myself there.

I want to be Krishna's Preeti forever.

To live with you...

and if I must die, to die only as yours.

*Krishna, today, after six long months,
you've called me to meet you again.
The board exams are over now,
but these six months have been
the saddest of my life —
because you weren't with me.
I understand you, Krishna.
I understand your situation.
But I don't want to be your weakness.
I want to be your strength.
I want to stand beside you for life.
Just promise me one thing —
after this, never push me away,
not even for a single moment.
I have to tell you something else...
I have a dream.
Someday, you'll write a beautiful book —
with our love inside it,
with an innocent journey of ours in it.
Because I know you love me deeply,
and I know one day you will surely
become a great writer.
And I... I will be your beloved.
So even if I'm no longer alive in this world,*

I will live on in your book.

Because I once read somewhere:

“If a writer falls in love with you, you will never die.”

Yours, always,

Preeti

I closed my diary and let out a quiet sigh. The first rays of the morning sun touched my face, warm and gentle, as if urging me forward. I had traveled all the way from Pune to Nanded, with a heart heavy from memories and unshed tears. I told the driver to head toward Kaleshwar temple, and the car moved through the quiet streets, carrying me toward a place that had once held laughter, silence, and a lingering sense of goodbye.

The car came to a halt. I stepped out, and the sunlight bathed my face, painting everything in gold. Slowly, I began walking toward the river—the river where our last meeting had unfolded, where words had ended but emotions had remained.

The river stretched wide before me, its surface glistening under the awakening sun. A lone boat drifted lazily, cutting through the quiet waters. From somewhere near, the faint chime of temple bells mingled with the gentle rustle of the breeze. My reflection shimmered on the rippling water. And in that reflection, for a fleeting moment, I imagined hers appearing beside mine—Preeti, standing silently, as if she had never truly left.

But reality struck harshly. She was gone. She had left me, stepping out of my world forever. And yet... she lived. She lived in the pages of this book I held close, in the depths of my memories, in the tears that still pricked my eyes, and

somehow, in the hearts of those who would read this, feeling what I felt.

Even in her absence, she was there; gentle, haunting, eternal. And I walked on, carrying the weight of her love, her presence lingering like sunlight on the water, guiding me through the silence of that sacred morning.

I wish I could tell her how much I loved her... but now, time has already taken that chance away...