

*Is this what
Love
looks like?*

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The evening sun had already begun its slow descent, casting a warm, golden glow across the house. The cool breeze of Chennai filtered through the open windows, carrying with it the sounds of birds chirping and the distant hum of the city. Inside, the comforting aroma of freshly cooked food filled the air, as Kayal, Anjali's mother, hummed a gentle tune while she stirred a pot on the stove. Her movements were steady, rhythmic, almost meditative as she worked in the kitchen. Oreo, their scruffy indie dog, lay lazily by the kitchen door, his eyes half-closed, tail occasionally thumping the floor, hoping for a treat to fall his way.

It was a serene, peaceful evening in the house, but upstairs, things were far from calm. Anjali, their 17-year-old daughter, had been distant for the past week. Her once bubbly personality, marked by her constant chatter and uncontainable energy, had faded into a strange silence. She had withdrawn into herself. Even her friends had noticed the change, asking her if everything was okay, but she brushed it off with a quiet, "I'm fine, just stressed about school."

But Kayal knew better. She had spent countless years raising her daughter, and she could tell when something was wrong. The little things were off...Anjali's absence from family dinners, the way she retreated to her room the moment she got home from school, the way Oreo had stopped playfully pouncing around her, and instead, now lay quietly at the foot of her bed, as though sensing her sadness. Even he knew something was wrong.

Kayal tried to reach out to her daughter, as any mother would. One evening, she walked into Anjali's room with a cup of chai, a small gesture that she hoped would open the door to a conversation. As she entered, she found Anjali lying on her bed, staring at the ceiling, her face etched with a sadness that Kayal couldn't ignore.

"Anju, is everything alright, kannu?" Kayal asked softly, sitting beside her daughter. "You've been a little quiet lately."

Anjali's smile, though present, was forced stretched thin across her face. "I'm fine, Amma. Really," she replied, her voice lacking the usual cheer and lightness that Kayal had come to associate with her daughter.

Kayal didn't believe her. She could feel the weight in the air, the heaviness that seemed to be surrounding Anjali. Her heart tightened as she stood up and walked to the door. "If you ever want to talk, I'm here," she said gently, but the words felt hollow even to her own ears. She left the room, her mother's intuition telling her that something far more serious was brewing underneath Anjali's quiet exterior.

The following morning, as Kayal tidied up Anjali's room, she stumbled upon her daughter's phone lying on the bed. She picked it up absentmindedly, intending to return it to her daughter, but as fate would have it, a text notification popped up on the screen. The sight of it caught her eye.

Without thinking, she glanced at the message preview. Her heart sank as she read the words that flashed across the screen:

"Please, Rohit... I miss you. Can't we just try again? I promise I'll change..."

Kayal's stomach twisted, a sickening feeling settling in the pit of her stomach. She always knew that Anjali and Rohit

were more than friends, her first love, but she had no idea it had ended so painfully. The rawness in Anjali's words, the desperation and longing, sent a jolt through Kayal. Her daughter was heartbroken, and she hadn't even told her. She felt a rush of anger and protectiveness flood over her. How could a teenage relationship cause her daughter so much pain?

Her hands shook as she stormed downstairs, phone in hand, her thoughts frantic.

"Ajay, you need to see this," she said urgently, her voice trembling. "Anjali's been texting Rohit, begging him to take her back. She's heartbroken. And she hasn't even told us about it. She's so young. She doesn't deserve this."

Ajay, lounging on the couch with a book in his hand, glanced up at her, his eyebrow raised in a mild but calm expression. He took a moment before replying. "Kayal, relax. It's just a teenage breakup. It's emotional, yes, but it's a phase. Don't make it bigger than it is."

"But Ajay..." Kayal began, her voice thick with worry, but he cut her off with a reassuring smile.

"I'll talk to her tonight. Let me handle it," he said, his tone warm but firm. "You're right, she's upset, but we can't go overboard. She needs someone to talk to, not someone to scold her."

Kayal stood there for a moment, conflicted, but eventually nodded. She trusted Ajay, even though her own anxiety was gnawing at her.

That evening, after dinner, Ajay called Anjali to the terrace, the family's favorite spot. The terrace, cozy with its string of fairy lights and cushioned chairs, had always been a place of quiet solace. From here, they could see the vast expanse of the night sky, the twinkling stars reflecting the

peacefulness of their neighborhood. The cool breeze was gentle, as if it knew this conversation would be anything but easy.

Ajay was already sitting in one of the chairs, his usual calm demeanor making Anjali feel both comforted and anxious at the same time. He patted the seat next to him with a knowing look. "Anju, come sit with me."

Anjali hesitated for a moment, her heart still heavy from the emotions she hadn't shared with anyone. Slowly, she walked over and sat beside him, her posture stiff, her gaze fixed on the ground, avoiding his eyes. She felt as though she were on the edge of something important, and yet, a part of her didn't want to hear what her father might say.

After a long, quiet pause, Ajay spoke, his voice gentle but direct. "Anjali, I know about Rohit. Amma found your messages."

Anjali froze, her chest tightening as the weight of the words hit her. She stood up abruptly, anger flashing in her eyes. "You went through my phone? You think you can just invade my privacy like that? How could you?"

Ajay remained calm, his voice steady. "I'm sorry, Anju. I shouldn't have looked. But your Amma and I—we care about you. We were worried when we saw how upset you've been."

Anjali's frustration boiled over, her voice trembling. "Worried? I'm not some little girl, Appa!" she snapped, her words sharp. "You and Amma have each other. You've always been together. But I... I don't understand why things end this way. Why does it hurt so much? I thought love was supposed to make you happy, but this... this is just pain."

Ajay watched her, his heart aching for his daughter. He understood her pain—how deep it ran, how raw it felt. He leaned back in his chair, his gaze softening. "You're right, Anju. Your Amma and I have been together for a long time. But relationships... they don't always follow the path you think they will. There's more to them than just being together. What you're going through right now... it's a phase. It's temporary. You'll get through it."

"But Appa," Anjali whispered, her voice small and fragile, "How can you understand? You and Amma... you're lucky. You found each other. You don't know what it's like to feel alone, to feel like you gave everything to someone, and it's still not enough."

Ajay paused, his eyes softening as he considered her words. "Do you really want to know if I understand, Anju?" he asked, his voice quiet but sincere.

Anjali blinked, confused. "What do you mean?"

Ajay leaned forward, looking up at the stars above them, his expression distant, as if remembering something long buried. "Do you want to hear my love story? The real one?"

Anjali's heart skipped a beat, and her mind raced. She had always imagined that her father's love story with her mother was just like every other fairytale easy, smooth, and perfect. But now, hearing him speak in this tone, she felt the stirrings of something deeper, something she hadn't considered before. Was there more to her parents' love story than she knew? Was it really as simple as she had always believed?

"Your love story?" she repeated, her voice small but filled with curiosity.

Ajay smiled enigmatically, his eyes twinkling in the dim light. Yes! As you said it wasn't easy for me as well!

Anjali's thoughts swirled. Her dad was going to tell her about his love story ? Was it about the hardships faced by him and mom ? The idea felt like a sudden rush of air, sweeping away her understanding of her parents' love story. She looked at him, her curiosity piqued.

Ajay leaned in closer, his voice quieter now. "I'll tell you, Anju. But you have to understand—it's not what you think. The pain you're feeling... it's temporary. Heartbreak is hard, yes. But it's just a phase. You'll look back on this one day and realize that it was just one chapter in a much bigger story."

Anjali's mind raced with questions. "I don't know... I don't know, but you guys are together anyway, Appa."

Ajay smiled, standing up slowly. "Maybe I'll tell you some other time, Anju. It's late, and I think we've talked enough for tonight."

As he walked back inside, leaving Anjali alone on the terrace, her mind buzzed with questions. What was he really going to tell her ? What did he mean by it being temporary? Did dad fell out of love with mom? Her emotions tangled confusion ,curiosity all swirled inside her. One thing was clear, though: her dad's story was more complicated than she could have imagined, and there was so much more she needed to understand.

With her heart racing and her mind buzzing with questions, Anjali retreated to her room. As she lay in bed, staring at the ceiling , Overthinking about everything and eagerly waiting to hear the story of her dad and mom!

The sunlight streaming through the window hits Anjali's face as she stirs awake, realizing she's late for school. Her alarm clock blinks 8:15 AM in big red numbers. Panic sets in. She jumps out of bed, rushing to get ready in a blur of motions. Brushing her teeth and quickly throwing on her uniform, she glances at the clock again. She still has time to make it, but only just.

Frustrated, she walks downstairs and sees her mother, Kayal, preparing breakfast with a smile on her face.

"Ammal! Why didn't you wake me up?" Anjali snaps, annoyed at her mother for not noticing her late start.

Kayal raises an eyebrow, replying sarcastically, "You're a grown-up now, aren't you? I thought you could manage your own morning routine."

Anjali sighs in exasperation, but before she can respond, her stomach growls. She walks over to the dining table, only to find it empty.

"Ammal!" she calls out, looking at Kayal in mock disbelief.

Kayal grins mischievously and walks to the kitchen. Moments later, she returns with a plate of food, which she places in front of Anjali. "There, all ready for you," she says with a playful twinkle in her eyes.

Anjali, momentarily forgetting her frustration, walks over and gives her mom a big hug. "Thanks, Amma," she says quietly, feeling the weight of the conversations she'd had with her dad yesterday. She pats Oreo, who's sitting nearby,

his tail wagging excitedly. The dog's comforting presence brings her a moment of peace in the midst of everything.

Ajay walks into the dining room just then, joining them for breakfast. Anjali can't help but throw him a glance, as if trying to signal him about last night's talk. Her father meets her gaze with a smile, but he doesn't react, instead motioning for her to eat.

"Good morning, Appa!" she says, trying to play it cool.

Ajay smiles and nods, "Morning, Anju. Eat your breakfast before you head out."

Anjali, still eager to know the story her dad hinted at, can't hold back and asks, "Appa, will you drop me at school today? I missed the bus."

Ajay, who's been observing her mood, notices the improvement in her behavior. She seems calmer today, less heavy, and he's glad to see that she's feeling a bit better. "Sure, I'll drop you. Let's go."

As they head out to the car, the ride to school is a mix of playful energy. Ajay cranks up the volume on the radio, and they both sing along to some of Anjali's favorite breakup songs. Ajay teasingly mocks her by singing extra dramatically, which makes Anjali laugh. It's the first time in days that she's genuinely laughed. The lightness in the car seems to ease Ajay's heart, as he's always done his best to shield her from pain.

But as they pull up in front of the school, Anjali spots Rohit laughing with his friends. Her heart sinks, seeing him appear completely carefree, as if their relationship had meant nothing to him. Anjali stares, her stomach twisting in a painful knot.

Ajay, sensing her discomfort, steps out of the car, walking around to stand beside her. He looks at her quietly for a

moment, then places a hand on her shoulder. “Anjali, if a person is happy, you have to let them go. It’s time for you to focus on your own happiness now.”

Tears well up in Anjali’s eyes as she shakes her head, unable to understand how Rohit can just move on. “How can he just ignore me like that, Appa? I loved him so much...”

Ajay’s heart aches for his daughter, but he pulls her into a warm hug. “It’s okay, Anju. Don’t cry. Don’t waste your tears on him. Show him your strength. You are more than this.”

Anjali nods silently, feeling the truth of his words, but still holding onto a glimmer of hope. She wipes her eyes, and Ajay lets go of the hug, his face soft but firm.

“If you can show him how strong you are, I’ll tell you the story tonight,” he says with a smile.

Anjali’s eyes light up with excitement. “You promise?”

“I promise,” Ajay says with a wink.

She quickly nods, wiping away the last of her tears. “Okay, Appa. I’ll be strong. I’ll show him.”

“Good,” Ajay says, giving her one last reassuring pat on the back. “Now go to school. You’ve got this.”

Anjali watches him as he drives away, feeling a bit lighter. She takes a deep breath and heads into school, determined to let go and focus on herself.

As Ajay drove back from dropping Anjali off at school, his heart ached seeing his daughter in so much pain. He replayed the moments of their conversation, her teary eyes, and the helplessness she felt over Rohit’s indifference. His own heart was heavy, and he couldn’t help but feel for her. His eyes welled up as flashes of his own love story danced in his mind — the moments of young love, the dreams, and

the heartbreaks. It was a difficult thing to relive, but as a father, he knew he had to be strong for his daughter.

He shook off the thoughts and focused on work, but his mind kept drifting back to Anjali. The clock ticked by slowly, and by 4 PM, he could no longer concentrate. He made the decision to leave early and pick her up. He knew she needed him, and he wanted to be there for her, even if it was just for a little while.

As he drove to school, his heart lightened with the thought of seeing Anjali again. He couldn't bear the idea of her feeling alone or unheard. He pulled into the school parking lot, and there she was, walking out with her friends, a smile already forming on her face. Anjali was surprised to see him.

"Appa! I thought I would come back by bus today," she said, a little confused but happy to see him.

Ajay smiled softly, trying to hide the worry still lingering in his heart. "I just wanted to spend some time with my daughter," he said, his voice warm and reassuring.

As Anjali climbed into the car, he noticed something he hadn't seen in days — her smile. She seemed lighter, more like the bubbly girl he knew. Her eyes weren't clouded with sadness anymore.

Ajay glanced at her with a raised eyebrow. "What's going on, Anju? You look different today. What's the matter?"

Anjali grinned, excitement evident in her voice. "Rohit apologized," she said, her eyes sparkling. "He said he was just going through a rough time with his family, and that's why he acted the way he did. I think... I think we can still be friends."

Ajay's heart shifted — a mixture of concern and disappointment surged within him. He was glad to see Anjali happier, but he also felt that something wasn't quite

right. He didn't show it, though. She was still young, and he understood the emotional rollercoaster that came with teenage relationships.

Anjali, noticing the silence in the car, turned to her father with a worried look. "Appa, why are you so quiet? Are you not happy for me?" she asked, her voice laced with concern.

Ajay forced a smile, his voice soft but filled with reassurance. "I am happy as long as you're happy, Anju. That's all that matters."

He reached over and patted her hand, and Anjali smiled at his comforting words. Ajay then steered the car towards her favorite ice cream shop — a place they often visited when they both needed to unwind.

As they reached the shop, Anjali picked out her favorite flavors, but she didn't forget about the rest of the family. She got an extra scoop for Kayal and another one for Oreo, who had been her loyal companion during the hard times.

On the way home, Anjali chatted away happily, the earlier tension gone. Ajay was content to see her like this. As they pulled into the driveway, he couldn't help but feel a little guilty for the disappointment he'd harbored inside. But for now, he would focus on the present — seeing his daughter happy, and keeping his own feelings at bay.

Kayal was in the kitchen when they returned home, and her eyes brightened when she saw Anjali, back to her old self. "Anju! Look at you, all cheerful again!" Kayal exclaimed, her voice filled with joy.

Anjali grinned, feeling lighter than she had in days. "Yes, Amma. I'm feeling much better now!"

Kayal smiled at her daughter, and then glanced at Ajay, who was unusually quiet as he took off his shoes. She noticed his

silence and gave him a questioning look. “Ajay, why are you so quiet today? You don’t look like yourself.”

Ajay gave a small shrug, attempting to mask his emotions. “I’m just tired, Kayal. That’s all.”

Kayal, sensing there was more to it, gave him a reassuring pat on the back and then returned to her work, knowing that sometimes, men like Ajay preferred to keep things to themselves. But she also knew her husband well enough to understand when he was carrying something heavy.

Ajay stood there for a moment, taking in the peaceful atmosphere of home — his daughter happy again, and his wife content. But inside, his heart was still heavy with unspoken thoughts. Tonight, he would share his story with Anjali, but for now, he just wanted to enjoy the calm, hoping that it would be enough to carry them through the days ahead.

He watched Kayal as she worked, and in that moment, his love for her, though quiet and unspoken, felt like it was enough.

Anjali was unusually cheerful that evening. Her laughter echoed through the house, filling every corner with a warmth that had been missing for weeks. It was a stark contrast to the past few days, when she had been quiet and withdrawn, her face clouded with worry. Now, she moved around with a spring in her step, humming a tune as she helped Kayal in the kitchen.

Ajay noticed the change immediately. Sitting on the living room sofa, he observed her, his mind a mix of relief and unease. He wanted to believe that things were finally getting better, that Anjali had turned a corner. But deep down, he knew why she was happy again. Rohit had started talking to her. That boy, her ex-boyfriend, seemed to hold a power over Anjali's emotions that made Ajay deeply uncomfortable.

He sighed heavily and got up, retreating to the quiet of his room. As he sat on the edge of the bed, his thoughts swirled in his mind, each one louder than the last.

"Am I not a good parent? Is Anjali feeling lonely? Why does her happiness depend so much on someone else?"

Ajay rubbed his temples, his frustration and sadness blending into one. He had always tried to be the best father he could be, giving Anjali the freedom to make her own decisions while being a steady presence in her life. But now he wondered if he had been too lenient, if his gentle parenting style had left her vulnerable.

The door creaked open, and Kayal stepped into the room. She had noticed Ajay's silence at dinner and the distant look

in his eyes. She sat beside him, her hand gently resting on his shoulder.

“What’s wrong, Ajay?” she asked softly, her voice filled with concern. “Is it about Anjali? She seems fine now, doesn’t she?”

Ajay looked at her, his face heavy with worry. “She’s happy because she got back with Rohit,” he said, his voice low. “That’s why she’s cheerful again.”

Kayal’s eyes widened in surprise, and then her expression hardened. She stood up abruptly, anger flaring in her chest. “What? She’s back with him? After everything? I’m going to talk to her right now, Ajay. She needs to understand that she can’t keep doing this to herself.”

Ajay reached out and caught her wrist before she could leave. “Kayal, wait. Please,” he said, his voice firm but tired. “Sit down.”

Reluctantly, Kayal sat back down beside him, her arms crossed and her face still tense with frustration. Ajay didn’t speak for a long moment, his eyes fixed on the floor. Then, slowly, he pulled her into a tight hug.

Kayal’s anger softened as she felt his embrace. She could sense the turmoil in him, the weight of his worries. “Ajay,” she said gently, her voice calmer now, “I understand your gentle parenting, but sometimes she needs to be told things directly. You can’t keep stopping me when I want to be strict with her.”

Ajay sighed, leaning back slightly to look at her. “I know, Kayal. I know. But if we go hard on her now, she might start hiding things from us. She might pull away completely. I don’t want that to happen. I keep wondering—what’s wrong? Is she feeling inferior about something? Is there a

personal issue she's not telling us about? Right now, I just... I just need your comfort, Kayal."

Kayal tightened her embrace, her heart aching for him. She had always admired Ajay's patience and thoughtfulness as a father. He had a way of handling things with care, never letting his emotions dictate his actions. But she could see that this situation was taking a toll on him.

"Ajay," she said softly, pulling back to look into his eyes. "You haven't made any mistake as a dad. You're the best father Anjali could ever ask for. It's just her age. Teenage years are complicated. Don't worry. She's our daughter, and she'll figure things out eventually."

Ajay nodded slowly, her words bringing him a small measure of comfort. But the worry in his eyes didn't completely fade. He knew Kayal was right—it was a phase, a part of growing up. Yet, the thought of Anjali depending so much on someone else for her happiness filled him with dread. He wanted her to be strong, independent, and self-assured.

Kayal got up, brushing her saree. "Let me go make dinner," she said, her tone lighter now.

As she turned to leave, Ajay playfully grabbed the edge of her saree. She spun around, startled. "Ajay!" she exclaimed, swatting his hand away with a laugh.

"I'm not done with you yet," Ajay said with a sly grin, his eyes twinkling mischievously.

"I have to cook dinner!" Kayal scolded lightly, trying to keep a straight face.

Ajay leaned back, a smirk playing on his lips. "My dinner is already here," he said, his voice dripping with playful flirtation.

Kayal blushed, her cheeks turning a soft shade of pink. She leaned in, kissed him quickly on the cheek, and ran out of the room, laughing as Ajay watched her go with a grin on his face.

For a moment, the weight on Ajay's shoulders lifted, replaced by the warmth of Kayal's love. Though his worries about Anjali lingered, he knew he wasn't alone in this. Together, he and Kayal would figure out how to guide their daughter through this challenging phase of her life.

Later that night, Ajay lay awake, staring at the ceiling. His mind wandered back to Anjali's childhood. He thought about the times she would run to him with her tiny problems, how he would lift her up and tell her that everything would be okay. Those moments felt so far away now.

He knew Anjali was growing up, and that meant letting her navigate her own struggles. But the father in him couldn't help wanting to protect her from every hurt, every disappointment. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"Let's see how this goes," he thought to himself. "One day, I'll talk to her—clear and direct. But for now, I need to give her space."

In the kitchen, Kayal was preparing dinner, her mind replaying the conversation she had just had with Ajay. She understood his perspective, but a part of her still wanted to step in and set things straight with Anjali. She knew it wasn't easy for Ajay to hold back his worries, to trust that time would heal things.

As she stirred the curry, she made a silent promise to herself: to be the balance that their family needed. Ajay's patience and her firmness would together guide Anjali through this phase.

That night, as the family sat down for dinner, Anjali's laughter once again filled the room. Ajay watched her carefully, his heart a mix of hope and concern. Kayal, noticing the look in his eyes, reached out and gave his hand a reassuring squeeze.

It was a small gesture, but it spoke volumes. They were in this together.

Dinner had ended with laughter and warm conversation, but by 10 p.m., the mood of the house shifted dramatically. Kayal's phone buzzed, cutting through the stillness. She answered it with a calm "Hello," but within seconds, her expression hardened. Her usually steady voice trembled as she asked, "What happened? Are you okay?"

Ajay immediately knew something was wrong. "What is it?" he mouthed.

Kayal placed her hand over the phone and whispered, "It's Stella. Her dad passed away. She's at the hospital alone."

Ajay leaned forward, his voice low. "Do you want me to come with you?"

Kayal shook her head. "Her husband and mom are on their way from Pondicherry, but until they get there, she's alone. I need to go."

Ajay nodded, understanding the urgency. "I'll stay here with Anjali. Don't worry about anything."

Anjali, overhearing the conversation, chimed in softly, "Amma, can I come too? Stella aunty always takes care of me when we visit. I want to be there for her."

Kayal offered a small, sad smile. "That's sweet of you, ma, but this isn't the right place for you. It's going to be a long, emotional night. Stay home, rest, and take care of Oreo. Appa will be here, okay?"

Anjali nodded reluctantly, the disappointment evident on her face. Before leaving, Kayal gave instructions to both of them. "Ajay, take Oreo for his walk before bed. And Anjali," she said, her voice taking on a firmer tone, "don't stay up texting on your phone. Sleep early, okay?"

With a quick kiss on Anjali's forehead and a squeeze of Ajay's hand, Kayal hurried out the door, leaving a heavy silence in her wake.

The house felt emptier without Kayal's presence. Ajay sat on the couch, scrolling through his phone absently, while Oreo lay by his feet. Time passed quietly until Ajay decided it was time for Oreo's walk.

"Come on, Oreo," he called, grabbing the leash.

As he passed by Anjali's room, he noticed the soft glow of her phone screen spilling through the slightly ajar door. Curious, he peeked inside and found her sitting cross-legged on the bed, her phone pressed to her ear. She was speaking in a hushed tone, her voice filled with excitement.

Ajay didn't need to guess. It had to be Rohit.

"Anjali," he called from the doorway, trying to keep his tone neutral.

Anjali glanced up, startled. "Yes, Appa?"

"Come for a walk with Oreo and me," he suggested.

"I'm on a call," she replied, her voice casual. "Maybe later?"

Ajay's eyebrows furrowed. "You've been on that phone all evening. Come now, it'll be good for you."

She hesitated, then shook her head. "I'll come next time, Appa. I promise."

Ajay sighed, irritation creeping into his voice. "Anjali, I'm asking you to come. It's just a walk."

But her focus was back on her phone. “Appa, please. I’ll join you tomorrow.”

His patience wore thin, but he didn’t push further. Clipping Oreo’s leash, he walked out into the cool night, frustration simmering beneath the surface.

As Ajay strolled through the quiet streets with Oreo, his thoughts churned.

This isn’t right. Giving her space isn’t helping—it’s only making her more attached to him. The more she leans on him, the less she thinks about herself, her goals, her priorities. She’s losing herself, and I can’t just sit by and watch.

The thought weighed heavily on him as he made his way back home. By the time he returned, he was still unsure whether to confront her or let it go for now.

The sound of his footsteps must have alerted Anjali, because when he stepped inside, he heard the faint click of her call ending. She emerged from her room, looking sheepish.

Appa,” she began hesitantly, “are you upset with me?”

Ajay glanced at her, his face calm but unreadable. “Why would you think that?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted, fidgeting with her hands. “It just feels like... you’re mad.”

Ajay didn’t respond immediately. Instead, he moved to sit on the couch, scrolling through his phone absently. Anjali stood nearby, unsure of what to say or do.

Finally, she mustered the courage to ask, “Appa, can we go for a dessert date? Just me, you, and Oreo?”

Ajay looked up, his expression softening for a moment before he shook his head. “It’s too late, Anjali.”

She frowned, disappointed. But then her eyes lit up with a sudden thought. "Appa, you still haven't told me the story you promised. Remember? About you and Amma?"

Ajay let out a dry chuckle. "Oh, so now you remember? After spending all evening glued to your phone?"

"Appa, come on," Anjali said, her tone pleading. "Why are you so mad?"

Ajay stood abruptly, the weariness in his eyes evident. "Goodnight, Anjali." With that, he walked toward his room.

But Anjali wasn't ready to give up. She followed him, her voice soft and apologetic. "I'm sorry, Appa. Really. Please don't be upset. Let's go to the terrace. We can talk there. Please?"

Ajay paused, his hand on the doorknob. He turned to look at her, and after a moment of hesitation, he sighed. "Fine. Let's go to the terrace."

The terrace was cool and quiet, the city lights twinkling in the distance. Oreo trotted alongside them, his tail wagging as he sniffed the air.

Anjali settled onto one of the chairs, her curiosity and anxiety battling for dominance. Ajay stood for a moment, looking out over the city, before finally sitting down beside her.

Ajay sat down, resting his hands on his knees as he let out a deep, heavy sigh. His eyes avoided Anjali's, instead focusing on the floor as though he were searching for the right words among the tiles.

"Anjali," he began, his voice calm but carrying a weight she hadn't heard before, "before I say anything, I want you to promise me something."

Anjali tilted her head, curious but slightly wary. "What?"

“You will not interrupt me,” Ajay said firmly, finally meeting her gaze. “No questions, no comments, no reactions—not now, not later. If you do, I’ll stop, and I won’t say another word about this. Do you understand?”

Anjali frowned but nodded, curiosity sparking brighter. “Okay, done! I won’t say a word. Pinky promise!” she said, holding out her little finger, hoping to lighten the tension.

Ajay gave a small, fleeting smile but didn’t take her hand. Instead, he leaned back and closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them, his expression was distant, as if he were looking through her, into a memory long buried.

That was the day I first saw her,” he began. “Usually, people meet their love in a café or in college. But mine was different... very different. We met in a hospital waiting room.”

Anjali’s brow furrowed in confusion, but she stayed quiet, waiting for him to continue.

“We were both there for our medical results,” he said, his voice lowering slightly, as if the weight of the memory still lingered. “The results... were for cancer.”

Anjali’s eyes widened in shock. “Wait, what? You and Mom had cancer? Dad, what are you saying?” she blurted out, unable to stop herself.

Ajay’s sharp gaze snapped to her. “Anjali, I said no interruptions,” he said firmly. “If you interrupt again, I’ll stop.”

Anjali quickly nodded, pressing her lips together. “Okay,” she murmured, leaning back but unable to hide her curiosity.

Ajay’s voice softened again as he continued. “It was just us, sitting in that hall. The waiting room was almost empty, quiet except for the occasional sound of someone walking by. And there she was, sitting across from me. She looked... nervous. Of course, anyone would be in a place like that. But she was young. I couldn’t help but wonder why—how—this girl had ended up there.”

Anjali closed her eyes for a moment, letting her father’s words paint the picture in her mind. She imagined her parents, young and anxious, sitting across from each other

in a sterile hospital corridor. Her mother's hands fidgeted with her dupatta, her face pale and tense, but there was a quiet strength in her eyes.

Ajay's voice broke through her thoughts. "She looked... devotional. Innocent, too. Like she'd never even broken a rule in her life. And yet, there she was, sitting in that waiting room, facing something no one her age should have to face."

Anjali opened her eyes and looked at her father, her curiosity growing stronger. "Did she notice you, too?"

Ajay nodded faintly. "Yes, she glanced at me. A few times, actually. But I wasn't sure what she thought when she saw me. I pulled out my phone and looked at my reflection." He paused for a moment, a faint, bitter smile flickering on his lips. "I looked... shabby. Unshaven, tired, dark circles under my eyes. My hair was a mess. I looked exactly like someone who had smoked their way into that situation. Maybe that's what she thought when she saw me—'No wonder this guy ended up here.'"

"Appa, you smoke?!" Anjali exclaimed, her voice rising slightly.

Ajay turned to her, his expression unreadable but stern. "Anjaliiii," he warned.

"Okay, okay, zip!" she said quickly, miming zipping her lips and locking them shut.

Ajay took a deep breath as he continued, his voice laced with nostalgia.

"Then the time finally came."

He looked at Anjali, who sat across from him, her eyes wide, hanging on to every word.

"The nurse called us in and handed over our reports. I was anxious as hell, but she—she was in front of me, way more

anxious. Her hands were clenched together, silently praying for the results. like it would change fate itself. And then...

Ajay paused, his fingers tracing the rim of his coffee mug. "She got hers first and walked away. Then I got mine."

He leaned back, exhaling sharply. "I stepped out of the room and opened my report, my heart pounding. And then I saw it—"

His voice dropped a notch. "The name on the report wasn't mine. It said... Geetha."

Anjali gasped, sitting up straight. "Geetha?! Wait... oh my god. So this is your love story before Mom? Appa—what?!"

Ajay smirked at her reaction but quickly shook his head. "Do you want me to continue, or shall I let you piece it together?"

Anjali, still in shock, gestured for him to go on.

"So, our reports got exchanged," Ajay continued. "And the worst part? Hers was positive."

Anjali's lips parted, ready to interrupt again, but something stopped her. She pressed them shut, choosing silence.

"I didn't know what to do," Ajay admitted. "I stood there frozen, staring at the report. A hundred thoughts ran through my mind. But before I could react, my phone rang. I checked the screen—it was an unknown number. And then, I picked up."

He smiled faintly, remembering the exact moment.

"Hello?" she said. Her voice was soft but urgent. "I think I have your report, and you have mine. I'm waiting in the canteen. Can you come?"

Ajay let out a small chuckle. "Even in that moment of panic, I felt... happy. Typical boy mindset, I guess. Getting a call

from her felt like a win, even though the situation was anything but.”

He continued, eyes distant as if he could see it all happening again.

“I rushed to the canteen, but my mind wasn’t on my results anymore. I was thinking about hers. How would she react? How would she feel, seeing those words written so clearly on the paper? It felt heavier than anything I had ever held in my life.”

His voice softened.

“She was already there when I arrived, sitting in the corner, anxiously pressing her green shawl between her fingers. She was wearing a white chudi, her hair loosely tied back, but some strands had fallen over her face. She looked up and saw me, and for a second, her face lit up. She waved. I waved back.”

Ajay smiled at the memory, then shook his head. “She tried to act normal. ‘I went back to the waiting area to find you,’ she said, ‘but you had already left. The lady at the counter even tried calling your phone, but I guess it didn’t reach you, so I had to get your number.’”

Anjali tilted her head. “So that’s how you got the call”

Ajay chuckled. “Yeh yeh”

Then his expression turned serious again. “I asked her if she saw my report. She shook her head. ‘Nah,’ she said, ‘I didn’t open it. After seeing your name, I figured I shouldn’t.’ And then she asked about hers. ‘What about mine?’”

Ajay’s throat tightened slightly.

“I didn’t know what to say. So, I just handed it over. She took it from my hand, and my expression must’ve given it away, because the moment she saw my face, her own turned pale.”

He exhaled. “She looked at the report, her fingers gripping the edges, and then...”

Ajay swallowed. “She broke down. Completely.”

“She started crying—loudly. Her whole body trembled, her breaths turning into short, panicked gasps. I tried to calm her, but people around us were already staring. In a hospital, you’d think people would be used to bad news, but no... they looked at me like I was the villain. Like I had done something horrible to her. Like I had broken her heart right there.”

Ajay shook his head, running a hand through his hair. “I didn’t know what to do. I felt so helpless. So, I did the only thing I could—I gently grabbed her hand and led her outside, away from the stares, away from the whispers. We walked to the lawn in front of the hospital. She was still sobbing, and I didn’t know how to stop it.”

He looked at Anjali, his voice softer now. “That was the first time I had ever seen someone break in front of me. And I had no idea how to react

Ajay leaned back in his chair, exhaling slowly. His voice carried the weight of memory, pulling Anjali into a past she had never known.

“As I took her outside the canteen, Anjali,” he began, his tone distant, as if he was still standing there, still feeling that moment in his bones. “She was breaking down in front of everyone, and I—I don’t know why, but I couldn’t just walk away.”

The hospital lawn stretched before them, silent and detached from the suffocating air inside. The evening breeze brushed against them, but it did nothing to calm the storm raging inside Geetha.

“She didn’t stop crying,” he continued, his gaze fixed somewhere far beyond the present. “Her sobs weren’t just tears, Anjali. They were... something deeper. Something that had been trapped inside her for too long, finally forcing its way out.”

Geetha stood there, hugging herself as if holding her own body together, her shoulders shaking violently.

“Why me?” she had whimpered. Her voice was so small, yet it carried so much pain. “What wrong have I done? Why does God always punish me? Why do I deserve this cruel death?”

Ajay paused, his fingers tightening slightly as he spoke.

“I had no answers for her. Because back then, I had asked myself those same questions.”

He remembered the way Geetha had looked—completely shattered, as if she had no fight left in her. Ajay had seen grief before, had felt it in ways he never spoke about, but this was different.

“It wasn’t just sadness. It was despair—the kind that drowns you, that makes you feel like there’s no way out. And I could see it, Anjali. I could feel it. She wasn’t just crying. She was unraveling.”

Geetha had let out a strangled, bitter laugh through her sobs. “It never stops,” she had choked out. “No matter how much I try, life takes everything from me. Again and again.”

Ajay exhaled slowly.

“And I knew that feeling, too.”

He had watched life take and take, leaving behind only scars and unanswered questions. And as he looked at Geetha, gripping her own arms as though she might fall apart if she

let go, he realized—he wasn't just seeing her pain. He was remembering his own.

His eyes drifted to her hands, where she clutched a crumpled file. His medical results.

"I had forgotten about them, Anjali. Imagine that. The thing that should have mattered to me most at that moment... and yet, it didn't. Not compared to this girl standing in front of me, breaking apart with no one to hold her together."

He had taken a slow breath then. "I don't know why life does that," he had finally told her. "I don't know why it chooses some people to suffer more than others."

There had been a hesitation in his voice, something uncertain, something heavy.

"But I know that pain like this... it needs someone to witness it."

Anjali sat still, listening. Her father's voice had changed. There was something in it—something deeper than just a story.

"She looked up at me then, Anju," Ajay murmured. "And she asked me... 'And what if no one does?'"

His voice wavered slightly.

"And in that moment, I knew—I couldn't be just another person who walked away."

Geetha had looked at him with hollow eyes, filled with something beyond sadness. And Ajay had held her gaze, not breaking away.

"We were strangers," he admitted. "But at that moment, we weren't."

Silence settled between him and Anjali.

“For the first time in a long time, Geetha wasn’t breaking alone. And for the first time in a long time, I wasn’t just a bystander to pain—I was standing in it, with her.”

Anjali swallowed, her father’s words lingering in the air.

She had never heard him speak like this before.

Ajay exhaled, his voice growing softer as he continued narrating to Anjali.

“After everything, she finally stopped crying... just a little,” he said, his mind drifting back to that evening. “We just stood there, looking at each other. And in that moment, there was nothing but silence between us—yet somehow, it felt like the most honest conversation we had.”

Their eyes met—his, still processing the weight of her pain, and hers, searching for something she had long given up on: comfort.

Then, suddenly, Geetha blinked as if realizing something, and she gasped.

“I—I’m so sorry,” she stammered, looking down at her hands. In her trembling grip was a crumpled file. Ajay’s results.

“I totally forgot about your results, and I—I think I crushed it a little... I’m really sorry,” she said, guilt flickering across her face.

Ajay glanced at the slightly wrinkled file and let out a small chuckle, shaking his head.

“Chill... it’s fine,” he said casually, though something about her concern for such a small thing felt strangely nice.

Geetha hesitated before handing it over, and Ajay thought that would be it—that she would just give him the results and walk away.

But she didn't.

She stayed.

She waited.

Even though it was something so small, something so simple, it mattered. In a world where most people left, she chose to stay. And somehow, that made Ajay feel... lighter.

Slowly, he unfolded the envelope, his fingers moving carefully, as if opening it would change something. As if delaying it might alter the truth inside.

Geetha, standing beside him, clutched the fabric of her shawl tightly, her knuckles turning white. She wasn't just watching—she was feeling it with him. As though the results were hers too.

In the midst of his own nervousness, Ajay noticed this. And despite everything—despite the fear pressing against his ribs—he felt an odd sense of warmth.

Then, he saw it.

And his face said it all.

His mind blurred, his body froze. The words on the page burned into his vision, yet it felt like he wasn't even reading them anymore.

Positive.

For a moment, the world around him faded. The sounds of the hospital, the rustling of the trees, the coolness of the evening air—everything felt distant, muted.

He didn't react. He couldn't.

Anjali, who had been listening quietly until now, suddenly sat up straighter.

"Appa..." she interrupted, her voice laced with fear. "You had cancer?"

Ajay's jaw clenched. He turned to his daughter with a sharp gaze.

"Anju," he said in a warning tone. "I told you—no interruptions."

"But, Appa—"

"Shh."

Something in his voice made Anjali go silent. Her heart pounded, but she said nothing.

Geetha, meanwhile, was staring at him. She hadn't seen the results, but his face alone told her everything.

Something wasn't right.

"Ajay...?" she asked hesitantly. "Is... is everything okay?"

Ajay swallowed hard, forcing himself to answer.

"Hm," he muttered, his voice almost robotic. "It's positive for me as well."

A heavy silence settled between them.

Geetha's lips parted slightly, but she didn't know what to say. There were no words that could fix this.

"I... I'm so sorry," she whispered.

Ajay still didn't react. His thoughts had already drifted elsewhere. His parents. Their faces. Their dreams for him. The life they thought he would have.

Geetha, sensing his detachment, hesitated before speaking again.

"Do you... want to talk?" she asked gently. "Or rant? Anything?"

Ajay remained still.

Geetha bit her lip. "Do you want to be alone? I can leave if you—"

Ajay was lost in his thoughts, barely even processing her words.

Geetha sighed softly, taking his silence as an answer. Maybe he needed space. Maybe this wasn't something she should intrude on.

She took a step back.

Then another.

But just as she was about to turn and leave, she felt a hand wrap around her wrist.

"Geetha, don't go."

His voice was quiet, yet there was something heavy in those words—something unspoken, something raw.

Geetha stopped. Slowly, she turned back to him.

Ajay looked up at her, his expression unreadable. And then, without another word, they both sat down on the grass.

They didn't speak. They didn't need to.

She didn't pull her hand away, and he didn't let go.

The silence wasn't empty. It wasn't awkward. It was something else—something deeper.

Ajay exhaled, his grip tightening slightly around her fingers.

"I know we just met a few hours ago," he murmured, his voice almost lost in the night air. "But... I don't know. Sitting there, holding hands with her in silence... it didn't feel like she was a stranger."

As I looked down at our intertwined hands.

"It felt like we had known each other forever."

Anjali let out a soft gasp, her wide eyes fixated on her father.

Ajay chuckled at her reaction but continued, his voice laced with nostalgia.

"We sat there, holding hands in silence. Neither of us spoke. And yet, it felt like we were having the most profound conversation of our lives."

The hospital lawn, once an eerie place filled with whispers of suffering, felt oddly peaceful. The grass beneath them was cool, the air carrying a quiet stillness that settled their hearts, even if just for a moment.

Then suddenly—RING, RING.

Their silence was broken by the shrill vibration of Ajay's phone.

He sighed. Obviously, it was Kishan.

"I swear, I don't know how these friends of ours have this sixth sense," Ajay muttered, shaking his head. "They'll never call you when you're alone, but the moment you're with a girl—bam! Phone call."

Geetha, who had just wiped away the last of her tears, let out a small chuckle at his frustration.

Ajay glanced at her, his lips twitching into a smile. He hadn't expected her to laugh—not so soon, not after everything. But there it was. And it made something inside him feel lighter.

He let go of her hand and picked up the call.

“Machan, where are you?” Kishan's voice boomed through the speaker. “Did you get your results?”

Ajay ran a hand through his hair, exhaling. “Yeah, da.”

But before he could say anything else, Kishan continued, “For the number of cigarettes you've smoked, I already know your fate. You'll be the next Mukesh, man.”

Geetha, who had been listening in silence, suddenly let out another small chuckle. This time, Ajay turned to her fully, watching the way a tiny smirk tugged at her lips.

Anjali, confused, furrowed her brows. “Mukesh?”

Ajay broke into laughter. “The guy from the cigarette awareness ad, Anju.”

Anjali's face contorted in a mix of realization and concern. “Ohh...” she said, blinking. “That's... kinda bad, Appa.”

“Tell me about it,” Ajay sighed before turning back to the call.

“Kishan,” he said, his tone shifting, “it's positive.”

Silence.

“Don't joke, da.” Kishan's voice had lost its teasing edge.

“I'm not joking. It's true. It's positive.”

Another beat of silence. The usual liveliness in Kishan's voice was gone.

"I'll come to the hospital immediately," Kishan said, urgency creeping into his tone.

But Ajay shook his head. "No, it's fine. I'll come to the room right away."

Before Kishan could protest, Ajay hung up.

He looked at Geetha, and she looked back at him.

But this time, there was no sadness.

Not exactly happiness either.

It was bittersweet. A feeling that didn't belong in any one box. A strange blend of tragedy and joy, of uncertainty and warmth.

Ajay rubbed the back of his neck. "Uhh... I guess we should leave."

Geetha nodded. "Yeah... it's already late."

Ajay hesitated for a second before asking, "Where's your home? I'll drop you."

Geetha shook her head. "It's fine, I'll take an auto."

Ajay raised an eyebrow. "You sure?"

She nodded. "Yep."

As they walked together out of the hospital, the cool night breeze hit them. The hospital doors, which had once felt like a gateway to despair, now felt like an exit to something lighter.

They reached the auto stand, and Geetha spotted an empty one.

Ajay stepped forward, speaking to the auto driver. "Brother, drop her safely, okay?" His voice was firm, protective.

Geetha glanced at him, her fingers tightening slightly around the edges of her shawl. A soft flutter stirred in her chest.

It wasn't love. It wasn't attraction. It was something else—something deeper.

A feeling of being cared for.

Of not being alone.

She got into the auto, and before it took off, she gave Ajay a small nod.

He nodded back.

Then, with a deep breath, he walked over to his bike, got on, and revved the engine.

And for some reason—despite everything that had happened—he felt happy.

No, more than happy.

“Actually,” Ajay said, turning to Anjali with a small grin, “we both should’ve been devastated, right? Getting results like that in such a tragic way.”

Anjali nodded, still staring at him, trying to make sense of how he could say all of this so casually.

Ajay laughed, shaking his head.

“But we left the hospital happy. Especially me. I was riding my bike like I had achieved something great. Like I had won something.”

His voice softened, his mind floating back to that night.

“That day should have been the most tragic day of my life, but somehow... somehow, it was one of the happiest.”

He let out a small chuckle, his eyes gleaming with the memory.

Ajay pushed open the door to his shared apartment near the university, his face lit up with an unusual brightness. The room, however, was anything but lively. His three roommates—Kishan, Aravind, and Surya—sat in a state of devastation, their expressions heavy with concern. Crumpled medical reports and empty coffee cups lay scattered across the table, the air thick with tension.

Kishan looked up first, his brows furrowing as he took in Ajay's unexpected mood. Why is he smiling?

"Machan, show your results," Kishan said, his voice edged with worry. "Can we try another hospital? Maybe a second opinion—"

But Ajay, still grinning, cut him off. "Dei, stop nagging me. Just listen."

Kishan and the others exchanged confused glances. They had spent the whole day dreading Ajay's medical test results, yet here he was, looking like someone who had just won the lottery.

Kishan leaned forward. "Did you meet the doctor?"

Ajay shook his head with a smirk. "No, da. I met Geetha."

Silence. The name hung in the air for a moment. Kishan's confusion deepened. "Geetha? Who's that?"

Ajay exhaled, still smiling to himself as if replaying a moment in his mind. "A girl, da. And not just any girl."

His friends stared at him, waiting for an explanation. The room that had been filled with anxiety moments ago was now charged with curiosity.

Ajay leaned back against the couch, stretching his legs onto the coffee table as he let out a contented sigh. His roommates, however, were still staring at him like he had lost his mind.

Kishan, unable to hold back anymore, shot him a sharp look. “Who is Geetha? Doctor-aa?”

Ajay rolled his eyes, exasperated. “Dei, shut up. Always doctor, results, hospital... that’s not important right now.”

Kishan’s jaw clenched, his frustration bubbling over. “Not important? You’ve been running around for test results, and now you’re acting like none of it matters?”

Ajay leaned back against the couch, stretching his legs onto the coffee table as he let out a contented sigh. His roommates, however, were still staring at him like he had lost his mind.

Ajay leaned forward, a small smile playing on his lips as he began to narrate.

“I first saw her in the waiting hall. She was sitting a few seats away, just like me—restless, constantly checking the screen for her turn. That was the first time our paths crossed, both of us waiting for something that could change our lives. And then... the unexpected happened.”

He paused for a moment, his gaze distant as he relived the moment.

“Our results got exchanged by mistake. When we realized it, we started talking... and I don’t know how, but it just felt easy. Natural. After a long time, da, I felt like I had someone.”

Aravind and Surya, the juniors in the group, watched the exchange in fascination. Surya leaned forward, resting his chin on his palm. “Anna, it’s like watching a movie.”

Kishan muttered, “Yeah, but the kind that breaks your heart.”

Ajay smirked. “And I’m the hero, da.”

Kishan scoffed, snatching the cigarette from Ajay's fingers before he could take another drag. "Yeah, hero... but if this continues, hero will die before the interval."

Everyone let out a dry chuckle, but Kishan wasn't done yet. He crossed his arms, his eyes narrowing. "Fine. Tell us. What about Geetha's results?"

Ajay giggled, flicking the ashes off his jeans. "For the heroine also... cancer, machan."

A heavy silence fell over the room. Kishan's expression darkened instantly. He shot up from his seat, running a frustrated hand through his hair. "Yebba! Ponga Da!"

Before anyone could respond, Ajay's phone buzzed on the table. The notification lit up the screen.

Hey, this is Geetha. Hope you reached safely.

Ajay's fingers froze just above the screen. His smirk softened into something more genuine, a quiet joy filling his face.

Surya, peeking over his shoulder, let out a dramatic gasp. "Ooooh! Annaaa, heroine entry!"

Ajay ignored him, quickly unlocking his phone, rereading the message as if to confirm it was real. His lips curled into a grin, his mind replaying every second of his meeting with her.

Kishan sighed, watching him. "That's it. He's gone. Completely lost."

Aravind chuckled. "No point talking to him now, machan. He's officially in love zone."

Ajay couldn't contain his excitement. With a cigarette in hand, he walked out to the balcony, the cool night air brushing against his face. His heart was still racing—not from fear or anxiety this time, but from something lighter, something new.

Leaning against the railing, he took a slow drag before pulling out his phone. His fingers hovered over the keyboard for a second before he finally typed:

"Yes, I reached. What about you?"

He hit send, exhaling a cloud of smoke, his eyes fixed on the screen, waiting.

That night dragged on, heavy with anticipation. Ajay kept glancing at his phone, hoping for a response, but the screen remained dark. With a sigh, he tossed it aside and lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling. Why hasn't she replied yet? The thought lingered until sleep finally took over.

The next morning, in the middle of a monotonous lecture, his phone vibrated in his pocket. A faint buzz—barely noticeable to anyone else—sent a rush of excitement through him. He pulled it out discreetly and glanced at the screen.

“Yes! I reached. Sorry, I slept early, so I couldn't reply.”

A wide grin spread across Ajay's face, his earlier impatience instantly forgotten. He turned to Kishan, nudging him with his elbow, his eyes gleaming with excitement.

“Look at this,” he whispered, tilting the screen towards his friend.

Kishan barely spared it a glance before rolling his eyes. “She just replied, dude. Nothing to be excited about. Why are you flashing all your teeth like you won a lottery?” he teased, shaking his head.

Ajay shot him a playful glare. “You don't get it, man. This means something.”

Kishan snorted. “Yeah, it means she slept early. That's literally what she said.”

Before Ajay could argue, a sharp voice rang across the classroom.

“You two! Out!”

They froze. The entire class turned to look at them as the teacher glared, arms crossed. Ajay quickly stuffed his phone

into his pocket while Kishan sighed dramatically, muttering, “Great. Now your great love story got us thrown out.”

Suppressing their laughter, they grabbed their bags and walked towards the door, Kishan shaking his head while Ajay still smiled, his mind lost in the single message that had made his morning.

Kishan and Ajay made their way to the canteen, the mid-morning sun casting long shadows across the college courtyard. Kishan was still fuming, his arms crossed tightly over his chest.

“I swear, Ajay, I already have low attendance, and now this! If I get detained, it’ll be because of your stupid love story,” he grumbled.

Ajay, completely unfazed, slung an arm around Kishan’s shoulder and grinned. “Machan, relax! We still have a month left. Attendance will increase, don’t stress. Plus, we’re in our final year—do you really think they’ll detain you now?”

Kishan shot him a skeptical look. “Oh, so now you’re a college rule expert? You—of all people—are giving me attendance advice?”

Ajay held up his hands in surrender, laughing. “Okay, okay, let’s not argue. Let’s go to the food court instead. I’ll get you a nice, hot bread omelette—my treat.”

At the mention of food, Kishan’s irritation melted away. He exhaled dramatically, shaking his head. “Fine. But if I fail because of this, I’m making you pay my exam fees too.”

Ajay chuckled. “Deal!”

As they reached the food counter, Kishan’s expression turned serious. He hesitated for a moment before speaking.

“Machan, at least after this month, let’s start your treatment properly. You’re not taking it seriously. I know college is your core reason for ignoring it, but no more excuses after this. Full treatment, okay?” His voice was firm, yet filled with concern.

Ajay shifted uncomfortably, looking away. “Kishan, it’s not that serious—”

“It is,” Kishan cut him off. “And right now, at least cut down on cigarettes and eat properly. You don’t realize how much you’re messing up your health.”

Ajay sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. “Fine, I’ll try. Happy?”

“Trying is not enough. Do it.”

Ajay smirked. “Bossy much?”

Kishan rolled his eyes. “If being bossy keeps you alive, then yeah.”

Their order arrived, breaking the tension. Ajay quickly pulled out his phone and typed a reply to Geetha:

“It’s fine. I was tired too. I slept as well.”

He hesitated for a second before hitting send, a small smile playing on his lips.

Kishan nudged him. “See? That’s how you should react to a message. Calm, cool, no unnecessary smiling like a rom-com hero.”

Ajay rolled his eyes. “Shut up and eat your bread omelette.”

Kishan grinned, taking a big bite, and the two friends laughed, enjoying the simple moment—despite the unspoken worries lingering between them.

As Ajay and Kishan sat in the canteen, enjoying their bread omelette, Ajay’s phone buzzed again. He almost knocked

over his plate in his rush to check it. His eyes widened as he read the message.

“What are you doing? How is your health?”

Geetha had replied immediately.

For a split second, Ajay just stared at the screen, his heart skipping a beat. Then, unable to contain his excitement, he grabbed Kishan’s arm and shook him.

“Saaaa!” he practically shouted, his voice a little too loud for the canteen. “She’s interested! She likes me, machan!”

Kishan, in the middle of chewing, barely looked up. He swallowed and raised an eyebrow. “All this because she asked how your health is?”

Ajay ignored the sarcasm. “Bro, she replied immediately! And she asked about my health. That means she cares!” His grin stretched from ear to ear.

Kishan sighed, setting his spoon down. “Or... maybe she’s just being polite? You were sick, remember? Normal human beings ask about that kind of stuff.”

Ajay scoffed, shaking his head. “No, no, no. You don’t get it. If she wasn’t interested, she wouldn’t have replied this fast.”

Kishan smirked. “Yeah, because the speed of a reply determines the depth of love.”

Ajay groaned, leaning back in his chair dramatically. “You’ll never understand romance, man.”

Kishan laughed. “And you’ll never understand reality. Now shut up and reply before she thinks you fainted from excitement.”

Ajay grinned and quickly typed back:

“I’m good now! Just a little tired, but nothing serious. What about you?”

He hesitated for a second before hitting send, wondering if he should add something more—maybe a joke, maybe a smiley? But before he could overthink it, Kishan snatched the phone from his hand.

“Machan, if you stare at the screen any longer, she’ll think you’re writing a love letter instead of a simple reply,” Kishan teased.

Ajay rolled his eyes and snatched his phone back. “Let me have my moment, da.”

Kishan smirked. “Sure, sure. Just don’t faint if she replies fast again.”

Ajay shook his head, but he couldn’t hide his excitement. His fingers tapped the table impatiently, waiting for another notification.

Ajay’s phone buzzed again. His heart raced as he read the message.

Geetha: “I’m okay! Are you free? Can we meet?”

For a second, he just stared at the screen, blinking. Then, suddenly, he grabbed Kishan’s arm and shook it wildly.

“Machan! See! She wants to meet me!” Ajay’s voice was so loud that a few students at the next table turned to look.

Kishan smirked. “Okay, okay, relax, dude. She wants to meet you first—that’s a good sign.”

Ajay’s grin widened. “That’s exactly what I said!”

Kishan leaned back, arms crossed. “So... when are you meeting her?”

Ajay immediately stood up. “Uhh... right now. We are going. Come, get up!”

Kishan nearly choked on his juice. “We?! I didn’t sign up for this!”

Ajay ignored him, already typing. "Okay, fine, I'll ask her where to meet."

He quickly sent: "I'm in college right now but free. Where should I come?"

The reply came instantly.

Geetha: "Marina Beach."

Ajay looked up. "She said Marina Beach."

Kishan groaned. "Machan, that's so far. Kattankulathur to Marina? Damn!"

Ajay grinned mischievously. "Yeah, yeah. We're going in 45 minutes. My bike, my rules."

He typed back: "I'm at my college. Will take 40 minutes. See you."

Almost immediately, another message popped up.

Geetha: "Which college?"

Ajay smirked as he replied:

"SRM KTR."

A few moments passed before Geetha texted again.

"That's far, right? It's fine, we can meet later."

Ajay read the message, then shook his head. He wasn't about to let this chance slip away.

"Nahh, no classes. I'm chilling. I'll come."

There was a pause before Geetha replied.

"Okayyy! I'll reach there in 40 minutes. Will call you once I'm there."

Ajay smiled to himself and, without thinking, added a little heart at the end of his reply.

"Okay, see you ❤️"

As soon as he hit send, Kishan leaned over and peeked at the screen. The moment he saw the heart, he burst out laughing. “Broooo, you’re gone.”

Ajay ran a hand through his hair, suddenly feeling self-conscious. “Shut up, man. Let’s just go.”

Kishan grinned. “Yeah, yeah. Just don’t fall off your bike in excitement.”

Ajay laughed, tossing his keys in the air. “Let’s see who reaches first.”

And with that, they rushed out of the canteen, the excitement buzzing between them.

Geetha's phone buzzed as she received Ajay's reply. She stared at the screen, feeling a mix of excitement and nervousness.

Before she could even react, her best friend Akshaya squealed, throwing her arms up.

"Yeeee! Finally, you're gonna meet a guy!"

Geetha shot her a glare. "What are you so excited about?"

Akshaya smirked. "Oh, please. Don't act clueless. I saw you smiling at your phone."

Geetha sighed, running a hand through her hair. "I'm actually nervous. I haven't texted anyone like this before. And technically, you took my phone and did all this!"

Akshaya grinned. "Yeah, but you didn't deny anything either."

Geetha opened her mouth to argue but closed it again. "Okay, fine. But still..."

She hesitated before grabbing Akshaya's hand. "I'm not going alone. You have to come with me."

Akshaya leaned back dramatically. "Nooo way. Third-wheeling? No thanks."

Geetha folded her arms. "Then I'll just tell him my friend texted you and say sorry. Problem solved."

Akshaya groaned. "Ugh, fine! I'll come. But it's gonna be awkward."

Geetha smiled. "He's an extrovert. He'll handle it."

Akshaya nodded. "Yeah, and I bet he'll bring a friend too."

Geetha laughed softly. "That makes two awkward third wheels then."

Akshaya grinned. "Anyway, congrats. I'm totally rooting for you both."

Geetha rolled her eyes. "Shut up! I literally met him yesterday."

Akshaya's expression suddenly changed. "Hmm... yesterday. Don't remind me."

Geetha frowned. "What? Why?"

Akshaya sighed, her voice softer now. "You know why. You're always so stubborn. You don't want to get treated. And that worries me."

Geetha looked down for a moment before giving a small smile. "You just want me to experience certain things in life before I... y'know."

Before she could finish, Akshaya slapped her arm hard.

"STOP. Don't say that!"

Geetha winced, rubbing her arm. "Owww! I'm a patient, don't hit me!"

Akshaya's eyes welled up, and before Geetha could react, she pulled her into a tight hug.

"I believe in God," Akshaya whispered. "I pray every day that everything will be fine. Some miracle will happen."

Geetha let out a soft sigh, resting her chin on Akshaya's shoulder. "I know."

A moment of silence passed before Akshaya sniffled and pulled away.

Then, she suddenly wiped her tears and smirked. "Okay, enough of this emotional drama. You better not cry in front of your boyfriend."

Geetha groaned. "Oh my God, he's not my boyfriend!"

Akshaya wiggled her eyebrows. "Yet."

Geetha shook her head, laughing. "Let's just go before I change my mind."

And with that, they grabbed their bags and headed to Marina Beach.

The city blurred past them as Ajay and Kishan sped through the traffic, weaving between honking autos and slow-moving buses. The wind hit their faces, carrying the faint scent of the sea, signaling that Marina Beach wasn't far.

Kishan, gripping Ajay's shoulder from the backseat, spoke over the roar of the bike. "Machan, I swear she's gonna feel awkward if I'm there. First meetings are already weird, and now she has to deal with me sitting there like a bodyguard?"

Ajay chuckled, eyes on the road. "I'm telling you, she'll bring a friend. And honestly..." he smirked, "I doubt whether this meetup is even her idea. What if her friend set all this up?"

Kishan shook his head. "Dude, you met her just yesterday. You're already overthinking."

Ajay scoffed. "Met her yesterday, but we spent almost the entire day together. I know her, Machan. She's the shy type, she wouldn't play around."

Kishan sighed dramatically. "Ohhh, you know her. Right. My bad, I forgot she's your soulmate now."

Ajay grinned. "Not yet... but might be."

Kishan groaned. "Ayyooo! This is why I say love is a disease, da!"

Ajay laughed, shifting gears as they turned onto the beach road. “Then let me be Chennai’s most infected patient.”

After dodging a few more autos and skipping a red light (“Machan, rules are optional at this point”—Ajay), they finally pulled up near Marina Beach. The golden sand stretched before them, the waves lazily crashing against the shore under the evening light.

Ajay parked his bike and removed his helmet, scanning the area. “Okay, let’s sit here—it’s shady, less crowd. Good spot.”

Kishan stretched his arms. “Okok, anything for Romeo.” Then, with a dramatic sigh, he added, “I just hope your ‘big romantic meetup’ is worth the attendance I sacrificed today.”

Geetha and Akshaya finally arrived at Marina Beach. The sea breeze tousled their hair as they stepped onto the sand, the scent of salt filling the air.

Geetha was visibly nervous. She kept checking herself in her phone’s front camera, adjusting her dupatta, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, and then undoing it again.

Akshaya rolled her eyes. “Dai, relax! You look fine. It’s just Ajay, not an interview.”

Geetha shot her a look. “You literally forced me into this, and now you’re telling me to be calm?”

Akshaya smirked. “You didn’t deny, though.”

Before Geetha could argue, Akshaya dialed Ajay’s number and handed the phone over to her.

Geetha took a deep breath and answered softly, “Hey... we reached. Where are you?”

Ajay’s voice came through, casual as ever. “I’m opposite the Vivekananda Cultural Centre.”

Geetha turned to look around. "Oh, you're that side? Wait, we'll come."

Ajay put his phone on mute and elbowed Kishan. "See? Told you, she's with a friend."

Kishan rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah, love detective. Now, unmute and guide them before we sit here like statues."

Ajay unmuted and spoke, "Geetha, stay on the line till we spot you."

After a few moments, they finally saw each other.

Ajay stood up and waved. His heart was beating a little faster than usual, but he kept his cool.

Geetha was wearing a simple blue salwar with silver jhumkas that swayed as she walked. She looked soft, elegant, and a little nervous. Ajay, in his white shirt and jeans, suddenly felt like he had dressed too casually.

As they came closer, the air felt heavier. A mix of nerves, excitement, and anticipation filled the space between them.

They finally stood face to face.

Ajay smiled. "Hi."

Geetha, slightly fidgeting, gave a small smile back. "Hi."

Ajay gestured toward Kishan. "This is Kishan, my best friend."

Geetha nodded and turned to Akshaya. "And this is Akshaya, my friend."

The four of them exchanged nods and smiles before settling down on the sand. The waves rolled in the background, and for a moment, there was silence.

The four of them sat down on the warm sand, the distant sound of waves crashing against the shore filling the silence.

between them. The ocean breeze was cool, but the atmosphere between them was oddly stiff.

Neither Geetha nor Ajay spoke. But their eyes met—again.

For a moment, it was as if they were having a silent conversation. Curiosity, hesitation, and something unspoken lingered in their gaze. Geetha's fingers played with the edge of her dupatta, while Ajay rested his arm on his knee, his body slightly leaning toward her. It wasn't dramatic, but it was intense in its own way.

The silence stretched a little too long.

And then, Kishan cleared his throat loudly.

"Umm... so, Geetha, what do you do?" he asked, breaking the trance between Ajay and Geetha.

Geetha, caught off guard, blinked rapidly and stammered, "I..."

Before she could form a full sentence, Akshaya, ever the extrovert, jumped in.

"We completed college a month ago. Journalism graduates." She gave a casual smile, making it seem like this conversation wasn't awkward at all.

Ajay, nodding, replied, "That's nice. We're engineering students."

Akshaya tilted her head slightly. "Oh, engineering? That's great."

Geetha, finally regaining her composure, tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear and looked at Ajay. Her voice was softer this time, but her interest was genuine.

"Which branch?" she asked.

Kishan, stretching his legs out in the sand, casually responded, "Computer Science."

“That’s niceee,” Geetha said with a small nod, her tone carrying a bit of admiration.

Akshaya, still leading the conversation, asked, “Which year?”

“Final year,” Kishan answered with a slight sigh, as if already exhausted by the thought of completing it.

There was another brief pause, but this time, it wasn’t as awkward.

Ajay, sensing the moment, leaned slightly toward Geetha and asked, “So... journalism? That’s interesting. Why journalism?”

Geetha looked at him, a little surprised by the direct question. She hesitated for a second, then said, “I’ve always loved writing and storytelling. I wanted to do something where I could express real stories, real emotions, and maybe make a difference.”

Ajay smiled. “That’s actually cool. Not many people get into journalism because they want to. They usually end up there. But you chose it?”

Geetha nodded. “Yeah... I did.”

Ajay nodded approvingly. “Nice choice.”

From beside her, Akshaya smirked slightly. She noticed the shift in Geetha’s body language—the way she had relaxed just a little, the way her voice had become more natural.

Kishan, watching Ajay, nudged him playfully. “Da, engineering is boring compared to this. They have all the fun.”

Ajay laughed. “True, true. We spend more time typing codes.”

Geetha chuckled softly, and for the first time, the conversation didn't feel forced.

The ice had finally started to break.

Akshaya stretched her arms and let out a dramatic sigh. "Okay, I feel hungry. I'll go get some snacks for us."

Before anyone could react, she shot a quick glance at Kishan and subtly tilted her head—a silent signal.

Kishan, catching on immediately, raised an eyebrow. "Huh? Why me?" he muttered under his breath.

Akshaya didn't even look at him. "Come with me, na. I can't carry everything alone."

Kishan scoffed, realizing her true intention. She wanted to leave Ajay and Geetha alone.

Ajay, meanwhile, barely suppressed a smirk. He knew exactly what was happening.

Kishan, sighing dramatically, got up. "Fine, fine. Let's go."

As the two walked away, Akshaya turned her head slightly and smirked at Geetha. It was subtle, but enough for Geetha to glare at her, her cheeks turning slightly warm.

Ajay watched them leave and then turned back to Geetha, smiling. "Well, that was obvious."

Geetha, rolling her eyes, tucked her hair behind her ear and mumbled, "She's impossible."

Ajay chuckled. "I don't mind, though."

And just like that, they were alone.

As Kishan and Akshaya walked along the bustling Marina Beach, the salty breeze tousled their hair, and the distant chatter of vendors filled the air. The golden sand felt warm beneath their feet as they weaved through small stalls selling roasted corn, spicy sundal, and pink cotton candy.

Despite the lively atmosphere, a certain weight settled between them—one that had nothing to do with the bags of snacks they were about to buy.

Akshaya slowed her steps and turned to Kishan, her tone shifting from casual to serious. “Be honest with me... How is your friend?”

Kishan, taken aback by the sudden question, raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, is he serious about Geetha? Or is this just some time-pass thing?” Akshaya asked, folding her arms as if bracing herself for an answer she didn’t want to hear.

Kishan let out a short laugh, shaking his head. “Whoa, chill. Time-pass guys don’t ride all the way from Kattankulathur to Marina Beach just for a meet-up.”

Akshaya wasn’t convinced so easily. “Every guy makes an effort in the beginning,” she pointed out, her expression unreadable. “It’s what happens after that really matters.”

Kishan sighed, stopping near a small tea stall. “Nah, we aren’t like that,” he said, his voice firm.

Akshaya studied his face for a moment before nodding slightly. “That’s nice to hear,” she admitted, finally breaking eye contact.

Kishan glanced at her, sensing there was more on her mind. “What about Geetha?” he asked, his tone softer now.

Akshaya took a deep breath, as if deciding how much to say. “Don’t take this the wrong way, and don’t think I’m being overprotective...” she started carefully, “but her circle is really small. She doesn’t let many people in. Her parents are divorced, and she lost her mom recently.”

Kishan’s expression shifted instantly. “Damn...” he muttered under his breath. “That’s... that’s really tough.”

“She lives with her grandmother now,” Akshaya added, staring down at the sand, her fingers absentmindedly tracing patterns in the air.

Kishan hesitated before asking, “What about her treatment?”

Akshaya let out a dry chuckle, but there was no humor in it. “She’s stubborn. She flat-out refused it. She doesn’t even talk about it.”

Kishan sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Ajay is the same way...”

Akshaya looked up, surprised. “What do you mean?”

Kishan kicked a small rock near his foot, his voice dropping slightly. “Ajay is fifty-fifty. He wants to finish college first and make his family financially stable before anything else. He grew up struggling a lot. Even now, he works part-time while handling college. He even makes projects for other students—school kids and engineering students—just to earn some extra money.”

Akshaya’s face softened. “That’s... really sad,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Kishan nodded. “I think he sees his medical expenses as a burden. He probably avoids treatment because he doesn’t want to add more stress to his family.”

Akshaya exhaled slowly. “Geetha, financially, has no struggles. But emotionally... she’s been through way too much.” She paused, kicking at the sand. “And I’m leaving for my master’s in the UK soon...”

Kishan looked at her, sensing the unspoken worry behind her words.

“I just want her to be in safe hands,” Akshaya admitted, her voice breaking slightly.

Kishan gave her a reassuring nod. “Don’t worry. We’re there for her,” he promised.

Akshaya let out a small, tired smile. “I just don’t get it... Why this cancer for both of these souls?”

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

The waves crashed in the distance, the smell of salty air mixing with the faint aroma of freshly fried bhajis from a nearby stall.

The world around them was moving—vendors shouting, couples laughing, children playing in the sand.

But for that moment, Kishan and Akshaya just stood there, holding the weight of their friends’ struggles in their hearts.

Ajay and Geetha found themselves in their own little world, the background noise of the bustling Marina Beach fading into a distant hum.

Ajay leaned back on his hands, looking at Geetha with a small smile. "You look very beautiful today," he said casually, but there was a genuine warmth in his voice.

Geetha's cheeks flushed slightly, and she let out a soft chuckle, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "You look better than the other day too. You actually look neat today," she teased, her eyes twinkling with mischief.

Ajay gasped dramatically, placing a hand on his chest. "Ouch, are you saying I was looking bad the other day?"

Geetha laughed, shaking her head. "I didn't say that!"

"But you meant it!" Ajay shot back playfully, making her laugh even more.

A comfortable silence settled between them as they both watched the waves crash onto the shore, the setting sun casting a warm golden hue over the sand. The sea breeze ruffled Geetha's dupatta, making her hold onto it gently.

After a moment, Ajay spoke again. "I didn't expect you to talk this well. You seemed so quiet the other day."

Geetha shrugged, giving him a small smile. "People assume I'm quiet, but once I get comfortable, I talk a lot."

"Oh, so I should feel special that you're comfortable with me?" Ajay smirked.

Geetha rolled her eyes but smiled. "Maybe."

Ajay tilted his head slightly, observing her. “You don’t have anything else to ask me?” he asked.

Geetha hesitated for a second before looking at him. “How’s your health?” she finally asked, her tone softer now.

Ajay scoffed lightly. “Out of all the things you could ask, you chose that?”

Geetha’s expression didn’t change. “I’m just concerned.”

Ajay held her gaze for a moment before sighing. “As if you’re perfectly alright...” he muttered. “You have cancer too.”

Geetha’s lips pressed together, and she gave him a side glance.

Ajay blinked; a bit taken aback. “Woah.”

Geetha raised an eyebrow. “What?”

“Nothing...” Ajay said quickly, shaking his head, but his mind was still reeling. There was something about the way she looked at him just now—like she had already made peace with something he himself was still running from.

Realizing the shift in their conversation, Geetha changed the topic. “Tell me about yourself, Ajay. Your likes, dislikes, things you love, things you hate...”

Ajay smirked. “You want a full biodata?”

Geetha giggled. “Something like that. I want to know the Ajay beyond what I saw yesterday.”

Ajay leaned forward, resting his arms on his knees. “Okay, let’s start with something easy. Favourite food?”

“Butter chicken with naan,” Geetha answered immediately. “You?”

“Bread omelette. Simple, cheap, and tasty,” Ajay replied, making Geetha shake her head with a smile.

“Favourite movie?” she asked.

Ajay thought for a second. “Interstellar. I love anything to do with space and time travel.”

“Ohh, so you like deep, complex movies?”

“Not really. I also enjoy feel-good Tamil comedies,” he admitted with a grin. “What about you?”

“I like feel-good movies too. But sometimes, I enjoy sad, emotional ones. They make me feel alive,” Geetha said, looking at the ocean.

Ajay observed her silently. “Why do I feel like you’re the type who enjoys pain?”

Geetha shrugged, her expression unreadable. “Maybe because pain makes everything else in life feel more real.”

Ajay exhaled slowly. “Damn, that’s deep.”

“Now your turn,” she said, looking back at him. “What’s something you hate?”

“Hospitals,” Ajay answered almost instantly.

Geetha smiled sadly. “Same.”

They sat there, sharing little pieces of themselves, peeling back layers they didn’t even realize they had.

Ajay hadn’t felt this at ease in a long time. And for the first time in a while, Geetha felt like she wasn’t alone in her thoughts

As they continued talking, the conversation naturally drifted toward past relationships.

Geetha tilted her head, resting her chin on her palm. “So, Ajay, have you ever been in love?”

Ajay leaned back, exhaling. “Yeah, I had a girlfriend back in school. We broke up.”

Geetha's eyes widened slightly. "Oh? What happened?"

Ajay glanced at the waves before replying, "I broke up with her."

Geetha frowned. "Wait, what? You broke up?"

Ajay nodded; his expression neutral. "Yeah. I found out she cheated on me."

A moment of silence passed between them. Geetha looked at him, her brows knitting together. "That's... that's really sad. I'm sorry."

Anjali, who had been quietly listening from the side, suddenly interrupted, "Appa! So, you had two love stories, huh?"

Ajay shot her a sharp look, snapping out of his memories for a second. "Anjali, no story for you. Stay quiet."

Anjali held up her hands in surrender. "Sorry, sorry! Please continue!" She was grinning, clearly enjoying this new insight into her father's past.

Ajay shook his head but smirked slightly before continuing his story.

Geetha gave him a small, understanding nod before he asked, "What about you?"

Geetha chuckled softly. "Girls' school, girls' college... where would I even get a boyfriend?"

Ajay's eyes widened. "Damn. So, you haven't had your first love yet?"

Geetha sighed dramatically and nodded. "Yep. And no guy friends either."

Ajay smirked. "Well, that's actually a plus point."

Geetha rolled her eyes but smiled. "Why does that sound like such a 'guy' thing to say?"

Ajay laughed. "I'm just saying, it means no past drama, no baggage."

Geetha chuckled before she leaned slightly toward him. "You really believe in all that 'first love' thing?"

Ajay looked at her seriously for a moment before grinning. "You know what? First love will break your heart, but second love will heal you."

Geetha raised an eyebrow. "Oh? So, you're saying my heart will get broken?"

Ajay smirked. "And my heart will heal."

Geetha narrowed her eyes. "What do you mean?"

Ajay looked at her with a mischievous glint in his eyes. "Because I'll die first. And for me, you'll be the love I had."

A stunned silence hung in the air. Geetha blinked, feeling a warmth rise to her cheeks. "That was... smooth," she admitted, trying to fight the smile creeping onto her face.

Ajay grinned smugly. "Of course. That's me."

Geetha shook her head and lightly smacked his arm, laughing. "Idiot."

The evening breeze carried their laughter along the shore, making the moment feel like something out of a memory they'd never forget.

As the story settled in, Anjali sat back, staring at her father. The way he spoke, the emotions behind his words—it all felt too real.

"Appa..." she asked hesitantly, she was not your first love, right?

Ajay turned to her, his eyes reflecting years of emotions. He smiled softly.

"She was my only love."

Anjali felt her throat tighten, her heart heavy with a strange mix of admiration and sadness.

She had asked about his past love stories, but she was only now realizing—her father’s love story was never just a memory. It was a part of him, living on even today.

Kishan and Akshaya walked back with the snacks, the crinkling of the packets filling the silence between them.

As they neared the group, Akshaya glanced at Kishan and said in a low voice, “I won’t tell Geetha about our conversation. I hope you won’t either.”

Kishan gave her a reassuring nod. “Pakka. I won’t.”

When they arrived, their eyes fell on Geetha and Ajay. The two were laughing, completely at ease, their conversation flowing effortlessly. Ajay playfully nudged Geetha, and she responded with a lighthearted push, her face lit up in a way Akshaya had rarely seen before.

Akshaya raised an eyebrow. “Yep, I was right. I’ve never seen her gel this soon with someone.”

Kishan observed for a moment before nodding. “Yeah... and Ajay seems serious too.”

The night air carried a cool breeze, rustling through the trees as the four of them sat together on a wooden bench under the dim glow of the streetlight. The faint hum of the city in the distance mixed with their laughter, creating a moment that felt untouched by time.

Akshaya leaned in, a playful smirk spreading across her face. “Well, well, Geetha, I’ve never seen you get this comfortable with someone so quickly.”

Geetha, who had been casually talking to Ajay, turned sharply. “What do you mean?” she asked, trying to keep her voice steady, but the slight pink on her cheeks betrayed her.

Kishan, who had been watching the interaction with amusement, gave them a knowing look. "Oh, nothing. It's just... Ajay, you seem pretty serious too," he added, raising an eyebrow.

Ajay, unfazed, simply leaned back on his hands. "Serious? About what?"

Akshaya rolled her eyes. "Oh, come on! Don't act innocent. We can see the way you two have been talking. It's like you've known each other for years."

Geetha quickly glanced at Ajay, her heart skipping a beat when she noticed the soft smile on his lips. Was she being too obvious? Was she actually getting comfortable with him without realizing it?

"Maybe it's because I'm easy to talk to," Ajay finally said, stretching his legs out. His voice was calm, yet there was an unmistakable warmth in it.

"Oh, please!" Akshaya nudged Geetha playfully. "Look at her blushing! This is adorable."

Geetha groaned, covering her face with her hands. "You guys are too much."

Kishan laughed. "Alright, alright, we'll stop. For now."

The conversation continued, flowing effortlessly between teasing and casual chatter. They spoke about everything and nothing—memories from childhood, embarrassing moments, dreams, and things that made them laugh. As time slipped away, the streetlights flickered, signaling that the night was drawing to a close.

Ajay checked his watch. "It's getting late. We should head back."

The group stood up, stretching after sitting for so long. As they dusted themselves off, Geetha turned to look at the

road ahead, a little disappointed that the night had to end. But just as she was about to take a step forward, she felt a warm grip on her wrist.

She turned, surprised, only to find Ajay holding her hand gently.

“If you’re free tomorrow night...” he began, his voice quieter than before. “I’ll take you on my bike.”

Geetha’s breath hitched. “What?”

Ajay’s eyes locked onto hers, his expression sincere. “You mentioned you like night bike rides, right?”

Her mind flashed back to an earlier conversation—one where she had casually spoken about how she loved the feeling of the wind in her hair during a late-night ride, the way the streets seemed quieter, more peaceful. She hadn’t expected him to remember.

For a second, she didn’t know how to respond. Her heart pounded in her chest.

Then, before she could think too much, a small smile formed on her lips. “Yeah... I did.”

Ajay’s grip on her wrist loosened slightly, but he didn’t let go just yet. “Then let’s go tomorrow.”

Geetha felt warmth spread across her face. She knew Akshaya and Kishan were probably watching, waiting to tease her again. But right now, she didn’t care.

She nodded. “Okay.”

Ajay smiled, finally releasing her hand. “It’s a date then.”

As they walked away, Geetha felt her heart still racing, excitement bubbling inside her. The night had ended, but something new was just beginning.

Ajay sat in class, half-listening to the professor's lecture. The droning voice at the front of the room blurred into background noise as he glanced at his phone under the desk.

Geetha: What class are you in now?

A small smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

Ajay: Some boring lecture. I swear time has stopped.

Geetha: Oh no, poor you! I bet even one minute feels like an hour.

Ajay chuckled, quickly typing back.

Ajay: More like a whole year.

From the seat beside him, Kishan noticed the small smile on Ajay's face and the way he kept glancing at his phone. He leaned in slightly, smirking.

"Dai," Kishan whispered, nudging Ajay's arm. "Who's got you grinning like a fool in the middle of class?"

Ajay glanced up, pretending to be uninterested. "No one, machan. Just Geetha."

Kishan's smirk widened. "Ohhh, just Geetha, huh? You two have been texting non-stop. What's the deal?"

Before Ajay could respond, his phone buzzed again.

Geetha: You're definitely not paying attention to class, are you?

Ajay: Nope. But you're distracting me, so it's your fault.

Geetha: Oops, my bad!

Ajay shook his head, his smile widening. Kishan raised an eyebrow. “Bro, you’re gone. You like her, don’t you?”

Ajay hesitated for a moment. Then, with a sigh, he leaned back in his chair. “I don’t know, da. It’s just... easy with her. I feel comfortable.”

Kishan’s teasing expression softened. “That’s rare for you.”

Ajay nodded. “Yeah, I’ve never felt this way before. No pressure, no pretending. Just... easy.”

Kishan studied his friend for a moment before lowering his voice. “I heard from Akshaya that Geetha has been having a hard time. She’s dealing with some serious family issues, a rough past.”

Ajay’s smile faded slightly, and his brows furrowed. “I figured... she carries something heavy. But I don’t want to treat her like she’s fragile, da. She’s strong.”

Kishan nodded, but his voice was serious. “Just don’t get hurt. And don’t hurt her.”

Ajay exhaled, giving him a lazy grin. “Chill, machan. I got this.

In a coffee shop, Geetha sat with Akshaya, absentmindedly stirring her coffee. The café was buzzing with People, but her mind was elsewhere.

“Ajay’s nice, isn’t he?” Akshaya asked casually.

Geetha smiled softly. “Yeah, he is.”

Akshaya hesitated for a second, then sighed. “There’s something you should know, though.”

Geetha frowned. “What is it?”

“Ajay has been struggling financially,” Akshaya admitted. “He doesn’t talk about it much, but things haven’t been easy for him.”

A pang of sadness struck Geetha’s chest. “I had no idea...”

“He won’t tell you,” Akshaya added. “And honestly, his friend told me not to mention it to you either.”

Geetha frowned, feeling a mix of concern and helplessness. “But if I can do something—”

“Chill,” Akshaya said, cutting her off. “He doesn’t want help. Just be there for him.”

Geetha nodded slowly, her thoughts swirling.

As the sun set, Geetha found herself staring at her reflection in the mirror. Why was she nervous? It was just a bike ride. Just Ajay. But still... her heart refused to stay calm.

Outside, the sound of a bike engine roaring to life broke her thoughts. She hurried to the balcony, peering down to see Ajay waiting in front of Akshaya’s house.

He was here.

And then, the magical night began.

Ajay leaned against his bike, arms crossed, a teasing smirk playing on his lips. The dim streetlight flickered above, casting a warm glow on his face.

“Hii,” he drawled, dragging the word out in a playful, flirtatious tone.

Geetha narrowed her eyes, trying—and failing—to suppress a smile. “What kind of ‘hii’ was that?”

Ajay tilted his head, pretending to think. “The special kind.”

She scoffed, but the small laugh that escaped her betrayed her amusement.

Ajay patted the seat behind him. "Get on."

Geetha hesitated for a beat before swinging her leg over, settling in behind him. The moment she did, a rush of excitement coursed through her. It had been years since she had been on a bike—the familiar hum of the engine, the cool night air against her skin, the quiet thrill of movement—it all brought back long-forgotten memories.

Ajay glanced back, noticing how her fingers barely brushed the seat instead of holding onto him.

"What, never been on a bike before?" he teased, revving the engine.

Geetha smirked. "I have... just not in a while."

Ajay raised a brow. "Years? Why?"

She hesitated, looking away. "No reason."

He caught the shift in her tone but let it slide. Instead, he flashed his usual grin. "Alright then, hold on tight."

As the bike roared to life, the city blurred around them. Geetha started with her hands on the seat, but when Ajay took a sharp turn, instinct took over—her fingers grasped the back of his shirt for balance.

Ajay chuckled. "You can hold onto me, you know. I won't bite."

She rolled her eyes. "Will see."

But as the roads stretched out, the wind whipping past them, she finally gave in, slipping her arms around his waist. The warmth of his body, the steady rhythm of his breathing—it made her feel safe in a way she hadn't expected.

For a few moments, they rode in comfortable silence. Then, Geetha leaned slightly forward.

“So... where exactly are we going?”

Ajay smirked. “You’ll see.”

Geetha sighed dramatically. “This better be worth the suspense.”

Ajay chuckled. “Trust me.”

The city lights faded as they rode along ECR. The salty breeze hinted at the ocean’s proximity, but just when she thought he was taking her to the beach, Ajay turned down a quieter lane. The street was lined with parked cars, old shops, and dimly lit bulbs hanging overhead.

Geetha frowned. “Uh... this doesn’t look like the beach.”

Ajay pulled up in front of a rustic-looking dhaba, strands of fairy lights hanging from the ceiling, casting a soft golden glow over wooden tables and colorful charpais. The air was thick with the scent of butter naan, smoky tandoori, and rich, creamy butter chicken.

She blinked in surprise. “A dhaba?”

Ajay turned off the engine and looked at her. “Not just any dhaba. A Punjabi dhaba.”

Geetha turned to him, realization dawning. “Wait... I told you just yesterday that my favorite food is butter chicken and naan.”

Ajay shrugged, playing it cool. “Yeah. And?”

She stared at him. “You remembered?”

Ajay smirked. “I have a good memory.”

For a second, she just looked at him. Something about this—about him bringing her here instead of anywhere else—felt personal.

Ajay snapped his fingers in front of her face. “You coming, or are you planning to sit there all night?”

She shook her head, laughing softly. "I'm coming."

They stepped inside, choosing a table under the open-air canopy. The soft hum of Punjabi music played in the background, and the place had the comforting warmth of a home-cooked meal.

Ajay leaned back in his chair, watching her take it all in. "Hungry?"

Geetha sighed. "Starving."

They ordered a feast—butter chicken, butter naan, dal makhani, and a plate of hot, crispy parathas. As they waited for their food, Geetha tilted her head, watching him.

"So... why this?" she asked. "You could've taken me anywhere. Why here?"

Ajay took a sip of his lassi, his gaze steady. "Because I know you will like it"

Her breath hitched for a second.

He said it so casually, like it wasn't a big deal. But to her, it was.

Before she could find the right words, the waiter arrived with their food, placing dish after dish between them. The rich aroma made Geetha let out a soft, blissful sigh. "God, I love food."

Ajay chuckled. "I can see that."

They dug in, the flavors bursting in their mouths. Geetha hummed in appreciation. "This is so good."

Ajay watched her, amused. "You know, you're kinda cute when you talk about food."

She raised a brow. "Are you flirting with me?"

Ajay smirked. "What do you think?"

She shook her head, laughing.

Their conversation flowed effortlessly—College stories, embarrassing moments, dreams for the future. Geetha found herself laughing more than she had in a long time.

At one point, Ajay tore off a piece of butter naan, dipped it in the butter chicken, and held it out to her.

“Here, try this.”

Geetha hesitated for a beat before leaning forward and taking a bite. As her lips brushed his fingers, a subtle tension filled the air. She swallowed, looking away, suddenly hyper-aware of how close they were.

Ajay, however, just smirked. “Good?”

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

As the night went on, Geetha realized something—Ajay wasn’t just some guy who flirted for fun. He noticed things. He remembered the little details. And, more than anything... he made her feel special.

After finishing their meal, they leaned back, fully satisfied.

Ajay glanced at her. “So? Worth the suspense?”

Geetha smiled. “More than worth it.”

Ajay looked pleased with himself. “Good.”

As they got up to leave, Geetha hesitated. Then, before she could overthink it, she reached out and slipped her hand into his.

Ajay stiffened for half a second, caught off guard. But then, his fingers curled around hers naturally, like they had always belonged there.

Geetha looked up at him, her voice softer than before. “Thank you.”

Ajay met her gaze, something unreadable in his expression.
Then, he squeezed her hand gently.

“Anytime.”

And just like that, something changed.

Something unspoken.

Something undeniable.

And neither of them wanted to let go.

Ajay leaned against his bike, the engine still warm from their ride to the dhaba. Geetha stood beside him, stretching her arms, a satisfied smile playing on her lips. The night air was crisp, carrying the faint scent of the sea mixed with the lingering aroma of butter chicken from their meal.

She sighed, looking up at the sky. "I had a nice time. This made my day."

Ajay smirked, watching her. "The night hasn't ended yet. It just started."

Geetha's eyes widened. "What? It's already past 11. I need to call Akshaya. She'll keep the keys and sleep."

Ajay shook his head, stepping closer. "You don't have to."

She raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

Ajay grinned. "Because you're with me."

Geetha scoffed, crossing her arms. "As if you're my husband," she mumbled under her breath.

Ajay tilted his head. "What was that?"

"Nothing," she said quickly, avoiding his gaze.

Ajay chuckled but then his voice turned serious. "Okay, fine, I'll be serious. You know, they say we only live once. But in our case..." He exhaled, his playful expression fading. "We might die anytime. So you should enjoy it. Live it fully."

Geetha's smile faltered. She looked away, her fingers absentmindedly tracing patterns on the seat of his bike. "I forgot we had cancer."

Ajay sighed. "I wish I could forget too. But seeing you restrict yourself reminds me of it every time."

There was a silence between them, thick with unspoken fears. The weight of reality pressed down on them, but Ajay wasn't going to let it steal this night. He nudged her shoulder lightly.

"Get on the bike."

Geetha hesitated for a moment before rolling her eyes. "Okay, okay, stop your lectures."

Ajay laughed, watching her climb onto the bike. "You look cute when you're mad."

Geetha huffed. "Just start the bike, Romeo."

Ajay smirked. "Alright, alright, ma'am." He revved the engine and glanced over his shoulder. "Hold on like before."

Geetha hesitated but then placed her hands lightly on the sides of the seat. "I'll see about that."

With that, he sped off into the night, the city lights slowly giving way to the open road.

The wind rushed past them, carrying away their worries, if only for a little while. Geetha closed her eyes for a moment, letting the cold breeze kiss her cheeks. It felt freeing—like she was escaping everything, even herself.

Ajay rode in silence for a while, occasionally glancing at her through the mirror. He wanted to say something, but instead, he just smiled to himself.

After a while, Geetha spoke. "Where are we even going?"

Ajay grinned. "No idea. Just... going."

Geetha shook her head but didn't argue. There was something peaceful about not having a destination.

She looked at the road ahead and then at Ajay. "Hey... do you ever wonder what life would've been like if we weren't sick?"

Ajay didn't answer immediately. He tightened his grip on the handles, thinking. "Yeah," he finally said. "All the time."

Geetha leaned forward slightly. "What do you imagine?"

Ajay chuckled. "Oh, you know. The usual. College, parties, a boring 9-to-5 job, maybe getting married someday..." He glanced at her. "What about you?"

Geetha smiled sadly. "I imagine just being normal. Waking up without wondering if it's a good day or a bad one. Not having people look at me with pity. Not having to be 'strong' all the time."

Ajay nodded. He understood. More than anyone, he understood.

After a beat, he said, "You know what I imagine the most?"

Geetha hummed. "What?"

Ajay smirked. "Us. Meeting under normal circumstances. Maybe in college. You, sitting in the first row, being all studious. Me, at the back, being the lazy genius."

Geetha laughed. "Lazy genius?"

"Absolutely. I'd probably tease you, steal your notes, and charm my way into making you help me study."

Geetha shook her head, smiling. "And I'd probably hate you."

Ajay grinned. "Nah. You'd fall for me eventually."

Geetha rolled her eyes. "In your dreams."

Ajay smirked. "Exactly. In my dreams."

Silence settled between them again, but this time, it was filled with something warm. Which can't be put in words.

The wind was cold against Geetha's skin as she sat behind Ajay on his bike, the city lights blurring past them. The silence between them stretched, heavier than before.

Three days. That's all it had been since they met. And yet, here she was, sitting behind him, trusting him enough to follow wherever he took her—even if she had no idea where they were going.

She assumed it was the beach. Because that's where they met first without the hospital chaos.

But then he took a turn she didn't expect.

Her brows furrowed. "This isn't the way to the beach," she called out over the wind.

Ajay didn't answer. He just kept riding, his grip firm on the handlebars, his posture unusually tense.

Something about that made her sit up straighter.

Another turn. Another unfamiliar road. The city lights dimmed as they moved further away from the usual late-night spots. The streets became quieter, the buildings taller, more structured.

And then, finally, she saw it.

A large gated entrance.

Her breath caught as realization hit her.

His college.

Ajay slowed the bike as they passed through the entrance, the guard at the gate barely acknowledging them. The campus stretched out before them, eerily silent.

During the day, this place was probably alive—crowds of students, buzzing conversations, the shuffle of feet against pavement. But now, it felt like an entirely different world.

Empty. Quiet. Almost haunting.

The bike came to a stop near a massive glass building, its exterior reflecting the faint glow of the streetlights.

Geetha hesitated before getting off. She shoved her hands into the pockets of her jacket, suddenly hyper-aware of the stillness around them.

“A college visit at midnight?” she muttered, half to herself, half to him.

Ajay exhaled, as if he had been holding in a breath. “Come,” he said simply, already walking towards the building.

She frowned. “If we get caught, I swear—”

He glanced back, a ghost of a smirk playing at his lips. “Tell them, I kidnapped you”.

Geetha rolled her eyes but followed him anyway.

He led her up a flight of stairs that opened into a wide, open space in front of the tech park. The steps leading up to the building looked worn, as if countless students had sat there, talking, dreaming, figuring out their lives.

Tonight, it was just them.

Ajay walked ahead and sat down, stretching his legs out in front of him.

Geetha hesitated for a second before lowering herself onto the step beside him, leaving a small space between them. She looked around, her fingers absentmindedly tracing the rough edge of the stone beneath her.

“So... this is the famous SRM Tech Park steps?” she asked, breaking the silence.

Ajay's gaze remained fixed ahead. "Yeah."

His voice was different. Lower. More distant.

Geetha studied him for a moment. His usual confidence—his teasing remarks, his smirks—none of it was there tonight.

She leaned back slightly. "You talk about this place a lot."

Ajay let out a small breath, shaking his head. "Do I?"

She nodded. "Not directly. But whenever you talk about college, this place always comes up."

Ajay rested his elbows on his knees, staring out into the distance.

Geetha watched him, waiting.

Then, finally, he spoke.

"Whenever I'm in doubt, I come here."

His voice was quiet, almost like he was saying it more to himself than to her.

Geetha frowned slightly.

"Doubt?" she repeated. "About what?"

Ajay didn't answer immediately. His fingers tapped lightly against his knee, a restless habit. Then, after a long pause, he sighed.

"Everything."

That one word hung between them, heavy in the still night air.

Geetha wasn't sure how to respond. They had barely known each other for three days. They weren't lovers at the same time they weren't friends their relationship had no name or tag. But something about this moment felt... different. Like she was seeing a part of him that wasn't meant to be seen.

She looked away, her gaze drifting over the quiet campus.

“Did it work?” she asked after a moment.

Ajay glanced at her.

She motioned toward the building. “Coming here. Did it help?”

He was silent for a long time. Then, finally, he exhaled.

“I don’t know.”

Geetha nodded slowly, letting the answer settle.

She didn’t push him for more.

And somehow, she felt like that was exactly what he needed.

The night felt heavier than usual.

Ajay sat on the cold stone steps of the SRM Tech Park, his elbows resting on his knees, fingers absentmindedly rubbing against each other.

The glow from the distant streetlights barely reached them, leaving the entire place drenched in a mix of darkness and quiet solitude.

Beside him, Geetha shifted slightly, her fingers running along the edge of the step as if contemplating whether to break the silence or not.

She did.

“Ajay... is it about the cancer?”

Her voice was soft but certain, cutting through the night like a whisper that refused to be ignored.

Ajay’s breath hitched for half a second before he let out a slow exhale. He didn’t turn to look at her. Instead, he kept his gaze ahead, staring at nothing in particular.

“It’s not just that,” he said finally, his voice lower than before. “It’s everything.”

Geetha stayed silent, waiting. She had a feeling this wasn't something he had shared with many people. Maybe not even himself.

Ajay leaned back against the step, tilting his head slightly towards the sky.

Ajay's voice was steady, but there was an unmistakable weight behind his words, a heaviness that had settled deep within him long before this conversation. He exhaled slowly, as if letting out the burden he had been carrying alone for far too long.

"I'm the only son," he began, his gaze fixed on the empty campus before them. "The first graduate in my family. My father... he's an auto driver. He's spent his whole life on the roads, driving under the scorching sun, through endless traffic, just to make sure I had a future better than his. And my mother..." He paused for a moment, his fingers curling into a loose fist. "She worked as a housemaid for years. Cleaning floors, washing dishes, taking orders from people who never saw her as more than just 'help.' But I understood everything, Geetha. Even when I was a kid, I knew the sacrifices they were making. I knew I had to do something. So I studied hard—harder than anyone. I got into this college on a good scholarship, worked my way through every semester, and now... now I'm not just a student. I make projects for others, work part-time jobs, and somehow, I managed to stop my mother from working as a maid. That was my first step. The next was supposed to be simple—finish my degree, get a job, settle them. Take them out of this life, give them the peace they never had. But now..." His voice wavered, just slightly, before he forced himself to continue. "If they ever find out about my cancer... they'll be devastated, Geetha. I can't let that happen. I have to settle them first. I have to make sure they're okay. No matter what happens to me."

He looked down, his shoulders tense, his breath unsteady. And for the first time since she had met him, Geetha saw something in his eyes that she had never seen before. Not determination. Not resilience.

Fear.

He swallowed hard.

“I should settle them somehow. But I have very little time.”

Geetha felt a tightness in her chest.

Ajay rarely spoke about himself. He was the kind of person who brushed things off with sarcasm, who let people assume what they wanted without ever correcting them. But now, sitting here under the weight of the night, he wasn't hiding anymore.

She could see it in the way his shoulders tensed, in the way his fingers fidgeted, in the way he exhaled a little too sharply between his words.

It wasn't just pressure.

It was fear.

Fear of not being able to do enough.

Fear of running out of time.

Fear of failing the people who had given him everything.

Geetha swallowed the lump forming in her throat.

She wanted to say something—anything—to make it better.

But what do you say to someone who carries the weight of an entire family on their shoulders?

She turned slightly towards him, pulling her knees up and resting her arms on them.

“Ajay,” she said softly, her voice laced with something between comfort and certainty. “You don’t have to figure it all out tonight.”

He let out a small, dry chuckle. “Feels like I do.”

“You don’t,” she insisted, nudging his arm lightly. “You’re already doing everything you can. You’re studying, you’re working towards something. And I don’t believe for a second that you won’t make it.”

Ajay let out a small breath through his nose. “Easy for you to say.”

Geetha smiled. “Yeah, it is. Because I believe in you.”

He turned slightly, finally meeting her eyes for the first time since she started speaking. There was something unreadable in his gaze, something that flickered between surprise and something deeper—something he didn’t want to name yet.

Geetha held his stare, a small smirk tugging at her lips.

“And besides,” she added, “you’re too stubborn to fail.”

Ajay huffed a quiet laugh, shaking his head. “You’re unbelievable.”

She grinned. “I try.”

For the first time that night, the tension in his shoulders eased just a little.

A silence settled between them again, but this time, it wasn’t heavy. It wasn’t the kind of silence that pressed down on them like a weight—it was the kind that lingered, soft and steady, like the calm after a storm.

Ajay looked away, shaking his head with a small smirk. “I can’t believe you can actually speak this well. That too, positively.”

Geetha gasped dramatically, placing a hand over her chest. "Excuse me? You think I can't be positive?"

He shot her an amused glance. "I've known you for three days. You're either sarcastic, skeptical, or silently judging people in your head."

She gasped again; this time more exaggerated. "How dare you?"

Ajay raised an eyebrow.

"Okay, fine," she admitted with a small laugh. "Maybe a little. But I can be positive when needed."

He scoffed. "Right."

Geetha grinned, nudging him playfully with her shoulder. "Learning from you, Mr AJAY."

Ajay chuckled, shaking his head. "That's right."

Ajay just rolled his eyes, but there was something softer in his expression now, something lighter.

Geetha, noticing this shift, clapped her hands together. "Alright! Enough of this serious talk. Show me the whole campus!"

Ajay frowned. "Now?"

"Yes, now! Midnight campus tour—let's go!"

Ajay gave her a long look, as if debating whether to entertain her request or not. But then, seeing the sheer excitement in her eyes, he sighed dramatically.

"Fine," he muttered. "But if security catches us—"

"I will tell them you Kidnapped me."

Ajay smirked. "Oh, ok madam"

Geetha hopped up from the steps, extending a hand towards him. "Come on, Mr. SRM Tour Guide. Time's wasting!"

Ajay shook his head but took her hand anyway, letting her pull him up.

As they walked through the empty pathways of his college, something inside him felt... lighter.

For the first time in a long time, he wasn't thinking about the future.

For the first time in a long time, he wasn't drowning in expectations.

The night air was crisp, wrapping around them as they wandered through the vast pathways of the university. The dim glow of the streetlights flickered softly, casting long shadows on the pavement. It was quiet, except for the sound of their footsteps against the stone path.

Geetha glanced around, taking in the sheer size of the campus. "This place is huge," she murmured. "My college was nothing like this."

Ajay smirked, shoving his hands into his pockets. "Where did you study?"

"Stella Maris," she replied casually.

Ajay let out a soft chuckle. "Damn, Stella? My ex studied there, apparently."

For a split second, Geetha's expression shifted. She wasn't sure why—maybe it was the way he casually mentioned his ex, or maybe it was just the odd feeling of knowing something about his past.

"Oh," she said, her voice quieter than before.

Ajay caught the change in her tone and grinned. "What was that? A little 'oh'? Someone's getting possessive, I guess?"

Geetha scoffed, rolling her eyes. "Nothing like that."

Ajay leaned slightly toward her, teasing, "It's okay, you know. This reaction is cute too."

She gave him a dramatic side-eye but couldn't stop the small smile that tugged at the corners of her lips.

They continued walking, their steps slow, unhurried. Ajay led the way, pointing at different blocks as they passed by.

“That’s the Law block,” he said, nodding toward the grand building standing under the moonlight.

“That,” he gestured to the next one, “is the MBA block, right next to it.”

“And this...” He stopped, turning to face another structure. “This is the Architecture block. My favourite, actually.”

Geetha raised an eyebrow. “Architecture? Didn’t take you for the artsy type.”

Ajay chuckled. “I’m not. But this place... it has a vibe, you know?” He pointed across the road, where a small, well-maintained lawn was nestled between the buildings. “When the Tech Park steps are too crowded, this is my other spot.”

“Come on,” he said, leading the way.

They sat down on the grass, the silence between them comfortable yet weighty.

But this time, something was different.

Geetha, usually the one who filled the quiet with sarcasm or random observations, was completely silent.

Ajay tilted his head slightly, studying her face. There was something lingering in her expression—something far away, something she hadn’t yet spoken about.

“What’s on your mind?” he asked gently.

Geetha hesitated for a moment before exhaling. “Nothing. It’s just... seeing the Architecture block reminded me of my dad.”

Ajay frowned. “Your dad?”

She nodded; her gaze distant. “Yeah. He’s an architect. And he always wanted me to be one too.”

Ajay leaned back on his elbows, watching her closely. “But you didn’t?”

“No,” she murmured, shaking her head. “I didn’t even bother.”

Ajay didn’t respond immediately. He knew there was more.

Geetha took a deep breath. “Two of his daughters became architects, though. His perfect daughters.”

Ajay raised an eyebrow. “Wait... you have siblings?”

Geetha let out a bitter chuckle. “Step-sisters. But no, not really. We don’t talk. We don’t exist in each other’s worlds.”

Ajay was taken aback but stayed calm. He sensed that this wasn’t just a passing detail—it was something that had shaped her deeply.

“My dad and mom were in a happy marriage,” she continued, her voice quieter now. “But it didn’t last.”

Ajay stayed silent, letting her take her time.

“They fought. About everything. Anything. My entire childhood was filled with the sound of arguments, slammed doors, and broken things. But the funny part? They were once madly in love.” She let out a small, humourless laugh. “At least, that’s what they used to say.”

Ajay’s jaw tightened, sensing where this was going.

“Then one day, my mom found out that my dad was having an affair.” She paused, her fingers tracing invisible patterns on the grass. “She confronted him. They fought again. And this time... it ended for good. They got divorced.”

Ajay’s heart clenched at the way she said it—so matter-of-factly, yet carrying an unspoken pain.

“My dad remarried,” Geetha continued. “And suddenly, he had a new life. A new family. Two daughters—architects, just like he wanted.” She exhaled. “The perfect daughters.”

Ajay didn’t know what to say. He wasn’t expecting this.

“After the divorce, my mom and I moved from Hyderabad to Chennai. She couldn’t stay there anymore—not in that city, not in the house that used to be theirs.”

Ajay’s brows furrowed. “Wait... Hyderabad?”

She nodded. “Yeah. I grew up there. My whole life, my schooling, everything was in Hyderabad. My mom was from Chennai, but she moved after she got married.” She smiled faintly, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “Then, after everything fell apart, we came back.”

She exhaled, her voice growing softer.

“For a while, it was just me and her. And my grandma.”

Ajay noticed the shift in her tone—the way it became heavier, quieter. He braced himself.

“She... she didn’t take the divorce well,” Geetha whispered. “She was suffering. She was hurting. And no matter what I did, I couldn’t help her.”

Ajay felt something sharp twist in his chest.

“She committed suicide last year,” Geetha said, her voice barely audible. “She just... couldn’t take it anymore.”

A heavy silence fell between them.

Ajay turned to her, but she wasn’t looking at him. Her eyes were fixed ahead, unblinking. She looked detached, as if she had replayed this moment in her head so many times that it no longer felt real.

He wanted to say something. Anything. But what do you say to someone who lost everything?

Geetha let out a shaky breath. “So now, it’s just me. And my grandma.”

She turned to Ajay, a sad smile on her lips. “And now, cancer too.”

Ajay’s heart clenched.

She said it so simply, as if it was just another fact. But he could see it—the exhaustion, the loneliness, the years of pain that had built up inside her.

Without thinking, he spoke.

“And you have me.”

Geetha’s eyes widened slightly, caught off guard.

Ajay held her gaze, his voice firm. “You have me, Geetha.”

Her lips parted slightly, but no words came out.

Ajay exhaled. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know... I didn’t know you’ve been through all this.”

Geetha shook her head. “It’s okay. And... I’m sorry for you too.”

Ajay’s throat tightened.

She looked at him, really looked at him, for the first time that night. “You’ve taken up the financial responsibility of your entire family. You’re carrying so much on your shoulders.”

Ajay nodded slowly. “Yeah... but at least I have a happy family.”

Geetha let out a dry chuckle. “I didn’t have that. But I don’t have financial struggles.”

They sat there, two people carrying worlds of pain, finding solace in each other’s company.

Ajay leaned back, looking up at the dark sky. “We both didn’t deserve this.”

Geetha exhaled. “Yeah.” She turned to him. “The cancer?”

Ajay nodded. “Not that just”

For a long time, neither of them spoke.

In the silence that stretched between them, something shifted—something unspoken yet deeply understood. Slowly, hesitantly, he reached out. His fingers brushed against hers, tentative at first, as if testing whether this was real, whether he was allowed this moment of connection.

Geetha didn’t pull away.

Instead, she let her fingers entwine with his, just like they had on the day they first met in the hospital. The warmth of his touch was familiar, grounding. It wasn’t grand or dramatic—just a quiet, simple gesture. Yet, in that moment, it meant everything.

They sat there, hands clasped, breathing in sync, listening to the rustle of leaves and the distant hum of the city beyond the university gates. The night breeze was cool against their skin, but the warmth of each other’s presence made it bearable.

For a long time, neither of them spoke.

And for the first time in years, it didn’t feel like they were carrying it alone.

Geetha exhaled slowly, almost as if she had been holding her breath for too long. She had built walls—tall, unbreakable ones. She had taught herself that vulnerability was dangerous, that no one stayed, that letting people in only meant setting herself up for disappointment.

But Ajay—he was different.

He didn’t rush to offer empty words of comfort, didn’t tell her that things would magically be okay. He didn’t try to fix

what was broken. Instead, he simply sat there, holding her hand, sharing the weight of it all.

Ajay tightened his grip slightly, a silent reassurance. "You know," he said after a while, his voice low, "I always thought pain was something you had to deal with alone."

Geetha looked at him, her eyes soft. "Me too."

Ajay sighed. "But maybe... maybe we don't have to."

Geetha didn't respond right away. She squeezed his hand lightly, tracing her thumb over the back of his hand absentmindedly. It was a small movement, but Ajay noticed.

A small smile played on his lips. "So, you do have a soft side."

Geetha scoffed, rolling her eyes. "Shut up."

He chuckled, and just like that, the heaviness lifted—just a little.

Ajay nudged her gently. "Come on, let's walk. I still have more of the campus to show you."

Geetha raised an eyebrow. "Oh, so now you're my personal tour guide?"

Ajay grinned. "Damn right. Plus, it's better than sitting here being all moody and emotional, don't you think?"

Geetha shook her head, but a small smile tugged at her lips.

Hand in hand, they stood up and began walking again, their footsteps slow, unhurried. The night stretched ahead of them, uncertain and vast, much like their lives. But for the first time, it didn't feel so lonely.

They had each other.

And for now, that was enough.

As they were leaving the lawn, Ajay's gaze lingered on the MBA block for a moment too long. It was subtle—just a

glance—but Geetha caught it. The way his eyes flickered with something unreadable, something almost hesitant, made her curious.

She nudged him playfully. “What? Haven’t seen this block before?”

Ajay snapped out of his thoughts and let out a small chuckle. “It’s nothing,” he said quickly, shaking his head.

But Geetha wasn’t convinced. “Oh, come on,” she pressed, tilting her head. “That was not just a random look. What’s up with this block?”

Ajay hesitated for a second before stuffing his hands into his pockets, his expression unreadable. “Nothing important,” he said casually, but there was a slight tightness in his voice.

Geetha narrowed her eyes. “Ajay.”

He sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. “It’s stupid.”

“Try me,” she challenged, crossing her arms.

Ajay glanced at the building once more before finally speaking. “I always thought I’d end up here,” he admitted. “I mean, after engineering... my plan was to do an MBA, get into a good company, and settle my family.”

Geetha’s expression softened. “That was the plan?”

“Yeah,” Ajay said, exhaling. “A solid, straightforward plan. Get a degree, get a job, make money, make sure my parents never have to struggle again.” He let out a small laugh, but there was no humor in it. “But life had other plans, I guess.”

Geetha watched him carefully. He wasn’t just looking at the MBA block—he was looking at the life he had once imagined for himself. The future that now felt uncertain, slipping through his fingers like sand.

For a moment, she didn’t know what to say.

Then, she reached for his hand again, squeezing it gently.

“You know,” she said, her voice softer this time, “just because things didn’t go exactly how you planned doesn’t mean it’s over.”

Ajay turned to her, surprised.

“You’re still here,” she continued. “You’re still fighting. You’re still... you.” She paused, searching his face. “And if there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that life never goes the way we expect it to. But that doesn’t mean we stop dreaming.”

Ajay held her gaze, his expression unreadable at first. Then, slowly, a small, tired smile appeared.

“Since when did you become so wise, Miss Geetha?” he asked, a teasing glint returning to his eyes.

Geetha smirked. “Since I met you, I guess.”

Ajay chuckled, shaking his head. “Alright, alright. Enough deep talk. Let’s get out of here before the security guards kick us out.”

She laughed, nudging him as they walked away. But as they left, Ajay stole one last glance at the MBA block.

Maybe things didn’t go as planned. Maybe life had thrown him into a storm he never saw coming.

But for the first time in a long time, he didn’t feel completely lost.

Because somewhere between the chaos and the uncertainty, he had found something—someone—worth holding onto.

As they reached the bike, Geetha took one last glance at the towering tech park and the vast college campus spread before her. The bright lights illuminated the pathways, the buildings standing tall against the night sky. There was

something about this place—the energy, the sense of belonging, the idea of students walking these paths with dreams in their eyes—that tugged at her heart.

“I wish I had studied in a campus like this,” she murmured, almost to herself.

Ajay, securing his helmet, turned to her with a playful smirk. “Ohh, I see, madam. So now you’re suddenly regretting your college choice?”

Geetha chuckled. “Not exactly. Stella was great, but... I don’t know. This place feels different. It feels alive.” She sighed. “I never really thought much about my college life while I was in it. Completing my degree itself was a big deal for me, considering all the chaos and family issues I faced. I didn’t even stop to think about doing a masters”

Ajay observed her for a moment, sensing the longing behind her words. “So... seeing and visiting a college again made you feel like studying again?”

She nodded. “Yeah. Just for a moment, it made me wonder... what if?”

Ajay grinned. “That’s great, Geetha. Who knows? Maybe one day you’ll actually go for it.”

Geetha smiled and turned to him. “If I do, I guess I have to thank you for reminding me.”

Ajay folded his arms. “Damn right, you should. I take full credit for this life-changing moment.”

Geetha rolled her eyes, then, with a dramatic bow, said, “Thank you, sir, for everything.”

Ajay laughed. “That’s more like it.”

She chuckled as she climbed onto the bike, and this time, without hesitation, she wrapped her arms around Ajay, holding onto him naturally.

Ajay stilled for a second, surprised by the sudden warmth of her embrace. It wasn't the cautious touch from their earlier ride—it was different. Natural. Like she trusted him. A small smile crept onto his lips as he reached down and gently touched her hands before starting the bike.

“Where to next?” Geetha asked.
Ajay smirked. “What? You don’t want to go home?”

Geetha shook her head. “No.”

Ajay chuckled. “That’s right.”

“Where are we going, sir?” she teased.

Ajay revved the engine. “I don’t know... but as long as you’re coming, I guess it doesn’t matter.”

Geetha smiled, resting her cheek against his back as they sped off into the night.

The roads were emptier now, the city slowing down for the night. The streetlights cast long shadows as they rode, but neither of them felt the time passing.

This ride wasn’t like the one they had a few hours ago.

Back then, the silence between them had been heavier, filled with unspoken thoughts and lingering hesitations. But now, it was different. There was an ease, a comfort in the way they sat, the way Geetha’s arms held Ajay just a little tighter, the way Ajay occasionally glanced at her through the side mirror and smiled to himself.

Their playlist, which neither had known they shared, started unconsciously forming as they hummed along to the songs playing in their heads.

At first, it was small—just soft humming from Geetha. Ajay caught on, and soon, they were both mumbling lyrics under their breath.

And then, when Sundari Kannal Oru Seidhi played in Ajay's mind, he couldn't help but start singing the iconic line—

“Naan unnai neenga matten...”

To his surprise, Geetha joined in immediately, matching his tone.

They sang together, their voices blending with the wind rushing past them. There was something about it—something freeing. They weren't perfect singers, but in that moment, they didn't care. It wasn't about how they sounded. It was about how they felt.

And right now, they felt alive.

Ajay grinned. “Damn, Geetha. We should start a band.”

Geetha laughed. “I don't think the world is ready for that disaster.”

Ajay pretended to be offended. “Excuse me, madam, I am a fantastic singer.”

“Sure, sure,” she teased. “Let's see if the sea agrees.”

Ajay raised an eyebrow. “Sea?”

Geetha suddenly pointed forward. “Ajay! The beach!”

Ajay smirked. “Madam is finally happy?”

Geetha clapped her hands. “Finally! Yes! I was wondering when you'd take me to a beach.”

Ajay slowed the bike as they reached Kovalam Beach. It was quiet, nearly empty, the sound of waves crashing against the shore filling the air. The salty breeze hit them as they parked near the sand.

As soon as she got off the bike, Geetha ran toward the shore, her excitement evident. “Finally, yehhh!”

Ajay followed at his own pace, watching her. She was glowing—a side of her he hadn’t seen before.

She turned around, grinning at him. “Come on, Ajay! What are you waiting for?”

Ajay chuckled. “I’m not running like a maniac, Geetha.”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine. Then don’t blame me if I push you into the water.”

Ajay smirked. “Oh? I’d like to see you try.”

And with that challenge, Geetha sprinted toward him, shoving him lightly. But Ajay was faster—he grabbed her by the wrist and twirled her around, causing her to stumble slightly. She laughed, trying to push him again, but he caught her hands every time.

The playfulness between them felt so easy. Like they had known each other forever.

They kicked water at each other, ran along the shore, and for the first time they both felt free without anything bothering them. Ajay, the responsible son with financial struggles, or Geetha, the girl with a broken past or even cancer patients.

They were just two people, lost in the moment, feeling like kids again.

At one point, Geetha managed to sneak up behind Ajay and push him just enough that his foot slipped in the wet sand, making him lose balance and fall into the shallow waves.

“Damn you, Geetha!” he yelled, drenched.

Geetha burst into laughter. “Victoryyyy!”

Ajay shook his head, standing up, water dripping from his hair. "Oh, you're so dead."

Before she could react, he grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her down with him. She shrieked as she hit the water, getting just as drenched.

"Ajay!!!" she screamed, laughing as she tried to get up.

Ajay just grinned. "Revenge is sweet."

She splashed water at him. "I hate you."

Ajay leaned back, arms behind his head. "No, you don't."

Geetha rolled her eyes but smiled.

The waves crashed softly around them, the night sky stretching above. For a moment, they just sat there, letting the ocean wash over their feet, breathing in the salty air.

Geetha looked at Ajay, her expression softening. "Thank you."

Ajay raised an eyebrow. "For what?"

"For this." She gestured around them. "For today."

Ajay smiled, looking out at the horizon. "I should be thanking you, too."

Ajay and Geetha lay next to each other on the sand, drenched from the sea, laughing like children who forgot they were broken inside. Their clothes clung to them, heavy and soaked, but their hearts felt lighter than ever before. There was no crowd, no sound but the ocean, and in that perfect simplicity, they found the rarest kind of peace.

It was late. But for them, it was never too late.

"Geetha," Ajay whispered, turning his face toward her, "I wish we didn't have cancer."

She turned too, facing him now, just inches apart, her damp hair splayed across the sand like ink bleeding into a page. “It’s okay,” she said softly, her voice a mixture of acceptance and courage. “What’s written will happen... but because of this cancer, at least we met.”

Ajay’s gaze softened. “Yeah... the only good thing.”

A silence fell between them—heavy, but warm. The kind that needed no words, only closeness.

Geetha blinked slowly, then asked, “How much time do we have... approximately?”

Ajay sighed, looking up at the sky. “Five to six years for stage one. Sometimes even more... I guess.”

She nodded, taking that in. Then she turned on her side, propping herself on her elbow. “So... what’s the plan?”

Ajay chuckled. “You really want to talk plans now?”

“Yes. Right now,” she said, poking his arm.

He smiled faintly. “I’ll be done with college in a month. Then I want to get a job—definitely will get one, actually. After that... I’ll try to settle my family. My dad’s an auto driver, mom was a maid... I stopped her from working recently. They deserve a peaceful life, Geetha. They shouldn’t have to worry about me.”

“Hmm,” Geetha said, watching him. “MBA?”

Ajay blinked at her. “Yeah... my dream was always to do an MBA. Become an HR, work in a good company. I’m passionate about it, you know? Good salary, better life. But now...”

“Do it,” Geetha said, simply.

Ajay looked at her like she was joking. “Geetha... are you serious?”

She sat up now, brushing sand off her arms. “We have six years, okay? Let’s keep it five. That’s enough for a two-year MBA. You’ll graduate, get a great job, serve your family, and you’ll feel fulfilled.”

Ajay was about to protest, but she cut him off, placing her finger over his lips. “Shhh. Don’t give me your ‘practical’ speech.”

Ajay laughed, despite himself. “Then what?”

“Let’s do it,” she said, suddenly glowing with mischief and resolve. “Nothing will happen to us. And... let’s do it in SRM.”

Ajay tilted his head, confused. “Let’s do it...?”

Geetha grinned. “I’ll study with you. MBA. Same campus.”

He gawked. “Are you even interested?”

“Nope,” she said cheerfully. “Not one bit. But sitting at home alone sucks. Akshaya is leaving to the UK soon as well. I’ll be lonely. At least this way, I can come to college and be with you. Let’s be classmates. Let’s be together.”

Ajay blinked at her, genuinely touched. “You’re planning this on a whim. You don’t have to...”

Geetha leaned in, her hand gently cupping his cheek, her eyes full of both mischief and honesty. “Ajay... trust me. Please. We’re in this together. Let’s not overthink it.”

Ajay’s heart fluttered—not from romance, not from thrill, but from something deeper: the comfort of being understood. For a second, the world shrank down to just her hand on his face, the waves behind them, and the distant echo of hope.

He took a slow breath. “Okay... studying, I can accept. But... why don’t you want to take treatment?”

Geetha paused. Her smile softened into something bittersweet. “In my case... it’s not about money. My dad still sends money regularly. Financially, I’m okay. But emotionally... my grandma can’t take it. She’s already lost her daughter. I can’t watch her break again. I don’t want to burden her with hospital visits, false hope, and countdowns.”

Ajay looked down at the sand between his fingers.

Geetha caught the shift in his silence. “What about you?” she asked gently. “Why aren’t you taking treatment?”

He didn’t answer immediately. He exhaled slowly, almost like the words were too heavy to carry.

“Because if my parents knew... they’d be devastated. They put everything into me—every rupee, every dream, every prayer. I’m their only son. The first graduate in the family. They gave up everything so I could have a future.”

He swallowed hard. “If they find out I have cancer, it’ll crush them. And even worse... if they knew the treatment cost, they’d do anything—beg, borrow, even fall at someone’s feet to save me. And I can’t bear that. I don’t want to see them beg. I don’t want them to spend every paisa they saved just for a 50:50 chance.”

Geetha didn’t speak. She just slid her fingers between his and held his hand.

Ajay looked up at the sky. “So I decided... I’ll do what I can with the time I have. Settle them. Get a job. Give them peace. That way, even if I leave... they’ll be okay.”

Silence lingered like a blanket over them.

Geetha squeezed his hand tighter. “Okay, then. Let’s not waste this time. Let’s use it. MBA it is. Together.”

Ajay turned toward her, really looking at her. “We’re... officially classmates?”

Geetha grinned. "Yes, sir. And seatmates too, if I get to pick."

As the horizon began to blush with the first hints of dawn, Ajay and Geetha left the beach, the salty breeze still clinging to their skin and hair. The night had been a whirlwind of emotions, revelations, and unspoken promises. Ajay navigated the quiet streets, the hum of the bike filling the comfortable silence between them. Soon, they arrived at Akshaya's residence.

Geetha dismounted, her movements slow, as if reluctant to break the spell of the night. Ajay remained seated, watching her with a soft smile.

"It was just one night," he began, his voice tinged with wonder, "but it felt magical. It ended too soon."

Geetha turned to face him, her eyes reflecting the gentle glow of the approaching sunrise. "Once we join college together," she replied with a playful glint, "we'll meet all day."

Ajay chuckled, nodding. "That's right. So, today's date is done, I guess."

"Yep, I think the same," Geetha responded, her tone light yet carrying an undertone of something unspoken.

They exchanged goodbyes, but as Geetha turned to leave, a lingering feeling held her back. She paused, glancing over her shoulder, then pivoted back towards Ajay.

Ajay raised an eyebrow, curiosity piqued. "What? You wanna go somewhere now?"

Geetha shook her head, taking a step closer. "No," she began, her voice soft yet steady. "I want to say something."

Ajay's expression shifted to one of attentive anticipation. "What is it?"

She took a deep breath, gathering her thoughts. “Umm... you were the first guy to hold my hand, and the first guy I rode with on a bike. I wish you were my first kiss as well.”

Ajay's eyes widened, clearly taken aback by her candid confession. The typically reserved Geetha was unveiling a side he'd never seen.

He searched for words, but before he could respond, Geetha continued, her gaze unwavering. “Is this a proposal?” he finally managed, a hint of a smile playing on his lips.

“Yep!” she affirmed, her confidence growing. “I love you, Ajay! I know it's crazy; we've only known each other for three days, but it feels right. Every moment with you has been the happiest. It feels like we've known each other forever. And you might wonder why this is so soon, but... we have only a limited time, five to six years. I don't want to lose you. So, I've said it. It's your choice, but whether it's a yes or no, MBA is together.”

With that, she turned, beginning to walk away, leaving Ajay in stunned silence.

But something within him stirred—a realization, a surge of emotion he couldn't contain., Ajay reached out, gently grasping her waist and pulling her back towards him. The world around them faded as they stood close, the space between them charged with unspoken emotions.

“I love you too,” Ajay murmured, his voice thick with emotion. “I don't want to lose you either.”

Geetha's breath hitched, her eyes searching his for any sign of hesitation. Finding none, she allowed herself to smile, a tear slipping down her cheek.

Ajay reached up, brushing the tear away with his thumb. “We'll face this together,” he whispered, his forehead resting against hers. “Every step, every moment.”

Geetha nodded, her arms wrapping around his neck as she closed the distance between them.

In that moment, the world around them faded, leaving just the two of them standing on the precipice of something beautiful and profound.

As the sun rose higher, casting a golden glow around them, they knew that the journey ahead wouldn't be easy. But together, they felt invincible, ready to embrace whatever time they had left with unwavering love and determination.

The Next One Month – A Beautiful Blur of Emotions

The days after their love confession unfolded like a quiet symphony. Each moment carried warmth, laughter, and a growing sense of belonging.

Ajay had just one month of college left, and with his final project looming, he threw himself into the work. Geetha, ever the gentle force beside him, became his constant. She brought him notes, reminded him to drink water, and even stayed on late-night calls — sometimes in silence, just breathing together — as he coded through the night.

It was in those unspoken moments that their bond deepened.

Every evening, once the world slowed down, they would sneak out to their favourite spot on the beach. There, they'd sit barefoot on the sand, talking about everything and nothing — from childhood memories to the dreams they hadn't dared to say aloud before. Geetha would sometimes lean her head on Ajay's shoulder, and he'd wrap his arm around her without a word — like it was the most natural thing in the world.

While Ajay chased deadlines, Geetha quietly researched MBA applications, even drafting both their SOPs. She didn't tell him at first — just wanted to make life a little easier for him.

In the middle of all this, life shifted again — Akshaya got ready to leave for the UK. On the day of her departure, Ajay,

Geetha, and Kishan accompanied her to the airport. As they waited at the gate, Akshaya pulled Geetha into a tight hug.

“Please consider your treatment, G. Don’t push it away. I love you,” she said, trying to keep her voice steady.

Then she turned to Ajay and held his arm. “Take care of her. And yourself. Don’t pretend you’re invincible.”

Ajay smiled but his heart stirred. There was love in her words, but also weight — a silent reminder of the reality they were trying so hard to escape.

But for now, joy had found them.

Ajay cleared his exams. They applied to SRM for their MBA — and when the acceptance letters came in, it felt like a dream made real.

To celebrate, Ajay had only one place in mind — the old Punjabi dhaba he’d taken Geetha to that unforgettable night. The place where she had smiled freely for the first time in front of him, where they’d sat under the ceiling of fairy lights and shared buttery Naans and soft silences.

As they walked in again, hand in hand this time, the waiter grinned. “Same spot?” he asked.

“Of course,” Ajay replied, glancing at Geetha, who nodded with a giggle.

They slid into their corner table. The dhaba smelled of spice and nostalgia. Geetha immediately ordered her favourite — butter chicken and Naan — and Ajay, pretending to tease her, said, “Remember you said you were going on a diet?”

Geetha gave him a mock glare.

In between bites, she leaned across the table and wiped a smudge of chutney from the corner of his lips. He froze for

a second, surprised, then smiled — the kind of smile that said he was home.

Her phone buzzed mid-meal. It was her grandma on call. Geetha answered with glowing cheeks and said, “Paati, I got in!”

On speaker, her grandma’s voice cracked with joy. “I told your Mom’s photo — our girl made it!

Geetha got very emotional. but she was happy that she is finally doing something in her life.

And the cherry on top? Kishan also got his M.Tech admission at SRM — completing their little circle.

That night, under the hum of fairy lights and laughter, they forgot cancer. Not because it didn’t exist — but because love, dreams, and togetherness had taken centre stage.

Ajay gently reached for Geetha’s hand across the table, their fingers locking naturally. She looked at him, eyes gleaming.

“From a broken day to a beautiful life,” she whispered.

He smiled; eyes soft. “And we’re just getting started.”

The gates of SRM University loomed ahead, not intimidating, but full of promise. Geetha stood quietly, taking in the bustling energy of the place — the sharp sound of dragging luggage wheels, fresh notebooks clutched tight, excited chatter from groups who had already found comfort in each other, and others nervously scanning the campus map.

Beside her, Ajay adjusted the strap of his backpack and nudged her elbow gently. “This is it. Day one of our MBA life.”

Geetha looked up at him, a soft smile blooming on her lips. “I still can’t believe we made it. Feels like yesterday we were at that Punjabi dhaba talking about dreams.”

He grinned. “Well, dreams walked us here.”

The walk from the gate to the MBA block was about eight minutes, but it felt shorter — like time bent around the familiarity of his presence. They walked hand-in-hand, weaving between students and bikes, the campus trees casting flickering shadows across the path.

Geetha soaked it all in — the filtered sunlight dancing across the grass, the smell of new paint in the air, the dull echo of someone playing a guitar near the architecture block. Everything felt like a movie’s opening scene. And in that movie, Ajay was her lead.

But that magic paused the moment they reached their department.

Just a few steps from the classroom, Ajay abruptly let go of her hand.

Geetha blinked, the warmth of his fingers fading too quickly from hers. “Ajay?” she whispered.

He didn’t look at her. His gaze was fixed ahead. “Let’s keep things low-key today, okay?”

A pause.

“No need to act like a couple in front of everyone.”

Her steps slowed. “Wait... what?” Her voice cracked slightly, disbelief turning in her throat.

Ajay turned to her, a firm expression on his face. “We’re starting something serious here. An MBA isn’t high school. I don’t want people assuming things or judging us. Let’s not invite drama.”

Drama? The word landed like a slap.

Only a few nights ago, he was tracing constellations on her palm and saying he didn't want to lose her. Now, her hand was suddenly too loud to hold?

"You think holding my hand is drama?" she asked quietly, voice trembling with the effort to stay composed.

He rubbed the back of his neck, clearly uncomfortable. "I'm not saying it's bad. I'm saying it's not necessary. We know what we are. We don't need to prove it."

And then, the words she would carry all day: "Be mature, Geetha."

Geetha felt something in her chest tighten. Not anger. Not exactly sadness either. Just... confusion. Deep, aching confusion.

"Okay," she said, with a small nod that tasted bitter.

The classroom smelled of fresh wood and new beginnings. Sunlight streamed in through the tall windows, casting sharp rectangles across the rows of seats. Every inch of the space felt like it belonged in a dream — polished desks, an enormous whiteboard, a massive projection screen, and clean walls that echoed with anticipation.

Geetha walked in behind Ajay, her fingers brushing the edge of the desk they passed. He didn't even glance back to check if she was following. He slid into a seat in the middle row — the "not too front, not too back" kind of place. She took the seat next to him, though it suddenly felt like sitting beside a stranger.

He was already arranging his notebook, writing something. Scribbling casually, almost like he was trying not to notice her.

She sat silently.

Around them, students filled in. Laughter, phone scrolling, whispered hellos — the usual first-day hum. But all of it felt far away from her. Like she was watching through a glass window. She stole a side glance at Ajay, hoping he'd look at her. Even for a second. Even accidentally.

He didn't.

Instead, he leaned back, arms crossed, eyes fixed ahead.

The professor entered — a middle-aged woman with sharp glasses and the kind of energy that demanded attention. She introduced herself as Dr. Vandana Reddy. Her presence was calm, commanding.

"Welcome, everyone," she smiled warmly. "Let's not waste time. Let's begin with introductions — not your CVs. I want to know who you are, beyond your marks. Tell us something personal. Something real."

The room fell into a curious hush.

And then, Ajay stood up first. Confident. Casual. Effortlessly composed.

"I'm Ajay," he began, his voice smooth. "I come from Chennai. My background is in tech and design. I've worked on a couple of freelance projects, and I've always been drawn toward building my own thing — a startup, maybe. I'm here to build something meaningful. That's all."

A few heads nodded in appreciation.

But Geetha?

She felt nothing.

He didn't even glance at Geetha.

Not once.

She sat there, stunned. Not because he didn't mention her — she never needed that. But because... he didn't even look

at her. As if she was just another stranger sitting in a classroom. As if all the nights they shared under the stars, the shared laughter, the secrets, the promises — none of it mattered anymore.

Next was Geetha.

She stood slowly, every bone in her body screaming to sit back down. But she took a breath. She'd never been good at public speaking — and today, it felt harder than ever. But something inside her told her she had to do this. For herself.

"I'm Geetha," she said, her voice gentle. "I am basically from Hyderabad but I am settled in Chennai. My world is... quiet. I lost my mother last year from then It's been just me and my grandma She raised me when things fell apart, and she never stopped believing in me — even when I didn't believe in myself."

There was silence. The kind of respectful, heavy silence that only raw honesty can create.

"I love writing. And stories. I think I've always seen the world a little differently... maybe softer than most people do. I'm here because I want to build something meaningful, too — but not just for myself for my mother as well even though she is not here with.

She sat down before her voice could crack, though it already had.

A few students clapped first. Then a few more. Soon, the room was filled with applause — warm, genuine, louder than anyone else's so far.

But the one person she looked for?

Ajay didn't move. Didn't clap. Didn't even blink in her direction.

Geetha looked away.

And in that exact moment, she felt something inside her — it's not just sadness it was something heavy. she felt invisible to the person who once made her feel seen like no one else.

During the break, they stepped out. Kishan found them at the café and brought with him a wave of comfort.

“Daa! Finally, SRM has all three of us,” he laughed, throwing an arm over Ajay's shoulder and grinning at Geetha.

She forced a smile. “Finally,” she said softly.

Kishan looked at her and then at Ajay — noticing something, but not saying a word.

Ajay slipped back into his usual self in front of Kishan, joking, talking about the crowd, the food court. But to Geetha, that version of him felt like a stranger now. The boy who once made her feel seen — like she mattered more than the world — now made her feel invisible in a room full of people.

As they sipped on their coffee, Geetha turned her face away slightly, pretending to look at the sky.

But inside, a small part of her was breaking.

The sun had dipped low, casting a mellow orange hue across the sky as Geetha and Ajay walked out of the campus gates. The first day of college had ended — but for Geetha, it hadn't ended the way she'd imagined it would.

She was quiet.

Ajay, walking beside her, sensed the silence but didn't say much either. He stretched a bit and casually asked, “Want me to drop you home?”

Geetha looked at him. She wanted to say yes. She wanted him to notice her silence, to ask what was wrong, to say

something that brought her back from that weird, distant version of their day. But instead, she gave a small smile.

“It’s okay. It’s far. I’ll go by train.”

Ajay didn’t argue. “Fine, at least I’ll drop you at the station.”

They rode together, the bike slicing through the early evening traffic. The streets of Chennai blurred around them, the city lights flickering on one by one. But Geetha didn’t feel any of it — her mind kept rewinding to how he had introduced himself earlier that day like she didn’t even exist... how he had let go of her hand at the classroom door... how he told her not to create drama.

She held onto his waist loosely, but not like before.

At the station, he parked the bike and walked her towards the platform. There was a faint breeze and the distant chime of a train approaching. For a moment, Geetha just stood there, looking at the tracks.

Ajay reached out, gently took her hand.

“What now?” she asked softly, her eyes searching his.

Ajay shrugged. “It’s just in class, Geetha. Don’t overthink. Nothing’s changed.”

She nodded slowly. But inside, something had changed.

Just then, two of their classmates from the same MBA batch passed by, recognizing Ajay. They waved. In that split second, without a word, Ajay let go of her hand — like it burned.

And that moment... broke something.

Geetha noticed. Of course, she noticed.

She didn’t say a word. She simply looked at her hand — now empty — then at him.

"I'll see you tomorrow," she whispered, and turned toward the arriving train.

Ajay nodded, completely unaware of the weight of that moment. He genuinely thought she was just being sensitive — overreacting. To him, it was a small thing. A formality.

Geetha boarded the train, found a window seat, and as it pulled away, she watched him grow smaller and smaller on the platform. No wave. No smile. Just standing there, hands in his pockets, looking at his phone.

Her reflection on the train window stared back at her — eyes tired, heart a little heavier.

Ajay got back on his bike and rode to his hostel, where he stayed with Kishan and two juniors. He kicked his shoes off, threw his bag on the chair, and sighed.

"She's too emotional sometimes," he mumbled to himself, brushing off the unease.

But deep down, somewhere quiet — a feeling lingered.

And for Geetha, as the city passed by outside her train window, the silence between them had never felt louder.

The Chennai sky had darkened by the time Geetha stepped off the train. The rhythm of the city buzzed around her — autos honking, vendors calling out their last deals, lights blinking in shop windows — but she walked through it all as though the world had gone muted.

Her footsteps echoed on the pavement. Not because the road was empty, but because her mind was too full.

Each step toward home felt heavier than the last. She replayed the moment again and again — the way Ajay had smiled so freely with his classmates, the way he let go of her hand the second someone saw. As if her presence needed to be hidden. As if she needed to be hidden.

Her house came into view — the one with the blue gate and the faint fairy lights her grandmother refused to take down from last Diwali. Normally, the sight brought her comfort.

Tonight, it just made her eyes sting.

Her grandmother greeted her at the door with her usual warm smile. “You look tired, kanna. College okay?”

Geetha nodded, forcing a faint smile. “Yeah, paati. Just a long day.”

She didn’t wait for more questions. She rushed into her room, shutting the door gently but firmly behind her. The sound of the bolt sliding into place echoed in the silence of her small, safe world.

She placed her bag on the table, changed into her soft cotton nightwear, and sat on the bed.

Then... she waited.

Her phone lit up — but it was just a message from her college about attendance.

She waited some more.

Maybe he was eating.

Maybe he was with Kishan.

Maybe he just got busy.

Ten minutes.

Twenty.

An hour.

Nothing.

No “reached?”

No “tired?”

Literally nothing...

Geetha stared at her screen. Her fingers hovered over Ajay’s name. The chat still had that one final “Drive safe” she’d sent when the train pulled away, but no reply.

She tapped the call icon before her overthinking could stop her.

Ringling...

No answer.

She tried again.

Ringling...

Still no answer.

The silence on the other end of the line sounded louder than any fight could’ve been.

Something inside her started to spiral. Her heart thudded in her chest, anxiety bubbling up like a storm she didn't ask for.

"Maybe he's sleeping."

"Maybe he just wants space."

"Maybe this is what happens after the first few days of love — the novelty wears off."

"Maybe... I annoyed him."

"Maybe I'm too emotional."

"Maybe he regrets it."

She placed the phone beside her, screen facing down. She didn't want to see it anymore. But even then, every small vibration sent her heart racing. Only for it to turn out to be something else. A promotional SMS. An app notification. Nothing from him.

Her eyes flicked to her journal lying on the desk. The one where she used to write about the sunsets they saw, the dhaba they laughed in, the promises made under the stars.

She didn't touch it tonight.

For the first time in days, she felt like maybe those pages would only remind her of something slipping away.

She picked up her phone again. Her thumb hovered over Akshaya's contact.

If there was one person who could ground her thoughts, who knew how to bring clarity to her chaos, it was Akshaya.

But...

Akshaya was in the UK now. Different time zone. First week of her Master's. Geetha didn't want to interrupt. Didn't want to sound like a helpless girl having a meltdown over a boy.

So she put the phone down again.

And then, she sat there. In the quiet of her room. Moonlight spilling in from the side window. The hum of an auto somewhere outside. The occasional bark of a street dog.

The world continued.

But inside Geetha, a storm of thoughts raged. Unanswered. Unnoticed.

“Was I expecting too much?”

“We just started college... maybe he’s nervous.”

“Maybe he doesn’t love me anymore.”

Tears welled up, but she blinked them back.

She refused to cry.

Not for someone who once looked at her like she was magic — and now treated her like she was just someone in the class.

The next morning, the sun rose but Geetha’s heart felt stuck in the night before.

No messages.

No missed calls.

No “good morning.”

She checked her phone multiple times, thinking maybe there was a glitch, maybe she missed a call in sleep. But the screen was blank. Silent.

She sighed, trying to shake the heavy feeling off. Maybe he’ll talk in college, she thought, forcing herself out of bed. She slipped into her favourite pastel blue kurti — the one with tiny embroidered flowers — and tied her hair the way she always liked. Not for him. Not today. At least that’s what she told herself.

On the way to college, her thoughts spiralled. Every noise around her felt muffled by the echo of Why didn't he call? Did I do something wrong? Was it too much to expect a reply? But she shook those questions away like water off an umbrella. Focus on the day. Be normal Geetha.

But "normal" shattered the moment she entered the classroom.

Ajay was already there. Laughing. Chatting with a girl — Ayesha — who was clearly enjoying his company. His body was relaxed, his voice light, his eyes carefree. Not a trace of last night's tension.

Geetha paused for a moment at the door, her eyes meeting his for the briefest second. He gave a casual nod — not even a smile — and turned back to Ayesha as if he hadn't spent the previous day holding her hand at the railway station.

She walked in, her heart thudding, and sat down in her usual seat, unsure whether to feel confused, hurt, or just plain invisible.

Ajay eventually came up to her, his tone unusually casual. "What's with the face?" he asked as if she were merely upset about the weather.

She turned slowly, barely keeping her composure. "I called you last night."

"I slept," he replied nonchalantly, shrugging.

"You could've at least messaged me in the morning," she whispered, trying not to let the disappointment show.

Ajay laughed softly, almost dismissively. "Chill, Geetha. We're gonna see each other here anyway. What's the big deal?"

Before she could respond, the teacher walked in. The conversation dropped, but her thoughts didn't. She sat

through the class stiffly, her eyes on the board but her mind miles away.

When the class ended, she stood up and walked out into the corridor, needing air, needing space — needing him to follow.

And he did.

Ajay caught up with her, frustration evident in his steps. “Geetha,” he said, his voice low, but not tender. “You want me to beg now or what?”

She looked up at him, shocked.

“Don’t act childish or create some drama. Just get inside the classroom.”

She felt the words like a slap — cold and unexpected. And for the first time, her silence wasn’t out of shyness, but out of heartbreak. She turned away, walking back into the classroom, her feet moving like they weren’t hers.

She didn’t return to her usual seat. Instead, she walked to the far side of the room and sat next to a girl with a cheerful face and warm smile — Shruthi.

Ajay didn’t say anything. He didn’t try to stop her.

Instead, Ayesha slid into the now empty seat beside him without hesitation.

Geetha noticed — of course she did — but she said nothing. She just sat there quietly as Shruthi turned toward her, eyes bright. “Hey! I’m Shruthi! You’re Geetha, right? I saw you during intro day!”

Geetha managed a soft smile. “Yeah... hi.”

Shruthi’s energy was infectious, a stream of bubbly chatter about classes, canteen food, and how she always gets a crush on nerds. For a few minutes, Geetha forgot. Forgot the

disappointment. Forgot the silent treatment. Forgot the fact that just a day ago, she was his whole world.

Then the bell rang for break.

Shruthi tugged at Geetha's arm. "Come with me! I'll introduce you to our gang!" She was impossible to say no to.

They went out, joined a lively group near the college café. Laughter. Introductions. New faces. New beginnings, maybe.

But Geetha's eyes were scanning — searching.

Where's Ajay?

And then she saw him.

In the canteen.

With Ayesha.

They were talking, smiling. He leaned in to say something, and Ayesha laughed — too loudly, too comfortably.

Geetha's chest tightened. Not with jealousy. But with disbelief.

I came here for him... doesn't he even want to come look for me?

Just then, Kishan spotted her. He walked up, balancing a plate of samosas. "Hey, Geetha! Where's Ajay?"

Geetha gave a dry smile and pointed toward the corner where Ajay and Ayesha sat. "There."

Kishan turned to look, then looked back at her. "You, okay?"

She nodded. Lied.

And walked back to class alone.

Geetha sat at her desk, the classroom a quiet hum around her. Geetha was finally alone — but not in the peaceful way. Her eyes wandered to Ajay and Ayesha as they walked back

in, still mid-conversation. He didn't look at her. Not even once.

She wasn't expecting a dramatic apology. Not even a smile. But something. A glance. A silent "hey." Anything to tell her she still mattered.

But nothing came.

She turned her head back to the front and pulled out her notebook, though she had no idea what the next class was. Her pen moved across the page, scribbling nothing — just shapes, lines, loops. All her energy was focused on holding herself together.

Then Shruthi returned, chatting about how the water cooler was broken again and how someone should really complain to the admin. Geetha smiled weakly, nodding along. Shruthi's voice was a cushion — not solving her pain, but softening the edges.

When class resumed, she kept her eyes on the board, avoiding Ajay completely. But every now and then, she could feel his presence like a weight in the room — silent, deliberate. She didn't know if it was guilt or stubbornness that kept him from talking to her, but either way, the silence was now speaking louder than any words.

At lunch break, Geetha left without saying anything to Shruthi. She walked to the back of the campus where a narrow pathway led to a small tree-covered seating area students rarely used. She needed quiet. She needed to feel like herself again.

She sat there alone, staring up at the sky, thinking, was it really me who misread everything? Was he never serious?

She thought about the nights they spent talking, the plans they made, the way he once looked at her like she was his entire world. Where did that boy go?

A single tear rolled down her cheek, and she quickly wiped it away, hoping no one saw.

But someone did.

Kishan.

He stood a few steps behind, unsure whether to approach or not. Then he walked forward and sat beside her.

“You, okay?” he asked gently.

Geetha nodded, then shook her head. “I don’t know.”

“I’m not going to ask what happened. But if you ever want to talk... I’m here.”

She gave him a soft, grateful smile. “Thanks, Kishan.”

They sat there for a while, not saying much. But sometimes, company doesn’t need words.

Later that day, the classroom emptied like a drained glass—its last drops soaked in silence and unspoken tension.

Geetha walked out first, her steps brisk but heavy. Each stride tried to carry away the aching tightness in her chest. She didn't glance back. She didn't expect Ajay to walk with her anymore. That idea now belonged to some old, distant dream.

Inside the classroom, Ajay stayed behind. His fingers tapped idly on the desk. His ego, tall and smug, sat comfortably on his shoulders—he convinced himself she was the one overreacting. That it wasn't his fault. That he was just being "mature."

That evening, the sun dipped low, washing the sky in tired hues of orange and grey. Ajay unlocked the door to his shared apartment and tossed his bag in the corner, not even bothering to unlace his shoes. He slumped into his cot, picked up his phone, and dialed Geetha's number.

Switched off.

He frowned and tried again.

Still off.

A sigh escaped him—not one of regret, but frustration. "She's such a drama," he muttered, the phone still in his hand. "I should've known. That day I said yes... probably the worst decision I made." His voice dropped. "I involved myself in an emotional mess."

The room was still. But the silence didn't agree with him.

From across the room, Kishan—half-lying on his bed, scrolling through something mindlessly—sat up slowly, his eyes narrowing. “Worst decision?” he repeated. There wasn't anger in his tone. Just disbelief. And disappointment. “You think loving her was the worst decision?”

Ajay avoided his eyes, shrugged. “Bro, you weren't there. She's acting like I owe her everything. Like if I don't text her or smile one morning, it's the end of the world.”

Kishan sat up straighter, the mattress creaking under him. “Who's being dramatic now?” he asked, voice firmer. “You... or her?”

Ajay's jaw clenched. “Don't start, Kishan.”

“I'm not starting. I'm observing,” Kishan said, getting to his feet now. “Today in class—man, you didn't even look at her. You were busy chatting with Ayesha like she didn't exist.”

“So? I was just talking. What's the big deal?”

“She just stood there, Ajay,” Kishan shot back, emotion creeping into his voice. “Like she didn't even recognize the guy she joined this course for.”

Ajay rolled his eyes. “Oh, don't give me that again. She chose MBA. I didn't put a gun to her head.”

“Are you hearing yourself?” Kishan snapped. “She chose you. And this MBA came along with it. You think it's a coincidence she picked SRM when you picked SRM?”

Ajay let out a short, bitter laugh. “Bro... you're talking like she's some angel and I'm the villain.”

“I'm talking like your friend, Ajay. And I've seen you date before. I know how you move on when things get inconvenient. But Geetha's not like them. She's not some

casual college crush. She's pure. Innocent. She meant every word she said to you."

Ajay's face turned cold. "Ah. So, her sympathy card worked. Even my best friend is on her side now."

"This isn't a card," Kishan said, voice quieter now but shaking with conviction. "It's not sympathy. It's truth. I saw her eyes today, bro. I saw how much she was trying. And you... you didn't even try to understand."

Ajay flinched a little but masked it with a scoff. "You don't get it. You don't know what she said to me before class. How she acted. How she's always expecting something."

Kishan laughed, dry and sad. "Expectation? She expected a good morning text. That's your version of pressure now?"

Ajay didn't respond.

"You know what I think?" Kishan continued. "You don't want to be seen with her. Not because you don't care. But because you care too much. And that scares you."

Ajay's face stiffened. "Don't psychoanalyze me, Kishan."

"Then be honest with yourself," Kishan said. "You're not angry at her. You're angry at how she makes you feel. Vulnerable. Real. And you don't know what to do with that, do you?"

Ajay still didn't speak.

"She held your hand at the station, and you let go because classmates were around. What the hell is that, Ajay? Embarrassment?"

Ajay turned away, teeth clenched.

"And now? Now you're calling her dramatic? When she shut her phone probably to stop herself from calling you for the hundredth time today?"

“She always shuts off when she’s upset,” Ajay murmured.

“Yeah,” Kishan said softly. “Because you leave her no space to talk.”

The room fell into silence again. But it wasn’t peaceful. It was heavy—like something that should’ve been said long ago had finally been spoken.

Kishan exhaled and turned away. “I’m going to grab dinner,” he muttered. “Think about what you just said. And why you said it.

The room was cloaked in a heavy silence, the kind that settles after a storm of words. Kishan, still reeling from the confrontation, grabbed his keys and headed towards the door. Just as he reached for the handle, Ajay’s phone buzzed, its screen illuminating the dim room.

Ajay glanced at the caller: Akshaya.

He hesitated, the name stirring a mix of surprise and apprehension. Before answering, he muttered, “Told you, she’s being dramatic.”

Kishan, pausing mid-step, shot him a look. “Just pick up the call first.”

Ajay answered, trying to mask his tension. “Hello?”

“Ajay,” Akshaya’s voice was laced with concern. “Geetha’s grandmother called me. She said Geetha’s phone is switched off. Is everything okay?”

Ajay’s heart skipped a beat. “Her phone’s off? I... I didn’t know.”

“I told her Geetha was working on a project with friends to ease her mind,” Akshaya continued. “But honestly, I’m worried. Do you know where she might be?”

Ajay felt a knot tighten in his stomach. "She was upset earlier. I thought she needed space."

Akshaya's voice grew urgent. "If she's really upset, she might have gone to the beach. She finds solace there. Please, find her. Let's talk later."

The call ended, leaving a weighty silence in its wake.

Ajay turned to Kishan, his facade of indifference cracking. "Machan, you head to Kovalam Beach. I'll check Marina. We need to find her." "I don't want to waste time lets split up and search."

Kishan nodded, the gravity of the situation evident. "Don't worry. We'll find her."

As Kishan rushed out, Ajay grabbed his jacket, but something made him pause. A thought, a hunch. Instead of heading to the beach, he turned towards the college campus.

Navigating the familiar pathways, memories flooded his mind: shared laughter, stolen glances, moments that once felt eternal. As he approached the Tech Park, he spotted a solitary figure sitting on the steps, her silhouette framed by the soft glow of the campus lights.

It was Geetha.

Relief washed over him, quickly replaced by a surge of anger. He approached, his footsteps echoing in the quiet night.

"What the hell, Geetha? Everyone's worried sick!" he shouted, his voice breaking the stillness.

Geetha looked up, her eyes red-rimmed but defiant. "I needed time."

"Time? By disappearing?" Ajay's voice rose. "Do you have any idea what you've put us through?"

She stood, facing him. “I didn’t ask you to come looking for me.”

Ajay’s anger flared. “Unbelievable. After everything, this is your response?”

The cool night air clung to Ajay’s skin as he stood before her, anger quickly giving way to something far more fragile—fear. The fear of losing someone who had quietly become his everything.

Before he could speak again, he pulled out his phone and quickly dialed Kishan.

The line rang once before Kishan picked up.

“Machan?” Kishan’s voice was sharp with worry.

“I found her,” Ajay said, eyes still on Geetha as she stood silently before him on the Tech Park steps. “She’s here. In the college campus.”

There was a pause. A breath of relief. “Thank God,” Kishan exhaled. “I hope you remember what I said.”

Ajay didn’t answer that. Just a low “Hmm,” before he hung up.

He slipped his phone back into his pocket and turned to Geetha, his jaw still tight, but his gaze a little softer.

“What the hell were you thinking, Geetha?” he burst out. “You switched off your phone, left without a word. Do you know how worried we all were? Your grandma, Akshaya, Kishan, me...”

Geetha’s expression shifted. The composure she had clung to cracked, and her voice, when it came, was full of heat and trembling pain.

“You’re worried now?” she cried, her voice loud, slicing the silence like a blade. “Where was this concern when you sat

in class laughing with another girl, acting like I didn't even exist?"

Ajay blinked, taken aback by the rawness in her tone.

"You think I stormed off because of nothing? Because I'm dramatic?" she shouted, stepping closer, tears now streaming down her cheeks. "Do you know what it feels like to sit next to someone who meant the world to you, and watch them pretend like you're invisible?"

Ajay opened his mouth to speak, but Geetha wasn't done.

"I followed you here, Ajay. I changed everything for you. My course, my life! All because I believed in what we had. And now... you won't even look me in the eye when someone else is around."

The sob that escaped her lips wasn't soft. It was guttural, angry, heartbroken. She turned away, wiping her tears with her hands, ashamed that she let herself break down in front of him.

Ajay stood frozen. Her words echoed in his mind louder than any lecture, louder than his own thoughts. For the first time in days, the fog of his ego began to lift.

He stepped toward her slowly, carefully.

"Geetha..." he whispered, voice trembling, "I'm... I'm sorry."

She didn't move. Didn't turn.

"I mean it," he said again. "I'm really, really sorry. I got lost. I didn't know how to handle what I was feeling... I let my ego win. But seeing you like this—hurting—it's tearing me apart."

She turned to face him, her eyes still wet. "You think 'sorry' will fix everything?"

“No,” Ajay said honestly. “But it’s a start. I promise, I’ll never do this again. I’ll never leave you wondering if I care. I won’t shut you out. I won’t pretend. I’ll stand by you... always.”

He extended his hand, his eyes earnest. “I will never let go of this hand again. Not in front of anyone. Not ever.”

Geetha looked at his hand, then into his eyes. Her lip trembled as she took his hand in both of hers.

“And I promise I won’t disappear like this again,” she said softly. “No more switched-off phones. No more running away.”

A small smile began to form on Ajay’s lips. The storm had passed, and in its place, something real was growing.

As their argument softened into apologies and promises, the weight between them lifted. Ajay gently held her hand, and after a long pause of silence, he looked up at her and said, “Come, I’ll drop you home.”

Geetha wiped her tears and nodded silently.

They walked out of the Tech Park, the night air cooler now, calmer—like even the wind had taken a breath.

Ajay walked up to his parked bike; the same one she used to cling to during their early days on campus. He handed her the helmet, and for a moment, there was a familiar flicker in her eyes.

“Don’t think this helmet makes up for everything,” she said, trying to act stern but failing to hide her smile.

Ajay chuckled, putting on his own helmet. “I’ll work on the rest while you sit behind and remind me every minute.”

They rode through the near-empty roads of the city, Geetha resting her head lightly against his back. The wind in their hair, the hum of the bike beneath them—it all felt like home again.

Ajay spoke while riding, raising his voice just enough to cut through the wind. “You know, I was planning to search every damn beach in Chennai tonight.”

Geetha smiled, the wind brushing away the last of her tears. “And I was sitting there wondering if you even cared.”

“I care,” he said. “More than I’ve ever said. I’m just terrible at showing it.”

She tightened her arms around his waist, just a little. “Then start learning.”

They both laughed—genuine, free, the kind of laughter that only comes after a long cry. As the city lights flickered past them, it felt like the universe was slowly aligning again.

Ajay finally pulled up in front of her house and stopped the bike.

Geetha started to climb off, but Ajay caught her wrist gently and said, “Wait.”

She turned, puzzled.

He removed his helmet slowly, his eyes locked on hers. The porch light made her face glow in the dimness, and for a moment, he just looked at her—like he wanted to memorize this second forever.

“I love you,” he said quietly, as if it was a truth he was finally brave enough to say out loud.

Geetha blinked, then smiled softly—like she’d been waiting to hear it forever.

“I love you too.”

Ajay’s face broke into a wide grin. “You have no idea how much I’ve missed hearing that.”

Geetha stepped back slowly, hand still brushing against his. “And you have no idea how much it hurt not hearing it.”

He nodded. “I’ll make up for it.”

She was about to turn toward the gate again when Ajay called out, “Geetha?”

She looked back.

“I’ll come pick you up tomorrow morning. For class.”

Geetha smiled brightly, the kind of smile that lights up her entire face. “I’ll be ready.”

And with that, she disappeared into the house, while Ajay sat on his bike for a second longer, helmet in hand, heart light, soul full.

That night, they didn’t just find each other—they chose each other all over again.

The morning sun cast a golden hue over the quiet streets, bathing everything in a soft, honey-colored light. It was one of those rare Chennai mornings where the air felt still and kind, holding the promise of something beautiful. Geetha stood before the mirror in her small, neatly kept room. She leaned in slightly, adjusting the tiny red bindi between her brows with delicate care. Her eyes sparkled with a quiet excitement as she stepped back to look at herself.

She had chosen her favourite cotton Kurti—peach with light thread work and a modest neckline. She paired it with silver bangles that jingled softly with each movement and a matching dupatta carefully pinned in place. A light kajal outlined her eyes, and her hair fell in soft waves, cascading over her shoulder. She wasn't trying to impress the world—just one boy.

Today was special. Ajay had promised to pick her up, and for some reason, that simple gesture had felt monumental to her. It wasn't just about the ride—it was about being chosen, noticed, remembered. She wanted to look pretty for him. Not loud, not flashy—just... lovely in her own way.

Geetha walked down the narrow pathway outside her house, her heart fluttering at the sight of Ajay already waiting on his bike. He leaned casually against it, scrolling through something on his phone, one foot tapping absentmindedly against the ground. Helmet in hand, dressed in his usual navy shirt and jeans, he looked effortlessly cool in that way he always did—unknowingly.

As he noticed her approaching, he looked up and gave her a brief smile. A polite one. A friendly one. But not the kind that lingered or held surprise or awe.

Geetha's heart sank a little. But she didn't let it show. She reached him, her bangles gently chiming, waiting—hoping—for him to say something.

Nothing came.

They both climbed onto the bike. She placed her hands cautiously on the edge of the seat, leaving space between them. She didn't expect him to hold her hand. But maybe... just maybe... a compliment?

She finally asked, voice soft, "No compliment? I got ready for you."

Ajay glanced over his shoulder, a half-smirk playing on his lips. "Oh... for me, is it?"

"Yes," she said, her tone holding a thread of shyness and expectation. "Don't you like it?"

Ajay let out a short breath—half a chuckle, half a shrug. "To be honest, Geetha, you dress in a very old-fashioned way for college."

The words hit like a cold slap.

"You should see the other girls in our college," he continued casually, starting the bike. "They've got some real dressing sense. Like... they've developed it over time."

Geetha froze. Her hands tightened their grip on the side bars. Her voice caught in her throat. It wasn't just about the clothes—it was what the clothes meant. Her effort. Her intention. Her heart.

Still, she managed to ask, blinking back the sting in her eyes, "Oh... like Ayesha?"

"Yep," he replied with zero hesitation. "She has a great style."

He laughed then, adding lightly, "Unlike your friend Sruthi—such a fatty. That girl should seriously think about skipping a few lunches."

It wasn't just offensive. It was cruel. Insensitive. And so unlike the Ajay she thought she knew.

Geetha didn't say a word after that. She turned her face slightly to the side, letting the wind rush past and dry the single tear that had dared to fall. Her bindi, once a symbol of care and excitement, now felt like a foolish decoration.

The ride to college was a quiet one. The silence wasn't comfortable—it was thick with things unspoken. She didn't know whether to feel angry, insecure, ashamed, or just... invisible.

And for the first time since they had started seeing each other, Geetha wondered whether she is not enough for Ajay.

The college gates loomed ahead as Ajay and Geetha approached on his bike. The morning sun cast elongated shadows, and the usual chatter of students filled the air. Geetha's heart was a tumultuous sea of emotions—anticipation, insecurity, and a yearning for affirmation.

As they dismounted, Ajay casually reached out and held Geetha's hand. The gesture, though brief, sent a ripple through the crowd. Whispers ensued, and one voice rang out, "New couple alert!"

Ajay chuckled, releasing her hand. "Nah, we're just best friends," he said, his tone light.

Geetha's smile faltered. The warmth from his touch was overshadowed by his words. Yet, she clung to the moment, finding solace in the fleeting connection.

Inside the classroom, the atmosphere buzzed with energy. Ayesha approached Ajay, her eyes gleaming. "Nice shirt, Ajay," she complimented.

Ajay grinned, "Yov Ayesha, your hair looks cool!"

“Glad you noticed. I cut it yesterday,” she replied, twirling a strand.

Geetha stood nearby, her presence unnoticed. The exchange between Ajay and Ayesha played on a loop in her mind, each repetition chipping away at her confidence.

The professor entered, signaling the start of the lecture. As Geetha moved to sit beside Ajay, Ayesha slid into the seat with practiced ease. “Oh, Geetha, did you want to sit here?” she asked, feigning innocence.

Geetha shook her head, forcing a smile.

Geetha sat beside Shruthi, her books open, but her eyes unfocused. The professor’s voice echoed faintly in the background like waves crashing against a distant shore, but nothing really registered. She blinked slowly, trying to push back the sting behind her eyes. It wasn’t just what Ajay had said earlier on the bike. It was everything—the silences that felt too long, the smiles he gave to others that once were hers, the lack of awareness that made her feel invisible.

Throughout the lecture, Geetha’s thoughts spiraled. Is it just me? Am I overreacting? Why does his opinion matter so much? The questions echoed, each one amplifying her self-doubt.

She kept her head down, doodling mindlessly in the margins of her notebook. Her thoughts were a maze, and every turn led to Ajay.

He held my hand. For a second, I thought maybe... maybe something had changed. That he was proud to be seen with me. That he felt something.

But then came his laugh. “We’re just best friends.”

And now Ayesha sat beside him. Laughing. Whispering. Nudging his arm when the teacher said something funny. Geetha watched all of it from the corner of her eye,

pretending to take notes while her chest felt heavier with every passing moment.

Ajay, on the other hand, sat in his usual easy-going manner. His leg bounced restlessly under the bench. He scribbled quick notes and occasionally tilted his head towards Ayesha when she whispered something.

To him, this was normal.

This was how he had always been. Friendly. Flirty in a harmless way. Oblivious to how certain things could break someone quietly.

Ajay thought everything between him and Geetha was fine—unchanged. She laughed at his jokes. She rode on his bike. She came when he called. She never said anything when he forgot to notice her efforts. In his mind, everything was the same. He was just being himself.

But for Geetha, that “normal” had become anything but.

She used to think he was just reserved. That maybe he didn’t know how to express feelings. But now, she questioned everything. Was he like this with every girl? Did she really mean anything more to him? Or had she imagined their closeness? Did she read too much into every handhold, every ride, every midnight chat?

She bit her lip.

A part of her wanted to walk up to him and scream, “Look at me the way you look at her.” But she didn’t.

Instead, she kept her voice locked in the back of her throat and smiled when Shruthi cracked a joke beside her.

Inside, she was crumbling. She looked down at her outfit again—the kurti she loved. The bangles she carefully picked. The bindi she wore because she thought he’d like it.

She remembered how she stood before the mirror that morning, heart fluttering, imagining what he might say.

“You look beautiful,” she had hoped.

Instead, he told her she looked old-fashioned.

And worse, he laughed at Shruthi—her best friend. The one person who always supported her, even when she was silently battling her inner storms.

The Professor left the classroom slam opening the door, snapping her from her thoughts. Students began shuffling out. Ajay turned around and gave her a grin.

“Hey, Geeths. You didn’t speak much today.”

She smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “Headache,” she lied.

“Oh. Okay. Want coffee after this?”

She wanted to say no. She wanted to say I’m tired of feeling like I don’t matter.

But instead, she nodded. “Okay.”

Because that’s what love does sometimes—it makes you agree to things that hurt, just to be close to the person who makes you feel like you exist.

Later that day...

They sat in the college canteen. Ajay was animated, talking about a football match he had watched. Geetha stirred her cold coffee absentmindedly.

“...and bro, that goal! You should’ve seen it,” Ajay laughed.

She nodded, not really listening.

He looked at her. “Geetha, are you sure you’re okay? You’re acting weird.”

That stung.

She looked up, forcing a soft smile. “Maybe I’m just tired, Ajay.”

He leaned back. “You’ve been off since morning. What’s going on?”

Geetha stared at him for a long second. Her heart wanted to blurt it all out—to tell him how she felt like second-best every time he ignored her, how his words cut her confidence, how every day she wondered if he even saw her the way she saw him.

But instead, she said, “It’s nothing.”

Ajay shrugged. “Okay. Cool. You want to go for a ride later?”

And again, she nodded.

Because saying no to him felt like a punishment she didn’t want to give herself.

Geetha started waking up later. She didn't bother with the bindi. The bangles stayed in the drawer. Her vibrant kurtis were replaced with duller ones.

Ajay noticed—but not in the way she wished.

“Geetha, what happened to your style?” he asked one day.

She smiled faintly. “Maybe I’m trying to be more modern. Like the other girls in college.”

He blinked, not realizing the irony of his earlier words now echoing back at him.

He still texted her good morning. Still picked her up on his bike. Still held her hand sometimes.

But Geetha had begun to change inside.

She didn't laugh as easily. Her messages became shorter. Her eyes held more questions. And she smiled only because she didn't know what else to do.

Ajay thought she was just busy with projects. But inside, Geetha was questioning her worth every single day.

And the saddest part?

Ajay didn't even know he was breaking her.

The classroom buzzed with whispers, laughter, and the occasional clatter of pens on desks. But Geetha sat silently next to Shruthi, staring blankly at the whiteboard. It had been a month—thirty long days of silent battles, suppressed tears, and internal storms she couldn't name. Every morning she woke up hoping Ajay would notice her

in the way she needed. Every evening, she told herself not to expect anything at all.

Ajay wasn't cruel. He wasn't violent. But his "normal"—his casual remarks, his compliments to Ayesha, his dismissive attitude—felt like tiny, invisible daggers Geetha couldn't shield herself from. He held her hand in front of the class one day, but denied their bond with a smirk, calling her just a best friend. Then, moments later, he was complimenting Ayesha's haircut with enthusiasm he never spared for Geetha's efforts.

That day, Geetha laughed when Ayesha teased her about trying to sit next to Ajay. But inside, something snapped quietly. She had bottled too much, held back too often.

The dam finally broke in the quiet corridor behind the library, where she poured her heart out to Shruthi—everything except her cancer. That part, she still guarded. But she told Shruthi how she felt invisible next to Ayesha, how Ajay's words chipped away at her confidence, how she tried so hard to not be "too much," to just be enough.

Shruthi had hugged her. "Geetha, I'm with you," she said.

But Shruthi wasn't just a friend—she was also a chatterbox.

Within a day, the whispers returned to Geetha, louder and sharper. And it didn't take long before Ayesha found out. And then... Ajay.

It happened on a Wednesday morning, just after the teacher left the class for five minutes. Ajay stood in the center of the room, rage boiling in his veins.

"You want drama, Geetha?" he snapped, his voice loud enough to silence every conversation. "Fine. Yes. She's my girlfriend. Happy now?"

The entire class froze. Even Shruthi's mouth hung open.

“This is what you wanted, right?” Ajay barked again, pointing at her. You got your attention enjoy it!

And without another word, he stormed out.

Gasps followed. The class buzzed like a hive of bees disturbed.

Geetha was frozen in place. Her face burned with humiliation. She turned to Shruthi, eyes wide and broken. “I trusted you,” she said, her voice shaking.

And then she ran. Out the door, down the hall, calling out Ajay’s name.

“Ajay, please! Ajay, listen!” she cried.

But he didn’t stop. He mounted his bike, helmet on, and sped away, leaving her voice to echo behind him.

Geetha collapsed onto the bench outside the building, covering her face with trembling hands. Her heart was shattering. All she wanted was to feel seen, valued, not compared to Ayesha or mocked for her choices. All she ever did was love him—even in silence.

In her panic, she called the only person who would understand both her pain and Ajay’s ego: Kishan.

“Hello?” Kishan picked up on the third ring.

“Kishan...” Her voice cracked.

“Geetha?” His voice sharpened. “What happened? Where are you?”

She explained between sobs. Kishan listened silently. When she kept blaming herself—“Maybe I’m just not enough. Maybe I’m ugly. I’m not like Ayesha”—he stopped her firmly.

“Geetha, stop. You don’t have to be anyone else. Ajay’s the one being toxic.”

But she wasn't listening. "I want to see him cry for once. Just once. I want him to know how it feels."

There was a long pause on the call.

"Get ready. I'll pick you up. He'll be in his room. Let's go."

Fifteen minutes later, Kishan's bike screeched to a halt outside Ajay's apartment. Geetha's knees were shaking. Tears refused to stop.

Kishan rang the bell.

Ajay opened the door and saw them.

He shut it.

Kishan, without hesitation, pushed it open. "Come," he said.

Geetha stepped in. Her whole body trembled. Ajay stood a few feet away, arms folded, jaw tight.

"She's here for answers, Ajay," Kishan began.

But Ajay erupted. "Answers? She's here to perform again! What's this—act two of the pity party?"

Geetha's eyes widened. "What...?"

"You're always crying, Geetha! Playing victim. Don't trust her, Kishan. This is what she does. Drama after drama!"

"I'm not acting," Geetha whispered. "I just wanted to explain."

"Oh, now you want to explain?" Ajay clapped sarcastically. "What? That I didn't compliment your kurti? Or your bindi wasn't appreciated enough? I'm sorry I didn't throw a damn parade."

Geetha broke down. "You don't know how much your words hurt. You made me feel small. Every day."

Ajay stepped closer, eyes furious. "You think I'm the villain here? You're the one twisting everything. I said Ayesha had

a cool haircut, and suddenly I don't love you? That's insane, Geetha."

"I never said don't be friends with her. But I saw how you looked at her. I saw how you smiled at her. How you never smiled at me."

Ajay growled, "Insecure much?"

Geetha's voice cracked. "You called me old-fashioned. You laughed at Sruthi's body. You denied me in front of people. And the worst part? You made me question my worth every day."

"You're too sensitive!" Ajay shouted. "This is me. I've always been this way."

"No," she cried. "You weren't like this when we met. You used to listen. You used to care. You clapped for Ayesha in the talent show. You didn't clap for me during my intro!"

Ajay stepped back. "I'm sorry, okay? I shouldn't have gotten into this with you. I was wrong to say yes when I didn't know what I was getting into. You're too much, Geetha. And I'm tired."

Kishan stepped forward slightly, ready to intervene. But Geetha raised her hand.

Ajay continued, cruelly cold now, "You use your pain like a shield. You make everyone feel guilty. But I can't anymore. I can't handle your 'sympathy card.' I'm done. Just leave before I hate you completely."

Silence fell.

Geetha collapsed to her knees. Her heart shattered into pieces that no one could see. She sobbed uncontrollably, her breath catching with every cry. She wasn't dramatic. She was destroyed.

Kishan kneeled beside her, holding her hand.

“Come, Geetha. Let’s get out of here. You don’t deserve this.”

They walked out slowly. Outside, Kishan bought her lemon juice to calm her down. He sat with her as she drank in silence.

“I’ll go home myself,” she said quietly.

“I’ll drop you at the station at least,” Kishan insisted.

She nodded.

The train platform was cold and noisy. She boarded the train, eyes red, heart numb, and tears still threatening to fall.

As the train sped through the city, Geetha leaned against the window, her eyes hollow, her reflection blurred by tears. Her mind was reeling — not just from what Ajay had said, but from the deeper ache of knowing she still wanted him despite it all.

It wasn’t about pride anymore. It wasn’t about who was right or wrong. It was about the terrifying weight of love — the kind that makes you forget your self-worth just to hold onto someone who once made you feel alive.

She blinked back tears again, biting her lip hard enough to hurt. That pain, at least, made her feel real.

“I said sorry,” she whispered to herself, voice barely audible. “Even when I had no reason to. I said sorry because I thought if I apologized, he would stay. Because I thought love meant bending, adjusting... sacrificing. But what if love isn’t supposed to hurt this much?”

The thought lingered, heavy in her chest.

She wasn’t angry at him anymore. Not the kind of anger that burns fast and fades. It was the slow, hollow ache of disappointment. Of losing someone who was still alive, still

breathing, still a phone call away—but emotionally miles apart.

She glanced at her phone again. No new messages. Nothing from him. Not even a “where are you?”

And yet... she missed him.

Even in this moment. Even after everything.

Her heart was loyal to a fault.

As the train slowed at the next station, she sat still. People got in, some talking, others laughing. One girl sat across from her, sharing stories on a call, her voice filled with joy. Geetha envied that version of herself—the one who could laugh freely, talk without overthinking, love without being scared.

“I don’t want him to be the reason I break,” she murmured, eyes fixed on the passing trees.

But the fear was already there.

What if she was broken?

What if this pain stayed? What if she couldn’t forget him?

What if he never understood how much he meant to her?

And as Geetha sat there, her eyes still red, she whispered to herself one last time, “I just wanted him to fight for me. Just once.”

But he hadn’t.

And that silence... hurt more than anything he ever said.

The room was dimly lit, just the pale glow from Ajay's desk lamp casting shadows across the cluttered floor. A half-finished plate of food sat abandoned beside his laptop, the silence thick, unmoving. The knock on the door came like a warning shot. Persistent. Hard.

Ajay opened it, and Kishan barged in before he could say a word.

"What the hell is wrong with you, da?" Kishan growled, his tone already rising. "She was crying, Ajay. Crying on the platform like she had no one. I had to drop her because you—you just left her there like she didn't matter!"

Ajay leaned against the wall, folding his arms as if shielding himself from guilt. "She didn't tell the truth. She twisted everything. Everyone's calling me the villain now."

Kishan's jaw clenched. "Did she really twist everything? Or are you too blind to see what she's been going through for the past month?"

Ajay scoffed. "Don't lecture me, da. You don't know her like I do."

"I know enough!" Kishan thundered. "I know she kept everything inside. That she cried herself to sleep some nights after you ignored her for days, acted hot and cold, kept praising Ayesha in front of her. I know she was scared to tell you how she felt because she didn't want to lose you!"

Ajay's eyes darkened. "She's playing victim. Drama queen. Always with that sad face, acting like the world's against her. I bet she's crying to you now too—wait for it—we'll get a

call one day that she's done something stupid. That's how they are."

Kishan went silent. A heavy, dangerous silence. Then, in a voice that trembled with rage, he stepped forward.

"Don't you dare say that again." His voice cracked. "You don't understand what kind of storm she's holding back. You've never tried to understand. You only see what fits your ego."

Ajay raised his voice, defiant. "I only know her real face, machan. Sweet in front of everyone, manipulative behind. She twisted Shruthi too—look how this drama started."

Kishan's fist clenched. "You know what the real problem is, Ajay? You were loved too purely, too genuinely. And you didn't know what to do with it. You didn't respect it. You expected perfection from someone already breaking on the inside."

Ajay rolled his eyes. "Spare me the lecture. Why are you defending her so much, da? You into her or something?"

That was it.

Kishan's voice exploded. "She's like a sister to me! And even if she wasn't—she's a damn good human. She deserved kindness. Compassion. Not humiliation. Not whatever the hell you gave her!"

Ajay's expression hardened. "I told her the truth. I can't fake love. She wanted a relationship—I gave her one. She expected too much, da. She clung on. That's not love."

Kishan pointed a finger straight at him, his eyes glinting with disgust. "And you gave nothing. Not even the bare minimum. Not even a thank you for the way she smiled through pain. Not a sorry when you made her question her worth."

Ajay turned away, trying to distance himself from the weight of Kishan's words. "I didn't ask her to love me."

"No. But she did. And you took that love like it was your right, and spat it back like it was poison."

A long silence stretched. The room felt suffocating.

Kishan took a deep breath, but it came out shaky. "You think you're strong because you walked away first? That makes you a coward, Ajay. Not a man."

Ajay turned, anger flickering in his gaze, but Kishan didn't flinch.

"I don't care what you think of me now. I won't stay quiet watching you destroy someone just because you're too afraid to face your own feelings."

He paused, stepped back toward the door.

"You lost her. And not because she changed. But because of who you are."

Ajay stayed silent, jaw set, eyes hollow.

Before leaving, Kishan muttered one last thing under his breath. It was soft, but sharp enough to cut.

"Go fuck yourself, Ajay. She deserved better. And deep down, you know that too."

The door slammed behind him, echoing in the emptiness of Ajay's room.

And for the first time in weeks, Ajay stood there... truly alone. The silence wasn't comforting anymore.

The next morning, Ajay walked into college, feeling the weight of the previous day's argument pressing down on him. His eyes darted nervously across the hallway, sensing the stares from his peers. He had always been the center of attention, but today, the attention felt different. His best

friend, Kishan, was angry at him. Geetha was missing. And despite his confusion, Ajay knew there was more to everything than just the words exchanged.

The air felt thick, as if every step he took was weighed down by the unspoken tension between him and Kishan. Every glance he received seemed to linger a little longer, as if they were all waiting for something to happen, something they couldn't quite understand. Ajay's mind raced—thoughts of Geetha's silence, the way she had looked when he had last seen her, all those vulnerable moments he had ignored—clashed with his frustration at Kishan's unexpected withdrawal.

As the first class ended, Shruthi approached him. Her eyes were soft, filled with regret.

"Ajay... I'm sorry," she began, her voice quiet. "I tried calling Geetha. She isn't picking up. She didn't show up today either."

Ajay's heart skipped a beat. "I don't know anything. Can you leave, Shruthi?"

Her expression faltered. "I'm sorry again, but... Geetha really loves you, Ajay. Please, think about it." Shruthi's words lingered in the air, but Ajay just nodded, dismissing her with a wave.

She turned to leave, but Ayesha, who had been watching from a distance, stepped forward. "What's going on?" she asked, her tone casual but her eyes filled with curiosity.

Ajay hesitated. His mind was a swirl of emotions—confusion, anger, guilt. But he couldn't keep everything bottled up anymore. He took a deep breath and spilled it all out, the raw truth. "Geetha... she's been distant. I've been too harsh on her, and I don't know what's happening

anymore. But I can't just go back to her like nothing happened."

Ayesha nodded, her expression unreadable. "She's immature," Ayesha said bluntly like pouring oil on a burning fire, "Geetha's acting all dramatic. She needs to grow up."

Ajay didn't respond to her. He had heard the words, but they didn't resonate with him the way they should have. He was angry, yes, but deep down, he knew something was wrong with how he had been acting. His thoughts lingered on Kishan's silence, the way his best friend had withdrawn from him without a word of explanation.

That Evening, Ajay tried to break the silence. He looked at Kishan, sitting on his bed, his eyes glued to his phone.

"Machan..." Ajay began, his voice tight, "I'm sorry for how I spoke to you. But I'm not sorry for what I said to Geetha. I meant it. But... I need to know if you know anything. Is something wrong with Geetha? Did she tell you something I don't know?"

Kishan didn't say anything. He just stared ahead, the silence between them growing thicker. Ajay's frustration built with every passing second.

"Why are you doing this, Kishan? Why are you siding with her? She's not some fragile flower. She's not a victim."

Kishan's expression hardened. "Don't talk like that about her."

Ajay stepped forward, his anger bubbling to the surface. "What do you want me to do, Kishan? Apologize? Be the one who keeps running after her like some fool?"

Kishan stood up, his voice cold. "You're not seeing it, Ajay. You're so stuck in your own world of pride and ego that you can't see how badly you hurt her. You're not the only one

dealing with problems. Geetha... she trusted you, and you broke that trust. She didn't deserve any of this."

Ajay looked away, the weight of Kishan's words sinking in. But he still can't accept that he is the one who is wrong.

He had been so caught up in his anger, in his frustration with Geetha, that he hadn't stopped to consider her feelings. She was hurting, and he had pushed her away.

The next day, Ajay arrived at college feeling empty. He had no idea what he was supposed to do anymore. His mind was clouded with thoughts of Geetha and the argument with Kishan. He felt lost, like a part of him was missing. He still couldn't bring himself to apologize fully to Geetha. Pride held him back, but it was more than that—he feared what an apology would mean. Would it fix everything? Or would it make things worse?

The day went on, but everything felt like a blur. Geetha didn't show up again, and despite his anger, Ajay couldn't help but worry. What if something was really wrong with her? Is her health okay, or has the cancer spread?

That evening, as the weight of the day pressed down on him, Ajay walked into the room where Kishan was, sitting quietly.

"Machan..." Ajay said softly, "I'm sorry for how I spoke to you. I was angry, and I shouldn't have taken it out on you. But... I can't ignore it anymore. Geetha's not here. She's not answering her calls, and I don't know what to do."

Kishan didn't respond at first, his gaze distant. Ajay waited, his hands shaking with nervous energy. "Please... just tell me if you know anything about her. Is she okay?"

Kishan looked up, his eyes serious. "Get on the bike. We're going to see her."

The tension between Ajay and Kishan was palpable. Every word exchanged felt heavy with the weight of what was left unsaid. It was more than just an argument—it was a fracture in their bond. But Ajay knew that the only way to fix this was to make things right with both Geetha and Kishan. He had to stop running from the truth, no matter how much it hurt.

As Ajay got on the bike behind Kishan, the silence stretched between them, but this time, it wasn't filled with anger. It was filled with the unspoken understanding that something needed to change. The ride was filled with uncertainty, but as they approached, Ajay's heart began to race.

The sun was just beginning to dip, casting an orange glow over the cracked roads and chaotic rhythm of the city. Ajay sat on the back of Kishan's bike, his hands resting on his thighs, unsure and restless. The wind brushed against his face, but it didn't cool the heat that had built up inside his chest — a strange mix of guilt, anger, and something heavier he hadn't named yet.

Kishan hadn't spoken a word since they left. The silence between them was suffocating, a slow burn that made Ajay feel like he was sitting on something volatile, something waiting to explode. He wanted to ask where they were going, but a part of him held back — maybe afraid of the answer, maybe just not ready.

Finally, the bike slowed.

Ajay looked up.

The tall, clean gates of Apollo Hospital came into view.

His heart stopped for a beat. Then started racing.

"Kishan..." his voice broke slightly, "Why are we here?"

Kishan didn't look at him. He parked the bike and removed his helmet with practiced ease. "Come," he said flatly.

Ajay stood frozen. "Da... what happened? Why are we at Apollo? What happened to Geetha?" His voice was sharp now, almost a whisper of panic. "Did her... did her cancer— did it spread?"

Kishan finally turned to look at him. There was no coldness in his eyes, just exhaustion. "No. Nothing like that."

Ajay took a step closer. "Then what? You're scaring me, machan."

Kishan sighed. "She had a fever. A bad one. She was severely dehydrated and emotionally drained. She collapsed yesterday night and was admitted here early morning."

Ajay's chest tightened. "Fever? How? What—"

“Anyone would get sick,” Kishan interrupted, his tone low, almost trembling. “Anyone who’s been crying non-stop for days.”

Ajay didn’t respond.

Kishan continued. “She didn’t tell anyone. I called her today, just to ask if she was okay. She casually mentioned she’s in the hospital and told me not to come. Like she didn’t matter.”

Ajay looked away, jaw clenched.

Kishan’s voice dropped lower. “I also called Akshaya. She said it’s only her and Geetha’s grandma staying with her now. Patti’s old, da. She insisted I come. So I am. You’re here now, too. So behave. Please.”

Ajay simply nodded.

They walked into the hospital lobby. Ajay’s legs felt heavy with every step, as if the air had thickened. When they reached the ward, Ajay saw her — lying on the bed, an IV drip running into her wrist, her hair tied loosely, eyes dull but still warm when they noticed Kishan entering.

“Hey...” Geetha smiled faintly.

Ajay lingered behind Kishan like a shadow, unsure where to stand.

Geetha’s eyes met his.

He looked down.

“Ajay’s here too,” Kishan said gently.

Geetha gave the smallest nod. “Okay...”

There was an awkward silence.

Kishan sat on the chair beside her bed and began chatting softly with her. He made her smile a few times, talked about random things — movies, assignments, even the latest

canteen gossip — just to ease her mood. Geetha's laugh was soft, but brittle.

Ajay stood by the wall, quiet.

Then, Geetha turned to her grandmother who was seated on the sofa beside the bed. "Patti, this is Kishan... and that's Ajay."

Her grandmother looked at them with a kind smile. "Ahh... Ajay-aa? Geetha speaks a lot about you. Always smiling when she does."

Ajay felt something twist inside his stomach. He managed a small smile and looked away.

Her grandmother continued, "Where are you guys staying"?

Kishan nodded. "Patti. Near the college. In a PG apartment."

She turned to Geetha. "Then you also move nearby, kanna. Traveling this far every day... it's not good for your health. I see how tired you get. Always sneezing, cold, body pain..."

Geetha sighed. "Patti, I'm fine..."

"No. You stay near college. You come home weekends or I will visit you. That's final. Your health comes first."

Kishan smiled. "Patti, I'll check with our landlord if any 1BHK is vacant. I'll let her know."

Her grandmother beamed. "Such a good boy."

Ajay still hadn't spoken.

A while later, Kishan left the room to take a call. It was just Ajay, Geetha, and her grandmother now. The silence grew denser again.

Ajay slowly walked over to the table, picked up the prescription and the bill, then stepped out. He returned a

few minutes later with a small paper bag of medicine and handed it to Geetha without a word.

She looked at him. “Thanks.”

He paused.

He wanted to say I’m sorry.

He wanted to say I was wrong.

He wanted to say I will never hurt you.

But the words felt trapped in his throat, blocked by ego... or fear.

As he turned to leave, he stopped for a brief second.

“Take care, Geetha,” he said quietly.

Her eyes shimmered but she nodded.

And then he walked out — carrying a silence that weighed heavier than any argument ever could.

The road shimmered under the weight of the orange street lights. The wind was light, but it carried with it a strange kind of heaviness — the kind that sits on your shoulders when there’s something left unsaid. Ajay and Kishan rode in silence, the thrum of the engine beneath them masking the quiet chaos in their heads.

After about twenty minutes, Kishan slowed down, pulling up beside a familiar roadside parotta stall, the kind they used to frequent during late-night assignment rushes and post-football practice cravings.

“Dei... let’s eat,” Kishan said casually, killing the engine.

Ajay nodded wordlessly, his helmet still on for a moment longer than necessary, as if trying to hide behind its black visor — hide from questions, from judgments, and maybe, from himself.

They ordered food — two egg kothu parottas and a bottle of soda to share. It was their usual, yet nothing felt usual about this moment.

As they sat down at the plastic table under the flickering tube light, Kishan looked at Ajay — really looked at him.

“You didn’t talk inside,” Kishan finally said, voice quiet but sharp, like a pinprick in a balloon. “Not even one proper word, machan.”

Ajay took a deep breath, his fingers unconsciously crumpling a tissue. “I didn’t know what to say, da.”

Kishan narrowed his eyes, clearly frustrated but still holding back. “You didn’t know what to say? Or you didn’t want to say anything?”

Ajay didn’t meet his eyes. “I don’t want to get into anything anymore. Not right now. Not after everything.”

The waiter came and dropped the plates. The sound of steel clanking broke the moment for a second. Kishan stirred the parotta with his spoon absentmindedly, then looked back at Ajay.

“What is your problem, da?” Kishan asked, this time with no hesitation.

Ajay was quiet. He looked down at his food but wasn’t eating.

“It’s like... I feel trapped when I’m with her, da,” he said finally, the words slipping out like a confession he hadn’t rehearsed. “But I also... love her. I think I do. But I’m scared. I feel suffocated sometimes, but the thought of not having her also terrifies me.”

Kishan stared at him, unable to mask the disappointment in his face. “Then what the hell are you doing, da?”

Ajay's voice dropped lower. "I don't know. It's like I can't stay... but I can't leave either. I can't see her cry because of me... but I don't know if I'm even the right person for her. Maybe I'm already hurting her just by existing in her life like this."

Kishan took a deep breath, folding his arms, trying to collect himself before he lashed out. "And you think this — this half-assed silence — helps her? You think acting like she doesn't exist will protect her? Ajay, you don't protect people by erasing them."

Ajay looked like a kid caught between shame and stubbornness. "Maybe it's better this way," he muttered. "No more expectations. No more drama."

Kishan leaned forward; his voice tight with anger. "Dei. Just don't hurt her again, da. That's all I'll say. She's not like others. She breaks differently. She hides it well, but she's already halfway cracked."

Ajay dropped his spoon and rubbed his face with his hands, feeling the weight of everything collapse on him. "That's why I didn't talk to her. If I spoke, da, she would've smiled. She would've leaned in. She would've forgiven me. That's what she always does. And I know myself... I would've dragged her back in."

"And that's a bad thing?" Kishan's voice was rising again. "Do you even hear yourself? You love her. She loves you. But you're both acting like love is a punishment."

Ajay let out a breath. "You don't get it, machan. I... I don't want to be that guy. The one who talks sweet in the beginning and fades later. I'm scared. What if I become someone, she'll regret loving?"

Kishan leaned back, exasperated. "You already are."

Silence.

Ajay blinked slowly, those words hitting harder than anything else that night.

There was a long pause before Ajay finally spoke, his voice barely above a whisper. "Maybe I should stop talking to Ayesha too. She spoke bad about Geetha today. It wasn't good... it didn't sit right."

Kishan shook his head, sipping the soda now, trying to calm his nerves. "You should've stopped talking to her the moment you saw Geetha's eyes when Ayesha laughed with you."

Ajay clenched his jaw. "I thought I was just being normal."

Kishan stared straight at him. "And maybe your normal is not what she deserves."

The next morning light filtered through the dusty glass panes of the classroom, casting long, golden streaks over the empty desks. The chatter that usually filled the hallways seemed unusually subdued. Ajay walked in with his backpack slung over one shoulder, eyes scanning the rows subconsciously—almost as if expecting to see her. But Geetha wasn't there.

She hadn't come.

He knew why.

And for the first time in days, the silence around him felt louder than the words he'd used to hurt her.

He sat in his usual place, resting his elbows on the desk, fingers lightly touching his lips. His mind kept playing flashes from the hospital the day before—her weak smile, the IV drip beside her, the way her grandma had smiled with warmth... and how Geetha had said nothing.

Just that one soft, fragile "OK" and nothing else. Not even anger. Not even coldness. Just... nothing.

That's what haunted him.

Not rage. Not tears. Just her silence.

When Ayesha approached him before class with her usual energy, her voice perked up, "Ajay! You okay?"

Ajay interrupted gently, "Yeah. I'm fine." His tone was soft but dismissive.

He didn't stop to explain. Not because he didn't trust her. But because for the first time, he started realizing she may

have been feeding into his worst thoughts rather than helping him face them.

“She’s immature,” Ayesha had said. That one line kept echoing in his head like a drumbeat.

He shook it off.

He didn’t sit near her. He didn’t even make eye contact.

After the first class, Ajay slowly walked up to Shruthi who sat alone, scribbling something in her notebook. She looked up, surprised.

“Shruthi...” he started, voice low. “I just wanted to say... sorry.”

She blinked. “For?”

“For how I spoke to you earlier. I was... harsh. Rude even. I was upset but that doesn’t excuse how I treated you.”

Shruthi put down her pen and studied him for a moment. Then she smiled faintly, not out of happiness but out of quiet relief. “It’s okay, Ajay.”

There was a pause.

Ajay hesitated, then added, “Geetha’s not here today... she’s sick. I... I think she’ll be back tomorrow.”

Shruthi nodded. “She told me she might. She’s still weak.”

Ajay wanted to ask how she was. Really ask. But he didn’t know how to frame it without sounding desperate or guilty.

Shruthi looked at him carefully. “She’ll forgive you,” she said simply.

Ajay nodded slowly. “I know.”

But inside, he wasn’t sure if he deserved it.

Because even though he knew she was hurting, he had chosen silence. He had chosen ego. He had chosen confusion.

The rest of the day passed in a blur.

In class, Ajay couldn't focus. Every note the teacher wrote on the board, every diagram, every formula—it all blurred into white noise.

His thoughts kept returning to Geetha's eyes. Not the bright, curious ones that used to light up at even the smallest of things. But the tired ones at the hospital—eyes that had cried too much, hurt too long, and hoped too little.

He began wondering—was this really how it should be?

He missed her. Not just her presence. But her laughter. Her small texts. Her sarcastic retorts. Her weird jokes. Her obsession with cold coffee and bike rides.

He missed the version of himself that existed only when he was around her.

He thought of messaging her. Just a simple “How are you?”

But he couldn't.

Because part of him still held on to the belief that he had done nothing wrong. That his actions were justified. That he had only drawn boundaries.

But the other part? The softer part?

It whispered that maybe... just maybe... he'd broken something precious without realizing it.

And now he wasn't sure if it could be fixed. Or whether he wanted to fix!

The next two days passed like a slow blur for Ajay.

Classes went on as usual. Professors spoke, friends chatted, assignments were assigned — everything looked the same on the surface. But Ajay knew something was off. Something was missing.

No, not something. Someone.

Geetha's absence was a silent echo through his day. Her laughter that usually cut across the classroom, her half-tied hair bouncing as she walked in late, her soft humming when she was thinking — it was all gone.

And the strange part was, he didn't know whether it was guilt or longing that was gnawing at him from within.

He didn't text. He didn't call. Every time he picked up his phone to check her last seen, he would freeze — wondering what if she's resting? or worse, what if she doesn't want to hear from me?

But that didn't stop his thoughts from wandering back to her.

On the second evening, as he sat on the edge of his bed, running a pen along the spine of a half-read book, he turned to Kishan, who was quietly scrolling through his phone.

"Machan... you heard anything from Geetha?"

Kishan looked up, his tone slightly irritated but still calm. "She's fine. Resting. Taking it slow."

Ajay nodded, almost as if trying to convince himself he was okay with that. But then Kishan asked — a question that felt like a brick to his chest.

"What's in your mind, da? About her. About this relationship. You love her or not?"

Ajay stared into space. "I don't know da," he said honestly, voice low. "Maybe it's better this way. No drama. No emotional traps."

Kishan scoffed and looked away, his frustration barely contained. "I can't talk to you anymore. Do something, Ajay. Either move forward or let go. This in-between is cruel."

Ajay said nothing. Because he didn't have answers. Just guilt and confusion twisted together.

Then came the third day.

It was just after the morning break when the classroom door creaked open.

Geetha stepped in.

She looked a little pale, but radiant in that familiar way. A soft cotton kurti, loosely braided hair, and a tired but calm face.

Shruthi saw her first, her eyes widening with joy. “GEETHA!” she yelled, springing from her seat and throwing her arms around her.

Geetha hugged her back tightly, her eyes closing for a second longer — like she needed that warmth. Slowly, the others started walking up to her, welcoming her back with concern and chatter.

“You okay now?”

“We missed you yaar.”

“You look better!”

Geetha smiled through all of it. She was touched, truly. But as her eyes scanned the room, they found only one person not walking toward her.

Ajay.

He sat there, still, silent, only giving her a soft nod. Not even a smile.

Her heart twisted, but she pretended to ignore it. He doesn’t care anymore. She shouldn’t too.

But then she noticed something else — Ajay wasn’t talking to Ayesha either. Not even acknowledging her. That... was new.

Still, she didn’t go to him. She had promised herself she wouldn’t beg anymore.

After classes that day, as the sky dimmed into a golden pink, Geetha walked out of college with Kishan. Waiting near the gates was her grandmother, standing with a soft smile and a folded umbrella.

“Kishan,” she said kindly, “shall we go see the flats?”

Ajay, who had just stepped out a few feet behind, paused when he saw them. He wasn’t supposed to care. He had decided to go straight to the room. But his feet didn’t move.

Then Geetha’s grandmother spotted him. “Ajay kannal!” she called out warmly. “Come, come with us. You help too!”

Kishan turned and nodded.

Ajay hesitated for just a second, then walked toward them.

As they walked toward the first flat, the group mostly chatted around Geetha’s grandmother. Kishan led the way, pointing out street landmarks, laughing at how one of the flats had a spiral staircase that “looked like it was built by someone who loves Tv soaps.”

Ajay trailed behind quietly, hands in his pockets, occasionally kicking at the gravel on the roadside. He stayed close, but not too close. Every now and then, his eyes drifted to Geetha — just to check if she looked okay, if she was too tired, if she needed water.

She noticed.

When they entered the first flat, Ajay instinctively held the door open — not with a dramatic gesture, but with a natural fluidity that showed how familiar he still was with her little ways. Geetha walked past him, not saying anything... but she saw it. And somewhere inside her, a part of her softened.

The flat was alright, nothing special. Her grandmother looked around politely, but Geetha wasn’t feeling it.

It was the second flat that changed everything.

The moment they entered, something in the air shifted. A breeze swept in through the open balcony doors. Sunlight fell in gentle patches on the wooden flooring, and the scent of fresh paint still lingered faintly in the walls. A pair of wind chimes hung outside, swaying lazily.

Geetha stepped in and turned in a slow circle, eyes wide with wonder.

Ajay watched her — really watched her — as she smiled faintly, brushing her fingers along the edge of the window frame.

Her grandmother had walked into the kitchen with the broker. Kishan followed to check on storage space.

That left Ajay and Geetha in the small living room for a fleeting moment.

She walked out onto the balcony, drawn to it.

Ajay hesitated at the doorway, then stepped out too, standing beside her.

The silence between them wasn't heavy. It was light... gentle. Like a song they both remembered but couldn't hum aloud.

She leaned on the railing. "It's... peaceful."

He nodded, glancing at her profile. "Yeah."

The sunlight caught her eyelashes, made her hair glow. For a second, he wanted to say you look better now, or I missed this, or even I'm sorry. But none of it came out. So instead, he reached up and flicked something off her shoulder — a tiny leaf stuck to her shawl.

She turned slightly, startled.

"Just a leaf," he muttered.

Her lips twitched. "Thanks."

It wasn't much. But it was them — quiet, soft, understated.

Back inside, when her grandmother asked for their opinions, Ajay was the first to speak — surprising even himself. “Yeah... this is nice. Feels safe. We're just two blocks away too. So, if Geetha ever needs anything...”

Kishan shot him a look, eyebrows raised. Now you talk, huh?

Geetha's eyes found his. For a second, she didn't know what to feel. But it felt warm — like someone still cared, even if they didn't say it aloud.

Later, when the broker handed Geetha a pen to sign a tentative agreement, she hesitated. Her fingers were slightly shaking — not from nerves, but fatigue. She had only just recovered from her fever, and the day had been longer than expected.

She quietly rubbed her forehead.

Ajay noticed.

Without making a big deal out of it, he walked over to the small table in the corner where a jug of water and a few paper cups were placed for visitors. He poured a cup, walked back, and held it out to her — steady, simple.

“Here,” he said softly. “You look a bit tired.”

Geetha blinked, surprised by the gesture.

She took the cup slowly, their fingers brushing ever so slightly.

“Thanks,” she whispered, eyes lingering on his for a second longer than they should've.

Ajay nodded, looking away, pretending to study the wall paint as if it were the most fascinating thing in the world.

Geetha took a sip, and for a moment, the air between them felt less like strangers and more like a memory — like the version of them that used to care silently and deeply.

And in that brief pause, even without words, Geetha understood something:

He noticed.

He always did.

The flat had been finalized. All the paperwork was done, and the little 1BHK apartment was now officially Geetha's new space. It wasn't grand, but it had character — like her. The rustling leaves on the balcony, the soft peach-colored walls, and the smell of fresh paint mixed with sunlight made it feel like the beginning of something new. Something healing.

Geetha's grandmother was especially cheerful, her usual cautious tone replaced by one of satisfaction. "This place feels safe. And warm. You'll be alright here," she said, patting Geetha's head fondly.

They stood in the center of the empty living room, sunlight falling on the specks of dust dancing in the air. Geetha smiled — a tired but real smile — and nodded. "Yeah, Patti. I think I will."

Her grandmother, however, wasn't done planning. "We should hire a cook too," she said. "You can't be coming home tired and then stand over a stove. What if you fall ill again?"

Geetha bit her lip. "Patti... I'll manage, please. Don't spend extra for me."

Before her grandmother could argue, Ajay and Kishan hailed an auto. Kishan helped the older woman in first, while Ajay lightly placed his hand on Geetha's back, guiding her toward the auto without a word. His touch was careful, distant—but it lingered for a second too long.

The ride to the station was quiet. Chennai's late-evening breeze blew gently through the sides of the auto, and as the buildings rushed past, the air felt a little too still between them. Not cold. Just full of unspoken things.

At the station, Geetha's grandmother looked at her once they stepped out. "We'll shift everything tomorrow, okay? Weekend holiday is there. It'll be less stressful."

Geetha nodded. "Okay, Patti."

Then she paused, reaching for her grandmother's hand.

"You don't have to do everything, okay? I'll take care. You've done enough."

Her grandmother opened her mouth to speak, but before she could, both Kishan and Ajay jumped in.

"We'll help her, Patti," Kishan said with an easy smile.

Ajay nodded silently beside him, his hands in his pockets. "Seriously, don't worry."

Something about the way he said it made her grandmother smile gently. She simply patted both their backs and said, "God bless you both."

Later that evening, Geetha and her grandmother began packing up their small apartment in Egmore — the familiar place that had seen both tears and laughter. Every item tucked into a box came with memories. Her grandmother carefully folded sarees, kurtis and other dresses while Geetha packed her books, her notes, and a small frame that had a picture of the two of them from her graduation.

The whole night felt like the end of a chapter.

They arranged a cab for the next morning — one that would carry all of Geetha's things to her new place.

The next morning arrived, bathed in soft sunlight and the kind of stillness only Sundays carry. Geetha stood at the doorway with her grandmother. The moment was heavy.

She hugged her tightly, burying her face in her patti's shoulder. "Thank you for everything," she whispered, her voice shaky.

"You're my heartbeat, kanna," her grandmother said, holding her back firmly. "Be strong. Be gentle. But never forget who you are."

Geetha nodded. "Come visit often."

"I will."

She wiped her eyes, pulled her luggage toward the gate, and called Kishan. "Bro, I started from home."

Kishan was in the shared apartment, packing a small tool kit to help her set up things. He smiled at the sound of her voice. "Good. I'll tell the cleaners to go ahead and prep the flat. It'll be perfect when you arrive."

Ajay, who was on the couch, half-listening, sat up. "Was that Geetha?" he asked casually.

"Yeah," Kishan replied without looking up, "she's on her way. I'm calling the cleaners now."

Ajay stood for a second, conflicted. "I should... we should go, right?"

Kishan paused. “We?”

Ajay looked away, suddenly unsure of his own words. “I just meant... I’ll come too. She’s moving in. I want to be there. That’s all.”

Kishan gave him that classic annoyed look. “Ajay, I genuinely don’t get you da. One day you’re cold as ice, next day you’re planning and tagging along like a husband.”

Ajay sighed. “It’s not like that.”

“Then what is it?”

Ajay ran his fingers through his hair. “I just... I don’t know, machan. I want to be there. But not too close. Not in a way that... traps us both.”

Kishan shook his head in disbelief. “You love her. Anyone with a heartbeat can see that. You care. You listen to her even when she’s not speaking. Then why do you keep holding back?”

Ajay looked at him, torn. “Because when I’m with her, it feels too much. Like everything else fades. And that scares me. I can’t afford to lose myself.”

Kishan shook his head and picked up his helmet. “I hope she understands your chaos. Because even I’m tired of decoding it.”

Ajay gave a faint smile. “She knows. I think she knows me.”

Kishan didn’t respond. He just gave him a long, disappointed stare. Then, without a word, he said, “Come if you want. But stop playing with her feelings — and yours.”

They reached the flat before noon. The cleaners had already begun, mopping the tiled floors, wiping down the balcony, airing out the cupboards. There was a quiet hum in the air—the sound of something new beginning.

Ajay stood in the middle of the empty living room. He ran his fingers across the window pane, then turned to Kishan. "Ask Geetha if she's eaten."

Kishan looked at him. "Why?"

Ajay didn't answer. He just gave a small shrug. Kishan rolled his eyes and dialed her.

"Geetha, had lunch?"

"No, but I'll manage," she said. "It's okay."

He hung up and turned to Ajay. "No, she hasn't."

Ajay took one deep breath and reached for his keys. "Okay. I'll get food. You stay here and handle the rest."

Kishan stared at him. "Machan, you're caring. You're doing all this without being asked. Why can't you just accept that you're in love with her?"

Ajay froze at the door. Then turned.

"Because love with her brings confusion. Guilt. Pain. I don't want to involve myself again into this emotional trap."

Kishan didn't blink. "So you'd rather be a shadow?"

Ajay looked at him, almost defeated. "Being nearby... watching her heal, smile, live—that's enough for me."

Kishan stepped closer. "No da, that's enough for you. Not for her. You think hiding behind your silence protects her? It doesn't."

Ajay looked away, gripping the doorframe. "Please stop the lectures da... I've heard too many. Lemme just... let me be this way."

He walked out, the sunlight cutting across his face like a spotlight.

His pace was steady but his heart wasn't. It pounded hard—each step reminding him of how much he wanted to be by her side. But also, how terrified he was of ruining her again.

Still, as he walked down the road to get her food, all he could think of was her smile.

Maybe this is what love really looks like, he thought.

Not grand gestures. Not declarations. Just... showing up. Quietly.

Geetha stepped into the new flat, the air inside still holding a faint trace of paint and fresh wood polish. The afternoon sun filtered through the curtains, casting a warm golden hue on the empty walls. Kishan was already there, stacking a few boxes on the floor and talking to the house cleaning guy.

She looked around, absorbing the feeling of it all — a new space, a fresh start. But a part of her couldn't ignore the mild weight pressing in her chest. Ajay wasn't there.

She didn't know why she expected him. But she did.

"Thank you, Kishan," she said, softly smiling. "You've done a lot, really. I don't know what I would've done without your help."

Kishan wiped his hands on his jeans. "Don't start that now, Geetha. You know I'll do anything for you. You're like family now."

She gave a small nod and looked away, adjusting her dupatta, pretending to fix something in the boxes.

And then... came the voice from the doorway.

"I've got us lunch. Let's eat here, together, in your new home. Then we'll arrange your things properly."

Geetha froze.

That voice. She could recognize it even in a dream.

She turned around, heartbeat racing faster than she would like to admit.

It was Ajay.

He stood there in a plain black T-shirt and jeans, holding two brown paper bags and a small bottle of Pepsi under one arm. He looked calm. But his eyes — they held something restless, something unspoken.

Geetha's face gave nothing away. "Oh," she said. "You came."

Ajay didn't answer immediately. He just smiled, a small one. "Yeah. Thought you'd be hungry."

She tried her best to stay composed, but the scent coming from the bag made her break into a smile.

"Wait... butter naan?" she asked, eyeing the packet. "And... butter chicken?"

Ajay casually placed the packets on the folded newspaper Kishan laid out like a mat. "Your favourite, right?"

Her eyes softened without her permission. "Yeah... I didn't expect..."

"You'd better eat before it gets cold," he said, cutting her thought short.

They sat together, the three of them, on the floor of her new home. No furniture yet. Just three souls sitting on the floor, passing plates, laughing softly at how messy they were with the food, making fun of Kishan for spilling the gravy.

Geetha couldn't stop smiling. The food warmed her, but it was more than that. It was Ajay. His presence. His quiet efforts. She watched him talk to Kishan, crack a half-hearted joke, pass her a tissue without her asking — and something in her chest bloomed.

He doesn't say it. But this... this is love, isn't it?

After lunch, they got up to sort through her things. Kishan began unpacking the books and kitchen items. Geetha and Ajay went toward the bedroom with her bag full of personal stuff — photos, clothes, tiny gifts, and an old frame she loved with dried bougainvillea pressed in it.

"I want to hang this here," she said, pointing to the wall just above her study desk.

Ajay nodded. "Sure. Let me..."

But before he could get the hammer Kishan borrowed from the neighbour, Geetha stood on a small stool she had brought with her. She tried to stretch and fix the nail herself.

"Geetha, wait, you'll—"

Too late. Her foot slipped a little. She gasped — but didn't fall.

Because Ajay was already there, his arms wrapped tightly around her waist, steadying her before she could stumble.

Their eyes met.

For a long second, the world went still.

They didn't speak. They didn't need to. His hands were warm on her waist. Her fingers curled unconsciously over his shoulder.

Their breaths were shallow. The distance between them almost dissolved.

And then...

Kishan cleared his throat loudly from behind. "Shall I come with background music next time?"

They both jolted back. Geetha looked away, hiding her flushed cheeks behind her hair. Ajay coughed and took a step back, pretending to brush dust off his jeans.

“Uh... I’ll hang that frame,” he said, avoiding her gaze.

“Yeah... okay,” she murmured.

But that moment lingered like the scent of rain after a storm. Quiet, fresh, confusing — yet undeniably real.

When Ajay accidentally picked up a scarf she had once worn during their first meet, Geetha noticed his fingers lingered a second longer.

When she tried to fit a stubborn drawer, he came behind her, didn’t say a word, just helped her fix it without needing to be asked.

And every time their hands brushed, every time their shoulders touched, the air between them thickened with a mix of longing and restraint.

Kishan, meanwhile, kept himself busy with random comments, sometimes stepping out to talk to the landlord, sometimes purposely giving them space.

But even he noticed — the silence between Geetha and Ajay wasn’t cold anymore. It wasn’t distant.

It was filled with everything they never said. Everything they felt but never voiced.

As they wrapped up the final bits of unpacking, the flat slowly began to feel lived-in — a home stitched together with new memories, fresh paint, and quiet moments.

Ajay stood near the door, leaning against the frame, his arms crossed casually. But his eyes, they kept following Geetha as she moved from one corner to the other, carefully placing her books, her framed memories, and that small wooden

jewellery box which is her mom's memory he remembered it.

He didn't say a word. But the way his gaze lingered said enough.

Geetha felt it. Every time she looked up and caught him watching, her heart fluttered.

He remembers. He notices. He still cares.

In her mind, it was unmistakable — he was treating her the same way he did when they were together. Quietly protective. Thoughtful in his own awkward way. Bringing her favourite lunch without her asking. Catching her when she slipped. Standing next to her silently when she needed someone close. It wasn't just friendship. No one does all this for someone they've moved on from.

To her, it felt like love — unspoken, but loud enough in its actions.

She smiled to herself.

He's just fighting it. But deep down, I'm still his girl.

But across the room, in Ajay's mind — it was different.

To him, all of this wasn't about being in love. At least, that's what he kept telling himself.

He wasn't trying to rekindle anything. He had convinced himself of that. He was simply... being there. That's all.

Geetha had gone through enough. The hospital. The breakdown. The shift. The new flat. He didn't want her to feel alone in any of it. That didn't mean he was still in love.

Love is messy, he thought. Love makes things complicated. And she deserves better than that. Better than me.

He looked at her now, laughing with Kishan, arranging her books alphabetically like a kid who loved order. Her hair was

tied up in a messy bun, strands falling loose as she moved around the flat she was going to call home from now on.

She looked beautiful.

Don't fall back in, his mind warned him.

So, he kept his heart on a leash. Told himself this was friendship. Loyalty. Guilt, even. Anything — anything but love.

By evening, when everything was set, curtains hung, shelves arranged, bedsheet folded over the mattress, the flat began to look like a home.

Geetha stood in the balcony, sipping the cold Pepsi left from lunch. The breeze played with her hair. The sunset painted the buildings golden-red.

Ajay came and stood beside her, not too close, not too far.

"This is a nice place," he said.

"Yeah," she nodded. "Feels... peaceful."

Silence again.

She turned to him, softly. "Thank you, Ajay."

He looked at her.

"For what?" he asked.

"For the food. The help. For showing up," she said.

Ajay's lips parted, like he wanted to say something more. But instead, he just smiled faintly.

"I'll be around," he said. "If you need anything."

She nodded. But inside, her heart screamed — I do. I need you.

But neither of them said it.

As they left, Ajay looked back once at the door before turning away.

And Geetha... stood at the balcony, watching him disappear down the street with Kishan.

Her heart full. Her eyes unsure.

Love didn't need grand declarations.

Sometimes, it was butter chicken and a stolen glance on a balcony.

The sun had just begun to stretch across the sky, casting gentle golden hues over the narrow lanes that led to the college. The air was still, touched only by the soft rustle of trees and the occasional honk in the distance. Geetha walked slowly, her steps light but unsure.

Today, she wore something different. A simple pair of jeans and a light peach-colored top — a change from her usual salwar. It wasn't about looking different for anyone else. It was more about feeling new, trying to start afresh in this new phase of her life. The previous few weeks had drained her emotionally — the hospital, the move, the ache of distance from someone she still couldn't forget — but today, something in her told her to breathe a little deeper.

As she walked past the tea stall at the corner, she heard a familiar sound — the sudden screech of brakes. She turned slightly and saw Ajay, parked just ahead on his bike.

He lifted his visor with that boyish grin that once made her heart race without permission.

"Hey Geetha," he called casually. "Get in. Let's go together."

She froze for a second, unsure how to respond. He hadn't offered this in a long time. Not since... everything.

But he looked at her like nothing had changed. Like they were just two college friends going to class on a bright morning. A simple offer, made without strings.

Still, Geetha's heart fluttered. She nodded and climbed on. "Okay..."

As they rode through the cool morning breeze, her hair flying gently behind, Ajay began talking — not like a distant version of himself, but like the one she had once known.

“Did you finish that assignment we missed last week?” he asked over his shoulder.

“Almost. You?”

He chuckled. “Shruthi nearly bit my head off about it. She literally cornered me near the canteen yesterday. That girl has zero chill.”

Geetha smiled, that familiar warmth creeping into her chest. “She’s right, though. You do procrastinate like crazy.”

He turned slightly. “Et tu, Geetha?”

She laughed softly. That laugh — it had been buried for days. It felt good to let it out.

Then, without thinking too much, she asked, “Why did you stop talking to Ayesha?”

The question came out before she could filter it.

Ajay was quiet for a moment. Then he muttered, “Dk. Just leave it.”

But Geetha noticed the faint shift in his tone. That uncomfortable pause. She didn’t press further, but she smiled quietly. Somewhere deep inside, her heart whispered — maybe he stopped talking to her for a reason... maybe that reason was me.

As they neared the college gate, Ajay asked, “Did you have breakfast?”

She shook her head. “No. I thought I’d eat in the canteen.”

Ajay pulled over and turned toward her. “Let’s go then,” he said, and without warning, gently tugged her by the hand,

walking toward the canteen like it was the most natural thing in the world.

To him, it probably was. A friendly gesture. A habit.

But to Geetha, it was everything. His touch sent a ripple through her — a memory of every moment they once shared. Her hand tingled long after he let go.

They sat across from each other at their usual table. The one they once claimed as “theirs” during the first semester. He ordered her favorite — masala dosa and coffee — without even asking. She didn’t know how to tell him how much that meant.

And then, somewhere between teasing Shruthi’s angry text messages and joking about their professor’s wild handwriting, he looked at her and said, “By the way, you look good today.”

It was casual. Brief.

But her heart? It bloomed.

“Thanks,” she replied softly, trying to look away — hoping he wouldn’t see the way her cheeks had flushed.

In class, they sat together. It felt like the past had curled into the present. Shruthi joined later, throwing amused glances at both of them, but didn’t say anything.

Geetha, though, felt the world fall back into place. The chaos inside her head quieted. The doubts, the ache, the nights of wondering if she had lost him forever — it all blurred for a moment.

Because here he was. Laughing with her. Talking like they always did.

And just like that, she convinced herself — maybe he does still love me.

Maybe this is our restart.

The last bell rang, and the corridors buzzed with familiar noise — footsteps hurrying out, friends planning chai meets, and the rustle of notes being stuffed back into bags.

Geetha lingered by the classroom door, unsure whether to wait for Ajay or walk alone like she usually did these days. But before she could decide, a familiar voice called out behind her.

“Hey, let’s go. I’ll drop you,” Ajay said casually, swinging his bag over his shoulder.

She turned, surprised — again — by his simple gestures.

“We’re like neighbours now, right?” he added with a grin. “Might as well save you the auto fare.”

Geetha nodded, suppressing a smile. “Yeah... okay.”

As they walked together toward the parking lot, the late afternoon sun cast long shadows, the golden light wrapping around them like nostalgia.

Ajay started talking about something Shruthi had said in class — another of her dramatic monologues about assignments. He laughed as he recounted it, and Geetha listened, more to his voice than the story.

But just as they reached the bike, Kishan stood leaning against a pillar nearby, his arms crossed and eyes narrowed.

Ajay noticed him. “What da, Kishan... early today?”

Kishan just nodded and gave Geetha a silent smile.

Geetha climbed onto the backseat, and the two of them rode off.

Kishan watched the bike disappear down the road.

His chest tightened. Something about the way Ajay looked back while driving — like he was stealing peace from

something he was pretending didn't exist — made Kishan want to scream.

As Ajay pulled up, Geetha climbed off and looked at him. The sky had started to dim, the blue bleeding into purple.

"Thanks for the drop," she said softly.

Ajay was about to nod and leave when she said, "Come have some coffee... just for five minutes. You always used to."

Ajay hesitated. Something about the way she said it — warm, hopeful, and yet careful — tugged at him.

But he shook his head gently. "Not today. Later for sure. I'll reach my room and text you in ten minutes, promise."

Geetha smiled. That was enough. That little sentence — I'll text you — it was a thread of connection she needed.

She stood at the gate, watching him ride off into the twilight, her arms folded to her chest. The breeze lifted her hair. And for a moment, she whispered to herself, He still cares... he still loves me.

The moment Ajay entered the room, he found Kishan seated on his bed, legs crossed, arms still folded, his gaze fixed like a storm ready to hit.

"Where were you?" Kishan asked calmly.

Ajay tossed his keys on the table and shrugged. "Dropped Geetha. We had a good time today."

Kishan didn't smile. "Who is she to you, Ajay?"

Ajay sighed, pulling out his hoodie. "She's a very close friend. That's all."

Kishan leaned forward. "Really? That's what you're calling it?"

Ajay frowned. "What else do you want me to say?"

Kishan shook his head and stood up. "Ajay, she thinks it's love. It's written all over her face. You're giving her hope without meaning to. You think your kindness is neutral, but it's not. Not to someone who's still healing."

Ajay snapped. "Why is this always on me da? I'm not asking her to love me. I'm just being a good friend."

"You're not just being a friend," Kishan said, voice rising. "You hold her hand, drop her home, pull out chairs for her, bring her favourite food. You treat her like someone you're in love with — but you're too scared to accept it or too proud to admit it."

Ajay's voice turned colder. "I've told you a hundred times... being with her isn't good for her. Or me. You know what we've been through. This— this is better. Friendship is safe."

Kishan walked over, his eyes burning with frustration. "Safe for who? You? This isn't friendship, Ajay. It's a delusion. You get to feel close to her without committing. And she... she thinks you're still hers."

Ajay looked away.

Kishan's voice softened. "She's not immature, da. She's just in love. And you — you're the one playing scared."

Ajay sat on the bed, rubbing his temples. "Enough, da. I'm really tired. I don't want to fight. I don't want to think."

"You don't want to feel," Kishan corrected.

Ajay didn't respond.

And the silence between them grew heavy — like a room filled with the weight of unsaid things.

The room was mostly dark, save for a small lamp near the bed. Geetha sat with her knees pulled up to her chest, wrapped in a thin shawl. The hum of the fan, the buzz of distant traffic, the faint clicking of her phone screen — that was all she could hear.

Her phone lit up.

Ajay: “Reached safe. Just got settled. Your flat looks nice btw.”

Her heart skipped.

She had been staring at his chat for more than an hour. Those two messages she sent earlier — still no reply. But now he had texted. That was enough.

She replied quickly.

Geetha: “Yeah... It’s slowly feeling like home. Thanks for helping today. And for lunch.”

Ajay replied almost instantly.

Ajay: “Anytime da. Good to see you smiling again.”

Her eyes lingered on that sentence.

“Smiling again.”

She bit her lip. Her fingers hovered over the keyboard.

Geetha: “I was smiling coz of you.”

She didn’t send it.

Instead...

Geetha: “You too... looked happier than before.”

Ajay: "Haha maybe. College feels normal again. Plus I don't have to listen to Kishan's nonstop cribbing anymore."

She laughed softly, typing:

Geetha: "Lol he does that with me too. Complains about you always being confused."

Ajay: "He's dramatic. I'm not confused. I'm just... cautious."

Geetha paused. She could feel it — a crack in the wall he always built.

Geetha: "Cautious about what?"

There was a long pause.

She watched the "typing..." bubble disappear. Then reappear. Then vanish again.

Finally:

Ajay: "Life, people, feelings. You know me."

That made her chest tighten.

Geetha: "Yeah... I know you. And I still..."

She stopped. Deleted it. Typed again.

Geetha: "Still think you overthink everything."

Ajay: "True that. Anyway you sleep soon okay? Big day tomorrow."

Geetha: "Why?"

Ajay: "Coz I'm picking you up. Bike buddy from now."

She froze. Her lips parted slightly. Was this... what she thought it was?

Geetha: "You sure? You don't mind?"

Ajay: "Of course not. We're neighbours now. What are neighbours for?"

There it was.

That word — neighbours.

Not love, not us, not relationship.

She swallowed back her disappointment. Typed anyway.

Geetha: "Okay Ajay. Goodnight."

Ajay: "Goodnight Geetha. Take care."

She stared at that final message long after their chat went quiet.

To Ajay, it was friendship, comfort, normalcy.

To Geetha, it was everything.

Every word, every smile, every ride... it was a sign.

Or at least, she wanted it to be.

She placed the phone beside her pillow, rolled to her side, and whispered, "You still love me... you're just not accepting it."

And with that soft ache blooming in her chest, she drifted into sleep.

The sunlight slipped through the white curtains of Geetha's new flat. The air still had that new-house smell—of paint, cardboard, and soap. She stood in front of the mirror, pulling on her jeans and a pale blue top. Nothing fancy. But she still dabbed a tiny bit of kajal and a soft lip balm.

Not for the world.

Not for college.

Just in case... for him.

Her phone buzzed.

Ajay: "Bike's here. Come down slow. No need to rush like action hero."

A smile tugged at her lips. She grabbed her bag and ran down.

Ajay was leaning against the bike, dressed in his usual white tee and black jeans. Cool, casual, unreadable as always. He looked up, and for a moment, just stared. Noticing her. Really noticing.

Ajay: "Jeans and all? Wow. Trend setter."

Geetha smiled shyly. "Good wow or bad wow?"

Ajay: "Good. Definitely good."

He turned, started the bike. She got on, gently, not wanting to hold him too tightly, but also not too far. That awkward-but-sweet space between them.

And the ride... was peaceful.

No heavy talks. No drama. Just occasional updates about classwork, Shruthi's latest gossip, and his teasing her about her tiny handwriting.

But to Geetha, every word mattered.

Every look he gave her while waiting at a signal.

Every time he slowed down near speed breakers so she wouldn't be thrown off.

Every time he said, "Hold tight."

It felt like love.

They walked in together. Shruthi raised her eyebrows playfully but didn't comment.

Ajay pulled a chair for Geetha beside him. Casual. Chill. Like it was no big deal. To him, it wasn't.

But to her?

Her heart was pacing like a drumline.

Every small thing he did made her feel chosen.

And when he shared his chips packet halfway through class, and nudged her arm when she was dozing during a boring lecture—she couldn't help but think:

He feels something. He has to.

As they reached the bike again, Ajay casually said, "I'll drop you and go. C'mon."

Geetha nodded, her heart aching with that soft hope.

He always insisted.

He always made sure she reached safe.

He always looked back before leaving.

And today, she pushed it—just a little.

Geetha: "Come home na. I'll make coffee."

Ajay: "Another day. I have a headache. I'll text you after reaching, okay?"

She smiled anyway. "Okay."

He did text. Exactly 12 minutes later.

Ajay: "Reached. Drink your coffee and sleep early. Bye madam."

Each day, they went to class together.

Had breakfast in the canteen.

Shared small secrets, inside jokes, playlists.

And at night, exchanged a few texts before falling asleep.

Ajay called her "idiot" when she forgot her file.

Geetha sent him memes when he was cranky.

They fought about nonsense.

They shared fries.

They sat beside each other in the library—silently, but together.

From the outside?

They looked like a couple.

Even Shruthi once said:

“I don’t get it. You two are practically married but ‘just friends?’”

Geetha only smiled. But inside?

It was exhausting.

The unspoken love.

The quiet longing.

The almossts and maybes.

She tried—once or twice—to hint. She’d say things like:

- “What if someone else comes into your life?”
- “Don’t you ever think about... like relationships and stuff?”
- “Do you think exes can ever really be just friends?”

But Ajay?

He’d brush it off.

“Aiyo Geetha, too much drama. I’m happy like this.”

Or “Let’s not complicate what’s already simple and nice.”

And each time, she’d retreat.

Back into that shell.

Afraid that if she asked directly...

If she said: “Do you love me or not?”

She’d lose him.

And right now, even this confusing closeness felt better than silence.

So she said nothing.

Just stayed in this loop.

Smiling when he called.

Hurting when he left.

Loving him quietly.

Ajay, on the other hand, wasn't completely heartless.

He did care.

He noticed her eyes searching for him in the corridor.

Noticed how her voice softened only when talking to him.

He even caught himself smiling at her texts, staring at her when she wasn't looking.

But in his mind, it was just comfort. A warm friendship. A habit maybe.

"This isn't love," he told himself.

Because love... to him... was messy. Dangerous. Risky.

And what he had with Geetha now?

It was stable. Soft. Familiar.

Safe.

She would lie on her bed, staring at the glow of her phone screen, waiting for his "goodnight."

Sometimes he texted late.

Sometimes just a "hmm" or "sleep soon."

Sometimes he forgot.

But even then, she'd whisper to herself:

"He still loves me. He's just scared."

“He’ll realise soon.”

“He has to.”

And so, the pattern continued.

Day after day.

Week after week.

Ajay, stuck in his idea of “close friendship” — secretly leaning on her more than he realised.

Geetha, deep in love — smiling by day, doubting by night.

Both walking beside each other...

Close, but not together.

Familiar, but undefined.

Loving, but not confessing.

And somewhere in between these silences and smiles, they were slowly building a storm neither of them was ready to face.

The day unfolded like any other, with Ajay offering to drop Geetha home after college. However, Geetha requested to be dropped near the local grocery store, mentioning she had some shopping to do and would walk home afterward. Ajay agreed but, upon arrival, parked his bike and joined her inside the store.

“It’s okay, you don’t have to,” Geetha said, slightly surprised.

“It’s fine. Let me help you out and then I’ll head home,” Ajay replied with a smile.

As they navigated the aisles, Geetha picked up vegetables, eggs, paneer, and mushrooms. Ajay teased, “Madam is quite the chef, I see.” ☺☺☺

“Of course!” Geetha responded confidently.

“I didn’t know you could cook.”

“Yes, I can.”

“So, what’s on the menu tonight?”

“Nothing much, just egg fried rice and mushroom gravy.”

“Wow, you’re tempting me now.”

After Geetha paid the bill, Ajay insisted on carrying the grocery bags. Upon reaching her apartment complex, he said, “I’ll come up and drop these bags off; they’re heavy.”

“It’s okay, I can manage,” Geetha replied.

“Nope, I’m coming,” Ajay said firmly.

As they reached the lift, Geetha invited, “Why don’t you have dinner at my place tonight? I’ll cook and we can call Kishan as well.”

Ajay pondered for a moment before agreeing, “Okay, I’ll drop off these bags at your place and then go bring Kishan.”

Geetha’s face lit up with excitement. “Yayyy!”

Ajay smiled, and in a spontaneous gesture, touched her cheek and said, “You’re such a cutie.”

Geetha blushed, feeling a mix of shyness and happiness.

They entered the lift, and Geetha mentioned, “It’s a pretty old lift; it gives a jerk when it starts.

She pressed the button for the first floor, and as anticipated, the lift jerked slightly. Geetha stumbled and fell into Ajay, their eyes meeting in close proximity.

{Present}

Ajay paused for a second, a soft chuckle escaping his lips as he stirred the coffee on the table before him. Anjali sat across from him, arms crossed, eyes narrowed suspiciously.

“So... what happened next?” she asked, tone teasing.

Ajay cleared his throat dramatically and said, “Well, we... shared a hug.”

Anjali raised an eyebrow. “A hug?”

“Yes,” Ajay replied, nodding, his face too calm to be true. “Just a warm, meaningful hug.”

There was a beat of silence.

Anjali smirked. “Right. A hug. That’s exactly what couple do when they get inside a life she mumbled within her.

Ajay threatened, “Anjali should I continue or what?”

And Anjali, though still smiling, softened. She could see it — her father, not just as ‘dad,’ but as Ajay — a young man once so unsure of love, clumsy with feelings, caught between logic and longing. She nodded her head asking Ajay to continue.

{Past what actually happened which Ajay twisted to Anjali}

Geetha pressed the button for the first floor, and as anticipated, the lift jerked slightly. Geetha stumbled and fell into Ajay, their eyes meeting in close proximity.

In a moment of vulnerability and emotion, Geetha leaned in and kissed him.

There was an awkward pause.

“Ajay, I’m sor—” Geetha began, but Ajay dropped the grocery bags, pulled her in, and kissed her back.

The lift reached the first floor, but Ajay pressed a random button, prolonging their time together. They continued to kiss, lost in the moment.

Eventually, they reached Geetha’s floor. Both were silent as they entered her apartment. Ajay placed the groceries on the kitchen counter.

“Ajay, that was my first kiss,” Geetha confessed.

Ajay smiled, unsure of what to say. “I’ll go get Kishan now,” he said, heading towards the door.

As he was leaving, Geetha touched his shoulder, and they kissed again, sharing gentle kisses on each other’s faces.

Ajay stood in the middle of Geetha’s living room, the grocery bags now resting on the kitchen counter. The silence after that kiss in the elevator still lingered in the air, soft and electric. Geetha’s breathing was uneven as she leaned slightly against the wall, her hand still on his

shoulder. The world outside felt paused — like nothing else mattered for a moment.

Ajay looked at her, unsure — not just about what to do, but about what this meant. Yet his body was already moving closer, drawn to her warmth like it always was. Geetha's eyes were searching his, not for permission, but for certainty — a kind of unspoken reassurance that she wasn't the only one falling deeper.

And Ajay, even with all his confusion, didn't move away.

She reached up, brushed a lock of hair from his forehead, and whispered, "I didn't plan this."

Ajay nodded, almost breathless. "Me neither."

Their lips met again — slower this time, softer. A kiss that lingered like a secret. Her fingers gently curled around the collar of his shirt. His hands found her waist, not tentative like before, but sure. Like he had been holding back for far too long.

The kisses deepened, one blending into another, each one more certain than the last. It wasn't just physical — it was filled with everything they hadn't said over weeks and months. The confusion, the pull, the friendship, the yearning — all of it poured into each moment.

Without saying a word, they moved toward her room. The door creaked open gently, and the evening light spilled in through the sheer curtains. The room felt small, personal, filled with her — her books stacked on the side, a sketch pinned to the wall, a slightly messy bed that still smelled like her favorite body mist.

Ajay looked around for a second, taking it in — her world. A world he had tiptoed around but never fully stepped into. Until now.

Geetha stepped closer and ran her fingers over his hand.

“You can stop me anytime,” she said softly, voice trembling with vulnerability.

Ajay shook his head gently. “I don’t want to.”

She smiled, and it wasn’t shy this time. It was tender, open, and full of trust.

They moved to the bed slowly, almost carefully. Their touches were explorative, as if discovering a map they already knew but had never dared trace completely. Clothes were removed with care, laughter whispered between kisses when buttons got stuck or hair got in the way. It wasn’t perfect — but it was real.

When they finally lay together, wrapped in each other, the silence wasn’t awkward. It was comforting.

Ajay brushed her hair back from her face, eyes on hers.

Geetha whispered, “This... was my first.”

Ajay blinked, surprised. He touched her cheek softly, thumb grazing her skin. It’s my first as well and “I’ll never forget it,” he said.

And he meant it.

They didn’t talk about what it meant yet — because in that moment, it wasn’t about definitions or labels. It was just two hearts tangled in the quiet after a storm, holding onto something that had always been there — even if one of them still hadn’t named it.

The room was still warm with silence, laced with the faint trace of their breathing, shallow and hesitant. Ajay sat at the edge of the bed, slipping his shirt back on, his fingers trembling just slightly as he buttoned up. Geetha, wrapped in a shawl, quietly searched for her clothes, her cheeks still flushed with the heat of what just happened — and the confusion of what it meant.

There weren't many words between them.

Not because there was nothing to say — but maybe because there was too much to say.

Geetha brushed her hair back, her fingers pausing at the base of her neck where Ajay had kissed her not long ago. Her heart was beating loud, but her voice was soft when she finally said, "I'll go start the cooking..."

Ajay glanced at her and nodded. "Yeah... I'll go bring Kishan."

Geetha gave him a small smile. Not wide. But not broken either. "Okay."

He stood up, looked at her for a second too long — wanting to say something, not knowing what.

There was warmth in her eyes, a lingering glow that Ajay noticed—but didn't address. He didn't know what to say. In his mind, this was... a moment. It happened. It was special, yes. But he wasn't going to label it. Especially not as love. That word felt heavy. Dangerous. He wasn't ready to go there.

He grabbed his keys and helmet and left.

Inside his room, Kishan was in his own world — music blasting through a Bluetooth speaker, dancing in his shorts and old college tee, hair flying in all directions. He moonwalked across the room, then spun once before sliding on the floor, arms raised in mock victory.

Ajay swung the door open and yelled:

"Machaaannn!"

Kishan froze mid-slide like a deer in headlights.

"Dei! Dei what da! You scared the crap outta me!" he said, heart racing. "Do you ever knock?"

Ajay, breathless and still a little dazed, leaned against the wall.

“I need to talk da,” he said.

Kishan narrowed his eyes. “What now? You and Geetha fought again, huh? What did you do this time, Mr. Emotionally Unavailable?”

Ajay gave a nervous chuckle and scratched the back of his neck. “No machan... not a fight. I... crossed a line da.”

Kishan stared. “What line? Like... a kiss?”

Ajay hesitated. Then shook his head.

Kishan blinked. “Don’t tell me—”

Ajay nodded.

“I lost my virginity with Geetha,” he said quietly, almost like it was someone else saying it.

Kishan dropped onto his bed like someone had just unplugged him from life.

“Dei. What da.”

Ajay stood there, frozen.

Kishan held his head, groaned, and said dramatically, “So this is your version of close friendship? Dei Ajay, seriously? Friendship oda 2.0 version ah?”

Ajay didn’t smile. He slumped against the wall.

Kishan went on, “She was already confused about what this is. And now, da... she’ll think it’s something more. You’ve just made everything a thousand times harder.”

“I didn’t plan it,” Ajay said. “It just... happened.”

Kishan groaned, “And now what? You still gonna say ‘we’re just friends’? After all this?”

Ajay exhaled. "Yes. Because we are. I don't want a relationship, machan. I've told you that. This doesn't change that."

"But it changes her, da," Kishan said, softer now. "You might think it's just a moment, but to her... it's everything."

Ajay looked down. "I know. That's why I didn't want to go too far. But I couldn't control it. I was just in the moment."

Kishan stood up. "So what now?"

Ajay picked up his helmet again. "She said she's making dinner. For us. Let's go. Just... act normal."

Kishan gave him a look. "You already had dinner, I think."

Ajay groaned. "Dei, stop with the jokes, please."

But Kishan was half-smiling. "I'll come. But you better figure out what you're doing, da. Or someone's heart is gonna break. And I don't think it's yours."

They left the room, one clearly more confused than the other.

Geetha's flat was warm with the scent of something delicious simmering on the stove. The faint sizzle of mushrooms in a pan filled the cozy space, and the aroma of egg fried rice, infused with garlic and spring onions, wafted through the air. She stood barefoot in the kitchen, her hair loosely tied, sleeves rolled up as she stirred the gravy with quiet focus. Her mind, though, was racing—playing back the moments from earlier. The kiss. The look in Ajay's eyes. The silence that followed. Her heart was thudding still.

The doorbell rang. She wiped her hands and opened it with a calm smile. Kishan was first to enter, giving her a friendly grin. Ajay followed close behind, eyes a little cautious, his smile brief. Geetha greeted Kishan cheerfully, and when she turned to Ajay, she gently patted his shoulder, her eyes lingering on him for just a moment too long. That single touch, so subtle, sent a tremor through Ajay.

Kishan caught it. He didn't miss a beat and shot a look at Ajay—a mixture of concern, warning, and a classic "I told you so."

They all moved to the table. Plates were set, and Geetha served the egg fried rice with care. The mushroom gravy was rich and earthy, thick with flavour, and paired perfectly with the rice. Ajay took a bite and his expression shifted with surprise.

"Wow... this is... really good," he admitted, licking his lips slightly.

"I didn't know you could cook like this," he added.

Geetha beamed. “I told you, I’m not just a college topper. I’ve got skills.”

Kishan, already halfway through his serving, nodded. “Super tasty, Geetha. Like hotel level.”

Geetha looked pleased, but most of her attention was on Ajay. She kept refilling his plate despite his polite refusals, brushing close to him now and then in those soft, familiar ways that once meant comfort. To her, they meant love now.

Ajay, however, sat stiff. He tried to act normal, playing it off—saying things like “I’ll serve myself, chill,” and giving small smiles. But inside, his chest was tightening. He didn’t want to lead her on. But he didn’t want to hurt her either.

And then came the final touch—Geetha brought out a small steel bowl of payasam, garnished with roasted cashews and a few strands of saffron.

“I made this... because I know it’s your favorite,” she said, placing it in front of Ajay.

Ajay looked at it, then at her. He hesitated. “Geetha, you didn’t have to—”

“I wanted to,” she said softly, cutting him off. She handed a bowl to Kishan as well.

Ajay took a spoonful. It was warm, perfectly sweet. Just like home.

“It’s good,” he said quietly.

That single sentence made Geetha’s face light up.

After dinner, as they began to clean up, Geetha lingered a little close to Ajay again—helping with plates, nudging his arm lightly as they dried the utensils. It was domestic. It was intimate. It felt like... something real to her.

But to Ajay, it felt like a slow blur of emotions he didn't know how to handle.

When she mentioned she had the movie Gunaa on a CD and suggested watching it, Kishan immediately jumped at the idea. "I love Kamal da! Switch it on!"

Ajay gave him a glare that said, "You're not helping."

The lights were off, the CD was on, and the three of them settled down—Kishan on the floor, Geetha and Ajay on the couch. The movie played. The hauntingly beautiful song "Kanmani Anbodu Kadhalan" came on.

And then, Geetha gently slid her hand over Ajay's and leaned her head on his shoulder.

Ajay froze. Every cell in his body tensed. His breath caught.

He didn't pull away. He didn't have the heart. How could he? She was smiling. Peaceful. Content.

He didn't want to break that.

So he sat there, unmoving, heart racing.

When the movie ended, Ajay stood up quickly. "We should go. It's getting late."

Kishan stretched, sighed. "What a movie, man."

Geetha walked with them to the door. She seemed reluctant. "Leaving already?"

Ajay just nodded. "Yeah."

She stood by the balcony as they stepped out. Ajay glanced back. She waved.

Ajay waved back, not smiling. His head was a storm.

Kishan looked at him, then said, "Dei, take the key. Start the bike."

Ajay said, "Machan, fast da... let's leave."

Kishan chuckled. "Scared, huh?"

Ajay didn't respond. But deep down, he was. Not because of love.

But because he knew Geetha wanted more.

And he still didn't know how to tell her he couldn't give it.

The engine of Ajay's bike hummed low as they rode back under the city's sleepy night sky. The roads were mostly quiet, the occasional barking of stray dogs and dim streetlights the only company they had.

Kishan sat behind Ajay, arms loosely hanging, but his head was loud with thoughts. He didn't say a word until they reached the final turning near their place. Ajay had barely parked the bike when Kishan stepped down and blurted, "Dei, you know what I'm gonna say, right?"

Ajay didn't even look back. "Machan, I know... I know. Don't start."

"No da," Kishan said, throwing his helmet on the table inside the room, "I have to start. You didn't just cross a line. You didn't just step into the deep end. You built a whole damn villa with a swimming pool in this so-called close friendship."

Ajay sat on the bed, both palms covering his face. "I didn't mean for anything to happen like this da..."

"Oh yeah?" Kishan laughed bitterly. "But it did. And now what? She's sitting there probably thinking you're the man of her dreams and you're here calling it... what? Friendship with benefits?"

"Machan, no! Not benefits. Dei!" Ajay was wide-eyed, "I was just trying to be there for her, not... not this."

Kishan shook his head. "Ajay, being there is one thing. Kissing, cuddling, holding hands, and—" he paused

dramatically, “everything else—that’s not ‘being there’. That’s a relationship, bro. Even if you don’t want to call it that.”

Ajay looked helpless, defeated. “I don’t want to be in a relationship, machan. I’ve said it from day one. I know it’ll turn messy. It already is. I can’t give her that future she dreams about. I don’t want to fake something and hurt her more in the end.”

Kishan sat down, finally softer. “Then you’ve got to tell her. Properly. Not with your ‘I’m just a friend’ nonsense in between kisses and hugs. She deserves clarity, Ajay.”

Just then, Ajay’s phone buzzed.

He stared at it like it was a bomb.

Kishan leaned over, “Who is it?”

Ajay swallowed. “Geetha.”

“What’d she say?”

“She asked if I reached home.”

Kishan chuckled sarcastically. “Oh yeah, she’s definitely chill. Totally not in love.”

Ajay frowned. “I’m scared da. I let her hold my hand. I didn’t stop her. I didn’t want to stop her. But now it’s like I’m digging a deeper pit every time I say nothing.”

Kishan raised an eyebrow. “Hold your hand? You mean just hold hands?”

Ajay shot him a look. “Dei.”

Kishan smirked, “Okay okay, I’ll shut up. Go on, what did she text next?”

Ajay sighed again. Another message popped in.

Geetha: Can we go to Marina tomorrow? After class?

He stared at it. "Oh no. Not Marina..."

Kishan's curiosity peaked. "Why? What's with Marina?"

"That's where we first met, da... You forgot? You, me, Geetha, Akshaya."

Kishan's eyes widened. "Oh yeah ...So she's going full circle now. Nostalgia attack. She's officially in her filmy romantic heroine phase. This is your climax song da!"

Ajay threw a pillow at him, half-laughing, half-panicking. "Don't joke da, I'm serious. I feel like I'm stepping into a trap of my own making."

Kishan became serious too. "Then step out with honesty. Go. Meet her. But this time, talk. Don't hide behind the friend label anymore. If it's a no, say it clearly. You already became the villain. Don't become a monster."

Ajay looked at the screen again. He hesitated for a moment, then typed slowly.

Ajay: We reached, Geetha. Tomorrow after class Marina sounds fine. I'm very tired. Gonna sleep. Good night.

He hit send.

Kishan clapped once, dramatically. "Alright. Curtain close for tonight. Emotions, confusion, guilt, and drama — all packed."

Ajay chuckled weakly, laying back on his bed, staring at the ceiling.

Kishan switched off the lights. "Let's see what kind of beach storm you walk into tomorrow. Good luck, Loverboy."

Ajay whispered, "I'm not a Loverboy..."

Kishan replied in the dark, "Tell that to her. And maybe to yourself too."

The moment Geetha's phone buzzed, she was still sitting cross-legged on her bed, hugging her pillow tight, replaying the night again and again in her mind. The kiss in the lift, the touch of his hand on her cheek, the way his breath had trembled just before he kissed her back. And later, in her room — something she never imagined would happen. Something she thought only love could lead to.

She'd barely eaten much of her own dinner, even though everyone had said it tasted amazing. Her mind was tangled with every small gesture from Ajay — the way he looked at her, the way he didn't push her away, the way he let her rest her head on his shoulder during the movie. And most of all, what they had shared behind her closed door.

The screen lit up. A reply from Ajay.

Ajay: We reached, Geetha. Tomorrow after class Marina sounds fine. I'm very tired. Gonna sleep. Good night.

Her heart raced.

Marina.

The place where they met, where everything had begun — the walks, the laughter, the silences, and the confusing closeness.

She clutched the phone, a small smile playing on her lips. For her, it wasn't just a place. It was a memory wrapped in emotion. A symbol of what they used to be — or what she thought they were. And maybe, now, it could be where something new truly started.

Unable to hold it all in, she opened her laptop and rang Akshaya on Skype.

"Geethaaa?" Akshaya said with a knowing smirk the moment the video connected. "Wait, you're glowing. What's going on? Did he finally propose or what?!"

Geetha burst out laughing, her cheeks colouring. “No, not exactly. But something happened. Something big.”

Akshaya narrowed her eyes. “What did you do?”

Geetha bit her lip and whispered, “We... slept together.”

Akshaya blinked. “No.”

Geetha nodded, her voice soft, “Yes.”

Akshaya dropped her coffee cup onto the couch and leaned forward as if she were right there in Geetha’s room. “WHAT?! You mean like... like properly?! Not just kissing and stopping and awkward silences?”

Geetha blushed, nodding. “We kissed... in the lift. Then again at the door. And... it just happened. There was no planning. No talking. Just... emotions.”

Akshaya looked stunned. “Geetha... wow. That’s a lot.”

“I know,” Geetha said, running a hand through her hair, eyes shining. “But Akshu... it felt right. It wasn’t just physical. He held me like I meant something. And later, during dinner, he didn’t push me away. He let me lean on him during the movie. He smiled at me. He... let me in.”

Akshaya stayed quiet for a second, processing. “Okay, that sounds beautiful. But, Geetha...”

Geetha’s smile faltered slightly.

Akshaya continued, her voice gentle. “Please don’t let one night convince you that he’s on the same page as you emotionally. I’m not saying he doesn’t care. I’m saying you know Ajay — he’s emotionally all over the place. You’ve told me that a hundred times.”

“I know,” Geetha admitted. “But this felt different.”

“I believe that,” Akshaya said. “But he’s also someone who confuses closeness with love. And you? You love him. Fully, deeply. That’s why I’m scared for you.”

Geetha looked down, her voice small. “I’ve decided to tell him tomorrow. At Marina. I’m going to propose again.”

Akshaya exhaled, leaning back. “You really are brave. But please... be prepared. In your heart, I know you’re already imagining him saying yes. But if he says no — again — promise me you’ll protect yourself this time. That you won’t keep hoping for change.”

Geetha nodded, tears filling her eyes. “I will. But I have to try. I can’t leave things unsaid again. Not after today.”

Akshaya’s expression softened. “Alright. Just... be careful, G. I love you, and I know you’re doing this from your heart. But don’t let your heart be the only one driving. Let your mind step in too, okay?”

Geetha smiled through the tears and whispered, “Okay.”

The screen flickered in the dim light of her room as the call ended. She sat in the silence, staring at the laptop lid. Tomorrow, it would be all or nothing. The beginning of something real — or the end of a dream.

The next morning bloomed with anticipation, tension, and unspoken hope.

Geetha stood in front of the mirror, carefully adjusting the folds of her black salwar. It was a rich, deep black that shimmered ever so slightly under the morning light that spilled in through her window. Her silver oxidised jewelry gleamed softly against her skin — the long jhumkas brushing her jawline, a delicate black bindi at the center of her forehead, and her wrists clinking gently with glass bangles that matched her outfit. There was something in her eyes — a nervous, glowing excitement that hadn't been there in a long time. She hadn't dressed up like this in forever.

Today was special.

Today, she was going to tell Ajay. Again. And this time, she hoped it would be different — that everything they had been through in the last few days, especially that night, had changed his heart.

She carefully tucked the small handmade greeting card inside her bag — the one she had spent hours writing the night before, the one that held her hopes and her heart. With it, a single red rose, wrapped with a thin white ribbon, slightly trembling in her fingers before she placed it in her tote.

Just as she was getting ready to step out, her phone pinged. A message.

Kishan: "Hey, I'm outside. Come down?"

Geetha's smile faltered slightly. "Kishan?" she muttered, surprised. She had expected Ajay.

She walked down and saw Kishan waiting on his bike. She tried to smile through her confusion.

"Hey... where's Ajay?" she asked, her voice light but clearly looking for an answer.

Kishan scratched the back of his neck. "Uh... his bike had a flat. He went to get it fixed. But he said you'd be waiting, so I came to pick you."

She nodded, a little disappointed, but masked it well. "Oh, okay."

What Kishan didn't say — what Ajay couldn't bring himself to admit — was that Ajay had panicked. After everything that happened, he didn't trust himself not to hurt her more. He thought some distance, even if just for a while, might help him think clearly.

But Geetha didn't know that. And her heart — already caught up in hope — didn't want to believe that Ajay was avoiding her.

As they reached college, heads turned. Geetha looked stunning. Her look was elegant, mature — a woman in love, radiant and composed. Even Shruthi gasped when she saw her.

"Wow, Geetha! You look beautiful," Shruthi said, giving her a quick hug. Ayesha chimed in, "You're glowing, girl. What's the occasion?"

Geetha just smiled shyly, brushing them off.

And then Ajay walked in.

He froze for a moment when he saw her. She was standing by the corridor near the classroom, sunlight dancing on the silver in her earrings, her smile soft as ever. And Ajay —

despite all the confusion and emotional barricades he had built around himself — felt something shift.

But he didn't let it show.

He walked up casually, holding his bag loosely, and said, "Hey."

Geetha smiled, but she was watching him carefully, hoping for something more.

He sat beside her in class, just like always. She leaned in a little more today, hoping he'd notice. When the lecture was dragging on, she finally turned to him and whispered, "So... how do I look?"

Ajay turned and met her gaze. For a moment, his throat dried. She did look beautiful — more than beautiful. He wanted to say it. But everything in him told him not to. Still, he said softly, "You look beautiful."

Her heart skipped a beat. The way he said it — so quietly, so genuinely — made her blush instantly. She looked away, trying to hide the smile that was blooming uncontrollably.

Throughout the day, she was closer than usual. A brush of her hand, a shared glance, and every time she laughed at his stupid jokes, Ajay felt the familiar pull — the one he kept trying to ignore.

But evening came too soon.

The ride to Marina.

Geetha had been waiting for this. It was more than just a place. It was their place — the first time they met, truly met, beneath that endless sky and crashing waves. That memory never left her, and now, she was determined to recreate it — but this time, with a confession.

She double-checked the greeting card and the rose tucked safely inside her bag. Her fingers trembled a little. This was

it. She got on Ajay's bike and instinctively held him tightly from behind.

Ajay tensed.

He wasn't used to this closeness anymore. Not after that night. But he didn't push her hands away. A part of him — a very quiet part — didn't want to. Still, in his head, the war raged on.

I'll speak to her today. I'll make it clear we're friends. Just friends. That night... it was a mistake. She needs to understand.

But behind him, Geetha was thinking something entirely different.

He'll understand today. He'll see it's love. Maybe he was scared before, but now, he knows. He just needs time. Today will be the day he finally says it back.

Two people.

Two hopes.

Riding toward the same place, but carrying entirely different dreams.

The breeze caught Geetha's dupatta, and her bangles chimed lightly as she held onto him tighter, her head leaning against his back for a fleeting moment.

Ajay closed his eyes for a second.

This was going to be harder than he thought.

The wind swept through Geetha's dupatta as she sat behind Ajay on the bike, her bangles clinking softly as she held onto him. The sun had just started its slow descent, casting golden hues over the city as the two made their way toward Marina beach. The roads buzzed with the usual traffic, but all Geetha could feel was the gentle thump of Ajay's back

against her palm, the way her heart was beating just a little faster than usual.

She leaned in slightly and began to hum softly—the same song they had once hummed together on their first ride. “Naan unnai neenga maten...” Her voice, soaked in warmth and nostalgia, floated through the air between them.

But Ajay didn’t hum back.

He didn’t even flinch.

Geetha paused for a second, hoping maybe he didn’t hear. So she hummed again, this time a bit louder, more playfully. She leaned toward his ear and whispered, “Hey... no duet today?”

Ajay gave a small smile, but his eyes didn’t crinkle the way they usually did when he was truly happy. “I’m just focusing on the road,” he replied, not turning back.

Geetha leaned back, hiding the slight sting that bloomed in her chest. He didn’t join. He always joins.

Still, she didn’t let her spirit falter. She adjusted her black salwar, the oxidised jhumkas brushing against her neck. She had taken extra care today—her kajal lined just right, the black bindi sitting perfectly between her brows, silver bangles stacked on her wrists. She felt beautiful. More than that, she felt hopeful.

She looked at the small greeting card and the red rose she had safely tucked into bag. Her fingers brushed against it, and she smiled to herself. Today... today I’ll tell him again. Properly. And this time, he’ll understand.

But Ajay’s silence was loud.

Inside, Ajay was anything but calm. He kept his eyes straight ahead, the wind brushing his face, the familiar scent of Geetha’s perfume reaching him occasionally. That

song—that song—sent a wave of memories crashing through him. The first meet, laughter, inside jokes, and then... that night.

The night that changed everything.

He bit his lower lip. Why is she humming that now? Why does she always make this feel so... much more? His knuckles tightened on the bike's handles. This is friendship. Just friendship. That night was a mistake, and today... today I'll make sure to tell her.

As they neared the beach, the tall lampposts began to cast long shadows, and the salty air began to grow thicker. The blue of the sea shimmered in the distance, waves crashing softly like background music to something more intense building between the two of them.

They parked the bike.

Geetha got off first, adjusting her bag and shaking her dupatta like a child dusting off butterflies. "Marina looks more magical today, no?" she said, her eyes gleaming.

Ajay gave a small nod, pulling off his helmet. "Yeah. Maybe."

Geetha tilted her head at his tone, but smiled anyway. "Let's go near the water. Same spot."

Ajay walked beside her, silent. Each step on the sand felt heavy for him, like the truth he carried was too big to fit inside him.

For Geetha, it was like coming home.

She didn't know this would be the most important walk of her life.

The soft waves of Marina lapped the shore as Geetha ran ahead, her laughter caught in the sea breeze. Her black salwar swayed in rhythm with the wind, and her silver

bangles clinked with every playful gesture she made. She ran toward the water, letting it touch her toes, kicking at it like a child, grinning wide.

She turned around, squinting in the sun, and called out, "Ajay! Come da, just a little! Look at this water... it's perfect!"

Ajay stood at a distance near the edge of the sand, his hands in his pockets, watching her. His lips curled faintly, but his eyes were distant. He gave her a small wave, shaking his head. "You enjoy, Geetha. I'll sit here."

Geetha stuck her tongue out and grinned. "Lazy fellow," she called, then turned back to the waves, splashing around, collecting little shells like they were treasure.

Ajay walked to a dry patch on the beach and sat down, elbows resting on his knees, head slightly lowered. The breeze was strong, but it did little to cool his burning thoughts. She's so happy... and I'm going to break her heart today.

Geetha came running back after a few minutes, cheeks flushed, dupatta half falling off her shoulder. "Ajay... I'm so hungry!" she announced dramatically, holding her stomach.

Ajay looked up. "Let's get something. There's a bajji stall nearby, right?"

"Yes!" she said brightly, brushing the sand off her palms. "And samosas too. Come, come!"

They walked side by side, the crunch of sand beneath their feet. Ajay kept his hands folded behind his back, while Geetha clutched her sling bag tightly, her heart fluttering—not from hunger, but from hope.

They bought a couple of bajjis, two hot samosas, and a couple of drinks from the stall. The vendor smiled at them like they were a couple, and Geetha smiled back, imagining

they really were. Ajay didn't notice. Or at least he pretended not to.

They sat back down on the beach again, a little away from the crowd, with the paper plates between them. Geetha broke a samosa in half and offered it to Ajay with a grin.

"Open your mouth," she said.

Ajay looked at her, blinking. "What?"

"Come on, like a kid. Just once!" she giggled.

Ajay hesitated. This is too much, he thought. But she looked so happy, so full of life.

He sighed and leaned forward, letting her feed him a bite. She laughed like she won something.

"You're a good boy," she teased.

Ajay chewed slowly, unsure of how to respond. She didn't notice his silence.

After they finished eating, they sat watching the sea. The sky had started turning orange now, the sun slowly dipping, casting long shadows behind them.

Geetha leaned in, gently holding Ajay's hand—fingers locking without resistance—and rested her head on his shoulder. Her heart swelled. This, to her, felt like home. Like something permanent. Like love.

"You know why I picked Marina today?" she asked softly.

Ajay turned to her, eyebrows slightly raised. "Why?"

Geetha looked ahead at the horizon, her voice turning tender. "This is where we first met... remember? That day with Kishan and Akshaya. We were all sitting here... just strangers turning into something more. That was special."

Ajay's eyes widened a little, and for a moment, he truly did remember. The four of them—new, awkward, laughing

over nothing. He nodded slowly, the corners of his lips curling faintly. "Yeah... that was a good day."

"For me," Geetha continued, her voice barely a whisper now, "it was the beginning of something beautiful."

Ajay stayed quiet. He looked at her, then back at the waves. Something in his chest tightened, but he pushed it away—telling himself again that it was just friendship. Special, yes. But not love.

For Geetha though, this was her way of tracing the full circle. From that very first moment they met here with their friends, to this evening—with just the two of them. The same beach. The same breeze. But her heart fuller than ever.

Ajay didn't answer immediately.

Geetha sat up straight a bit, still holding his hand. "You know this chudidhar I'm wearing... it's made from Amma's old saree. I had preserved it for a long time. Thought I'll wear it on a special day. I guess... I just felt today is one."

Ajay turned to her slowly. "Geetha..."

She looked at him, eyes shimmering. "Don't I look okay?"

"You look beautiful," he said quietly.

Geetha smiled wide. "Thank you."

But something shifted in Ajay's tone. Geetha could feel it. The way he said beautiful—it wasn't laced with the same warmth he usually had. It felt like a duty. A truth he knew she wanted to hear. Not one he meant to say.

Still, she pushed those doubts aside. She wanted to hold on to the moment.

Ajay, though, was drowning in conflict. His head really was aching—not from illness, but from the weight of everything.

He slowly pulled his hand away.

Geetha looked at him, surprised. "What's wrong?"

"I... I'm just not feeling well. My head's hurting a bit," he said, rubbing his forehead.

"You should've told me before, Ajay. We didn't have to come all the way here," Geetha said gently, worried.

He shook his head. "It's fine. I didn't want to cancel. I know you were excited."

There was a silence. The sea roared in the distance. A few couples were walking along the shore. A kid was flying a kite. But for them, the world felt strangely still.

Geetha slowly reached for his hand again, holding it with both of hers.

"This day means a lot to me," she said, voice barely a whisper. "I know you're not feeling well... but I just want you to know... I'm really happy right now."

Ajay looked at her. Her eyes were filled with sincerity, with a kind of hope that terrified him.

Geetha tilted her head and looked at Ajay, her eyes shimmering in the fading light of the beach. The dusky glow painted gold on her skin, and there was a softness in her smile—like everything in her world, in that one moment, made sense.

"Today feels special, doesn't it?" she asked, her voice barely louder than the waves behind them. Her hand slid into his, fingers interlocking gently. The kind of hold that wasn't seeking permission—it already belonged there. Then, without hesitation, she leaned forward, her lips brushing his cheek in a slow, affectionate kiss.

Ajay stiffened.

Something inside him broke.

He turned his face away. Her scent still lingered near his lips. His body was frozen, caught between guilt and the ache of truth he had buried too long.

“Geetha,” he said. His voice wasn’t loud, but it carried weight. Urgent. Uncomfortable. “I need to talk to you.”

Geetha blinked, the corners of her smile still holding. “What happened, Ajay?” she asked, her voice lined with concern. “Are you feeling dizzy again? You’re not okay with the beach? Is it the crowd—”

“No,” he said, cutting her off. There was no kindness in his tone anymore. Just exhaustion. “It’s not that. I just... I don’t like this.”

The words dropped like heavy stones between them.

Geetha furrowed her brows. "What do you mean?" Ajay gestured vaguely between them—her hand still in his, her head resting close. "This. All of this. The way you've been holding my hand, kissing me, dressing up... acting like we're—"

He couldn't even finish the sentence.

Geetha's expression cracked, like glass under strain. "Ajay... what are you trying to say?" she whispered. "Yesterday, you were fine. You were more than fine... you were with me. You smiled. You—" her voice broke, "—We kissed."

Ajay looked away, shutting his eyes. "That's what I'm saying. Yesterday... was a mistake, Geetha. I should've stopped it. I should've told you then."

Her lips parted in disbelief. "A mistake?" she repeated, her voice quivering.

"I'm sorry if you got any ideas... if I made you feel like it meant something. I... I shouldn't have crossed the line," he said, voice trailing off.

Geetha withdrew her hand slowly, as if it had been burned. "Crossed the line?" she echoed, barely able to breathe. "Ajay... how can you say that? After everything? Does... does sex mean nothing to you?"

Ajay looked down at the sand, his fists clenched on his knees. "Please don't shout, Geetha—"

Tears flooded her eyes. "Don't shout? You think I'd give myself to someone who didn't mean anything to me?" Her

voice cracked, raw and bleeding emotion. "I loved you, Ajay. I still—"

"Stop it," Ajay snapped. "We're friends, Geetha. That's it. I don't want a relationship. I don't want love. I never have. You knew this."

Geetha stumbled back slightly, blinking through her tears. "You're blaming me now?" she asked, laughing bitterly. "Is that what you're doing? Turning this all on me?"

"I'm not blaming anyone," he muttered. "I'm just... I'm being honest. You read too much into everything. You always do. You make something out of nothing."

Geetha's breath hitched. She held her salwar tight in her fists, trying to hold herself together. "Then why, Ajay?" she asked through sobs. "Why the hell did you kiss me back? Why did you pull me close? Why didn't you stop me that night?"

Ajay stood up suddenly, his voice rising. "Because I was just horny, okay?!"

The words echoed.

Even the sea seemed to quiet down.

Geetha stood still, unable to move. Her breath was short. Her vision blurred. That one word—horny—tore through every part of her being. Like everything they shared, every memory, every look, every smile... had just been dragged into the dirt.

She felt sick.

Her hands trembled as she reached into her bag and pulled out the greeting card and rose she had carefully preserved. The card she had written her feelings in. The rose she had picked for him. A part of her heart wrapped in those things. She flung them at him.

The card landed at his feet. The rose struck his chest and bounced off limply, its petals bruised.

"You don't deserve love," she said through clenched teeth, her voice trembling. "You don't even understand what it means."

Ajay looked at her, his jaw tight, but still silent.

"I came here to tell you I loved you. To give you my heart again even after everything. I waited. I hoped. I believed you were confused, but you cared. I was wrong."

She turned to leave.

"Bye, Ajay," she choked. "I don't ever want to see your face again."

Ajay swallowed hard, his voice coming out bitter and hollow. "Thank you. I hope you'll stick to that this time... instead of ending up in the hospital again or pulling some emotional drama like last time."

Geetha spun back, her eyes burning with rage. "Shut up," she said, her voice thunderous. "Shut your damn mouth, Ajay."

She didn't wait for another word.

Her footsteps were fast and furious, her sobs breaking through the sound of crashing waves. Her silhouette disappeared into the beach crowd, her black salwar flaring behind her like a storm.

Ajay stood there, completely still. His heart thudding. His mouth dry. He felt like something had been ripped out of him—something vital. But he didn't stop her.

He couldn't.

His pride stood in the way. Or maybe his fear. Or maybe the emptiness he didn't yet know how to name.

The greeting card lay at his feet, fluttering open slightly in the breeze.

He was standing there and watching her leave. The waves kept coming in, but for the first time, Ajay felt completely... alone.

Geetha stood at the edge of the beach, her breath heavy, her heart ripped in places she didn't know existed. The sky above was slowly turning to dusk, painted in bruised shades of blue and grey, echoing the turmoil inside her.

She hailed an auto, wiping her tears as she stepped in, but they kept spilling, refusing to stop. Her voice trembled as she gave the driver her grandmother's address. He gave a quick nod, and the vehicle jerked forward into the blur of the evening crowd.

As the auto sped past the roads that once held memories—of laughter, of bike rides, of stolen glances—Geetha curled up in the corner of the seat, trying to make herself small, invisible. The card she had written, the rose she had picked so carefully... all now lying abandoned on the beach, just like her heart.

Her fingers dug into the fabric of her salwar, the one made from her mother's cherished saree. It had been meant for a moment of love. A moment of celebration. But now it felt like a cruel costume in a play that had ended in disaster.

When the auto stopped in front of her grandmother's gate, Geetha stepped out like a ghost, her knees weak, her chest tight. Her grandmother opened the door and froze seeing her.

"Geetha, kanna, what happened?" she asked, voice trembling with concern.

Geetha didn't answer. She just walked in and collapsed into her lap like a child, sobbing uncontrollably. Her grandmother stroked her hair, asking no further questions, letting her grief spill out until her body could cry no more

The room was cloaked in darkness. Only the faint city lights from outside seeped in through the window, casting dull shadows on the walls. Ajay sat at the edge of his bed, elbows on his knees, head down. The air was still, heavy with the weight of things unspoken. His mind replayed every word, every expression, every tear on Geetha's face. But he sat still. Numb. Detached.

The door creaked open.

A sharp click echoed as the lights came on. Kishan stepped inside, backpack slung lazily over one shoulder. He froze when he saw Ajay.

"Dai..." Kishan frowned, dropping the bag to the floor. "Why are you sitting in the dark like some ghost? What's going on?"

Ajay didn't look up. His fingers were locked together, knuckles pale from the pressure.

Kishan walked closer, concern creeping into his voice. "Ajay... what happened, da? Did you talk to Geetha? Did you explain everything like you said you would?"

Ajay inhaled sharply, then gave a small, bitter laugh. "Hmm. She was about to propose. Again."

Kishan's eyes widened. "And?"

"I stopped her," Ajay said, finally lifting his head. His eyes looked tired, as if they hadn't blinked in hours. "She kissed me. I told her I didn't like it. Told her I didn't want any of this."

Kishan sat down on the chair opposite him, his brow furrowed. "So you told her the truth? About your confusion?"

Ajay shrugged. "I told her yesterday was a mistake."

There was a pause.

"You... only said that?" Kishan asked slowly, sensing something darker beneath Ajay's flat tone.

Ajay looked away, jaw tightening. "I told her... I was just horny."

Silence exploded between them. For a moment, Kishan didn't move. Didn't even blink.

Then his voice came, low and dangerous. "What?"

Ajay repeated it, more defensively now. "Yeah. I told her that. Because that's the truth, right? I didn't love her. It wasn't planned. It just... happened."

Kishan stood up, fists clenched. "Are you serious, Ajay? You told her that?"

"She needed to hear it," Ajay said coldly. "She was building castles in her head. Again. I couldn't let her go on thinking there was a future."

Kishan's voice rose. "But like that? You could've told her with even an ounce of humanity. Do you even realise what you've done?"

Ajay stood too, his frustration finally rising. "I'm done feeling guilty, machan! She's obsessed with me. She doesn't listen. I've told her a hundred times—we're friends. That's it. She keeps dreaming, dressing up, making food, writing cards... like this is some goddamn movie!"

Kishan looked at him, stunned. "You think love is obsession? You think her feelings were some kind of... fantasy?"

Ajay's face was tense, cold, yet something flickered in his eyes—guilt, maybe, but buried under layers of denial. “What else do you call it, machan? She doesn't stop. She doesn't listen. No matter how many times I said I didn't want more, she kept pushing. What am I supposed to do—keep pretending?”

Kishan stepped closer, his jaw tight. “You don't get it, do you? She wasn't pretending. She wasn't acting. She felt. Every damn second she spent with you meant something to her.”

“She chose to feel that way. Not me,” Ajay snapped. “I didn't ask her to fall for me. I didn't make any promises. But she kept turning every smile into a confession, every hug into a proposal. I never wanted it.”

Kishan stared at him like he didn't recognize him anymore. “You think that absolves you?”

Ajay didn't respond.

“You let her fall,” Kishan said, voice breaking with anger. “You stood there while she poured her heart into you, and instead of stepping back, you let her. You let her cook for you, stay up talking to you all night, kiss you, sleep with you, and the next day you spit it all out like poison? And you have the audacity to call her obsessive?”

“I didn't mean to sleep with her,” Ajay muttered, almost ashamed now. “It just... it happened.”

“No, Ajay,” Kishan said through gritted teeth. “It didn't just happen. You let it happen. You wanted it in that moment. Don't act like she tricked you. You knew damn well what was going on. You knew she saw it as love.”

Ajay's voice cracked slightly. “I didn't know what to say... I panicked.”

“So you punished her for it?” Kishan’s tone turned sharp, bitter. “You humiliated her to get out of your own shame? Do you know how broken she must be right now?”

“I didn’t want this guilt, da! I wanted to be free. I needed to end it.”

“You wanted to be free, so you ripped her heart out and called it honesty?”

Ajay flinched.

Kishan’s face twisted in fury. “She changed her for you, da. She cooked your favourite food. She chose that beach because all of us first met there. She built a moment that mattered, and you shattered it with one disgusting line.”

Ajay’s eyes welled, but his pride clung stubbornly. “I didn’t know how else to stop it.”

“Then grow the hell up!” Kishan roared. “You don’t destroy someone just because you’re too scared to deal with your own emotions!”

Ajay sat down suddenly, as if his legs gave out. He buried his face in his hands. “I didn’t mean to... I didn’t...”

Kishan’s voice turned quieter, but colder. “You know what hurts more than what you said to her?”

Ajay looked up, eyes red. “What?”

“That I defended you. I told her you were confused, that you needed space. I told her to believe in you. And now... I don’t even recognize you.”

“Kishan...”

“I stood by you even when I didn’t agree. I thought you were scared of love, not incapable of it.”

Ajay swallowed hard, then suddenly burst out, his voice bitter. “You don’t know her like I do, machan! She’s obsessed,

okay? Just wait and see—she'll call again. She'll text. She'll show up with some new drama. Cry. Beg. Try to talk to me like nothing happened. Like she always does."

Kishan froze.

Ajay continued, anger rising now like a shield for his shame. "She can't handle rejection. She'll act out again, end up in a hospital bed or send me some emotional crap. And everyone will blame me for her losing control. Again."

Kishan's eyes darkened with rage. "You really think she's the problem? You think it's her drama, her fault, her obsession?"

Ajay didn't answer.

"You destroyed a girl who only ever loved you. And now you're sitting here waiting for her to crawl back, so you can call it obsession and blame her for not letting go?"

"I just..." Ajay's voice faltered. "I just want peace."

"You don't deserve peace, Ajay," Kishan said, deadly calm. "Not when you found your peace by wrecking someone else's heart."

Ajay sat frozen; mouth slightly open.

Kishan's voice trembled, eyes burning. "She's not coming back. And if she has even an ounce of self-worth left, she'll never speak to you again."

He turned, picked up his bag, and headed toward the door.

"And if she does call," Kishan added, pausing at the threshold, "I pray it's not because she loves you... but because she wants to remind herself why she should never love someone like you again."

The door slammed.

And Ajay was alone again.

Geetha sat curled up on the old wooden cot, her salwar still wrinkled from the long ride, her eyes swollen from crying. The fan above creaked in slow rhythm, and outside, the sound of a distant auto rickshaw faded into the evening hush.

Her grandmother stepped into the room quietly, holding a stainless steel tumbler of water. She placed it gently on the bedside table and sat down beside her, careful not to say too much too soon.

After a moment, her paati reached out and gently ran her hand through Geetha's hair.

"What happened, kanna?" she asked, her voice soft. "You came in like a thundercloud. Did something happen in college?"

Geetha shook her head faintly, wiping at her cheeks.

"Ajay," she whispered.

That single name carried the weight of her entire heartbreak.

Her grandmother didn't press. She just gave a small nod. "I see."

Geetha looked away. She didn't want to talk about it. She couldn't even find the words to explain the pain without breaking all over again.

Her paati didn't ask for more. She simply adjusted her pallu and sighed gently. "You don't have to say anything if you

don't want to, ma. I don't need to know everything. I can see enough."

Geetha closed her eyes as fresh tears gathered.

"I've seen your face since you were born," her grandmother continued with a quiet smile. "I know when it's joy, when it's mischief, and when it's heartbreak. This one... this is heartbreak."

Geetha sniffled, curling further into herself.

"But you're stronger than you think, da," her paati said gently, her fingers still combing through her hair. "You always were. From the time you were little, you've faced things head-on. You never hid when you were scared, never backed away from what you felt."

"But this..." Geetha whispered, her voice thin. "It hurts so much, paati..."

"I know," her grandmother said, holding her close. "It always does the first time your heart breaks. It feels like the end of everything. But it's not."

Geetha didn't respond. She didn't need to. Her head rested against her grandmother's lap, eyes burning but slowly drying.

Her grandmother placed a hand on her back and said softly, "It might feel like a storm now. But the rain always passes, ma. You'll stand up again. One morning, you'll wake up and feel lighter. Maybe not tomorrow. But someday soon."

Then, with a faint chuckle, she added, "Don't cry too much, huh? Your eyes will swell like a frog's. Then how will you post your pretty Facebook photos, huh?"

Geetha gave a weak laugh through her tears. Just a little. But it was real.

Her grandmother kissed her forehead. “Get some rest, da. The world can wait.”

Geetha nodded silently and closed her eyes.

No details were shared. But everything was understood.

A week had passed since that stormy night at Marina beach.

Geetha had stayed with her grandmother, cocooned in the soft warmth of familiar walls and old memories. Though she didn’t speak much, her silence said enough. Her grandma didn’t press for details, only offered quiet comfort—home-cooked food, folded blankets, and gentle pats on her head.

On Monday, Geetha finally returned to college.

As she stepped into the campus, a wave of memories crashed over her. She held her head high, her eyes determined, even though her heart clenched with every step.

And then she saw him.

Ajay.

Leaning against the corridor wall, chatting casually with a group of classmates. Laughing. Smiling. As if nothing had happened. As if that night had never broken anything at all.

Geetha felt something twist inside her. But she didn’t let it show. She simply turned her eyes back to her books and walked on with Shruthi beside her, who gently squeezed her hand in silent support.

Kishan noticed her in the campus. His eyes softened as he watched her pass. Later that evening, he quietly offered her a ride to the railway station.

“You okay?” he asked, as the train whistled in the background.

"I'm surviving," Geetha said softly, her voice even. "One day at a time."

He nodded. "You're stronger than you know."

When the exams were announced a few days later, Geetha made up her mind.

That evening, while helping her grandmother peel vegetables in the kitchen, she said, "Paati... I think it's better if I move back to the flat. The exams are coming, and the travel is too long."

Her grandmother looked at her for a moment, then smiled gently. "Okay da, kanna. Very good. You focus on your exams. After they're done, we'll take a small trip somewhere. Just us. Anywhere you like."

Geetha blinked back sudden tears and hugged her tightly. "Thank you, paati."

She shifted back to her flat the next morning, burying herself in revision, assignments, and long walks alone on the terrace. She didn't look for Ajay, didn't text, didn't call.

She was trying to rebuild herself.

But the universe wasn't done testing her.

One late afternoon, Geetha and Kishan were walking towards their respective exam halls. She was nervously flipping through her notes, her eyes scanning words but absorbing none of them.

Then, from the corner of her eye, she saw movement.

Ajay.

On his bike.

With Ayesha sitting behind him, her arm loosely resting on his shoulder, her laughter ringing like a bell.

He zoomed right past them.

Time seemed to slow. The breeze caught in Geetha's hair, but she felt no air.

She stopped walking.

Her fingers trembled, the notebook slipping slightly from her hand. Her chest tightened, her breath caught between a sob and a scream—but she stayed still.

She didn't cry.

Not this time.

Kishan turned slowly toward her. His jaw clenched.

"Geetha..." he said softly.

She didn't look at him.

"I thought I was doing better," she whispered. "I thought... I could stay strong."

"You are strong," Kishan said, stepping in front of her. "You are. But that doesn't mean it doesn't hurt."

She nodded slowly. "How does he move on so easily, Kishan? As if none of it mattered..."

"Because he's pretending," Kishan said bitterly. "That's what cowards do. They laugh louder so they don't hear the guilt screaming in their own heads."

Geetha's eyes welled, but she blinked quickly. "I don't want to be broken anymore. I just want to get through this."

"You will," he said, placing a steady hand on her shoulder. "And when you do, you'll look back and realize that he lost more than you ever did."

She finally looked up at him, her voice small. "Why are you still here for me?"

“Because I know what you gave was real,” Kishan said. “And people like you... you don’t deserve to walk through pain alone. “And also you remind me of my little sister.

Geetha gave a faint smile.

Across the parking lot, Ajay saw them talking. His heart sank slightly. But he turned away.

Kishan caught Ajay’s glance for a second. He didn’t nod. He didn’t smile.

Just turned back to Geetha and walked with her.

For the first time in days, she felt less alone.

And as the exam bell rang, Geetha took a deep breath, wiped her tears—and walked inside, not to prove anything to anyone else, but to remind herself that she could.

That she would.

No matter how much it hurt.

The exams were steadily moving forward, each one passing in a blur of exhaustion and focused determination. Geetha had buried herself in her studies, the pressure of the exams a constant hum in her mind. Yet, despite the weight of textbooks and notes, there was always that subtle ache in her chest—the part of her that still missed Ajay, the part that wondered why everything had turned out this way. She hadn't heard from him since their confrontation, and though she had made peace with their separation, her heart still faltered when she thought of him.

The days passed, the exams came and went. Geetha sat through each of them with the same focused determination, but a part of her remained distracted, always drawn back to thoughts of Ajay, despite her best efforts to move on.

With only two days left before the final exam, the last stretch of the semester seemed to hover over her like an impending storm. She was sitting at her desk, running through her notes one last time, when her phone buzzed. Geetha glanced at the screen.

"Hello?"

"Good afternoon. Is this Geetha?" The voice was calm and professional, but something about it made her feel uneasy.

"Yes, this is Geetha," she replied, trying to sound composed, though her heart was pounding.

"This is Dr. Prakash from Appollo hospital. We're calling about the lung cancer test you underwent recently," the

voice continued. The mention of the test immediately caused her breath to catch.

“Yes,” she said, almost a whisper, still reeling from the memory of the diagnosis. “I was tested, and the results... they were positive.”

There was a pause, just long enough for Geetha to feel the weight of every second that passed.

“I want to inform that there’s been a mix-up with your test results,” the voice said carefully. “Your results were incorrectly reported. We’ve discovered that your sample was cross-referenced with another patient’s, which led to an inaccurate positive result.”

Geetha’s world seemed to slow down. “What... what do you mean?” she asked, her voice trembling despite her best efforts to remain steady. “So, I don’t have cancer?”

“Not necessarily,” Dr. Prakash responded. “We recommend you come in for a retest. The original results were not correct, and we need to ensure the accuracy of your diagnosis.”

The confusion and disbelief hit her all at once, leaving her dizzy. “Are you saying the results were wrong? I... I thought, I was positive. Are you telling me that I’ve been living with a wrong diagnosis?”

“Yes, unfortunately,” the doctor confirmed. “It was a mistake, and we sincerely apologize for the confusion. But it’s important that we get a proper result.”

Geetha’s mind was racing. She struggled to wrap her head around it. “But... with the mix-up... were their other people affected by this too?”

“Yes, there is another patient who was also affected by this. The test results for both you and the other patient came back positive due to this error.

Geetha hesitated, her voice soft but steady. “Um... the other patient whose results were mixed up... is his name Ajay, by any chance?”

There was a pause on the other end before the doctor replied, “Yes, the patient’s name is Ajay. Do you know him by any chance?”

Geetha’s heart skipped. “Yes... he’s my classmate.”

There was a brief, almost imperceptible pause on the other end before the doctor continued. “Thank you. That’s good to hear. We’ve been trying to contact him as well, but we haven’t had any luck. Can you please inform him about the retest? We want to ensure both of you are properly checked.”

Geetha felt a sickening knot form in her stomach. She hadn’t spoken to Ajay in days, not since their last heated argument. The thought of reaching out to him, under these circumstances, was almost too much to bear. But she had to. This wasn’t about their relationship; this was about something bigger.

“Yes, of course,” she said, her voice faltering. “I’ll let him know.”

“Thank you, Geetha. We’ve scheduled your retest for 10 AM tomorrow. If you could come in then, that would be ideal.”

“Okay, I’ll... I’ll be there,” she replied, barely able to breathe. “I’ll tell Ajay.”

“Thank you, Ms. Geetha. Please make sure to remind him about the urgency. We appreciate your help in reaching out to him.”

The call ended, but Geetha didn’t move. Her phone felt heavy in her hand. Ajay. The news of him being involved in the same test mix-up hit her like a brick. A part of her was overwhelmed by the thought of seeing him again. After

everything that had happened between them, the last thing she wanted to do was face him, let alone tell him about this.

But what else could she do? She had to reach out. She had to tell him the truth. Geetha wiped her face with the back of her hand, trying to steady herself. She took a deep breath, her thoughts spinning. She was already burdened with so much, and now this. The weight of it all was crushing.

She glanced at her phone again. Ajay's name was still in her contacts. Her thumb hovered over it, unsure. How was she going to say this to him? After everything he had done, how could she be the one to break the silence?

The sun was dipping low, casting a golden hue across the college turf. The distant hum of traffic mixed with the echoing thud of footballs and the sharp, occasional whistles from the referee. Ajay, Kishan, and a few other flatmates were immersed in a casual game of five-a-side football, sweat-soaked jerseys clinging to their backs as they darted across the synthetic field.

Ajay sprinted down the sideline, weaving past defenders, his expression sharp and focused—almost like he was trying to run away from something more than just the ball. Kishan intercepted him with a clean tackle, but the collision was harder than necessary. Both stumbled, and Ajay stood up with a glare.

“Dei, what’s your problem da?” Ajay snapped, brushing the dust from his shorts.

“You’re the one charging like a bull,” Kishan muttered, walking away.

But Ajay followed, not ready to let it go. “This is about Geetha, isn’t it?”

Kishan turned slightly; jaw tight. “I don’t want to talk about that here.”

Ajay scoffed. Loud enough for their flatmates to notice. “So you’re seriously giving me the silent treatment over one girl? Machan, you’ve changed.”

Kishan turned fully now, eyes narrowing. “It’s not about ‘one girl,’ it’s about how you treated her.”

Ajay rolled his eyes, his tone mocking. “Here we go again. Like I’m the villain in some love drama. You don’t even know the full story, da. That girl—she’s obsessed. You wait and see, she’ll come running back. I know her.”

Kishan didn’t respond immediately. His fists clenched slightly, but he held back.

Ajay smirked and added, “You really think she’s gonna let this go? I give it a day. She’ll call. Cry. Say sorry. She always does.”

Kishan shook his head. “That’s not love, Ajay. That’s pain. But you wouldn’t understand the difference.”

Ajay shrugged. “Whatever you say, machan. But when she calls, don’t act surprised.”

As if summoned by fate itself, Ajay’s phone began to ring in his pocket.

The boys paused, the game forgotten for a moment.

Ajay pulled out his phone, squinting at the screen under the stadium lights. His smirk widened.

“Speak of the devil,” he said, holding the screen up for Kishan to see. “Geetha calling.”

For a second, no one moved. Kishan’s expression faltered—half disbelief, half disappointment. He looked away, lips pursed.

Ajay turned the screen toward himself again, smug. “Told you. Obsession. She always comes back.”

Kishan didn't say a word. He just stared at Ajay, like he was seeing something he wished he hadn't.

Meanwhile...

Geetha stood in her flat, her phone pressed against her ear, listening to the line ring... then fall silent. No response.

She stared at the screen, her face blank.

But inside, her stomach twisted.

He didn't pick up.

She didn't even expect warmth—not after the way he spoke to her last. But this wasn't about apologies. This wasn't about love. This was about something far bigger.

And he ignored it.

Her throat tightened. I should've known.

She tossed her phone on the bed and stood frozen for a moment. The hospital's words replayed again and again.

"We need to retest you. There may have been a mix-up. You and another patient—Mr. Ajay—were both marked positive. But we believe the reports got interchanged. It's important that both of you come in again."

She sank into her chair, her fingers trembling slightly. Then a sickening thought hit her.

What if he doesn't come? What if he keeps ignoring it?

Her breath caught.

No matter what he'd done... she couldn't sit back knowing he might never find out.

And then she remembered—Kishan had told her earlier that they had a friendly match planned today at the turf. She'd brushed it off then, but now...

Geetha sprang up.

There was no time to think. No time to be angry at herself for still caring. This wasn't about emotions. This was about something real.

She grabbed her sling bag, slipped into her sandals, and rushed out. Her eyes burned, but her steps were steady.

I don't care what he thinks. I don't care what he says. I'm not doing this for him. I'm doing it because it's right.

She flagged down an auto, barely catching her breath. "College. Fast, please!"

The driver nodded and sped off. Geetha leaned back, watching the road blur past. Her fists were clenched tight in her lap. Her heart raced—not just with urgency, but with the fear that seeing him again would reopen every wound she'd tried so hard to close.

But this wasn't the time to feel.

It was time to act.

The turf lights flickered on overhead as the sun dipped behind the college buildings. The sky was tinged with purple and orange, the air hot with sweat, dust, and unresolved tension.

Ajay and Kishan were in the middle of yet another heated argument near the sidelines — it had become almost a daily ritual. What once was a friendship full of jokes and late-night talks had turned brittle, edged with sarcasm and cold silence.

Ajay kicked the ball aside with unnecessary force. “Why are you still mad, da? Over that girl? I don’t get you.”

Kishan looked at him like he didn’t recognize him anymore. “You’re becoming someone I can’t respect.”

“Oh please,” Ajay rolled his eyes. “For what? Because I don’t dance around her drama? Bro, she’s an obsessed bitch. That’s what she is. You’ll see — she’ll crawl back again. like she always does.”

His voice was loud. Careless. His friends nearby went quiet.

“She’ll call again. Make some scene. And you’ll run behind her. I swear—” he scoffed and ran his hand through his sweat-soaked hair, “—if I turn around right now, she’s probably standing there, listening.”

A silence suddenly fell across the turf.

Ajay, sensing the shift in air, slowly turned around.

And there she was.

Geetha.

She stood just a few feet behind him, her chest rising and falling, her eyes red not from tears — but from sheer fury.

Kishan's face dropped. Ajay's smirk vanished like smoke.

Everyone — even the juniors who had been playing on the other side of the turf — stood frozen.

Geetha stepped forward.

Her voice was sharp. Cold.

“I called you because I got a call from the hospital.”

Ajay swallowed.

Geetha's hands trembled slightly, but her voice didn't. “There's been a mix-up in our test results. The lung cancer report... it might've been wrong. Yours and mine — they're not sure.”

The word “cancer” cracked through the group like thunder. A few of the boys gasped. One of them dropped the water bottle he was holding.

“They asked me to come in for a retest tomorrow at 10 a.m. They've been trying to call you too — but obviously, you were too busy running your mouth.”

Ajay blinked, stunned.

“I called to tell you that. Not because I'm obsessed. Not because I want to talk to you. Not because I care about what you think of me. But because it was the right thing to do. Something you clearly know nothing about anymore.”

Her voice shook, just for a second. “I'm ashamed I even thought you were someone I once cared about.”

Then, louder — so everyone could hear — she added:

“I'm not your obsessed bitch. I'm someone who had the decency to care when no one else did. Even when you didn't deserve it.”

She turned, walking away in silence. But before reaching the gate, she paused. Without turning back, she spoke one last time.

“Apollo Hospital. 10 a.m. Don’t be late. Or don’t come. I honestly don’t care anymore.”

And with that, she walked out.

The turf was dead silent.

Ajay stood frozen, staring at the spot where she had stood. His face flushed, eyes wide, the weight of her words hitting him harder than anything Kishan could’ve ever said.

But the silence didn’t last long

As the gate clanged shut behind Geetha, her footsteps fading into the distance, a suffocating silence settled on the turf. The players remained scattered around, unsure whether to resume the game or walk away. No one looked at Ajay the same way anymore.

Ajay stood still, a storm brewing in his chest — but not of guilt, not yet. It was rage. Humiliation. His ego bruised more than his heart.

He turned around slowly, trying to play it cool, trying to wear a mask of nonchalance, but his lips were pressed tight, and a nerve on his jaw twitched.

That’s when one of the flatmates, Aravind, walked up to him hesitantly, eyes wide with concern.

“Ajay... da... what was that? Did she say cancer?”

Ajay’s eyes flared. “Mind your business, machan.”

But another one, Rakesh, stepped forward, his voice unsure. “Bro, what’s going on? That hospital stuff... is it true?”

“Are you sick or something, da?” someone else added from behind. “She said there was a mix-up... does that mean... you have—?”

Ajay’s fist clenched.

Kishan immediately stepped between them; his tone sharp. “Guys, enough.”

The boys fell silent at the authority in his voice.

“This isn’t something to talk about like it’s gossip,” Kishan said firmly. “Give him space.”

Ajay was staring at the ground, breathing hard, the weight of the moment crashing in on him. He could feel it — eyes. All around him. Judging. Whispering. Pitying.

His pride burned.

“She had to say it here?” he hissed under his breath. “In front of everyone?”

Kishan looked at him, a little stunned. “You think that’s the issue now?”

Ajay didn’t respond.

Kishan sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “Come. Let’s go home.”

Ajay didn’t resist. He didn’t speak. Just followed Kishan silently as the crowd slowly dispersed, the murmurs still echoing behind them.

As they walked through the campus, Ajay could feel the shift — like everyone knew. Like the word “cancer” had wrapped itself around his name and was now following him.

It wasn’t the fear of the disease that struck him first. It was the fear of becoming vulnerable. Exposed.

The moment they got to their flat, Ajay slammed the door shut behind him.

His fists were balled tight, the heat of humiliation still burning under his skin.

“She could’ve said it in private,” he muttered, not looking at Kishan. “Why the hell would she shout it like that in front of everyone? In the middle of the turf? You saw how everyone looked at me!”

Kishan, now seated on the edge of the couch, leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. He sighed, not angry, just tired — tired of watching his friend spiral deeper into ego and denial.

“Yes,” he said calmly. “She could’ve said it alone.”

Ajay turned, a flicker of vindication flashing across his face — but Kishan wasn’t finished.

“But... in that moment? After hearing you talk about her like that? After you called her names in front of everyone?” Kishan looked straight into Ajay’s eyes. “She was angry, da. Hurt. Do you blame her?”

Ajay’s face tensed, but his eyes flickered with something else — guilt, maybe, just a little.

“You think she came there to insult you? No, she came to help. She didn’t even want to call you. She told me she was debating it. She wasn’t going to come back to you at all. But the hospital couldn’t reach you. She chose to be the bigger person — again.”

Ajay stared at the floor.

“Yeah, maybe it wasn’t the best place to say it,” Kishan continued. “But people lose control in anger, machan. Especially when they’re hurting. You think she’s not been carrying pain this whole time? You think she wanted to stand there, shouting in front of everyone?”

Ajay exhaled sharply, running a hand over his face. He looked more exhausted than angry now.

Kishan stood and walked over to him. “You called her obsessed. A bitch. In front of everyone. And she still came... to warn you, She could have walked away after hearing you but she didn’t”

Ajay didn’t speak. He just stood there, his pride cracking silently under the weight of his conscience.

Kishan’s voice softened, but it didn’t lose its firmness. “So no, I won’t blame her for what happened today. Not entirely. She reacted. That’s human. But what you said before she even got there — that was just cruel.”

A long silence hung between them.

Ajay didn’t argue.

And that said more than words ever could.

Kishan placed a bottle of water in front of Ajay and sat down beside him. The room was quiet now, the earlier shouting on the turf replaced by the low hum of a ceiling fan and the occasional sound of traffic from outside.

Ajay looked like someone stuck between shock and denial, his eyes occasionally drifting to his phone, to the floor, to nowhere in particular.

Kishan broke the silence gently.

“Machan... go to the hospital tomorrow. Just get it done.”

Ajay didn’t reply immediately. His jaw clenched slightly.

“I know you’re pissed at how she said it. I get it,” Kishan added, tone calm but firm. “But this isn’t something you can ignore. You heard her—there’s been a mix-up. You deserve to know the truth.”

Ajay let out a breath. “Yeah...”

"I wish I could come," Kishan said, his voice softer now. "But my last exam ends only at 12. I'll come to the hospital straight from college, okay?"

Ajay nodded slowly. "Okay."

Kishan looked at him, trying to read what was behind the silence. "You'll be alright!"

Ajay didn't answer right away. Then finally, in a low voice, he said, "I don't know."

Kishan placed a hand on his shoulder. "We'll figure it out don't worry"

The next day arrived, heavy and slow.

Geetha stood in front of the mirror in her flat, staring at her reflection as she adjusted her kurti. Her hands were steady, but her chest felt tight. There was no kajal on her eyes today, no effort to look presentable. Just a plain outfit and a heart that felt far from plain. She took a deep breath, grabbed her file of medical papers, and stepped out.

The auto ride to Apollo felt longer than it actually was. Her fingers gripped the edge of the seat as she looked outside — not really watching the streets, but lost in her own storm of thoughts.

What if it's true again? What if it isn't? What if it's true for him?

She reached the hospital around 9:45. The air smelled of antiseptic and coffee from the nearby vending machine. Cold, clinical, impersonal. Her footsteps echoed slightly as she entered the waiting area near the diagnostics lab.

And there he was.

Ajay.

Sitting on the far end, wearing a plain hoodie and jeans, slouched over with his phone in hand. His hair was still damp from a hurried shower. He hadn't noticed her yet. But Geetha froze for a second. Just one second.

One second where every memory hit her like a wave —

The first hospital meet

The kiss.

The silence after.

The cruel words.

The fight on the beach.

And yesterday — his words echoing in public like a knife in her chest.

She looked away and walked quietly to the seat across from him. She didn't expect him to say anything. And he didn't. But he saw her. Out of the corner of his eye, his body tensed. He remembered too. But what lingered more in his mind was the sting of how she had shouted the news yesterday, in front of everyone.

Neither spoke.

The nurse came out at 10 sharp. "Ms. Geetha? Mr. Ajay?"

They both stood up, walking side by side in complete silence. The only sound was their footsteps down the hallway.

Inside the lab, the process was mechanical. Formal. Blood drawn, vitals checked. A few questions from the technician, some awkward nods. No eye contact. No conversation.

Geetha finished first. She took her bag and walked out. Not a word to him.

Ajay came out ten minutes later. He looked around the waiting area — but she was gone.

He stood there for a moment.

Just him.

In the same hospital where this whole storm had started.

Where one word — cancer — had tangled two lives beyond repair.

But now...

Silence.

The first semester of their MBA had finally come to an end.

It hadn't felt like just a semester — not for Geetha. It felt like an entire lifetime had passed in those few months. Friendships had changed. Trust had been tested. Love had surfaced and shattered. And somewhere between assignments, group presentations, late-night calls, and final exams... she had aged in ways she hadn't expected.

There were no celebrations for her.

No hanging out at the canteen. No selfies with classmates saying "semester 1 done and dusted." Just the quiet task of folding clothes and placing them back into a suitcase.

She was getting ready to leave her flat and stay with her grandmother for a while — to breathe, to heal, to feel safe. The flat that once felt like freedom now felt like a memory she didn't want to revisit anytime soon.

As she zipped up her bag, her phone buzzed.

She glanced at it.

It was a message from the hospital.

"Dear Geetha, your test results are now available. Please collect them tomorrow during working hours. Thank you."

The words made her stomach twist. It was the moment she had been waiting for and dreading in equal measure. She had hoped, prayed even, that the results would come back clear — that all of this worry and stress would just be a distant

memory. But deep down, she knew she couldn't avoid it any longer. It had to be faced.

With shaky hands, she dialed Kishan's number. He picked up almost immediately, his voice warm and familiar, yet there was an edge to it, a knowing in his tone. "Hey, Geetha. What's up?"

Geetha's voice was quiet, uncertain. "Kishan... the hospital sent me a message. My results are ready. I have to pick them up tomorrow."

A long silence followed. Kishan, ever the protective friend, knew exactly what she was talking about. They had both been through so much in the past few weeks. "Are you okay? Do you want me to come with you?" he asked.

Geetha took a deep breath. "I... I'm okay. I just wanted to let you know. But, Kishan, can you please tell Ajay about this? He won't check the message. I know he's been avoiding everything. He needs to know. He has to pick up his results too."

Kishan hesitated for a moment, then sighed. "Yeah, I'll tell him. He's been acting like he doesn't care, but he needs to face this. I'll make sure he knows. Don't worry about him right now, Geetha. Just focus on yourself."

Geetha smiled weakly. "Thanks, Kishan. I appreciate it."

They said their goodbyes, and Geetha turned her attention back to the flat. The packing felt heavier now, each item a reminder of everything that had happened. It was like moving on from a life she had tried so hard to create, only to face another uncertain chapter.

As the evening wore on, she found herself staring out the window, wondering if the world was ever going to stop spinning. Would she get good news tomorrow? Or would

everything change? One way or another, the truth was coming. And tomorrow, she would finally know.

The next morning, the air felt heavy with anticipation. The sun was already climbing when Geetha reached the hospital, her heart thudding with an uneasy rhythm. She clutched her bag tighter as she stepped inside, the sterile smell and quiet murmur of the lobby instantly flooding her with memories. The same waiting room. The same corridor. The same nervous energy that had once twisted her stomach when she met Ajay first.

And there he was.

Ajay sat in the far corner, his head slightly bowed, arms crossed, looking away. For a moment, Geetha froze. It hit her—the lawn, the first time they met here, the confusion, the fights, the closeness, and everything that had unraveled since. She quietly took a seat, leaving a chair between them. Ajay glanced sideways, their eyes met for a fleeting second, but there were no words.

A nurse appeared and called Geetha's name.

She stood, her legs shaky, heart racing. This time, she thought, let me take my own report. Let me carry this truth myself. The envelope felt heavier than it should. She returned to the lobby, walking toward the lawn with trembling hands.

Behind her, she heard someone call, "Geetha..."

She turned. It was Ajay. He walked up slowly, stuffing his hands into his pockets. His eyes weren't sharp with pride or anger anymore. They looked tired, hollow, and unsure.

"I just... wanted to say sorry," he said quietly. "If I've hurt you. I'm not saying whatever I did was wrong. I just wanted to clear the air."

Geetha's brows knit together. "Is this even an apology?" she asked, her voice tight.

Ajay didn't answer.

Geetha let out a long breath and looked at the envelope in her hand. "I haven't opened mine yet. But I hope... I hope it says I'm okay."

She tore it open. Her eyes scanned the paper. Her heart stopped—then released.

Negative.

Her lungs were clear. No cancer. She felt a wave of lightness. A smile tugged at her lips. She looked at Ajay.

"It's negative," she said softly. "I wish it had said this earlier. Maybe I would've never met you..."

Ajay nodded slowly. "That's... good," he said, his voice barely audible. Then, prompted by her relief, he pulled out his own envelope. His fingers trembled slightly as he opened it.

And then everything changed.

His smile vanished. His body stiffened. His eyes locked on the words. The paper slipped from his fingers, fluttering to the ground.

Geetha's joy dissolved into worry. "Ajay...?"

Ajay sat frozen on the hospital bench, eyes staring blankly ahead, the slip of paper crumpled slightly in his trembling hands. His breathing was uneven, and his shoulders were beginning to shake. The buzz of the hospital faded into a numb silence around him.

Geetha picked up the paper that had slipped from his grip.

Positive.

She couldn't believe it. Her breath caught in her throat. Her eyes darted from the report to Ajay, who now looked like a shadow of the boy she knew.

He pressed his palms against his face, trying to hold in the collapse.

"I..." he started, voice cracking. "I didn't even care the first time, da... I was just numb. No expectations. No hopes."

Geetha stepped closer, unsure of how to break the wall of shock around him.

Ajay looked up at her, his eyes red, the corners wet. "But this time... I thought it would be negative. After everything... after your result came... I actually let myself hope."

His voice dropped to a whisper.

"I thought this was over."

Geetha's heart squeezed. She knelt in front of him, her hand gently resting on his knee.

"You had every reason to believe that," she said, her voice tender but firm. "Anyone would."

Ajay let out a weak laugh through his tears. "I'm such a fool, no? Yesterday I was being a clown in the turf... and today..." he broke off, looking away, ashamed.

"You're not a fool," Geetha said softly. "You're scared. And you're just a human."

She placed the report gently on the bench beside him and reached out, pulling him into a hug—firmer, steadier.

Ajay didn't resist. He leaned into her, resting his head on her shoulder as the weight of the diagnosis sank in.

"I was going to go home tonight," he murmured, "see my parents. I even called them this morning. Now... I don't know. I don't know how to face them."

“You don’t have to have all the answers today,” Geetha whispered. “But whatever happens, you won’t go through this alone.”

She pulled back slightly to meet his eyes.

“I’m here. We’ll face this together.”

Ajay gave a slow nod, his eyes silently thanking her in a way words couldn’t.

As they stepped out of the hospital gates, the sky was heavy with grey clouds, mirroring the weight that pressed down on both their chests. Ajay’s fingers hovered for a moment over his bike keys before turning to Geetha. “I’ll drop you,” he said, his voice softer than usual, like a fragile thread trying to hold things together.

Geetha hesitated. Her first instinct was to say no. After everything... after the distance, the harsh words, the pain — being on the same bike again felt too close. Too vulnerable. But then she looked at him. He wasn’t the same Ajay who had mocked her on the turf. He looked lost. Hollow-eyed. Struggling to act normal when everything about this day was far from it.

She nodded slowly. “Drop me near college. I’ll walk from there.”

Ajay didn’t argue. He simply climbed on the bike and waited.

As the bike rode through the quiet roads, the world seemed to slow down around them. Geetha held the seat bar behind her, hesitant to touch him, but her eyes kept glancing at his reflection in the rearview mirror. His shoulders were tense, his eyes straight ahead, blinking fast as if trying to push back tears he didn’t want her to see.

Geetha swallowed hard. She wanted to say something — anything — to comfort him. But the last time she let herself feel, he had shut her down with “you’re just a friend.” That

sentence still echoed in her mind like a slap. But today... today didn't feel like that day. Something was different.

Suddenly, without overthinking, her arms reached forward and hugged him tightly from behind. Not for romance. Not for answers. Just to tell him, you're not alone.

Ajay's shoulders shuddered once — then settled. He didn't say a word. Instead, as if trying to respond in the only way he could, his hand slid down and gently held hers as they rode.

The moment was brief but heavy. The kind that lingers.

As they reached the college gate, Geetha got down slowly, wiping her eyes quickly before turning to him.

"Take care," she said, placing a hand on his shoulder for a second. Then she leaned forward and gave him one last, firm hug.

Ajay nodded silently, not trusting his voice.

Some college boys who had been loitering nearby exchanged glances, whispering among themselves after seeing the unexpected scene. But Geetha didn't care anymore. This wasn't about them.

Ajay watched her walk away for a few seconds before riding off.

Back at the PG, Kishan was sprawled on the couch, headphones around his neck, mindlessly clicking through a game on his PC.

He looked up as soon as Ajay entered.

"Deii machan," Kishan grinned, pulling off his headphones. "What's this da? Some of the guys from college said they saw you and Geetha hugging near the gate. Got nostalgic aa? Back together, huh?"

Ajay didn't respond. He just placed the keys on the table and sank onto the opposite chair.

Something in his silence made Kishan pause the game and turn to him properly. "Wait... what about the results? Everything's okay, right? You both are cancer-free?"

Ajay stared at the floor. Then, without lifting his eyes, he said quietly, "Geetha is."

Kishan blinked. "Okay... and you?"

Ajay didn't reply.

Kishan leaned forward, his voice dropping. "Machan... you're negative too, right?"

Ajay slowly shook his head.

"No da."

The room fell into an icy stillness.

Kishan froze, his hands clenched on his knees. He couldn't believe what he'd just heard. "What...? But... how..."

Ajay looked up now, his face pale but calm in the most terrifying way. "Last time when I thought I had it... I didn't care much. I was numb. Almost expected the worst. But this time... I had hope. I really thought it'd be negative. I really wanted it to be. I was even ready to go home. To see my parents. Tell them I'm okay."

His voice cracked.

"But now I can't even look them in the eye."

Kishan felt the sting in his throat, his eyes already misting. He moved to sit beside Ajay.

Ajay wiped his face with his hands and let out a weak laugh.

He slumped forward, his elbows on his knees, head hanging low. Kishan sat silently beside him, overwhelmed with helplessness, pain, and loyalty.

After a long pause, Kishan finally said, voice trembling, “We’ll get through this, machan. You’re not alone, okay? I’m with you. Every step.”

Ajay nodded, his eyes closing briefly as if holding onto those words.

And in that small PG room, two friends sat together — no noise, nothing, just quiet strength against the storm that had just begun.

The sky was dark.

Not just with clouds, but with a kind of heaviness that matched Geetha's chest. The wind outside carried the scent of rain and a hush that wrapped around the flat like a blanket. She stood by the window, staring into the dusky sky, her mind louder than the silence in the room.

Everything was packed. Her duffel bag sat by the door. Her laptop case leaned against it. She had planned to leave for her grandma's house in the morning, spend the semester break away from all this — from college, from memories, from Ajay.

But now... she couldn't.

She sank slowly onto the bed. The flat was too quiet, and yet her heart beat like thunder. Her eyes wandered around the room. The corner where they had shared that kiss. That moment. That confusion.

She had told herself she had to move on. That she had to draw a line and protect her heart. But today, watching Ajay — shattered, lost, terrified — something shifted.

Not because she still loved him. But because no one should face that alone.

She reached for her phone with trembling fingers.

"Hello, patti..." her voice was soft.

"Hello, kanna, are you on the way?"

Geetha hesitated. Her voice cracked just a little. "Patti... I got some last-minute internship work. I think I'll have to stay back. I'll visit you on weekends, promise."

There was a pause on the other end.

Her grandmother's voice came gentle, warm — almost like a hug. "Hmm... okay, da. But you sound tired. Eat well, and call me anytime."

"I will," Geetha whispered, blinking away the tears that had pooled at the edge of her lashes.

As she hung up, the wind picked up outside. A sudden gust rattled the windowpane. She pulled her shawl tighter around her and sat still for a long while.

Because tonight, the sky was dark.

And Ajay... needed a little light.

Morning crept in slowly, golden rays spilling across the half-drawn curtains of the PG room. The air inside was stale, heavy from the silence that had thickened overnight. Kishan was up early, already sitting on the edge of the couch with a worried look. The sound of the doorbell jolted him slightly.

He opened it to find Geetha, holding a steel tiffin in one hand, her eyes tired but determined.

"She's here," Kishan muttered to himself, letting her in.

Geetha walked in quietly, her gaze scanning the familiar space before turning to Kishan. "I brought him breakfast," she said softly. "And I want to talk to him. Just for a few minutes."

Kishan nodded, swallowing hard. "He's not in a great place, Geetha."

"I know," she said, already walking toward Ajay's room.

They both stepped inside. Ajay was still under the blanket, turned toward the wall, pretending to be asleep.

Kishan nudged him. "Machan. Wake up. Geetha's here."

Ajay didn't move.

Geetha gently placed the tiffin on the table and stepped closer. "Ajay," she said firmly but with warmth, "wake up. We're going to the hospital."

That made him stir. Slowly, he turned around, his eyes red and puffy, dark circles showing the night's unrest.

He sat up, disoriented. "Geetha... just leave me, please," he muttered. "I know what to do. I don't need a babysitter."

Kishan moved forward. "Machan, listen. She's not here to babysit you. She's trying to help. She explained everything to me. She's done her research. There's a government support scheme, there's a treatment plan. She's not pushing you for sympathy — she's giving you a chance."

Ajay's face twisted in pain. "A chance?" he laughed bitterly. "You think I didn't look this up already, da? You think I don't know what this means? I have lung cancer. And this isn't stage one. This isn't 'let's just take some tablets and you'll be fine.' This is hospitals, chemo, isolation, months of hell."

His voice rose. "My parents are middle class, Kishan! They've already spent their life savings getting me here, to this MBA. And now I go and throw another few lakhs at them? For what? A 50/50 chance? That's not a chance — that's torture."

Geetha stepped closer. Her voice cracked but stayed strong. "Then don't do it for yourself. Do it for them. For your mom who cries every time you come home late. For your dad who brags about you to relatives. For that boy you were when you first told me you wanted to take care of your family, who studied all night because you couldn't afford to fail."

Ajay turned away, breathing heavily, struggling to hold it together.

“You think I’m not scared?” he whispered. “I’ve been coughing for months, Geetha. I’ve been ignoring this. I knew. Deep down, I knew. And now it’s here... and I don’t want to fight. I’m tired.”

Geetha sat beside him. “Then let me fight with you. Let Kishan fight with you. You’re not alone, Ajay.”

He shook his head slowly. “I’m not privileged, Geetha. I can’t afford to believe in miracles.”

“You don’t need a miracle,” she said quietly. “You just need to start.”

There was a long pause. No one spoke.

Finally, Kishan knelt beside him. “Machan. We’ll figure out the money. I swear, da. We’ll try every possible way. But first, let’s just go. Meet the doctor. Get the truth. Don’t decide your ending before it’s begun.”

Ajay looked between the two of them — his oldest friend, and the girl he had hurt the most, both standing there, not out of pity, but because they believed in something he couldn’t yet see.

Ajay’s gaze drifted between them, then settled on the floor. His chest heaved with the weight of everything — fear, guilt, shame, and the crushing pressure of decisions he didn’t want to make. He shook his head slowly, a bitter smile curling at his lips.

“I can’t,” he said, voice hollow. “You both talk like this is some hero story. Like if I just get up and walk into that hospital, everything will be fine. But it won’t be. It’s not a movie, Geetha. This... this is real. This is pain. And it’s mine. I don’t want to drag anyone else into it.”

He stood up suddenly, walking toward the window, gripping the edge of the rusted grill.

"I don't want you both wasting your lives on me."

Geetha stood too, quietly. She looked at Kishan for a moment, then stepped forward, her eyes burning.

"Ajay," she said, her tone dangerously calm, "I didn't come here to beg you."

He turned around, frowning. "Then why are you still here?"

"Because you owe me," she snapped, her voice rising now. "You think you get to mess up everything, say whatever you want, leave me standing in the middle of Marina Beach calling it lust, humiliate me in front of everyone, and then now — now when your life is hanging by a thread — you think you get to walk away?"

Ajay blinked, stunned by the sudden burst of rage.

Geetha stepped closer. "You owe me that much, Ajay. You don't get to just give up. You don't get to die to escape guilt."

Kishan tried to calm her, but she was already in tears now. "You don't want to fight? Fine. But don't you dare pretend you're doing this to protect anyone. You're just scared."

Ajay's lip trembled. "Geetha, that's not fair—"

"No, it isn't," she cut in. "Nothing's fair. Was it fair when I found out I might have cancer? Was it fair when you told me I was just a friend after you slept with me like you meant it? Was it fair that I had to call you to tell you to go get retested because you ignored the hospital's calls? So don't talk to me about fair."

Ajay sank onto the edge of the bed, completely overwhelmed. Geetha's voice dropped again, trembling but fierce.

“I swear, Ajay,” she whispered, “if you don’t come with me to the hospital, I’ll call your parents myself and tell them everything. Every single detail. How long you’ve been coughing, how you’re refusing treatment, how you’re sitting here giving up when you have people who would die to save you.”

Kishan stared at her, eyes wide.

Ajay was frozen. His throat tightened. “You wouldn’t...”

Geetha stepped back. “Try me.”

There was a silence so sharp it felt like a scream.

Finally, Ajay looked up. He saw the tears streaming down her cheeks. Not from anger. Not from drama. From helplessness. From love.

And in that second, something shifted.

His shoulders dropped. His eyes closed.

“Okay,” he whispered. “Okay... we’ll go.”

Geetha exhaled, wiping her face quickly. Kishan let out a breath too, nodding.

“We’re with you, machan,” Kishan said, patting his back. “All the way.”

Geetha quietly opened the tiffin and placed it on the table. “Eat first,” she said softly. “We’ll go after.”

Ajay looked at her, then at the food.

For the first time in days, he picked up the spoon.

Outside, the city stirred to life — horns blaring, birds calling, and somewhere in the distance, the hum of traffic starting again. Inside that small PG room, a new kind of silence settled.

Not the silence of fear.

But the silence of beginning again.

The white walls felt too clean, too quiet. A ticking wall clock seemed louder than necessary. Ajay sat stiffly on the cushioned chair, flanked by Geetha and Kishan. Across from them, the oncologist, a composed man in his late 40s, studied the reports on his screen.

He looked up, addressing Ajay gently.

“Ajay, it’s Stage 3 lung cancer. It hasn’t spread beyond the nearby lymph nodes yet. This gives us a chance. We can fight it — but only if we begin immediately.”

Ajay’s eyes didn’t lift. He just nodded faintly.

The doctor continued, explaining treatment. “You’ll undergo chemotherapy and radiation. Six cycles of chemo, spaced about three weeks apart. Radiation runs concurrently — daily sessions for around 6 weeks. We assess the tumor after that. If it shrinks, surgery could be possible later.”

As he spoke, a nurse knocked and whispered something urgently to the doctor. He stood, apologetic.

“I need to attend to an emergency. I’ll be back shortly — please stay here. Think things through. We can admit you today if you agree.”

He left, closing the door gently behind him.

A thick silence dropped into the room.

Ajay stared at the floor. Kishan shifted awkwardly, looking between the two. After a moment, he stood. “I’ll step out for a bit,” he said, giving them space.

Now it was just Ajay and Geetha.

She sat still, fingers clasped together tightly. Then she spoke, low.

“Ajay... please don’t shut down now.”

He didn’t respond.

“You heard what the doctor said. There’s still a chance.”

Ajay’s voice was hollow. “At what cost?”

She looked at him. “We’ll figure that out. There are schemes, support systems—”

Ajay cut her off. “Stop it. Don’t talk like it’s simple.”

“I never said it was.”

He finally looked at her, eyes dark and tired. “Do you know how many zeros that cost has? How my parents will react when they hear this? My appa will pretend to be strong and quietly sell things. My amma will cry in the pooja room. And all for what? For a treatment that might or might not work?”

“Ajay...”

He leaned forward, voice tight. “I wasn’t scared when I first heard. Because I didn’t expect anything. But now... after everything, for the first time, I hoped it would be negative. I thought maybe... I could escape it.”

Geetha’s face softened. Her voice dropped. “You weren’t wrong to hope.”

“But hope doesn’t pay hospital bills,” he said bitterly.

She looked at him, heart breaking. “Then let me carry that part.”

His face twisted. “You can’t. You shouldn’t. This isn’t your problem.”

Her voice trembled. “Maybe not. But you are.”

Ajay looked away, throat tight.

Geetha continued. “You think you’re sparing your family by pushing them away? By pretending you’re in control? You’re just... slowly disappearing. And we’re all watching it happen. I can’t do that, Ajay. I won’t.”

She reached for his hand.

He didn’t pull away.

“I don’t care about the cost. Or how difficult it gets. I care about seeing you alive six months from now. Sitting in a boring lecture. Complaining about chai. Laughing at stupid memes with Kishan.”

Ajay stared at the ceiling for a moment, blinking hard.

“I’m scared, Geetha.”

She squeezed his hand. “Me too. But I’m here. And so is he. We’ll figure it out. One cycle at a time.”

A long pause.

Ajay finally let out a shaky breath. “Okay.”

The word was barely audible. But it was enough.

Just then, the door clicked open. The doctor returned.

“Have you decided?” he asked gently.

Ajay nodded once. “Admit me.”

Geetha’s eyes shimmered — not with victory, but with fragile hope.

The IV beeped softly in the corner, rhythmically echoing the tension in the room. Ajay lay on the bed, one arm propped behind his head, staring at the ceiling. The saline dripped slowly into his veins — his first official night as a cancer patient.

Geetha sat by the window, legs pulled up onto the chair, hugging her knees. The fluorescent lighting made everything look paler than it really was.

There was a quiet knock on the door. It opened slowly, and Kishan peeked in.

Ajay glanced toward him, unsurprised.

“You awake?” Kishan asked, stepping in.

Ajay gave a lazy nod. “Didn’t even try to sleep.”

Kishan came and stood by the bed. He looked more tired than usual — probably hadn’t processed things fully himself.

“I waited outside for a while,” he said, his voice low. “Thought you two might want some space.”

Geetha stood up. “You should’ve come in.”

“Nah, I figured you’d guilt-trip him into staying alive better than me,” Kishan replied with a forced smirk, trying to keep things light.

Ajay let out a soft breath that was half a laugh.

Kishan sat on the edge of the other chair now, placing a small paper bag on the table. “I got you a bread roll and

lemon juice. Don't know if you're allowed to eat it, but I panicked and bought it anyway."

Geetha chuckled under her breath.

Ajay looked at the bag and smiled faintly. "Thanks, da. Even if I can't eat it now, I'll keep it and dream about it later."

Kishan grew quiet. The room settled into a stillness — three people sharing a silence that wasn't heavy, just deeply human.

Then Kishan asked gently, "You okay with all this? The admission... the treatment..."

Ajay closed his eyes for a second. "Okay is a big word. But... I'm in it. I'm not running."

Geetha glanced at him — that was the most honest thing he'd said in days.

Kishan nodded, pride in his eyes masked by worry. "You don't have to be brave all the time, you know. We're here."

"I know," Ajay whispered. "And that's why I said yes."

Kishan stood up after a while. "I'll head back to the PG. Let you rest. Call me if you need anything."

Ajay gave a small salute, tired but warm. "I will."

As Kishan opened the door to leave, he paused.

"And hey... don't flirt with the nurses. You've got enough drama going on already."

Ajay smiled. "Noted."

Kishan left, the door closing gently behind him.

Geetha turned to Ajay, crossing her arms. "He's worried more than he shows."

Ajay looked at her. "You both are."

She didn't deny it.

Ajay leaned his head back and looked at the IV drip. “Stage 3... huh. Still feels like I’m dreaming.”

Geetha sat back down beside him. “Then sleep through it. When you wake up, we’ll fight it together.”

Ajay didn’t reply. But this time, when he closed his eyes, it wasn’t fear keeping him awake — it was the strange comfort of not being alone.

The room had finally dimmed. The nurses had turned off the main light, leaving only a soft amber glow from the corner lamp. The hallway outside was quiet, except for the occasional cart rolling past.

Ajay shifted slightly in his bed. The IV tugged gently at his wrist. His body ached more from the weight of realization than from anything physical.

Geetha was still there — curled into the visitor’s chair, a thin hospital blanket draped around her. Her phone light flickered occasionally as she scrolled half-heartedly.

Ajay turned to her.

“Geetha...”

She looked up immediately.

“You should go,” he said, voice barely above a whisper. “You’ve been here since morning. I’ll call Kishan. Let him stay tonight.”

“No.”

It wasn’t a loud protest. Just firm. Quietly firm.

“You don’t have to—” he began.

“I know I don’t have to,” she cut in. “I want to.”

Ajay watched her. There was no drama in her eyes. No guilt-tripping. Just unwavering care.

He sighed, defeated. "I don't even know if I deserve this kind of loyalty."

She smirked faintly, eyes tired. "It's not loyalty. It's love, Ajay. Even if you don't want it, I don't know how to switch it off."

That silenced him.

For a long while, neither spoke.

Then she pulled her blanket tighter and said, "Sleep. Tomorrow's going to be heavier than today."

Ajay turned to face the ceiling again. And for the first time since diagnosis, his breathing slowed enough for sleep.

Next Morning – Hospital Room

The door creaked open softly. Sunlight was filtering through the half-closed blinds, and the room smelled faintly of Dettol and something metallic.

Geetha was still in the chair, head tilted awkwardly, hair falling over her face. Her neck looked stiff from the way she had dozed off. Ajay stirred awake slowly, eyes squinting in the light.

"Good morning," she mumbled, rubbing her eyes.

He looked at her with a slight smile. "You stayed."

"You're surprised?"

"A little," he admitted. "You actually slept like a cat on that chair."

"I've had worse spots," she replied, stretching.

There was a soft knock.

A nurse peeked in. "Good morning, Mr. Ajay. Doctor will come in 15 minutes for rounds. Your reports from last

night's scan are ready. He'll explain everything and discuss the chemo plan."

Ajay nodded, suddenly tense.

Geetha stood and adjusted her kurti. "You want me to call Kishan now?"

Ajay thought for a moment. Then shook his head. "Not yet. Let's hear it first. Then we tell him."

Geetha nodded.

The nurse left.

Ajay sat up slightly in bed, heart pounding a little faster now.

Geetha noticed. She moved closer, sat on the edge of the bed. "Whatever he says... we face it. One step at a time."

Ajay looked at her. "I don't know how you're still here."

"I told you," she said, this time softly. "It's not something I can turn off. Not now. Not when you finally need someone."

Before he could respond, the door opened again.

This time, it was the doctor — file in hand, calm expression, ready to talk them through the war that was about to begin.

The doctor stepped in with a clipboard and a warm but professional expression.

"Good morning, Ajay," he said, with a slight nod to Geetha. "I'm Dr. Vinod. I'll be handling your treatment here along with the oncology team."

Ajay sat up straighter in bed, fingers unconsciously fidgeting with the bedsheet. "Good morning, sir."

Geetha stood beside the bed, arms folded, her stance steady.

Dr. Vinod glanced at the file in his hand, then looked directly at Ajay.

“First — thank you for agreeing to stay. That decision is always the hardest, and you’ve already crossed it.”

Ajay gave a small, almost embarrassed nod.

Dr. Vinod continued, “We’ve reviewed your CT and PET scans. The cancer is confirmed as Stage 3B Non-Small Cell Lung Carcinoma. That means it has spread beyond the lung to nearby lymph nodes, but not to other organs.”

Ajay’s eyes were locked on him. Every word felt sharp, yet grounding.

“It’s serious, yes,” the doctor said, not sugarcoating. “But not hopeless. Stage 3B is still treatable — aggressively. Our plan is to start with a combination of chemotherapy and radiation. Surgery is not our first step since the spread is too close to the mediastinum and lymph channels.”

Geetha asked, “When does it begin?”

“We begin prepping your body today,” Dr. Vinod replied. “Bloodwork, liver and kidney function, nutritional assessment. If everything is stable, your first chemo session will be day after tomorrow. You’ll be on a 3-week cycle — infusion once every three weeks for 4-6 cycles, depending on your body’s response.”

Ajay swallowed. “Side effects?”

Dr. Vinod softened slightly. “They will come. Nausea, fatigue, hair loss, maybe mouth sores. But we’ll monitor you closely. You’ll stay admitted for the first two cycles, then we’ll assess if you can move to day care chemo.”

Ajay looked down at his lap, quiet.

“Emotionally,” the doctor added gently, “it will test you. There’ll be days you’ll feel like giving up. Days when the body will feel like it’s not yours. But if you fight, and follow every instruction, we give you a good chance.”

Geetha's jaw tightened. Her hand slowly touched the corner of the bed — not quite touching Ajay, but anchoring herself.

Dr. Vinod turned to her. "He'll need people. Not just caretakers — but warriors beside him. It makes all the difference."

She nodded.

"I'll leave you both to absorb this," the doctor said. "My team will be in shortly for the blood tests. You're not alone in this, Ajay."

He left, file tucked back under his arm.

Silence settled again.

Ajay didn't speak for a full minute. He was staring ahead — not in shock anymore, but in surrender. Not the weak kind, but the kind that finally admits: Okay. Let's do this.

Geetha sat back down in the chair. Her voice was quiet.

"We start the war, huh?"

Ajay turned slowly to look at her, his throat dry.

"Yeah," he whispered. "And this time, I'm not running."

The morning was dull and sterile, like most hospital mornings — the soft whirring of machines, the distant chatter of nurses, the occasional clink of metal trays.

Ajay sat at the edge of the hospital bed, hoodie sleeves rolled up to his elbows, trying not to look at the needles. His heartbeat was steady, but his jaw was tight.

Geetha stood by his side, arms folded, watching the nurse swab his inner elbow.

"You okay?" she asked, though she already knew the answer.

Ajay nodded too fast. "Yeah. Just... tired of being poked."

The nurse smiled gently. “Last one for today. We’re checking kidney and liver function, complete blood count, platelet levels — all before chemo.”

As the blood filled the small vials, Ajay looked away, eyes fixed on the peeling poster stuck on the far wall: “Hope is the best medicine.”

He almost scoffed.

A few hours later – Hospital Cafeteria

Geetha forced him to eat. Or at least, she tried.

Ajay sat across from her, stirring dal rice with a spoon, eyes unfocused. “This food tastes like paper dipped in sadness.”

Geetha shrugged. “Welcome to hospital cuisine.”

She handed him salt. “At least try. You’ll need strength.”

He sighed and took a bite. She watched him chew slowly, like a man on trial.

“You still scared?” she asked gently.

Ajay looked up. “Scared is such a mild word.”

“Yeah. But it’s also honest.”

He swallowed. “I’m scared of... throwing up my lungs. Losing my hair. Watching myself become someone I don’t recognize. Needing help to stand up.”

He paused.

“And mostly... I’m scared of people watching it all happen. Especially you.”

Geetha didn’t flinch. “Then don’t look at me. But I’ll still be there.”

Ajay chuckled weakly. “That sounds like something from a serial.”

She smiled faintly. “Maybe. But that doesn’t make it less true.”

Evening – Hospital Room
The test results were back.

The doctor entered, crisp and efficient.

“Ajay, your bloodwork looks okay for now. Liver and kidneys are within limits. WBC is on the lower end, but manageable. We’ll begin chemo tomorrow morning, 9 AM sharp.”

Ajay nodded silently.

Geetha stood taller beside him. “What should we prepare for?”

Dr. Vinod looked at her. “Mostly hydration and light food. Emotionally... sleep early. He’ll feel better walking in rested than anxious.”

Geetha nodded. “We’ll manage.”

The doctor left.

Ajay exhaled hard. He finally looked at Geetha and said, “So that’s it. Tomorrow I officially become a chemo patient.”

She sat beside him on the edge of the bed, calm.

“You already are,” she said. “But tomorrow... we start the fight part.”

Ajay’s fingers found the edge of the hospital bedsheet. He was still scared, but something in her steadiness grounded him.

“You’ll stay tomorrow?” he asked, hesitant.

Geetha smiled. “I wasn’t planning on leaving.”

Night Before Chemo – 1:34 AM

Ajay couldn't sleep.

He lay awake, staring at the ceiling. The soft beeping of machines was now familiar. He turned his head — Geetha was asleep in the visitor's chair again, blanket tangled around her legs, her head awkwardly resting on a pillow against the wall.

He watched her quietly for a moment.

She looked... exhausted. But she hadn't left once.

Ajay reached for his phone and typed a message.

"I don't deserve you. But thanks for being here."

He didn't send it.

He just stared at it for a while, then locked the phone and closed his eyes

6:37 AM.

The sky outside was beginning to stretch open with a faint peach light. Inside, fluorescent bulbs hummed softly. The hospital was half-asleep — nurses moving quietly, janitors sweeping corridors.

Geetha stood near the window in silence. Her eyes were dry but tired. Her kurti was creased, skin slightly oily, her hair tied up in a rushed bun from days before.

There was a knock.

Ajay turned his head from the bed as the door opened.

Kishan peeked in, grinning sleepily. "Delivery boy reporting to duty."

Geetha's eyes lit up — not dramatically, but with quiet relief.

Kishan walked in with a bag and two coffee cups.

“Got the soap, towel, fresh clothes, and yeah — even that weird face wash brand you like,” he said, handing the bag to her.

She smiled properly this time. “Thanks, da.”

“I also brought your charger,” he added, then looked at Ajay. “And for our fighter here... coffee without sugar. As per madam’s strict instructions.”

Ajay managed a small smile. “That’s the only reason she kept you around, you know.”

Kishan winked. “Obviously.”

Hospital Bathroom

Geetha locked the door behind her and stared at herself in the mirror.

The harsh light didn’t lie — dark circles, faded skin, the salt of stress drying in the corners of her mouth. She turned on the tap, letting the cold water run before adjusting to warm.

Stripping off her old kurti, she stepped under the narrow shower. The water hit her like a quiet storm.

She didn’t cry — not this time. She just stood there.

Letting the days of waiting, fear, sweat, and hospital air wash off her body. Slowly. Silently.

Outside – Hospital Corridor

Kishan sat beside Ajay, sipping his coffee.

“First chemo day,” he said, more to himself.

Ajay nodded faintly. “Feels like a war I’m not ready for.”

“No one’s ready for war,” Kishan said. “But sometimes... the sword doesn’t matter. It’s the shield.”

Ajay looked at him. “You mean her?”

Kishan nodded. "She's been here like... a damn soldier. No complaints. No sleep. She even screamed at the pharmacy guy yesterday for delaying your meds." While we were in a call.

Ajay swallowed. "I know. I see it."

"Then tell her," Kishan said gently. "Before your mouth gets too bitter to speak."

Ajay looked away. "I don't know what to say."

"You don't need poetry, da. Just don't pretend like this isn't changing you."

Back in Room – 7:45 AM

Geetha entered the room fresh — hair washed, damp and loose over her shoulders. She wore a simple mustard cotton kurti and clean leggings. Her skin glowed faintly, not from beauty products but from water, from effort, from trying.

Ajay looked at her, and for a moment, forgot the chemo, the IV, the tubes.

"You look... alive," he whispered.

She smiled, towel still in hand. "So do you. Almost."

Kishan stood up. "Okay, I'll wait outside. You guys have 15 minutes before the chemo squad comes."

He stepped out, closing the door.

Geetha walked over and adjusted the blanket over Ajay's legs.

"You ready?" she asked.

Ajay didn't answer immediately. Then finally: "I'm still scared."

She reached out, brushing back his hair gently.

“That’s fine,” she said. “I’ll hold the fear until you’re strong enough to carry it yourself.”

He blinked fast — words failing.

And for the first time since his diagnosis, Ajay’s hand reached for hers... not by accident, not for support — but just to hold it.

Cycle One:

The first chemo session left Ajay crumpled.

The nausea came in crashing waves, never predictable — just there, sometimes hours after the drip stopped. His bones ached. His gums felt tender. Water tasted like metal.

Geetha stayed by his side every day and night.

She learned things quickly — which side to hold the vomit tray, which biscuits soothed the mouth ulcers, how to wake the nurse at 3 a.m. without panicking.

Ajay noticed all of it. But never said it out loud.

He was too busy fighting his own body.

Cycle Two:

The second session was worse — not in intensity, but in realization.

The hair started falling. Not in chunks. Just strands, on his pillow, on his towel, on Geetha’s kurti.

Ajay sat in the bathroom one night, staring at the fallen strands. He rubbed his hand across his scalp, and more came off. His eyes stayed dry, but something cracked inside.

The next morning, without asking, Kishan brought clippers.

“Let’s do it properly, da,” he said.

Ajay sat on the stool silently, towel around his shoulders. Kishan gently buzzed off what remained of the hair.

When he was done, he said, “Now your face matches your soul — freshly murdered.”

Ajay laughed. Genuinely. First time in weeks.

Geetha entered a few minutes later with her hair shorter — shoulder-length now. Uneven, clearly cut in a hurry, but light.

“I thought we could match the mood,” she said.

Kishan rolled his eyes. “Great. Now I have to shave my head too, or I’m the only traitor.”

He did.

After the second cycle, the doctor allowed home rest for ten days. The PG wasn’t suitable — too many stairs, too crowded. Ajay had barely the energy to sit up, let alone climb three floors.

Geetha didn’t wait for a debate. She packed his bag herself, spoke to his doctor, and arranged the discharge.

“You’re coming home,” she told him.

Ajay didn’t argue.

Geetha’s Flat – A New Routine

The flat was as usual modest — one bedroom, tiny kitchen, balcony with dead plants. But it smelled of Dettol and masala and care.

She set up his bed near the window, laid out fresh clothes, bought a small standing fan just for him.

She cooked everything light — thin rasam, broken rice, dry poriyal. She fed him when his hands were too shaky to hold the spoon.

He sometimes apologized.

She’d say, “Shut up. Eat.”

When he couldn't sleep, she stayed awake, reading aloud from books, sometimes making up stories.

When he vomited in the middle of the night, she didn't flinch. Just cleaned it up and gave him water.

One Night..Ajay woke up sweating. He tried standing but collapsed onto the side of the bed. Geetha rushed in, helped him sit, gave him ORS, wiped his back.

As he settled, she sat beside him, brushing his forehead.

He whispered, "Why are you doing all this?"

She looked at him. "Because you're my friend."

He stared at her, trying to see if there was more behind the word. He couldn't tell.

But somewhere inside, the word friend felt both too small and too big.

Ajay sometimes stared at her — when she wasn't looking — while she washed dishes or tied up her short hair. He wondered what he owed her. What she thought they were. What he thought they were.

But he said nothing.

And not because he didn't feel something.

But because he didn't know what he felt. It wasn't romance. It wasn't just friendship. It wasn't lust. It was something blurrier. He wasn't ready to name it — maybe afraid to.

And so he stayed quiet.

But every time she sat near him, offered water, cleaned his hands, or adjusted the blanket...

Ajay felt it rising.

The weight of unspoken something.

Chemo sessions had become quieter.

The first few were brutal — draining, terrifying, emotional. But over time, a kind of rhythm settled in. The vomiting reduced. The fatigue was expected. The pain came and went like waves — but with patterns now.

Ajay no longer flinched at the IV needle.

Geetha still came for every session, bringing crossword books, mints, and his favorite old hoodie, even in summer.

Kishan still brought snacks and stupid jokes.

Together, they made cancer feel... survivable.

Academics Took a Backseat

Geetha and Ajay missed many classes initially. Attendance slipped. Assignments piled up. Professors sent emails. But no one really complained — word had gotten around.

“Ajay’s fighting something more important than a semester,” one classmate said.

Geetha, too, looked like she belonged somewhere between a nurse and a ghost — tired, sharp-eyed, and fiercely focused. Even her professors gently backed off.

They didn’t just vanish from college.

They built a parallel life.

Hospital days. Recovery days. Home-cooked meals. Shampoo schedules. Blood tests. And long evenings sitting in silence.

By the end of the final chemo cycle, Ajay's face had filled out slightly. The dark hollows under his eyes softened. His appetite returned.

The doctor smiled at the final scan results.

"Chemo worked better than we hoped," he said. "We've reduced most of the tumor mass. The next step — radiation and targeted therapy."

Ajay nodded.

He wasn't happy. But he was... okay.

That was something difficult to put in words.

Back at Geetha's Flat – That Night

Ajay sat on the floor, back resting against the wall, drinking warm water slowly.

Geetha folded laundry beside him.

"Radiation next," he said.

"Yeah."

"You scared?"

She looked at him. "No. Not like before."

Ajay turned his head. "Why?"

She smiled. "Because you came this far. And because you didn't die. Yet."

He chuckled, shaking his head. "That's comforting."

She sat beside him, their shoulders touching slightly.

"Also," she said, "I think we needed this pause. Away from college. From expectations. From pretending like we're okay."

Ajay was quiet.

Then finally: "I don't know what we are anymore."

She looked at him — long, searching.

“Don’t define it,” she said. “Just let it be. Let it breathe.”

Ajay didn’t respond. But he leaned a little closer.

Somewhere in that silence...

He began living again.

Not chasing dreams. Not making plans.

Just... living.

Radiation Begins

Unlike chemo, radiation was quiet — almost deceptively simple.

No needles. No drips. Just stillness. Masks. Machines. A controlled beam targeting what remained of the disease, five days a week.

Ajay was called in each morning — 15 to 20 minutes lying still while the machine buzzed over him.

Geetha waited outside every day, reading notes or typing assignments on her laptop. Her presence had become protocol.

The nurses knew her.

“Caretaker?” they’d ask.

She’d nod, but never elaborate.

Then finally came the First Day Back at College – A Different World

It felt surreal.

Ajay entered the campus in a cap — not to hide, just to avoid the stares. The sun felt too bright. The noise too loud. People moved too fast.

Geetha walked beside him. She looked better — still tired, but clean. Sharp. Wearing her favorite silver jhumkas and no makeup.

Their classmates were kind, mostly. Some nodded. Some smiled awkwardly.

But many avoided them — unsure of what to say.

“You look... better,” one guy finally said to Ajay.

Ajay replied, “Yeah. I’m not dead.”

They laughed. The tension eased.

They only attended afternoon classes. Mornings were still for hospital.

Ajay sat in the back benches, his energy low, scribbling notes in half-full pages. Geetha was more organized — managing both their notes, updating missed assignments, collecting lecture recordings.

Professors were soft with them. They were “the kids who went through something.”

Kishan, meanwhile, hovered nearby. Teasing Ajay occasionally, walking with Geetha to the canteen, sitting between them when things got too silent.

A Quiet Shift

One afternoon, between classes, Ajay rested his head on the desk.

Geetha gently placed a bottle of buttermilk next to him.

“You’ve been out for 3 hours. Hungry?”

He nodded without lifting his head. “I hate this.”

“What?”

“Being halfway in everything. Half energy. Half attention. Half alive.”

Geetha looked at him, quiet for a moment. “It’s still better than being fully gone.”

He turned to her. “Sometimes I think I should’ve just stayed in the flat. Or in the hospital. This — all this — it doesn’t feel like my life anymore.”

She nodded. “Same. But... this is the part where we slowly take it back.”

Radiation brought a different kind of tiredness. Not dramatic. Just persistent.

Ajay’s skin near his chest darkened slightly. He got dizzy often. He sometimes forgot words mid-sentence. But he pushed through.

Some days, he didn’t come to college. Geetha would attend, record lectures, send him voice notes at night:

“Today was boring. Same theories. Akash farted in class and blamed Karthik. You didn’t miss much.”

Ajay would play them before sleeping. They became his lullaby.

One Night – Geetha’s Balcony

They sat under the night sky, silent.

Ajay had just finished 17 out of 25 radiation sessions.

He leaned back in the chair, eyes closed.

“Do you ever feel like you aged ten years in three months?” he asked.

Geetha nodded. “My mirror says that every morning.”

He looked at her short hair, the loose kurti, the deep lines under her eyes.

“You were always strong, but now... you’re something else.”

She smiled. “And you — you were always stubborn. But now you’re softer.”

Ajay looked at her, really looked.

“Do you miss the old us?” he asked.

She hesitated. “Sometimes. But this... this is deeper.”

Ajay didn’t respond. But he didn’t look away either.

Radiation Session – Day 25

Ajay lay beneath the machine, the sterile room humming like always.

His chest was marked with faded purple lines. The radiology mask sat beside him — molded once to his face, now lifeless.

This was the last one.

No one clapped. There were no balloons.

Just a technician saying, “All done. You can go.”

Ajay stood up slowly.

He didn’t smile. But something inside him exhaled.

Geetha was waiting just outside, sipping coffee from a paper cup. She stood the second she saw him.

“All done,” he said, almost numb.

“I know.” She handed him the coffee.

Their hands brushed.

And for a second, neither pulled away.

That Night – Geetha’s Flat

It rained a little that evening. The balcony smelled of wet dust.

Ajay sat on the couch, legs stretched.

Geetha cooked without speaking much — rasam, rice, mashed potatoes. All light, all familiar.

They barely ate.

They weren't hungry.

They were just waiting — for the scan results due in the morning.

The TV played some serial on mute. The room felt still. But their hearts beat like alarms.

Ajay looked at her mid-way through dinner.

“What if it's back?”

Geetha paused, holding a spoonful mid-air.

“Then we fight again,” she said.

Ajay nodded.

But something about the way she said we made his chest tighten.

Next Morning – Hospital, Room 103

They sat across from the doctor, the envelope unopened on the desk.

The doctor smiled, looking at the scan.

“Ajay...” he said, voice warm.

“You're cancer-free.”

Silence.

It rang louder than tears.

Ajay blinked. He didn't speak. Just stared at the words on the report.

The doctor explained recovery, follow-up, precautions — all a blur.

Geetha just nodded.

When the words stopped, Ajay stood up.

He turned to her — and in that moment, he broke.

He grabbed her and held her tightly, arms locking around her frame like she was the only thing keeping him tethered.

“I’m okay...” he whispered.

“I’m really okay...”

She hugged him back.

But her heart didn’t feel joy.

It felt quiet devastation.

Because this wasn’t a love hug.

This was gratitude. Relief. Survival.

And suddenly she realized —

She had built this world for him. Cared for him like a wife.

Stayed like a shadow.

All hoping that one day, the weight of her presence would turn into love.

But it didn’t.

Not in the way she imagined.

Not in the way that lasts.

And in that moment, inside the hug...

The fake bridge she had built — named friendship, dreamt love —

it broke.

Not with sound. Not with screaming.

Just silence.

A small internal thud.

Outside the Hospital

The sun was warm. The pavement still wet from last night's rain.

Ajay stepped out and turned to her.

"You wanna go get breakfast?"

Geetha smiled faintly.

"Sure."

But inside her, something was gone.

Not love.

That still remained — quietly.

What was gone...

It was hope.

Geetha stood beneath the hospital portico, sunlight slipping through the trees.

Ajay pulled out his phone, dialing.

“Kishan... done. I’m cancer free, da,” Ajay said, a quiet smile in his voice.

From the other end: “DAAAAAAAAA—” and a string of words they both didn’t catch through his half-crying excitement.

Geetha leaned toward the phone. “We’ll come home. But... one stop first.”

After they left the hospital, they went to a nearby temple.

Geetha stood beneath the temple arch, palms folded, eyes closed. The scent of camphor and jasmine lingered as Ajay stood beside her, mostly quiet, trying to match her energy but unsure what to feel. He had just been declared cancer-free — a miracle moment. But somehow, the silence between them felt heavier than celebration.

She looked at the deity and murmured silently, “Thank you for giving him back. You can take everything else.”

They didn’t speak much on the way back. Just soft directions, awkward glances, and that strange numbness that comes after intense relief.

When they reached Geetha’s flat, Kishan was already waiting outside the door, pacing like an excited kid.

“DAA! Machan!” Kishan nearly jumped into Ajay’s arms, pulling him into a tight, genuine hug. “You did it!”

Ajay grinned — tired but alive in a way he hadn't felt for months. They all walked into the flat, letting the moment breathe for a while. The air was filled with quiet laughter, coffee boiling, the sound of a chair scraping against the floor as they sat to eat.

But Geetha was different.

She moved around like a guest in her own space — placing spoons, adjusting the fan speed, folding an extra bedsheet. Her eyes had a glaze. Her smile didn't reach her cheeks.

Ajay noticed. "Geetha... What's up with you?"

She paused. Looked at him.

"I need to ask you something."

Kishan stopped mid-bite. The air changed.

Geetha turned fully toward Ajay and said, steady and soft, "Do you love me?"

Ajay stared, taken aback. "Geetha—what? I just came out of the worst phase of my life. This is what you want to ask now?"

"I know the timing's wrong," she said, voice controlled. "But I've waited so long. And today, when you hugged me at the hospital, something in me broke. I couldn't keep lying to myself anymore."

Ajay looked at her, confused, irritated, maybe even scared.

"I kept saying we were friends. I made myself believe that. But I've loved you, Ajay. Through everything. I thought maybe... somewhere, you did too."

Ajay ran his hand through his hair, stepping back. "Geetha, stop it."

Kishan looked up, frozen.

Ajay's tone hardened. "I knew this would come up. But not now. Not like this. You told me we were just friends. You said don't name it. You said 'care' — now it's love?"

She swallowed but stood her ground. "Yes. I said those things. Because I was scared. But I stayed. Through every test, every session—"

Ajay snapped, "So now what? Because you stayed through chemo, I should fall in love with you? Is that it?"

Kishan stood up, "Machan—enough da—"

But Ajay didn't stop. His voice was cracking now, rising.

"You played me, Geetha. Said friendship. Meant love. Guilt-tripped me with kindness. I feel like I'm in a trap. You're making me feel I owe you something — for surviving."

Geetha's face tightened. "You think I wanted you to owe me?"

Ajay's voice was colder now. "I think you liked me being sick. Because it meant I'd need you. And now that I'm better, you're afraid. So you start this love drama, so I don't leave. That's cheap. And selfish."

Silence.

Dead, full silence.

Geetha didn't cry. Her eyes were still, lips trembling only slightly.

Then she asked, barely audible:

"I'll never be enough for you, right?"

No answer came.

She nodded to herself. Calm. Certain.

"I'm done."

She turned and walked toward the door. Kishan rushed forward, “Geetha, hey—wait! Please!”

She didn’t pause. She didn’t look back.

She just left.

Kishan stood at the open door, breathing hard, watching her disappear down the stairs. He slammed the door shut and turned to Ajay, face flushed red.

“She did everything for you, da.”

Ajay stood, unmoving. “Did I ask her to?”

And Kishan’s fist hit the back of his head — loud, sudden, with years of pent-up anger.

Ajay stumbled slightly, stunned.

Kishan’s voice cracked. “You didn’t ask. But you needed her. Every damn day. She gave everything. And now, you throw it all like it was some trap?”

Ajay stared at the ground.

Kishan stepped back. “You don’t deserve her.”

He walked into the room, slamming the door.

Ajay remained standing.

Alone.

Surrounded by everything Geetha had once touched — the steel glass she drank rasam from, the blanket she folded every morning, her hair clip on the table corner.

And the echo of her voice, still ringing in the flat like a curse:

“I’ll never be enough for you, right?”

Present...

Ajay fell silent.

His hands rested on his lap, still. His jaw tightened, like he was holding back something heavy — something that didn't know how to come out in words.

Anjali looked at him, searching.

"Then... did you ever see her again?"

Ajay didn't answer.

She waited, leaned in a little. "Appa... why?"

The question hung in the air, soft but sharp.

Ajay's eyes didn't meet hers. His lips parted, but no words came out at first.

And then, quietly... almost like he was afraid to hear himself say it, he replied:

"I did."

Anjali's heart skipped.

She turned sharply to him, eyebrows raised.

"When? Oh—anyways, you guys were in the same class, right? You'd obviously have bumped into each other..."

She tried to sound light, but the weight in her voice was undeniable.

Ajay gave a faint smile. But it wasn't joy. It was the kind of smile you give when memories hurt more than silence.

"It wasn't in college," he said.

And he began to speak again — slowly, like lifting old glass.

After that fight, Geetha left. Switched to correspondence. Just vanished. And me? I thought she was being dramatic again. That she'd be back like always — stubborn, emotional, but Geetha. But she didn't come back.

Kishan stopped talking to me properly too. Wouldn't even look me in the eye.

A month passed. I couldn't take the silence anymore. I asked him — 'Where is she?'

He just said, 'Mind your business.' That was it.

That's when I panicked. I called her. No reply. Texted. Nothing.

I went to her grandma's house — locked. Empty. I stood outside like a stranger.

And then, somehow, through my classmates. I heard... they'd moved back to Hyderabad. To their old home.

That day broke something inside me. I waited during exam season, hoping I'd catch her somewhere, even in a crowd. But no.

I broke down, Anju. For the first time... I cried like mad. And that's when I started wondering—maybe this is what love feels like. Not the romance part. But the ache. The regret.

I broke down in front of Kishan too. After all that silence, he hugged me.

He said, 'You shouldn't have spoken like that to her.'

I nodded, sobbing. 'I know,' I told him.

And that's when he said something that crushed me even more.

'You know who paid for your treatment?' he asked.

I blinked. I said, 'You and Geetha told me it was a government scheme.'

He said, 'That's what Geetha told you. The truth? It was her. She sold the only jewels she had left from her mom. She used the money her dad sent her monthly — money she never touched for herself. She used it... all... for you.'

That shattered me. Every bit of ego, guilt, everything.

I told Kishan, 'I want to talk to her.'

He looked at me and said, 'No. Let it go. Be well. That's enough.'

A year passed. I tried to change. Started working out, doing better in life. But I still thought of her. Every day. Somewhere deep down, I hoped... maybe one day she'd message.

And one day... she did. On Facebook.

I saw her name. My hands trembled. My heart was racing.

I clicked the message.

It was her wedding invitation.

No words. Just the invite.

I didn't know what to feel. Angry? Sad? Guilty? Empty?

I couldn't breathe.

Anjali's eyes widened. Her voice was quiet. "Appa... just like that?"

Ajay nodded. His eyes were far away.

"She invited me. After everything. Just like that."

"Did you... go?"

Ajay hesitated. Then he nodded.

"Yeah. At first, I didn't want to. I was angry. 'How could she ghost me like that?' I kept thinking. But deep down... I had to see her.

I told Kishan. He said, 'Just go. But don't talk nonsense. Don't ruin anything.'

We went.

And then I saw her... standing with her fiancé. She looked peaceful. Beautiful. And honestly... happy.

All the anger inside me? Gone.

She saw me. Her face lit up.

She said, 'Ajay! You came!'

And then, 'How are you?'

I just nodded. Her fiancé was kind. Her patti too — so warm.

It felt like I didn't deserve even a second of their kindness.

We took a picture together on stage. I forced a smile. Inside, I was breaking again.

As I stepped down, she called out, 'Ajay...'

I turned.

She said, 'You look neat. And healthy. I'm so happy for you.'

And she smiled.

That smile... it killed me.

I smiled back. Somehow. And then I left the stage. Went outside. Looked at the wedding hall one last time.

Kishan walked beside me. He didn't say anything.

That was it. That's how it all ended."

Anjali didn't speak.
Her throat felt tight. Her chest ached. The sky above them stayed dark and wide, holding in all the words she couldn't say.

She looked at her father — this man she'd only known as calm, smart, and funny.

Now she saw him differently — a boy who once didn't know how to love properly...

and a man who never forgot the one person who did.

She whispered, "Appa..."

Ajay didn't reply.

He just stared at the stars.

And for the first time in a long time, they sat without words.

Because sometimes, silence says everything.

The silence between them stretched like a thread — delicate, trembling.

Then Anjali spoke, her voice soft, laced with a new kind of understanding.

"...Your story is worse than mine."

Ajay looked at her, surprised.

She wasn't being dramatic. She meant it.

For a second, he just stared. Then he smiled — faintly. Sadly.

"Not very different," he said. "Pain is pain."

Anjali shook her head. “But you didn’t even know it was love until it was too late...”

Ajay’s expression turned distant again, eyes swimming with memories.

He let the silence hang for a while, then finally said, “You know why I told you all this?”

Anjali looked at him, a little unsure.

Ajay turned to face her, this time completely — not as the calm, collected father — but as a man who’d once made a mess of his own heart.

“Because Rohit didn’t treat you right. And still, you gave him your whole heart. And then... you called it ‘just friends’ now.”

He paused, voice faltering a little.

“I know how much that hurts. Even if you never say it.”

Anjali stayed quiet. But her throat tightened.

“I see the old me in Rohit,” Ajay said softly. “That hesitation... that fear of committing, of saying what you actually feel.”

He exhaled.

“And for years, I told myself what I did to Geetha was just a mistake. That maybe it was timing. Or confusion. Or anything but what it truly was — my fault.”

He glanced at her now, eyes sharp with regret.

“But watching my own daughter go through the same thing... hiding her pain... giving more than she got back... it broke me.”

He clenched his fists lightly.

"Maybe this is my karma. But you don't deserve that pain, Anjali. You never did."

His voice dropped.

"That boy... Rohit... he's unsure. And love needs surety."

"You don't have to keep proving your worth to someone who doesn't know yours."

A pause.

And then, Anjali reached out — gently, without a word — and held his hand.

Her grip was firm.

"Appa," she whispered. "You've changed so much."

Ajay let out a soft laugh. "Have I?"

She nodded. "You're not just a good dad.... You're the best dad. And the best husband."

Ajay smiled, eyes glinting as he looked away. "Aiyo, too much praise. Enough."

She grinned, then playfully asked, "So... do you have any photo of her? Or any letter or card she gave you?"

Ajay stood up with a stretch. "Nothing, ma. Story over. Go sleep."

"Just now I said you're the best, and now you're hiding stuff again!"

He laughed. "I swear. I don't have anything. It's all in the past."

Anjali got up slowly. "Okay, okay... but still."

As she walked toward the steps, she murmured with a small smirk, "Hmm... I guess for everyone, first love ends in failure."

Ajay called out from behind, "Not always."

She turned, curious.

“I’m your amma’s first love. And that one ended in marriage.”

“WHAT?! Appa—wait—really?”

Ajay chuckled. “Yup. Queen, go sleep. That story... is for another night.”

She laughed as she walked away. “Good night, appa. Love you!”

“Love you too.”

The dim light of her phone screen reflected off Anjali's eyes.

Her thumb hovered over the message, motionless — like her heart was asking one last time: Are you sure?

She had typed and deleted this so many times.

But tonight felt different. Tonight, something had shifted.

Rohit...

I'm sorry.

I can't be friends anymore.

I deserve better.

I've already sacrificed enough just to stay close to you.

I'm choosing me now.

She stared at the words. They weren't angry. They weren't bitter.

They were just... true.

A war raged inside her — between the urge to send it and the ache of letting go.

But her breath came steady now. She blinked slowly.

And then, with fingers that no longer trembled, she tapped Send.

The screen flashed.

Message delivered.

She didn't wait for blue ticks. She didn't check if he was online.

She just went to his profile, hit Block, and watched it disappear.

One tear rolled down her cheek. It wasn't dramatic.

It just *was*.

And she didn't wipe it. She let it trace her face like a silent goodbye.

Curling up into her bedsheet, she whispered, barely audible, "Enough."

Not to Rohit. Not even to the world.

Just to herself.

Because she'd been trying too hard, for too long — to be loved back the same way she gave.

And sometimes, growing up meant walking away from what kept breaking you.

Downstairs, Ajay sat in the quiet of the hall, Oreo's soft breathing the only sound.

The dog's head rested on his lap, tail gently thumping now and then — like it knew something heavy sat on its master's chest.


Ajay petted Oreo absentmindedly, eyes staring at nothing.

But inside, memories stirred. Loud, loud memories.

He stood up slowly, as if the past itself was pulling at his back.

Opened the old cupboard. Reached in.

From behind an old pile of books, he pulled out a small, dust-covered wooden box.

He hadn't touched it in years.
The latch clicked open. And there it was.
The card.
Edges yellowed, corners softened by time.
But her handwriting — still bold. Still trembling.
Ajay,
I don't know how to write this without trembling.
I've erased and rewritten this card five times — but
somehow, these words keep finding their way back.
You were the first person to really see me.
Not just laugh at my jokes or eat what I cooked...
But see the storm inside me and still sit close.
You're my first friend.
My first safe place.
My first fight.
My first heartbreak.
My first everything.
I told myself I'm fine being "just friends."
But lying to myself every day is exhausting.
So today, I'm not holding back anymore.
Ajay... I love you.
More than these words. More than this card.
I don't know if I'm the right person for you.
But I had to try. I had to ask:
Will you be my life too?
– Geethanjali 

His fingers ran across the ink, almost like trying to feel her voice again.

He remembered her face as she threw it that day.

The anger in her eyes. The hurt behind it.

And he — silent, stupid, frozen by his own fear.

Geethanjali.

The name still ached when spoken inside his mind.

That name — the reason he had named his daughter Anjali.

A secret confession. A small atonement.

She never knew. No one ever did.

He held the card for a while.

Not like a souvenir. More like a wound you know won't bleed again — but still stings when you press it.

Then, he took a breath.

Not a deep, movie-scene breath. But a tired, heavy, real one.

And gently... he placed the card by the side of the dustbin.

Not torn. Not burned.

Just laid down — like a flower you don't pluck, but let fall.

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The door clicked open behind him.

Kayal entered, her hair tied up messily, bag sliding off her shoulder.

She paused.

Something about the way Ajay stood — still, quiet, slightly trembling — made her stop.

"Ajay?" she asked, softly.

He turned.

And walked toward her.

No words. Just his arms reaching, wrapping around her tightly.

Not like a husband coming home. But like a man trying not to fall.

Kayal was startled. Then slowly, instinctively, she held him back.

Firmer. Closer.

“Hey... what happened?”

No reply.

But his grip said more than any sentence could.

As they stood there, Kayal’s eyes drifted past his shoulder.

To the card — lying near the dustbin. Unopened. Untouched.

But not unseen.

She didn’t ask. Didn’t reach.

She just pulled him tighter.

As if to say — I know. I always knew...And it’s okay now.

Ajay’s eyes closed.

And something unspoken — maybe a memory, maybe a guilt, maybe the last piece of grief — finally loosened its grip.

Upstairs, a daughter slept — not just peacefully,

but for the first time in weeks,

with a heart no longer carrying what wasn’t hers to bear.

Downstairs, a husband stood in silence,

his arms around the woman who had waited for all the parts
of him

he hadn't even known were lost.

And in that quiet, in-between space —

between what was and what is —

a man finally let go of the weight he'd carried for years...

...and forgave himself.

THE END

Author's Note

This story didn't just come from imagination — it came from pieces of me.

From the daughter who lost her father too soon, and still carries that ache.

From the version of me that once dropped out, unsure of what came next.

And from the girl who found a home again — in Viscom, in storytelling, in healing.

Ajay, Geetha, Anjali — they weren't just characters.

They were feelings I've lived through... or tried to understand.

I didn't always have the perfect words. But I had the emotions.

When I looked for editors to help with my novel, the cost felt almost as high as publishing itself.

Since this is my debut, and every step mattered so much to me, I chose to shape it myself — with the help of tools like Grammarly and ChatGPT, which supported me with grammar and flow when I needed it most.

But every emotion, every scene, every decision — that was fully mine.

This story was born from my heart. The tools just helped me say it better

If this story reminded you of someone you loved, someone you lost, or someone you're still trying to become —

thank you for feeling it with me.

From one heart to another,

thank you for reading.

With love,

— **Perarasi Radja**

A special thank you to my family —

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