ARYA

TALES OF SAANJHPUR

HARSHINI PARSI

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BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS
www.BlueRoseONE.com
info@bluerosepublishers.com
+91 8882 898 898
+4407342408967

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Dear Reader

Knowing that you are holding this book today, I honestly don't know whether to feel grateful, nervous, or excited... maybe all of them at once. This is my debut novel, which makes this moment incredibly special. There is something both terrifying and beautiful about sharing a story with the world that once existed only inside your mind.

ARYA has been a part of my life for close to two years now. What started as a simple idea slowly turned into a world that stayed with me every single day. There were scenes that made me smile, chapters that left me emotional, and days when I wondered if I would ever complete this story the way I had imagined it in my heart. Sleepless nights, rewritten chapters, deleted pages, and a ton of self-doubt are all what it took for this book to come to life.

The journey of Arjun and Nitya is deeply personal to me. They are not extraordinary people trying to become heroes. They are simply two souls learning to understand love, pain, and each other while life continues to test them in unexpected ways. I never wanted this story to be just a romance. I wanted it to feel human.

I don't know how this journey will unfold from here, but I truly hope that somewhere within these pages, you find a character you understand, a moment that stays with you, or a feeling that reminds you that love, grief, healing, and hope can all exist together.

Thank you for being here.
Thank you for giving this story a chance.

With love,
Harshini Parsi

BIDDING FAREWELLS

Current day, Saanjhpur Airport —

In the middle of the bustling airport, emotions spilled like colors on a canvas, each shade capturing a different goodbye. Families gathered near the glass barrier, their expressions a mix of smiles, tears, and heartfelt embraces. Amid these moments, two stories are about to converge.

Arjun and his father watched Shreya go through the departure gate. Shreya, Arjun's younger sister, was leaving for the UK to start a new chapter in her life. A strange emptiness settled in Arjun's chest but his father's presence beside him brought comfort.

On a different side of the airport, a parallel scene unfolded with Nitya and her parents. Nitya's eyes filled with tears as she watched her elder brother, Gautam, and his family prepare to board their flight. Gautam, his wife Ritu, and their month-old baby Ira were relocating to Rajnagar – a city miles away from Saanjhpur.

As Shreya left, Arjun and his father walked towards their car – a mix of emotions rising within them. With gentle care, they closed the car doors.

In a different corner of the parking lot, Nitya's family settled into their car. Their glances and quiet words were enough to show how much they already missed Gautam and his family, and especially baby Ira. Wiping her tears, Nitya gently closed her car door.

The closing of doors was like the opening notes of a new melody, signifying fresh beginnings for Arjun and Nitya – ARYA.

~

ANCHOR OF HIS LIFE

As Arjun sat in the car and let his eyes shut, every little incident from the past flashed before him. Every tear he shed now had once been a form of pure happiness. Every sad moment of the present reminded him of a past as beautiful as memory could paint, not perfect, but complete... together as a family.

A memory from this very airport resurfaced and he smiled to himself.

Back in the past —

Tall and slim, dressed in a white shirt and denim jeans, a jacket in one hand and a travel bag in the other, Arjun had that effortless charm. And oh, those eyes, deep and dark, with lashes so thick they could melt a heart without trying.

Beside him was a woman gently holding his hand. His Mom. With partial brown hair tied into a neat bun, a delicate bindi on her forehead, and a saree that was both elegant and modern, she carried a quiet grace next to Arjun.

As they waited to board the flight, she nudged him gently, "Aru... look there, she's watching you."

"Mom, come on..." he whispered, a little embarrassed.

She smiled mischievously. "And she's pretty too."

Arjun shook his head and looked away. "Not my thing anymore."

His mother frowned lightly. "Anymore?"

He stayed quiet for a minute. She gently nudged him again, persuading him to tell her what had happened.

As they settled into their seats, Arjun finally began slowly. "I was in love once... or at least I thought I was," he said with a faint smile.

"Maybe we were just young and immature, I guess... and we had our own reasons. Somewhere along the way, it faded just like that..."

Her eyes widened. "My son was in love?"

He laughed softly. "Anyways... I don't believe in it anymore."

She looked at him lovingly. "But hearts change when the right person arrives, beta."

Arjun smiled. "There is no right or wrong person, Mom."

She gently held his hand. "Whatever... But one day, you will surely find someone truly kind and beautiful. Remember my words."

Arjun smiled faintly. "You still haven't given up?"

Not wanting to stay on that topic any longer, he unlocked his phone and handed it to her. "I think you're bored... that's why you've picked this topic. Read this instead."

She raised an eyebrow. "What is it?"

"Something I wrote."

As she read through the pages on his phone, Arjun began explaining little details, narrating parts of it like a storyteller.

When she finished, pride filled her eyes, "Wow... what a story, Aru."

Then she smiled. "If you keep writing like this, you may write a book someday."

He laughed softly. "A book? No way. It isn't easy, Mom. I'll need a lot of motivation."

She smiled knowingly. *"Who knows... maybe one day, you'll find that motivation."*

Present day —

Now, on the current day, sitting in the back seat of the car beside his father, Arjun slowly opened his eyes. That memory came rushing back – the story, his mom, her laughter.

As they stepped into the house, it felt quieter than usual without Shreya around. Arjun's father settled in his room while Arjun sat down in the living room.

His eyes fell on the couch, the coffee table, the corner near the bookshelf... And just like that, another memory from the past came into his mind. A brighter one. A small celebration.

Back in the past —

One evening, Shreya knocked on the door. "I'm here," she announced.

Arjun hurriedly opened the door. Shreya walked inside, took a deep breath, and began, "Mom, Arjun, I have something incredible to tell you." And she instructed them to close their eyes.

"Now you can open your eyes," Shreya said with a smile, pointing to her laptop.

Their gaze immediately fell upon the laptop screen, which displayed admission letter from one of the top Business Schools in the UK. Her mother's heart skipped a beat as she realized what this meant. Tears welled up in her eyes, "Shreya, is this...?" she asked.

With a radiant smile, Shreya shared the details of her admission and the scholarship she had received.

"Shreya, you've made your mother's dreams come true. I couldn't be prouder of you," she pulled her into a hug.

Arjun exclaimed, "Congratulations, little sister."

Arjun eagerly dialed their father's number and shared the news. His joy radiated through his heartfelt congratulations.

That night, the house came alive. Fairy lights. Balloons. A cake Arjun ordered at the last minute. Music. Laughter. Tears.

Present day —

A tear rolled down his cheek as he now stood in the very living room he once decorated for Shreya.

The day went on, but Arjun's mind swirled with thoughts. That night, after dinner, as darkness settled around him, Arjun closed his

eyes hoping for sleep. He shifted from side to side, the stillness only making it harder. His mind wandered, unwilling to settle.

And then, like a quiet ripple in the dark, he remembered another incident, a night not too long ago, when it wasn't him who couldn't sleep... It was *his mother.*

Back in the past —

One night, his mother couldn't sleep. Restless, she sat up in bed. Heavy thoughts, bad dreams, she couldn't explain. She had tried turning on the fan, shifting pillows, even praying, but nothing soothed the strange anxiety in her.

She walked to Shreya's room, gently opened the door, and switched on the light. There she was, Shreya, asleep. His mother stood there for a moment watching her. Later, she walked quietly into the kitchen, letting the cool water soothe her dry throat.

A few minutes later, Arjun appeared behind her, sleepy-eyed.

"You're up?" she asked gently.

"I heard some sounds. What happened to you Mom?" he asked.

"Just one of those nights. Bad dreams," she said.

He walked to her side, "Come. I'll walk you back to your room." They walked slowly, without a word. When she settled back onto her bed, Arjun didn't leave. Instead, he sat beside her and rested on her lap.

She began to run her fingers gently through his hair. Her touch was slow, rhythmic, and full of affection. Arjun closed his eyes, relaxed.

After a long pause, she whispered, "I had a very bad dream about myself tonight, Arjun."

He opened his eyes slowly, kissed her palm, and said, "Nothing happens to you, Mom. I'm right here."

She lowered her hand to his cheek and said, "You'll take care of everything, right? Your father, Shreya, the house..."

Arjun sat up a little, his brows raised. "Of course I will. But don't even dare talk like that," he said, his voice firm.

She smiled. “I don’t know,” she murmured, “It’s just… something about tonight feels broken. Just promise me one thing, Aru.”

He looked at her.

“Even when things don’t go as planned… Stay kind. Stay strong,” she said with a heavy heart.

Arjun didn’t answer right away. He simply leaned in and wrapped his arms around her, holding her like he would never let her go. “I promise,” he whispered. “But nothing happens to you. Okay?”

She held him for a moment longer, brushing his hair again. Slowly, he dozed off to sleep.

Present day —

Arjun’s heart was warm as he remembered his mother’s affectionate words and the way she gently brushed his hair. The comfort of that memory paused his thoughts, and before he knew it, he had fallen asleep.

THE BOUQUET

Back in the past —

After seeing his mother so restless that night, Arjun kept waking up again and again to check on her. All he wanted was to make sure she was okay.

The next morning, as sunlight filtered softly through the windows, he woke up earlier than usual. But she wasn't beside him. He hurried to the kitchen and found her already busy, moving quietly as she prepared for the day.

He walked toward her, "Please… never say anything like that again," he said firmly.

His mother smiled gently. "I'm sorry, Aru… I was just vulnerable last night," she said.

Later that evening, Arjun returned from office in excitement and called out, "Mom?" Once. Then again. No answer.

His mother was in her room, crying to herself. As she heard his voice, she quickly wiped her tears, not wanting him to see her like that. As his footsteps approached, she straightened up, trying to put on a brave face. "Arjun, I'm here," she responded.

As he stepped inside the room, he noticed a few tears still clinging to her lashes. He turned her toward him, and asked, "Mom… you're crying again?"

She remained silent.

"Mom… something's wrong. You haven't been yourself for the last two days. Last night, you woke up crying… and now this. Tell me. What's bothering you?" His voice cracked a little.

She managed to put on a smile, "It's just… Shreya is going to the UK soon… I'm feeling a little emotional, that's all."

He nodded believing her words. *But it wasn't just that. There was more to the story he didn't know.*

"I'm still here, right?" he said, holding her hand.

She nodded slowly.

He tried to lighten the mood, "Wait, I'm going to call Shreya. She needs to see how emotional she has made you!" he said, walking towards Shreya's room.

Meanwhile, back inside the bedroom, his mother quickly picked up her phone. Her hands moved fast as she deleted a few chats and call history. Then she wiped the last of her tears and stepped out into the hallway as if nothing had happened.

~

Later that evening, his mother looked at Arjun and said, "Aru... by the way, could you please drop me off at my friend Neelam's house? I couldn't attend her son's wedding last week. I already told her I'd visit her today."

"Sure, Mom. But it's already getting late. Can we go tomorrow morning instead?" he suggested.

"Beta, I will be at the factory tomorrow. So, meeting her today would be ideal," she said.

Arjun nodded understandingly, "Sure, Mom."

As they were getting ready to leave, Shreya couldn't help but notice the elegant handbag her mother was holding. She complimented, "Mom, this is such a stunning bag! I love the color. I've never seen you use it before."

Her mother smiled, "Ah, this one. It's a gift from your father a long time ago."

"By the way, why such a big handbag? What are you carrying in it?" Shreya laughed.

"There's a gift for the couple," she said and changed the subject, almost immediately.

Arjun cut in, "Okay, if you both are done discussing the bag, can we please leave now?"

Shreya and his mother smiled at his impatience.

As they drove, his mother sat quietly, gazing out of the window, her thoughts distant. Something was bothering her; something she hadn't spoken aloud.

She closed her eyes and leaned back. "My head is aching," she murmured.

"Probably from all the crying earlier. Close your eyes for some time, Mom." Arjun replied.

The car went quiet again. But Arjun's constant work calls didn't let his mother rest fully.

As they were approaching the place, "Aru, could you please pull over right here?" she asked, extending her arm toward a charming *florist shop* nearby. "I'd love to pick up a bouquet. I think it would add beauty to the gift I've bought for the newlyweds." She paused, and then added, "My friend's house is just nearby. I'll walk from here."

He turned to his mother and said, "Mom, I'll come inside and help you." Just as he was about to get out of the car, he received another call. His mother, understanding the urgency of his work, convinced him to continue his way.

She assured him, "You're receiving important calls. And, well, what is there to choose in a *bouquet* anyway? I'll manage."

"Okay, Mom. Take good care," he replied. "Call me once you're done. I will pick you on my way back." And he set off to his office.

As she entered the florist shop, her attention was immediately captured by the vibrant array of flowers. A few minutes later, her fingers reached for her phone, but to her surprise, her phone wasn't in her bag.

Meanwhile, Arjun heard the sound of his mother's phone ringing nearby. It must have slipped from her hand and fallen down while she was resting in the car. He picked it up and saw that his father was calling. After answering, he told him that he would head back and return the phone to her.

He made his way back to the area. As he approached the florist shop, he noticed a small gathering of people. From a distance, he struggled to understand what happened there. As he moved closer,

something on the road caught his eye – his mother's bag, lying open, the items scattered. He also saw a bouquet of flowers lay crushed.

He immediately pulled his car to the side and walked towards them. *"No, this can't be her!"* he whispered, moving forward. His heart raced even faster, desperate for confirmation that his mother was safe.

Arjun's mind swirled in chaos as he struggled to grasp the reality that was unfolding before him. His heart was heavy, knowing that his mother met with an accident.

Overhearing bits and pieces of conversation from others, he gathered that it was a hit and run case, and the driver fled. After the hit, it seemed she crashed into a pole and now was lying there unconscious and bleeding badly.

As he knelt beside her, a storm of emotions overwhelmed him. His hands held her with utmost care, aching to provide any comfort or relief he could do at that moment. Time seemed to stretch as he rushed his mother to the hospital, each passing second felt like an eternity.

"Mom," he choked out between his breaths, his voice a desperate plea to the universe. The thought of losing her was like a nightmare.

Knees weak, Arjun leaned against the hospital's wall, whispering to himself, "I'll do whatever it takes to save you. You'll be fine."

Her chances of survival were very low. He dialed Shreya and his father, his voice trembling with urgency. They rushed to the hospital, their hearts beating with fear and disbelief.

Shreya couldn't contain her pain, her tears flowing uncontrollably. Their father was devastated by the situation.

Throughout the long night, they remained in the hospital. Arjun sat by his mother's side, holding her hand. He whispered through tears, "Mom... Please don't do this. Wake up and talk to us."

Guilt took over him, "It's all my fault," he cursed himself. "I shouldn't have left you alone at the florist shop. I should have stayed with you. It's all my fault." He punched the wall with his fist.

Shreya pleaded, "Arjun, please...!"

Their mother's heart rate began to fluctuate. Before anyone could intervene, her life slipped away. The room fell into an unbearable silence. *She was gone.*

~

The void left by her passing is irreplaceable. Arjun, with his heart completely filled with grief, continued to hold back his tears, hiding the heavy burden in silence. He remained quiet and distanced himself from everyone and everything. Despite the passing of days, he was still unable to cope with the loss. Life took a tremendous turn in a way he never imagined.

Arjun's family filed a police complaint to investigate about the accident. A few witnesses said they saw a **green** color car at the scene of the accident; however, none could recall any specific details about the vehicle or the person driving it. The police didn't find any CCTV cameras in the vicinity of the accident, so the case remained unsolved.

Arjun's world no longer felt the same as he lost the anchor of his life. The sight of Arjun turning silent, overwhelmed by grief, shattered his father and Shreya. They sat beside him, offering whatever comfort they could, even while fighting their own battles inside.

Arjun expressed his deep regret, saying, "I should never have sent her out, I shouldn't have let her go to the shop alone. I blame myself for this."

Shreya gently reached for Arjun's hand. "Arjun, please don't do this to yourself. If it hadn't happened at the florist shop... it might've happened somewhere else. Maybe that's how fate works."

Their father, sitting beside them, nodded slowly, his eyes filled with pain. "She didn't leave because of anything you did, Arjun. None of this is your fault. You didn't cause this."

"But I..." Arjun began, his voice breaking.

"No," his father cut in. "We've all thought about the 'what ifs.' What if I had told her to wait another day? What if you had stayed a little longer? But the truth is, none of that changes what happened. This isn't your fault. Okay?"

Arjun remained silent, not uttering a single word.

His father continued, "She left knowing she was loved. That's all any of us can hope for. And if she were here now, do you really think she would want you to carry this guilt like a punishment?"

Arjun just closed his eyes and let his father's words sink in. He wasn't just grieving. He was breaking. *This was a son, shattered by the sudden silence of the woman who meant the world to him.*

~

In the days that followed, a moment arrived when Shreya informed Arjun and their father, "I've changed my mind about going to the UK. I want to look for a job here and stay with the two of you. I can't even bear the thought of going far away from you."

Her father replied, "No, Shreya. You hold a great opportunity, and I don't want you to let it slip away."

Arjun chimed in, now with a supportive tone, saying, "Yes Shreya, Dad is right. I think life is about learning to live without each other. We learnt it the hard way. You can do this."

Despite the difficulty they knew they would face living without Shreya, they offered her their support and encouragement.

Shreya, after multiple discussions and careful consideration, agreed to go. She began preparing for her departure in the coming days.

Their father tried hard to immerse himself in his business, seeking normalcy in his life. But it wasn't easy for him as he missed his wife both at home and their factory.

For Arjun, despite his sincere efforts, the pain remained deeply etched within him.

Current day – The day of Shreya's departure

Finally, the day of Shreya's departure had arrived. Standing before her late mother's photo, Shreya uttered a single heartfelt request, "Bless me, Mom."

Arjun and his father tried to remain strong, providing Shreya the support and courage she needed for her journey. They dropped Shreya at the airport and returned home with heavy hearts.

Meanwhile, in another corner of Saanjhpur, Nitya's house buzzed with activity as Gautam, his wife Ritu, and their baby daughter Ira prepared to leave for Rajnagar, a city where Gautam had accepted a new job. Though still only a month old, Ira was the calmest soul in the room.

Nitya, Gautam's younger sister, helped Ritu pack Ira's things, gently folding soft blankets and picking out the most comfortable little outfits to keep her niece cozy on the journey. She had treasured every second with Ira, and the thought of saying bye felt unbearable.

Later, as the family stood at the airport, Nitya hugged Gautam tightly. "I'll miss you," she whispered. "We've never stayed apart like this, not since we were kids." She continued in a sad tone, "I hate that you're moving to Rajnagar."

Nitya and her parents stood nearby, love and pain etched on their faces, as they waved goodbye to Gautam and his family.

~

MUSIC AND MELODY

Arjun came from a well-off family, but he had always chosen to build a career of his own. *Spectra Events*, his event management company, had started small, and he had worked hard for its growth. After his mother's death, he struggled to focus on work, and the business slowed for a while.

But now, a big opportunity came as a welcome distraction. Spectra Events was selected to organize the city's biggest music festival. It was Arjun's first shot at handling something this big. The team jumped into preparations with all their heart. Arjun, determined not to let this opportunity slip away, worked tirelessly, day and night.

He had grown rigid for the past few weeks. But this event gave him something to focus on. Something that kept him occupied.

And as the much-awaited day finally arrived, Arjun and his team stood immersed in preparations, checking lights, sound, staging, and every single detail.

~

Meanwhile, Nitya was having a challenging day at the office. Her meeting had not gone well, and she could clearly sense the disappointment on her manager's face.

Aditi, her friend, noticed her frustration. Concerned, she walked over to her desk and asked, "Nitya, what happened in there? You look really stressed."

"It's been a tough day, Adi. The meeting didn't go as I hoped."

Wanting to lift her mood, Aditi proposed, "I understand how tired you are and how hard you've been working. I'm going to the music festival tonight, and I really want you to join me."

"Oh no, Aditi. You go ahead. I'm in no mood." Nitya initially declined.

"No, Nitya. I promise you'll have a great time, trust me. You're coming with me. That's it." Aditi persuaded.

Nitya finally agreed to step out of her comfort zone for an evening of music and joy. However, they saw the tickets were all sold out.

Aditi saw that the event was organized by Spectra. The name instantly triggered her memory of her friend Shaurya, who works there. She immediately dialed him, and he managed to secure an extra ticket for her.

Music event —

As Aditi and Nitya finally made their way to the event, they entered a scene of great excitement.

Nitya, dressed in a long black dress, looked effortlessly stunning. She walked with quiet confidence, her sharp heels clicking softly against the floor. Her hair, styled in loose curls, fell over her shoulders. Her earrings added to her charm.

The stage stood magnificently, illuminated by vibrant lights. The air was charged with energy, and the crowd added to the overall buzz of the atmosphere. Nitya, who usually found her peace in quiet nights and the calm company of stars, stepped into a world so different from her own.

Aditi, brimming with excitement, rushed to meet Shaurya near backstage, "Hey Shaurya, thank you so much for arranging the extra ticket for us!" she exclaimed. Nitya expressed her thanks too.

Ashwin, a member of Spectra events, was also standing nearby. Shaurya introduced Ashwin to Aditi and Nitya. The group got lost in a lively discussion.

Arjun, initially occupied with stage arrangements, walked towards the backstage area. He spotted Ashwin and Shaurya there. He approached them and inquired if everything was going smoothly. And as he turned around, his gaze fell on *Nitya. Little did he know, the woman standing before him would one day become his hope amidst all the shadows*

As Nitya watched Arjun, his confident posture and gentle smile, she felt a surge of warmth. His black shirt, casual jeans, a few strands of hair falling over his forehead, even the subtle movement of his Adam's apple when he spoke; everything about him felt effortlessly magnetic to her.

As they shook hands, a subtle shift occurred within Nitya. She gently tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, exhaling softly.

On the stage, the excitement reached its peak as the musician made his entrance. He took center stage, captivating the audience with a fusion of raps, fast beats, and reverbed versions.

Nitya, typically reserved and not inclined towards social outings, surprised herself by dancing and syncing her movements to the *music and melody*.

Ashwin and Shaurya slipped into the side stage area, wanting to blend in with the crowd for a while. Arjun hesitated at first, but the duo persuaded him.

After a while, Shaurya called Aditi and Nitya over to join them. Arjun stood among them, unable to figure out how to act while the rest of them danced to the beats.

As Nitya looked around, she noticed how every face seemed to hold a different emotion – some were brimming with joy, some wore forced smiles, and a few looked quietly sad. Each face carried its own story.

What stories lie within, you charismatic soul?
Shining with charm on the surface
Yet bearing burdens within
What stories lie within, you silent spirit?
Wearing smiles as a mask
Yet, completely lost within
What stories lie within, you quite observer?
Present in the outer world
Yet, fighting within your inner world

On the other hand, Arjun's mind filled with thoughts, each wish echoing inside.

I wish I were the one among you
Tuning myself to life's melody
I wish I were the one among you
Dancing to my heart's music
I wish I knew how to trade my silence for laughter
But I remain a spectator, filled with my own shadows

While dancing, Arjun noticed Nitya's earring slip gently from her ear and land softly on the floor. He hesitated for a moment. But without a word, he picked it up and handed it to her. Just casually. He didn't say anything, just nodded once and turned away. No conversation, no words, but something stirred within Nitya. Every now and then, she found herself glancing at Arjun, and a smile slipped onto her face.

After a while, Arjun and the team headed backstage for the wrap-up preparations.

As the event ended, Aditi and Nitya went to thank Shaurya and Ashwin for being such delightful company and making them feel special. Arjun, though nearby, didn't join the conversation. He remained busy, taking calls and coordinating with the team.

When Aditi and Nitya finally prepared to leave, Arjun simply looked up and waved a casual goodbye.

~

WHERE STORIES COLLIDE

A few days later, Nitya called Gautam and shared her plan to celebrate their mother's 50th birthday. Gautam and Ritu were just as excited. She asked them to plan their visit to Saanjhpur and insisted they keep it a secret.

Gautam, aware of Nitya's knack for details, asked her to explore good event management companies that could elevate the celebration.

As the call ended, Nitya's first thought gravitated towards Spectra. However, mindful not to rush into a decision, she decided to explore other options as well. In the end, she found herself drawn back to Spectra.

Nitya knew that she could establish more connections with the team, as she was now familiar with Shaurya and Ashwin. She was confident they would be able to infuse the event with unique and personalized touches.

Excited about choosing Spectra, Nitya and Aditi decided to pay a visit to their office to discuss their plans with the team.

~

As Nitya and Aditi stepped into the office, Shaurya greeted them warmly and extended a hospitable welcome. He informed them that Arjun was with another client, and that he would join them shortly.

As they waited in the hall, Ashwin walked in and was surprised to see them. The group chatted as if they knew each other for long. Later, Shaurya shared anecdotes about some of the recent events they had organized, painting a vivid picture of Spectra.

Moments later, Nitya and Aditi entered Arjun's room. Nitya felt a rush of excitement as she stepped inside. She wore a simple pink knee-length kurti. The subtle pink earrings, paired with her signature second studs, added a quiet charm to her entire look. She carried a black handbag, neat and elegant.

Arjun wore a casual T-shirt, looking handsome. His eyes were focused on the laptop screen.

He simply greeted them with a calm demeanor. "Please have a seat," he invited. Aditi and Nitya took their seats, where Aditi's chair made an unexpected screech, and there was subtle reaction from Nitya. She couldn't help but smile.

Nitya began, "My brother Gautam and I are planning a surprise event to celebrate my mom's 50th birthday. We were hoping for Spectra to organize it."

The mention of that celebration stirred a pain in Arjun's heart. He was lost in his own thoughts, not focusing on what Nitya was saying. He was momentarily detached. If his mother were alive, her upcoming birthday would have been her 50th, he thought to himself.

As soon as he cleared his mind and saw them, he rubbed his finger to his nose, took a deep breath, and sighed, "Nitya, I'm sorry. What were you saying?" he asked.

Aditi and Nitya exchanged glances, slightly confused. As Aditi received a call, she excused herself and retreated to the hall leaving Nitya and Arjun in the room.

Nitya reiterated her wish for Spectra to organize the event. Arjun picked up a file, showcasing how they organized the previous parties. However, Nitya clearly explained that she was looking for something unique. After some discussions, Arjun proposed a retro-themed event with vintage vibes.

Nitya was amazed with the idea. She poured her heart out, expressing her deep admiration for her mother. However, in an internal struggle, Arjun found it challenging to maintain composure. His emotions were troubling; he wanted her to stop the conversation, but he chose to listen.

As she concluded, Arjun stood up suddenly, and assured her that Ashwin would handle the event further. He left the room without saying another word and closed the door behind him. Firmly.

Nitya felt a mix of confusion and hurt as she watched him leave so abruptly.

Just then, Ashwin knocked on the door and engaged her in a conversation. As they spoke, Nitya glanced at the door, puzzled by Arjun's sudden exit, but Ashwin's presence quickly shifted her focus back to the task. Ashwin asked her to return to the office the following week to discuss further.

As Nitya was about to leave Spectra, she couldn't help but scan the surroundings, hoping to catch a glimpse of Arjun. But he was nowhere to be seen. And she walked out silently.

The next day, Arjun had just wrapped up a meeting. As the client left with handshakes and polite smiles, Arjun stepped outside to send them off. That's when he saw it. Parked near the entrance, gleaming in the sunlight, there was a **green** car.

His chest tightened instantly. The color green had become a trigger, one he never spoke of, but always felt. It's not just about the color of the car that hit his mother, but she was also wearing a green saree that day; for Arjun *green = her*. Not just the accident. But her final memory. Her smile. Her presence. Her disappearance.

He doesn't just hate the color. He's *haunted* by it. In a second, the world around him blurred. All he could hear was the echo of tires screeching, a scream, the crash. The accident replayed in his mind like it had happened just moments ago. It wasn't the first time. The color green, once ordinary, turned into a wound he hadn't yet healed from.

~

After a few days, Nitya returned to Spectra to follow-up with Ashwin. As she waited near the reception desk, she overheard a tense conversation between Arjun and one of his staff members. She saw the person apologizing repeatedly, but Arjun's response was sharp and impatient.

Noticing that Ashwin and Shaurya were not around, she walked into Arjun's office to ask about their whereabouts. "Hey Arjun, Ashwin asked me to come to the office today. I've tried calling him but haven't heard back," she said.

Arjun replied, "They are at an event venue and will be back soon." His responses were brief and lacked the warmth Nitya expected.

She cleared her throat softly, drawing Arjun's attention. He reached down to retrieve a water bottle from a nearby cabinet and handed it to her.

She sat down and took a sip as she gazed at her watch repeatedly. The room was quiet, Arjun barely acknowledged her presence. Neither of them spoke, making it awkward.

After a minute, Nitya called out, "Arjun."

"Yes Nitya," he answered.

"I'm sorry, this isn't my place, but... earlier, the way you spoke to your staff... he looked really shaken. Maybe you could be a little softer to people."

It wasn't just about today. She was trying to calmly remind him how he had shut her the other day, without saying it aloud.

Arjun was already frustrated and didn't appreciate her intrusion. He abruptly cut her off. Again. "Nitya, please. I know how to handle my team," he said, sharper than he intended. "Don't tell me how to behave when you don't even know what happened."

Arjun almost immediately realized he had crossed a line here. But instead of explaining, he simply walked out of the room.

Nitya sat there, hurt. This time, her eyes welled up.

Outside, Arjun saw Ashwin and Shaurya walking into Spectra. He quickly went up to them and said, "Nitya is waiting for you in my office."

They stepped in and walked towards her. "Sorry, Nitya," Ashwin said. "We were stuck in an important meeting and couldn't answer your call."

Shaurya opened a cover and revealed Nitya's favorite cookies from Treats and Treasures. "We heard you like these," he said with a smile. "Aditi mentioned these are your favorite. We were passing by the shop on our way back, so we picked these for you."

Their thoughtful gesture brought a genuine smile on her face and she thanked them. But Arjun's behavior was still bothering her.

A little later, Ashwin began suggesting a few ideas for her mother's celebration. But Nitya wasn't really in the mood to listen.

She gently changed the subject, saying she needed to get home and that she would meet them another time.

As Nitya left Spectra, Arjun stayed where he was, quietly watching her go, not knowing how to react.

Later, Arjun returned to his room and shared an idea with Ashwin and Shaurya. He suggested to create a beautiful photo mosaic for the stage. It should show a picture of Nitya's mother at 50, made up of smaller photos from each year of her life.

He also suggested hiding the photo mosaic behind elegant blinds on the stage, with Nitya's mother unveiling it to reveal them. Ashwin and Shaurya exchanged subtle smiles.

Arjun stressed the need for secrecy regarding this, especially to surprise Nitya and her family. He asked the team to reach out to Gautam and Ritu for the pictures. He told them to keep his name out of it.

~

A couple of days later, Nitya stepped into Spectra once again. This time, her intentions were clear. She had no desire to speak to Arjun. And yet, she hoped he would say something. Just one word. Just a simple apology. She wanted him to be kind, to show that he cared, even a little.

But then again, this was Arjun, still not ready to talk. He sat in the same room, right across from her.

Ashwin handed Arjun a few samples and asked him to show them to Nitya. Though she didn't want to sit beside him, saying no in front of the group would be rude. So, she quietly moved her chair closer and leaned in, to glance at the samples.

Her mind wasn't interested. But her little heart? It was quietly thrilled just to be near him.

Arjun's eyes saw the soft folds of her emerald green kurti. The color looked beautiful on her. But to Arjun... it was anything but beautiful.

He blinked slowly. He had seen the color in passing – in traffic lights, shop displays, even nature – and managed to look away. But

not now. *Not when she wore it*. Because it's not just the color anymore. It's a woman he had subconsciously started to care for.

Arjun showed her the samples, explaining the details of the stage backdrop, lighting, guest seating, and other arrangements. He sounded professional.

Nitya looked through them carefully. When he finished, she turned to Ashwin right away, "Hey Ashwin, these are really amazing. Thank you so much. I'm sure my family will love them," she said, deliberately ignoring Arjun.

Arjun stayed silent. His face unreadable as he calmly gathered the samples and placed them back on the table. He could feel it. The silence she was creating on purpose.

Without a word, he stood up. "I need to take a call," he said casually and walked away.

Maybe, subconsciously, he likes her too. Maybe deep down, he does feel something for her. It's like one part of him wants to stay near her... while the other fights to stay free, pushing her away before she can matter too much

~

THE GESTURE

On the day of the event —

That morning, Shaurya stepped into Arjun's room to remind him about the event. But Arjun didn't seem interested in being part of it. He calmly told Shaurya that he had other commitments and asked them to manage everything.

Deep down, though Shaurya wished Arjun to join them, he didn't press. He knew how sensitive this celebration could be for Arjun. So, he simply nodded.

Ashwin, Shaurya, and the team had organized every aspect, ensuring that the retro-themed occasion would be memorable. Guests started to arrive. Nitya, Gautam, Ritu, and their charming daughter, Ira, each of them had dressed up for the occasion, embracing the vintage theme with their outfits.

Meanwhile, Aditi arrived at the venue. She met Nitya, and both women looked lovely, radiating charm. Ashwin, seizing the moment, secretly clicked a photo and showed it to them. Aditi couldn't help but praise how candid and beautiful the picture turned out.

Meanwhile Shaurya noticed Nitya being slightly disconnected. Her eyes kept drifting through the crowd, searching... as if she was hoping someone would appear any second. He gently patted her arm and said softly, "I know who you're waiting for. He's not coming..."

Nitya's expression fell. Shaurya caught it immediately.

Moments later, Nitya's family took the spotlight, and welcomed their mother onto the stage. As the celebration continued, the family beamed with happiness. They took pictures and captured memories.

Suddenly, the atmosphere changed as the team announced a surprise. Everyone, except Nitya's mother, stepped away from the stage. Elegant blinds descended on the stage, hiding something behind them.

Nitya's mother unveiled the blinds, revealing a breathtaking photo mosaic representing 50 years of her life. She stood in awe, her heart filled with happiness.

Meanwhile, Nitya stood there in genuine surprise. She walked up to Ashwin and Shaurya, eyes bright. "Guys... this was amazing. Why didn't you tell me before? And how did you even get these pictures?" she asked, her voice full of joy.

"Well, we have our ways," Ashwin said with a grin. "We got them from Ritu." He paused for a second, then added casually, "Also... this was all Arjun's idea. He planned everything."

Nitya froze. "What?" she blurted out. "Arjun? No way." Her voice came out a little louder than she intended.

"It is Arjun," Shaurya confirmed, enjoying her reaction. He leaned in and whispered in her ear, "After all... he's not that bad." Then he smirked. "Why do you think he wouldn't do it?"

Nitya was lost in her thoughts, trying to understand what kind of a person Arjun truly was. But above everything else, she felt overwhelmed because she hadn't expected this from him.

As she was walking back, her eyes locked onto someone standing near the entrance of the venue. And had the same resemblance to Arjun. Nitya's heart raced as she moved little closer. *Yes, it was indeed Arjun.*

He was standing there, quietly, almost secretly, perhaps to watch her reaction.

She made her way towards him, calling out "Arjun." At the sound of his name, he turned and stood there. Silent and composed.

"Thank you," she said, meeting his eyes.

"But why?" he asked, his tone innocent.

"I know it, Arjun," she said.

Arjun responded with a simple smile, his hands remaining in his pockets, occasionally brushing against his nose.

"Thank you so much, that was a lovely *gesture*," Nitya said again. "My mom is really happy, and I'm overjoyed that she is," she added.

Arjun spoke casually, "Glad to hear that. Well, we always try our best to make our clients happy," as if he didn't acknowledge her feelings.

Her expression changed slightly. "Client?" she thought, feeling a bit disappointed inside. Arjun sensed it; however, he remained silent. He waved goodbye to her and quietly left the venue.

Nitya stood there confused, "Seriously?" she whispered to herself. "Why did he come... and why did he leave?"

~

In the night, as Nitya prepared to sleep, she placed her phone nearby and closed her eyes. Suddenly, a soft beep broke the silence, but she initially ignored it. Another beep followed. To her surprise, *it was a message from Arjun.*

Meanwhile, in his room, Arjun sat with a drink in hand. Despite the late hour, he wanted to reach out to Nitya, his fingers typing a message to her. "I'm sorry," he texted.

This came as a surprise to Nitya. First, Arjun messaging. And then, an apology.

She gently touched the screen, feeling his words.

Another message soon followed, "I hope your family had a great day."

"Yes. Everyone loved it," she responded casually, but her lips curved into a small smile.

As he continued to drink, his inner thoughts echoed loudly. *Do I like her?*

As much as he tried to avoid her, something about Nitya kept pulling him in. He was genuinely drawn to her. But connections felt risky... too fragile. So, all these days he had tried to stay away, even though a part of him always noticed her.

But now, he began to see it. He hadn't been handling things well. So, silently, he made a promise to himself – to stop running from people, to be more present. To be himself again.

Spectra events —

A couple of days later, Arjun sat in his office, half-focused on the screen. He noticed a movement through the glass door, and saw Nitya walking with Aditi, Ashwin, and Shaurya. The four of them were lost in conversation, laughing effortlessly.

Arjun watched them silently. And without meaning to… his eyes stayed on Nitya. He felt a sudden urge to speak with her, but he couldn't let his desperation show.

In one private moment, while Nitya sat on the hallway sofa talking on the phone, Arjun silently walked over and took a seat beside her — *the other edge of the sofa…* Startled to see him there, she quickly cut the call.

"I…uh…sorry for the intrusion," he started, "I just needed to talk to you."

Nitya looked at him, happy and confused, "About what?" she asked, curious.

Arjun took a slow breath. "I've been meaning to say this for a while now. I know I've been… uh… distant." He paused there, as if the rest of the sentence refused to come out.

Nitya didn't interrupt. She waited patiently, watching him struggle with his words. "Distant… what?" she asked gently, a smile touching her lips.

Arjun blinked. He drew another breath and forced the words out. "At times… I may have sounded rude," he admitted. "But it was never my intention. Please don't mind."

Before she could respond, he stood up quickly and walked away like he was afraid he'd stay longer than he was supposed to.

A few minutes later, Nitya walked into his room. She pulled out a chair, sat down calmly, and looked at him. "So…" she said, trying to sound stern, "You come, you talk… and then you leave just like that?" She leaned forward slightly. "And what about my response?" she added playfully.

"I'm sorry," he said, with a small, nervous smile.

For the first time, Nitya saw Arjun smile. It was a rare expression from him. She couldn't help but smile back.

He didn't know how to take the moment forward. All he could do was change the subject. He turned his laptop towards her and started showing the pictures from the event.

Nitya scrolled through them carefully, her expression softening. "They're great," she said. Then she glanced at him, eyes teasing. "Your *client* is happy."

Arjun shook his head slightly, smiling to himself at the word client.

Just then, the others walked in, filling the room with noise and energy. Arjun tried to blend into the background while the others continued their chatter. He listened more than he spoke. He was present, but quiet.

Nitya, still processing what had just happened, found comfort in the camaraderie. The evening slowly slipped into laughter and lightness.

~

Later that night, Nitya heard the doorbell ring. Her mother went to answer it and returned with a package in hand. "Nitya, there's a delivery for you," her mother said, handing over the box with a curious smile.

Nitya opened it to find her favorite cookies. Tucked inside was a note that read, "*To my client*".

"Did you order these?" her mother asked.

"Yes, Mom," she lied smoothly and headed to her room.

She picked her phone and sent a message to thank Arjun. Later, she placed the empty cookie box on her desk and turned off the lights, smiling quietly. Maybe Arjun wasn't the kind of person who said much. But his *gestures*... they spoke in a language she was slowly beginning to understand.

~

EMOTIONAL EMBRACE

The recent texts between Arjun and Nitya felt warmer, slightly more open. But nothing could match the quiet intensity of being in the same room. She wouldn't admit it aloud but part of her always wanted to see him. Just be around him.

Yearning to meet again, to feel that surge of bliss
To bask in your presence, a moment I won't miss
Love, a concept so true
Yet, I refrain from naming it, for it's a feeling so new

One day, as she walked inside Spectra, her eyes instinctively scanned the hallway, the meeting room, the corridor that led to the office. But, no sign of Arjun.

Shaurya caught the subtle disappointment in her expression. She hadn't meant to show it, but it was there. He leaned forward and said, "Arjun will be here in a minute."

Nitya blinked. "What? No, I came for you," she said, putting on a playful smile to cover it up.

"Ahem... ahem," he teased, raising his brows.

Just then, the glass door creaked open and in walked Arjun. Their eyes met for a brief second. He gave her a small nod. She mirrored it. It wasn't awkward anymore.

Shaurya casually picked up his phone. "I'll just... check on something outside," he said, clearly not trying too hard to hide the smirk.

As he walked towards the door, he glanced over his shoulder once and raised an eyebrow at Ashwin. Now Ashwin looked for a different excuse to leave the room.

Arjun and Nitya stood there. She fiddled with the strap of her bag, and he was just watching her, smiling.

Nitya's eyes started to scan the room and landed on the shelf in the corner. A row of framed testimonials, awards, and neatly stacked files. She walked towards it, almost without thinking.

"You've built something really meaningful here," she said softly. She saw numerous accolades and positive testimonials from clients, praising Spectra for its service.

Her eyes were drawn to a file labeled "Spectra Inauguration." Curiously, she opened it and found several photos from the company's opening day. Among them was a picture of Arjun and his mother. The closeness between them was visible. "She's so beautiful," Nitya murmured, smiling. "Is that your mom?"

Arjun didn't respond.

She looked at him again, this time more gently. "She has such warmth in her face. I'd love to meet her someday."

Arjun froze. The lightness in the room vanished. His jaw tightened, and without warning, he stepped forward and took the file from her hands, not violently but abruptly. His tone dropped sharper than she had ever heard. "Please don't go through that," he said. "You shouldn't have."

Nitya stepped back instantly. She was shocked by his sudden outburst. "I... I'm sorry, Arjun. I was just curious. I didn't mean to..."

Arjun didn't speak. He held the file tightly. He knew he was overreacting. It wasn't just the photos; this is a part of his life he wasn't ready to share with anyone else.

Soon Arjun's anger started to fade, replaced by guilt. He opened his mouth to apologize, but before he could say anything, Nitya's expression changed. She immediately turned around and left the room, leaving her belongings behind. Arjun could only watch as she walked out, the door closing with a thud.

~

That evening, as he sat alone in his home, he apologized to her through message. He waited, staring at his phone screen, hoping for a response. But none came. Nitya had seen the message but chose not to reply.

After a while, another message came through from Arjun, "It's not your fault. I just... I'm not good at handling this stuff, especially after... everything."

Nitya paused, her mind racing with thoughts.

Arjun then sent another photo of his family, but this time without his mother in it.

"A part of me is missing," he wrote, his message conveying deep emotion.

Nitya was shocked, she was not expecting this. She could sense the pain in his words. She was not sure how to respond, but feeling empathy, she typed back, "I'm so sorry, Arjun. I can't imagine how hard it must be."

Arjun's response came slowly, "She was everything to me..."

Nitya's heart ached for him. She now understood why he reacted that way. She replied, "I'm here if you need someone to talk to."

Arjun felt an urge to see Nitya. Without a second thought, he grabbed his car keys, headed out and drove straight to her house.

Standing outside her home, he dialed her. "Can you please come out?" he asked.

Nitya's eyes widened in surprise, "What? Arjun?" she quickly opened her window and, sure enough, there he was, *standing there*.

Nitya stepped out of her house, carefully closing the gate behind her as she walked towards him.

Without saying a word, *he held her in a tight hug.*

Nitya didn't say a word. She remained silent, feeling his tears soaking the back of her dress. She held him gently, not wanting to interrupt his moment of vulnerability. Arjun finally let out the emotions he had been bottling up all these days.

After a moment, Nitya softly called out, "Arjun..." He slowly released himself from the hug, stepping back.

"I'm sorry," he murmured and turned towards his car and unlocked it. Before he could get in, Nitya reached out and gently took the keys from his hands.

"Arjun, you need to talk," she insisted, "I think you have been holding this in for too long. Just talk it out."

After some time, finally, he took a deep breath and met Nitya's eyes. "It's just..." he began, "After my mom passed away, it felt like a part of me was gone too. Without her... every day feels empty."

Nitya listened intently, her heart aching for him.

"I didn't mean to take it out on you," Arjun continued, "It's just... sometimes the grief, the anger... it gets too much. I don't know how to handle it, and I end up pushing away people."

Nitya placed her hand on his shoulder, squeezing gently. "It's okay, Arjun. I can understand."

"I just... I miss her so much," he confessed.

"It's okay to feel lost," Nitya reassured him. "But remember, it's not something you have to go through alone. Your friends, your family... we're all here for you. Okay?"

Arjun looked at her, "Thank you, Nitya. I should go. I'm sorry for disturbing you at this time of night."

But Nitya didn't let him leave. They both sat there for a while. Arjun slowly shared his feelings. She knew in that moment he didn't need advice. He didn't need comfort wrapped in sentences. He just needed someone to listen.

"Thank you for listening," Arjun finally said, "I didn't mean to unload all this on you, but... it feels better, talking about it."

Nitya gave him a gentle smile.

Arjun looked at her, "You've been really kind, Nitya." He took a deep breath and glanced at the time and realized how late it was. "You should get some rest. I will leave now."

She nodded, standing up slowly.

As Arjun turned to leave, he reached inside the car and pulled out a handbag. "I believe this is yours," he said, handing it to her.

Nitya blinked in surprise, realizing she had left it at Spectra earlier that evening. "Oh," she murmured, stepping forward. "I completely forgot."

As she walked back towards her house, Arjun turned again to see Nitya one more time. He walked towards her gently. Now her heart beating, just a little faster than before. He came closer and hugged her again. "Thank you," he said and got into the car.

As he drove away, Nitya stood there for a moment trying to understand what had just happened. She watched him go, feeling a mix of emotions. She locked the gate and headed back inside.

She couldn't stop thinking about Arjun. She replayed their conversation over and over. The connection between them felt natural.

As she lay in bed thinking about their past meetings, she remembered their first meeting at Spectra. Arjun had abruptly left the room when she was excitedly talking about her mother. And now it clicked.

Amidst this, her thoughts kept drifting back to their meeting – *the way he came to meet her in the night, the vulnerability in his hug, and the tears he had finally let fall.*

Meanwhile, Arjun felt a quiet peace and relief in Nitya's company. He replayed the moments in his mind – her understanding eyes, the way she listened without judgment, and the warmth of her hug. For the first time in a long while, the silence didn't feel so lonely.

~

The next morning, Arjun woke up with a lightness he hadn't felt in days. As he lay staring at the ceiling, he realized he was smiling.

Later, while sipping coffee at the breakfast table, he noticed his father sitting nearby, flipping through a few factory documents.

Something stirred in Arjun's memory. He leaned in slightly. "Dad... I remember Mom once mentioning someone named **Gupta**." His voice slowed. "She said he did terrible things at the factory."

His father's hand paused mid-page.

"I never really got a chance to ask her about it again," Arjun added. "What happened back then?"

His father didn't answer immediately. The name seemed to pull him into a place he didn't like revisiting. His expression tightened.

Then he finally looked up. "There's something we never told you... about Gupta."

Arjun straightened, listening carefully.

His father took a slow breath. “It’s a long story, Arjun. But yes… Gupta was the factory manager back then.”

He set the papers aside.

“We trusted him a lot. But he forged documents. Manipulated accounts. Played around with audits. At first, it wasn’t obvious. He was clever. Too clever. He didn’t steal in one big move… but he did it quietly. Systematically. Bit by bit. Enough to weaken us, but not enough to raise suspicion.”

Arjun asked, his voice curious, “How did you find out?”

His father’s eyes softened, almost painfully. “Your mother.”

He paused for a second and continued, “Your mother began noticing a pattern. She dug deeper, and that’s when Gupta’s deceit came to light. She acted just in time, before his fraud could destroy the company’s image and the trust we had built.”

Arjun’s jaw tightened. “What happened next?”

“There was chaos,” his father said, his voice dropping. “The damage was immense. It left scars on the business, and on us. We took legal action and Gupta was sent to jail.”

His father paused, his eyes turning distant. “That day, I saw a side of your mother I will never forget,” he said, “She was fierce.”

Arjun swallowed hard. “Is everything okay now?” he asked, worry still clinging to his voice. “And where is Gupta now?”

“Things have been running smoothly for a long-time beta,” his father replied. “And Gupta… I heard his family left the city. I haven’t seen or heard from them in years.”

Arjun exhaled slowly, knowing that things had finally settled down – *unaware of how close the past was beginning to circle back.*

~

A LITTLE POSSESSIVE

A few days passed. Aditi and Nitya no longer needed a reason to visit Spectra. It had quietly become their second home. And somewhere along the way, the closeness between Arjun and Nitya grew.

The next time they visited Spectra, everyone gathered in Arjun's room. Aditi's gaze drifted around the room and landed on a bookshelf nearby. "What a lovely collection, Arjun!" she exclaimed.

Arjun smiled. "I love reading."

"Hi-five!" Aditi grinned and tapped his palm.

Nitya chuckled softly, "I'm definitely the opposite. I've never really been much of a reader, unfortunately."

Arjun looked at her, "Have you ever tried?"

She shook her head. "Not really. It never interested me."

"I've tried convincing her so many times," Aditi jumped in. "But she never listens."

Nitya walked towards the bookshelf and slowly scanned his collection. "Okay... suggest me something to start with. I want to try this time," she said.

Aditi couldn't resist and asked with a smirk, "Oho... Why this sudden interest, Nitya?"

Nitya just smiled and tapped Aditi's shoulder.

Then almost at the same time, Arjun and Aditi reached for the same book. *A Letter from Noor*. They paused and exchanged a quick glance, surprised by their matching choice.

"Hi-fi, again," Arjun tapped her palm now.

Arjun turned to Nitya and held the book out to her. "I think this is the perfect one for you to start with," he said.

Aditi shared her own memories of reading this book, encouraging Nitya to dive in without hesitation.

To everyone's surprise, Shaurya revealed a hidden talent of Arjun. "He isn't just a reader. He writes too," he announced.

Nitya and Aditi were shocked. "What? Are you serious?" they exclaimed in unison.

Eager to see Arjun's writings, they requested a glimpse, but Arjun brushed off their curiosity, saying it was just a pastime, and he wasn't serious about writing.

That night, Nitya started reading '*A Letter from Noor.*' However, she managed only a few pages before dozing off with the book beside her.

In the morning, she woke up to a text from Arjun asking, "How's it going with Noor?"

That's when she realized she hadn't made it past few pages.

She replied, "Yeah, yeah... it was great. I fell asleep almost immediately."

Arjun, still half asleep, caught only the "it was great" part in her message.

He texted back, "Glad you're loving it. I finished the whole book in one night."

Nitya laughed, realizing he hadn't read her message properly. She replied, "Really, Arjun? Read it again."

"Oh, I've read the book multiple times," Arjun texted back.

Now she was laughing even harder. "Arjun, I meant the book was so good it put me to sleep in a few minutes. I'll keep reading it every night," she replied with a wink.

Arjun reread her texts properly this time and felt a little stupid, but he was smiling anyway. He replied, "Trust me and give it another shot. You'll love it."

"You're really not going to let me escape this, are you?" Nitya texted back playfully.

~

The following night, even though Nitya had absolutely no interest in continuing, she opened the book again – *for Arjun*. She pushed herself through to the end of the first chapter.

As she continued, she noticed that Arjun had highlighted a few lines with a marker. He also added his own annotations. Touching those marked words, she reread some of them.

"Some people come into your life like rain... soothing, overwhelming, but never meant to stay." This was one of the many Arjun had highlighted. Another one, *"Even though I know you'd never read this... I needed to write it anyway."*

Her chest felt tight reading those lines. Why does it feel like this? It didn't make sense to her. She was lost in her own thoughts and wondered, Was Arjun in love before?

Just like that, she had spent the entire night reading it. She clicked a picture of the last page and sent it to Arjun and dozed off.

The next morning, a sleepy message from Arjun popped up on her screen, "Did you really finish it or are you still teasing me?"

"Blame Noor. And you," Nitya replied. "By the way, the book was good."

"Just good?" Arjun asked.

"I managed to finish in one night. Just be happy with that," she replied.

Arjun smiled at that thought. He suddenly remembered something.

He texted Nitya, "Your message reminded me of someone from my past. She used to stay up all night reading the novels I shared with her. Funny how books stay the same... and people perceive them differently."

Nitya stared at that message for a second longer. "Oh? Who was it?" she typed back, as casually as she could.

Arjun's reply came quickly. "Just someone I used to know. Years ago." Casual. Effortless. Like it was nothing.

But for Nitya, this was everything. She didn't know why, but suddenly she was curious and a little upset. Why did this random mention of a girl from his past feel like a knot in my stomach?

She didn't respond for a few minutes. Just sat there, as if she didn't just feel *a little... possessive!*

Meanwhile, on the other end, Arjun had already moved on from the conversation. But Nitya? She was still thinking about that girl.

And then she typed, "You really marked some intense lines in this book... Seems like you felt a lot when you were reading it." Her finger hovered over the "send" button. Then she backspaced. *Too obvious,* she thought.

Instead, she retyped, "So... did you always read with a highlighter? Or was Noor special?" She hit send, but felt stupid for asking such a question.

A moment later, without overthinking, she retyped the first message – the one she had erased. This time, she hit send.

A few minutes passed before Arjun replied, "Honestly, I forgot I had highlighted anything at all." The tone was casual.

Another reply came, this time a little more playful than casual, "By the way... people don't highlight lines just because they feel them. Sometimes, it's just good writing, Nitya."

She was unsure what to reply. So, she stayed silent. On the other hand, Arjun was waiting for her message and a small part of him whispered... *She wants to know you. And you want her to.*

He locked the phone and put it beside him. And for a moment, just lay there wondering what it would feel like to finally let someone in.

~

The next evening, Nitya was back at Spectra to return the book to Arjun. This time, he noticed every detail – her red kurti, the way her earrings swayed, the way her soft curls bounced on her shoulders. And for a moment, he found her beautiful – truly beautiful.

Why was she so captivating today? Was it because she seemed a little possessive earlier?

As they spoke, Arjun let out a gentle smile watching her.

Nitya couldn't help but feel a flutter in her heart. She thought to herself, "My god! What kind of smile is that? He could melt my heart with it."

I keep stealing glances
hoping for a moment of connection
Just one glance, one smile from your lips
and my cheeks would flush with joy

"Arjun, thanks for the book," she said handing it over.

Aditi asked curiously, "You've already finished it? How was it?"

"It's good," Nitya said. "But please... no more books," she added.

Aditi understood. "At least you read something finally," she replied.

Arjun and Aditi were bookworms, while Ashwin and Nitya preferred movies. As they debated books versus movies, Shaurya remained a neutral observer, offering occasional nods but avoiding taking sides.

Nitya laughed as she remembered when Aditi convinced her to go to a book launch event. "Oh, that was so boring! That one hour felt like an eternity," she joked.

Arjun raised an eyebrow. Before he said something, Shaurya interrupted, "Alright, alright, enough of this debate! How much longer do I have to nod along! And it's already getting late!"

Aditi laughed and glanced at her watch. "Oh! Yeah. It's getting late. I should head home too." Ashwin stepped forward and offered to drop her home.

As everyone began to leave, Nitya gathered her belongings. Just as she reached for her bag, Arjun's voice stopped her.

"Nitya... you left your phone here," he said, handing it to her. And then, he leaned in slightly, "*Red suits you.*"

Nitya's heart fluttered. It was his first compliment. A strange kind of tension settled between them. Neither said a word about it. *But they both knew.*

That night, Nitya's thoughts drifted back to the girl Arjun mentioned the other day.

She typed a message finally, her curiosity clearly visible, "That person who also read 'Noor' in one night... Did she like books too?

Or just someone trying to impress you?" She sent it before she could think too much.

The reply came a few moments later. "Oho... someone's trying to dig into my past now," Arjun laughed.

She stared at the screen, smiling. "No! I was just... Hmm... you mentioned her. So, I asked."

Arjun said, "She loved the book. I think I was more in love with the idea of someone actually understanding that book."

Nitya tightened her grip on her phone. Jealousy rose quietly. She had read the book for *his* sake, and instead of noticing her effort, he was talking about some girl from his past loving it.

"Who is she..." Nitya finally asked.

Arjun paused before replying, "Not much to talk about, really. We were young. Everything felt dramatic back then. A few good memories. Some not-so-good ones. And then it faded."

He knew it. He guessed it right. And the way questions bombarded, he couldn't stop smiling. He enjoyed her curiosity, but he enjoyed it too much to give her a straight answer right away.

Nitya didn't know what to say for a moment. It wasn't that she was hurt or sad. But something about his words made her wonder. *Was it love? Does he still think of her?*

"What about you?" Arjun asked softly, "Have you ever... loved someone?"

"Not yet," she replied honestly.

"Don't lie... Everybody has some past," he added.

"Mine is a routine and boring life. Tell me more about *her*", Nitya typed.

"Okay okay... Esha she is", he typed back.

"Esha," Nitya repeated aloud to herself before typing, "Hmm. Not a great name."

"I like her name. What's wrong with it?" he replied.

A moment later, another message popped up, "In fact, it was my favorite name back then," he added deliberately.

Nitya sat up straight on her bed, eyes fixed on the screen like she was staring at a rival. *Jealous?* Yes. *Possessive?* Definitely.

A few minutes later, Arjun sent a photo. It was clearly an old photo of them from their collage days. Esha was beside him, and Arjun looked… younger.

She stared at the image for a second too long. Then typed, "She's good."

Almost instantly, his reply came, "She was pretty," he wrote. Again deliberately.

She took a breath and replied, "Yeah well… Whatever."

Curious, a little possessive, and completely innocent – Would this small glimpse into Arjun's past somehow make her want to be a part of his future?

~

FAMILY WE HAVE, FAMILY WE CHOOSE

One day, as Nitya returned from office, Gautam called her to show Ira's adorable appearance. Ritu had dressed up their little one, making her look exceptionally beautiful.

Nitya's face lit up with joy as she greeted her little niece, "Hello, Ira, sweetheart!"

Ira, in response, let out a series of coos. Her tiny hands reached out towards the screen, as if trying to touch Nitya's face.

Nitya couldn't help but feel her heart melt, "Oh, you're such a happy baby, Ira! I miss you so much."

Ritu joined the call, smiling. "Nitya, we miss you so much too."

"Please come back to Saanjhpur," Nitya said.

"I wish we could do that," Ritu laughed, her voice warm.

Gautam stepped away to attend a call. Meanwhile, Nitya expressed her concern, "Ritu, we've been really worried about Gautam. Is he still going through those convulsions? I hope he is doing okay now. I didn't want to bother him, so I never brought it up."

Ritu walking inside the room, replied privately, "Yes, Nitya. I took him to the hospital here. We told the doctor the convulsions first started on the day Ira was born, and that they returned a few times after that."

She paused, her expression heavy, "The doctor said it's linked to extreme stress... something he's been carrying for a long time. Gautam is trying his best to manage it." Ritu added, "He did have a couple of episodes after we moved to Rajnagar. But lately, the intensity has reduced a little. That's been a relief."

Nitya expressed her empathy, "I wish there was more we could do to help him."

"I know, Nitya," Ritu continued, "But it's something he has to work through on his own. Gautam couldn't bear to see me in such

critical condition during Ira's birth, and it might have left an impact on him. But don't worry, he'll be just fine."

Nitya's voice trembled as she recalled that challenging day. "I still remember that day, Ritu. We were all praying so hard for you. It was tough. Thank God you and Ira are safe."

Their conversation was interrupted by the sound of Ira's cries, signaling that the little one needed her mother's attention. And they hung up the call.

~

A few days have passed. One morning, Nitya's mom was in the kitchen, her father sitting in the living room, and Nitya absentmindedly folding her clothes, until the doorbell rang. "I'll get it," her dad said from the living room, walking towards the door.

"Ritu? Ira?!" he was surprised to see them.

Nitya rushed out, her hands still clutching a small towel. Ritu stood at the door, beaming, holding little Ira in her arms. "Surprise!" she laughed.

"I can't believe this..." Nitya gasped, running to them. "You actually came?" she said, pulling Ira into her arms.

Ritu stepped inside, "Gautam insisted we wait till Ira's birthday. I didn't listen."

"And good that you didn't," Nitya whispered. "I missed you, angel," she said softly, brushing her lips against Ira's forehead. And then she wrapped an arm around Ritu, "Thank you... really."

That evening, Nitya sat on the floor, baby Ira crawling around her, giggling as she tried to grab the edge of Nitya's dupatta. Ritu smiled from the sofa, sipping tea, while Nitya's mom was in the kitchen, already planning the night's menu.

With one hand gently patting Ira's back, Nitya opened her phone, clicked a picture of her with Ira and dropped it in their group chat, "Ira is here. You guys have to come."

The replies came in instantly. Everyone sounded excited, already agreeing to meet at Nitya's place.

There was a brief pause before Arjun typed, "Sure. Wouldn't miss it." Just two words. He smiled to himself. *It was Nitya's home.* Her people. A small part of her world. And for some reason… he felt happy to be invited into it.

~

The next evening, the doorbell rang again and again. One by one, they all arrived.

Aditi came first, carrying a bag filled with toys she had picked up at the last minute. Ashwin and Shaurya showed up empty-handed, but of course, loaded with fun and jokes.

Arjun arrived a few minutes later. When Nitya opened the door, her face lit up instantly.

"Come in," she said.

He stepped inside. The house was warm and alive. Ritu was in the middle of serving tea, while Ira crawled from lap to lap, her tiny fingers reaching for faces like she already knew everyone.

For a second, Arjun remembered his own house once filled with the same warmth and laughter. But he pushed the thought away. Not tonight. Not when the room around him was in a happy mood.

He reached down and lifted Ira into his arms. She let out a happy squeal. And just like that he melted. "Wow," he murmured. "She's… so light."

"She's not a dumbbell," Ashwin said from the sofa. "She's a baby."

Everyone laughed. Nitya stood nearby, quietly watching. Something about the sight – Arjun holding her niece so gently, so naturally stayed in her heart. She looked away quickly, pretending to grab the tray of snacks.

Her mother came over and greeted everyone, but paused slightly longer with Arjun. "So, you're Arjun," she said, smiling kindly. "We've heard a lot about you."

Arjun gave a respectful nod. "I hope it's all good."

"Mostly," Nitya mumbled, smiling.

Her mom chuckled. "Thank you for everything you did that day. That surprise was beautiful."

"It was a team effort," he replied casually.

As the night went on, the living room was filled with light conversations and delicious food. Everyone enjoyed the meal. Stories were exchanged. Jokes were cracked. And Ira became the official host, blessing everyone with smiles... and one pee incident on Ashwin.

In a quiet corner of the room, Arjun sat with Nitya's father, engaged in a deep conversation. He wasn't trying to impress. He wasn't oversharing. Just speaking with quiet maturity and clarity about Spectra, about building things slowly.

Later that night, as everyone began to leave, Nitya's eyes clouded with disappointment. She didn't want Arjun to leave. He didn't either.

Nitya walked him out. Then he turned to her, "Thank you for inviting me. Your family... they're really warm. Especially Ira! She has some charm in her."

Nitya smiled, "Seems like Ira loved you as well."

"I think I loved her more," Arjun chuckled. He paused, and then his voice dropped, "I felt at ease today. This evening, your family. They reminded me of what I had been missing for a while."

She nodded, her eyes meeting his briefly.

Then with a soft "Goodnight," he turned and got into his car.

Nitya stood there, watching him drive away. The place reminded her of the night when Arjun had come to her. Vulnerable and broken. And hugged her – not out of impulse, but *out of need.*

After reaching home, Arjun sat in his living room facing his mother's photo. There was silence around. "Mom..." he whispered, "I was happy today. *Because of her."*

Later, he moved to his desk, pen in hand, and a blank page waiting before him. He wanted to put down his feelings. He scribbled down a line, then another... His thoughts were messy, but he didn't care. He just wanted to capture them before they slipped away.

And then his phone rang. "Nitya."

He answered quickly, "Hello?"

"Hey, Arjun," came her voice, soft but shaken.

"Nitya? What happened?"

"Aditi fell off her bike while going home. I'm at the hospital now," she said.

Arjun stood instantly. "Is she okay?"

"The road was wet and she slipped. She's got a few bruises... and a minor ligament tear. But don't worry, she'll be okay."

"I'm on my way," he said grabbing his keys.

Nitya hadn't called Ashwin or Shaurya. Somehow, at that moment, calling Arjun felt right to her.

The rain hadn't stopped. By the time Arjun reached the hospital, his shirt was little damp from the drizzle. His steps were quick, his eyes scanning the corridor until he saw her. Nitya sat there near the waiting area. Her hair was slightly wet, a few strands sticking to her cheek.

"Where is Aditi?" he asked.

"She's resting inside," Nitya said.

They both stepped into the room. Aditi sat on the bed, a bandage on her forehead making her look slightly dramatic. Her right hand was wrapped in a firm bandage and supported with a sling. She looked tired. "Thank you... you both," she said with a small smile.

Nitya rushed to her side, half-laughing, half-crying. "You scared me."

"Don't hug me, my arm's still sore," she said playfully.

Arjun stepped closer and asked, "You okay, Aditi?"

"Yeah, I'm okay," Aditi muttered. "But my new dress! It's totally ruined," she hid her pain trying to get back to her usual self.

Arjun gently took the papers from the nurse and glanced through them. "You need to keep the sling on and limit movement for the next few days," he said firmly. "Don't strain it. And no moving around without someone by your side."

"Yes, doctor," Aditi replied, mock saluting him with the other hand.

And then Arjun walked over to the front desk and completed the discharge paperwork.

Later, he made sure Aditi was seated comfortably in the car. He placed a pillow behind her back for support. "Too tight?" he asked, adjusting the seatbelt carefully so it wouldn't press against her injured arm.

"No," Aditi whispered. "It's perfect."

Arjun closed the door gently and walked around to the driver's seat. Nitya watched everything quietly, the way he cared for Aditi.

The drive was silent at first. Aditi leaned back in her seat, drowsy. After a moment, Arjun glanced at Nitya and asked, "What exactly happened?"

"She stayed back for a while after you all left. A little later, she called me and said she slipped off her bike. Thankfully, a man nearby helped her and brought her to the hospital," Nitya said.

From the back seat, Aditi murmured, "Stop talking about me like I'm not sitting right here."

"You're injured," Nitya teased. "We get full rights."

They reached Aditi's house. By then, Ashwin had already arrived. They helped Aditi out of the car.

Ashwin looked visibly concerned, "You should've called me, Aditi," he said.

Aditi rolled her eyes playfully. "See? That's exactly why I didn't." She sighed, then added softer, "I'm fine, Ashwin." She said pulling his cheek with her uninjured arm.

Inside, they helped Aditi settle onto the living room couch. Ashwin went to the kitchen to make soup. Arjun, unsure of what else to do, followed him. A few minutes later, they returned with a bowl of warm soup and sat beside Aditi, helping her sip it slowly.

Watching the way Arjun and Ashwin cared for Aditi, Nitya couldn't help but feel like an outsider – almost as if she were just a new friend, while they had known Aditi forever. And she smiled to herself.

Later, as they drove back, Nitya stared through the rain-blurred windows, the city, usually loud, seemed to be so quiet in the night. She turned slightly towards Arjun and said, "Thank you."

"You don't have to thank me," he replied, eyes still on the road. "I'll always show up, Nitya. She's my friend too."

As they were approaching Nitya's house, Arjun deliberately took a wrong turn, one that would stretch the route by a few more minutes.

"Arjun... you should've taken left here," Nitya pointed out.

And he just smiled. She didn't get it at first. But a moment later, she realized he did it on purpose.

Arjun finally dropped Nitya at her house. He waited until she walked inside. Nitya bid a silent goodbye before closing the door.

~

It had been a few days since the hospital visit. Aditi was doing better now, but she was still on rest.

One evening, she heard a few knocks on her door. She moved carefully to open it and peeked out. Her hair tied up in a messy bun, one sock on, the other missing.

"Okay, this is either a surprise visit, or I forgot some plan again," Aditi said, raising an eyebrow.

"We missed you," Nitya added, stepping in with others behind.

The living room was dimly lit with warm yellow lights and a half-read book on the couch. She hadn't cleaned up as she wasn't expecting anyone.

Shoes were kicked off, and their playlist started in the background. They all settled on the floor, leaning against cushions and sipping coffee.

"You look better," Nitya said gently.

"Still hurts a little," she admitted. "Mostly boredom, though. I've watched so many shows."

After a while, she looked up, rubbing her stomach. "I'm starving."

"Let's go out for dinner?" Shaurya asked.

Arjun stood up, dusting off his hands as if he had some grand plan. "Nope. Not tonight."

Nitya raised an eyebrow.

"Let me see what's in your kitchen. I'll figure it out," Arjun said.

"You'll what?" Aditi blinked. "Wait... are we cooking?"

"No *we*," Arjun said, walking towards the kitchen, "*I* am cooking. You all sit."

Aditi leaned back on the couch, touched. "Okay, I'm not even going to pretend I'm not emotional right now."

Arjun did everything with surprising ease. Ashwin had offered to help but was quickly shooed away. Shaurya acted like he didn't care.

Nitya sat nearby, at the edge of the dining table, her chin resting on her palm as she watched him.

"Need help?" she asked, walking closer.

"I'm good," he said. Then added, "But if you keep staring at me like that, I might burn something."

"Not my fault. You look different today."

"I used to do this sometimes... back home. For my mom and Shreya. They'd sit on the kitchen counter; give all kinds of suggestions I didn't ask for... and still call my food the best"

Nitya turned to him and gently held his hand, hoping to quietly divert him from the memory.

He shook his head, smiling. "It's a good memory. I'm not thinking about it sadly anymore. Don't worry."

In the living room, the others were caught in their own world. Shaurya stretched out on the couch and looked towards the kitchen. He nudged Ashwin and Aditi, and whispered. "Look at those two."

Aditi shook her head with a smile. "They think no one notices... but come on. It's written all over their faces."

Back in the kitchen, Nitya was standing beside Arjun, her hand still holding his.

Just then, Aditi's voice came as she stepped into the kitchen. "Need anything, Chef?"

Nitya pulled her hand back and Arjun turned back to the pan.

Ashwin appeared in the kitchen doorway, "Aditi, come on... He'll ask if he needs something. Anyway, Nitya is here. She'll help him," he said pulling her by the arm.

Arjun, without looking up from the pan, smiled to himself, "He's impossible."

As they left, Arjun held Nitya's hand back. *This time, softer; This time, quieter; This time, longer.*

Later, as they all settled around the small dining table, Aditi took her first bite and sighed. "Arjun... this is delicious," she said, looking at him. Others nodded in agreement.

Ashwin raised his plate slightly. "Man, if you ever quit Spectra, open a restaurant. I'll be your partner."

Shaurya added, "I will do the billing."

Nitya sat beside him, quietly eating... and enjoying her meal but haven't commented yet.

Arjun interrupted her thoughts asking, "Nitya, you didn't like the food?"

Winking, she replied, "I think I can cook better... but this is not bad, Arjun."

For a second, Arjun believed her and looked impressed until Aditi jumped in and said, "Arjun, don't believe her words."

Nitya lifted her chin, "Of course I can cook."

Before Arjun could respond, Aditi playfully added, "She knows nothing but tea. Anything more, don't even let her near the kitchen."

Everyone burst into laughter. Nitya widened her eyes dramatically, "Wow. Betrayed by my own friend."

The banter continued and the evening was filled with smiles and joy. *Tonight reminded Arjun, love still lives, in the family we have... and the family we choose.*

~

After returning home, Arjun changed into a loose T-shirt and sat by the window with a drink in his hand – something that became a quiet routine at the end of long days. But today, he just stared at the drink. And then, without a second thought, he placed it aside.

He didn't feel the need to numb anything. He was... okay. He leaned back into the chair, lost in thoughts that narrowed down to one name – *Nitya*.

The urge to talk to her, to hear her voice, to just see her face... was growing with every passing day.

Meanwhile at Nitya's house, she slept with Ira beside her, and her tiny arm around Nitya's chest. Until of course... Ira woke up. First, it was just soft blabbering. "Mmm... baa... da-da-da..."

Nitya opened her eyes and smiled, brushing Ira's hair gently. "Hey, my angel."

Ritu also woke up. Ira was wide awake now. No matter what they tried, she was not getting back to sleep. And then Ritu started playing the music. And that was enough. Ira started wiggling side to side. Not really dancing. Just... wobbling like a tiny jellybean. Ritu captured a video to show it to Gautam.

"She's not letting us sleep tonight," Nitya whispered, grabbing her phone.

Without thinking twice, she hit the video call. "Arjun".

Arjun, already lost in Nitya's thoughts, was a little stunned. Their *first video call*.

They had met. They had talked. They had shared silences in the same room. But somehow... this felt different. More intimate. More real.

He answered within seconds. "Nitya?" he said, surprised.

"Hi," she said, "Sorry. I didn't even think before calling." She then flipped the camera around. There was Ira, still wobbling in slow motion, now clapping her hands. Arjun blinked.

Nitya turned the camera back to herself. She looked sleepy, but her smile said everything. "Ira woke up and started performing. I couldn't not show you," she said.

Maybe she could've sent a video. Maybe she didn't need to call. But she did. Because sometimes... you just want to see someone and you don't really need a reason.

Arjun just stared at the screen. At Nitya. At the way her eyes glistened when she looked at him. And he smiled. "Ira's got serious stage presence," he said.

Nitya replied, "Right? In few more days, she'll own this house." And they both laughed.

Ritu was watching Nitya from the side, smiling. She noticed everything, her expressions, her interest in Arjun. And she couldn't stop teasing her about it.

Nitya, still on the video call, kept gesturing for Ritu to stop it but she wouldn't. Before Arjun noticed it, Nitya slowly got up and walked towards her room.

"I was planning to sleep with Ritu and Ira tonight," Nitya said, "But this little one won't let me sleep."

"I didn't mean to wake you up," she said, pulling the blanket a little closer.

"You didn't," Arjun replied, adjusting the pillow behind his head. "I wasn't sleeping."

"You should be," she said.

"You called," his eyes stayed on Nitya. The loose strands of her hair. The drowsiness in her voice. He didn't want the call to end.

She was wearing a simple green T-shirt and black pajamas. Arjun had never said anything before, but today, out of nowhere, he spoke. "I don't like green," he said quietly.

"Huh? Why?" Nitya asked, half-smiling, not thinking much of it.

"Please don't wear it again," he added.

Nitya sat up straighter, resting her back against the wall. "Are you okay?" she asked gently.

"I just... don't like it," he repeated.

She didn't know what it meant. She thought he was just being silly, maybe it was a casual dislike. So, she started teasing him. She picked up a green pillow nearby and waved it onto the screen. Then a green flower vase. "Look, Arjun! Green is everywhere!" she joked.

"I don't want *you* to wear it," he stressed now.

Nitya finally paused. She looked at him closely. "Arjun... what happened?" she asked.

He took a breath and explained the memory, which was still too raw, too vivid.

Nitya's heart ached. To her, Arjun felt like a little boy today, innocent and vulnerable. In that moment, she realized something, *she*

mattered to him. It wasn't about the color. It was because he cared. He hadn't told anyone else but her. And for Nitya, that was enough.

A moment later, Arjun reached for his bedside lamp and turned it off. "I should probably sleep," he said but made no move to hang up the phone.

The glow of the screen lit up his face in the dark. "Goodnight, Nitya," he said.

She smiled. "Goodnight, Arjun."

And they repeated it twice and thrice. But neither of them cut the call. They just… let it stay.

Nitya slowly drifted off to sleep, her phone resting against the pillow. Arjun didn't move. He watched her for a moment longer – peaceful, serene, the soft rise and fall of her breath. Then, finally, he ended the call… and closed his eyes too.

~

A BREAK BETWEEN THE CHAOS

A few days later, life at Spectra returned to its usual pulse, faster and more urgent. They signed up for a new project. Big scale. Bigger pressure. Two months to deliver a high-profile launch event.

It was a challenge that would demand every bit of focus. And slowly, without realizing it, the team began slipping into old habits. Long hours and sleepless nights. Because they knew that an event like this could take Spectra to another level.

The hotel, tucked an hour away from the city, became their second home. They began visiting every other day, slowly watching the empty venue turn into a vision.

Back at the office, Nitya dropped by once, hoping to catch Arjun... but barely got a moment before he rushed out again.

One afternoon, on the road to the venue, Arjun was driving his car, humming to a random playlist. But his mind wasn't on the music. Or the road. Or the event. It was on her. He knew he hadn't spoken to Nitya properly in days. Not like before. And he missed her. She missed him too. He could sense it in her replies, the way she said 'okay' a little too often.

Meanwhile, at Nitya's end, her days went on. The same 9 AM login, the same coffee breaks, the same tabs open on her screen. But something was missing. Not something, but *someone*. She realized how much she got used to Arjun being a part of her routine.

~

It had been nearly two weeks since they'd met properly. Until one night Nitya couldn't take it anymore. She just... wanted to see him. So, she texted. "Are you free tonight?"

Arjun saw the message late in the night, just as he was finishing his dinner.

"Come to the park near my house. Just for a while," she texted.

By the time he reached, it was already dark. The street was quiet. He stepped into the small park, expecting nothing. But there she was. Waiting near the bench under a tree.

As he walked closer, Nitya approached him quietly closing his eyes from behind, "Guess who?"

Arjun smiled, his shoulders easing immediately. She removed her hands and took his wrist gently. "Come here," she said.

They walked to the little clearing where she had spread out a soft blanket. A flask of tea sat nearby, two cups placed neatly beside it. Above them, stars blinked gently. The sky was wide and calm.

"What's all this?" he asked, genuinely surprised.

"You need a small break, Arjun," she said, settling onto the blanket. "From… everything."

He stood there for a second watching her and then sat beside her. She poured the tea, handed him a cup, and leaned back to look at the stars. "Just look at that," she whispered. "That sky. That stillness."

Arjun followed her gaze.

"This is something my mind always yearns for. The quiet nights, the moon and the stars. The silence," she said.

His mind was buzzing a few minutes ago. Now… it was completely quiet. Turning slowly toward her, he said, "I missed you so much."

Nitya looked at him, "I missed you too, Aru," she whispered.

His eyes widened. His heart skipped. "Did you just call me… Aru?" he asked, half-laughing, half-shocked.

Nitya blinked. "Yeah? Why?"

Arjun stared at her. "That's what my mom used to call me."

Nitya paused, "I'm sorry, I didn't know that," she said. "It just… came out. Felt right."

He didn't respond immediately. Instead, he looked at her – really looked.

Beneath the stars, with tea growing cold between them and unspoken feelings blooming quietly.

He glanced sideways at Nitya. "I didn't think I'd get back to feeling like this again."

Nitya looked at him, surprised but didn't interrupt.

"After Mom passed... it was like the world just... slowed down. Everything was blurry, heavy. I woke up, worked, talked to people... but I didn't *feel* anything. You know what I missed the most?"

He paused and continued, "Laughing without guilt. Like, smiling without that heaviness sitting in the background, asking, 'how dare you be okay?' But tonight... sitting here, hearing you call me Aru... I don't know. I'm feeling... light. Not because things are fixed. But because... maybe I'm allowing myself to feel again."

There was a long pause before Nitya replied, "You deserve to be happy Arjun."

After a while, Arjun stood brushing off the grass from his jeans and spread his hand to Nitya. "Come on. I'll walk you home."

Nitya smiled and slipped her hand into his. They walked side by side. As they reached the lane near her house, Nitya slowed down. "I'll go through the back gate," she whispered.

Arjun chuckled, folding his arms as he watched her tiptoe towards that path. "You're unbelievable," he said smiling.

She looked back one last time and waved. "Goodnight, Arjun." And then almost instantly she corrected, "Goodnight Aru."

He waved back smiling, "Goodnight, Nitya."

She disappeared behind the house quietly and Arjun stood there for a moment longer. Then he turned and walked towards his car.

And just like that... they were in a phase not quite in love yet, but somewhere beautifully close to it.

A few meters away from the park, another car was parked under the shadow of a tree. A man sitting inside with a phone in his hand, but his eyes focused elsewhere. *On Arjun and Nitya.*

Gupta had been waiting there for a while observing everything around. Spying on Arjun, he adjusted his collar and gently whispered to himself, "Arjun... so this is where your heart lies?" and his wild thoughts started to weave in his mind. "That little spark won't last. Not while I'm there," Gupta laughed to himself.

~

Rajnagar —

One afternoon, the doorbell rang at Gautam's house in Rajnagar. Ritu opened the door and froze for a second. Her face lit up with surprise. "Gupta Chacha!" she exclaimed, breaking into a smile. "It's been so long!"

Gupta, whom Ritu fondly called Chacha, stood at the doorway with a hearty laugh. Beside him was his son, Jai. "We wanted to surprise you, Ritu beta," Gupta said warmly.

Ritu stepped aside and welcomed them in.

Gupta had been a close friend of Ritu's father. They had known each other for quite a few years.

Gupta's expression softened as his eyes landed on Ira, "I saw her in the hospital when she was born... and now look at her," he said, gently taking Ira into his hands. "Almost one year already?"

"Yes, Chacha," Ritu replied with a smile. "Dad told me you visited us at the hospital. But I couldn't meet you on that day. I was still recovering."

Gupta nodded, his tone sympathetic. "Of course. Your father told me you went through so much during the delivery."

Just then, Gautam walked in and greeted them with a polite smile, nodding at the guests. Ritu introduced them to each other.

Gupta then passed Ritu a neatly packed set of gifts and baby dresses. "I won't be able to come to Saanjhpur for Ira's birthday, so consider this my early blessings."

Ritu was touched. "Thank you so much, Chacha. That's really thoughtful of you."

Throughout the conversation, Jai sat beside Gupta – calm and polite, leaving a quiet impression. To Gautam, he looked well-mannered and decent.

Before leaving, Gautam and Gupta exchanged numbers. And then, with a few more smiles and parting words, Gupta and Jai stepped out. *Who would've thought...This one simple visit would lead to a story neither of them would forget.*

~

THE DAY SHE TURNED ONE

A few more days passed. One evening Nitya stepped into Arjun's cabin at Spectra, holding two cups of coffee. She placed one on his desk. "Ahem ahem... someone's too busy to even look up," she smiled, settling into the chair opposite him.

Arjun was clearly exhausted. "Never too busy to look at you," he said staring at her.

Then, her voice came out, "Can you believe Ira turns one, this Sunday... she's growing up so fast."

Arjun nodded slowly.

Nitya continued, "I was talking to Aditi and thought... why not plan something small and beautiful? Nothing extravagant. Just family, a few close friends at home. Gautam and Ritu will be here in a couple of days."

But as she spoke, she noticed the way Arjun's expressions changed. She tilted her head, "Arjun?"

He didn't reply right away. Then, in a quiet voice, he said, "It's a special day. Yeah."

She watched him closely. "What's wrong?"

He took a deep breath and set the cup down. "Nothing... you continue," he said.

"There is something wrong. Please tell me," she asked gently holding his chin.

Arjun hesitated for a moment, then spoke. "That day... it's the day I lost my mom. Exactly one year ago."

Nitya froze. Her heart sank. "Arjun... I thought you would be so happy talking about Ira, so I just... I'm sorry."

He looked up at her, "Didn't know how to feel when I heard the date."

She moved closer, "If I'd known, I wouldn't have brought it up like that. I...." she whispered.

"You didn't do anything wrong Nitya," he said. "This is just how life works and I have to accept it."

The room went quiet again. Nitya asked, "Do you want to talk about it?"

Arjun leaned back slightly, as he began. "That day started just like any other. I came back home in the evening, still swamped with work calls. She asked me to drop her at her friend's house."

He exhaled deeply, "We stopped by a florist shop. She wanted to buy a bouquet. I said I'd come in with her, but I had to leave urgently. So, I dropped her there."

"A few minutes later, I heard her phone buzzing beside me. She had left it in the car. And I went to return it. When I reached the florist shop again..." his voice dropped.

Nitya's eyes turned moist.

"She was lying there. Peaceful. Like she was asleep. I didn't even get to say goodbye," Arjun said with teary eyes. His voice was calm, but the pain behind it was unmissable.

Nitya's eyes brimmed with tears, "I'm so sorry Arjun. I shouldn't have asked..." she said, "I didn't know it would bring all this back. I'm... I'm really sorry." And then, the dam broke. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

"I'm here," she whispered. "For anything you need. For as long as you need."

Sometimes, love is simply being there. Sometimes, it's listening without interrupting. Sometimes, it's feeling their pain like it's your own – quietly and completely.

Nitya didn't bring up Ira again. She didn't talk about birthday plans. She simply sat with Arjun for a while, holding the silence with him and when the time felt right, she quietly left giving him the space she knew he needed.

Later that night, Arjun lay in bed, staring at the ceiling as memories replayed in his mind. His thoughts drifted to the day of Nitya's mother's 50th birthday. He remembered how he had distanced himself.

He was lost in his own grief then. But now... he wanted to be there. He knew what it meant to Nitya. He knew how much she'd want him there. So, he made a quiet promise to himself – he would show up just like others. *For her.*

The next morning carried a different kind of air. Arjun hadn't slept much. He stood in front of the mirror, hair still a little messy, rubbing the sleep from his eyes when he picked up his phone and typed a message to Nitya.

"Let us handle Ira's birthday. I mean it. A celebration at home. We'll take care of everything and bring the party to you."

A minute passed. And then Nitya's reply blinked on the screen. "Wait... *we*?"

"Spectra. But not as Spectra," he replied. "Just your friends. Your people."

On the other end, Nitya stared at the screen, a little stunned. She hadn't expected this. Not after what she heard yesterday. But the fact that he was the one stepping forward... it meant everything to her.

She replied, "Aru, are you sure?"

"I am," he replied.

A pause and then he said, *"For you!"*

~

Sunday afternoon arrived. The sky was clear and the sunlight was pooling into the streets. Arjun, Ashwin, Shaurya, and Aditi stepped into Nitya's home, all smiles and bags in hand.

In the kitchen, Nitya's mom was multitasking like a pro, chopping vegetables, stirring something on the stove, occasionally turning to wipe her hands and checking if the rice hadn't overflowed.

Ritu was in the living room, gently trying to take out balloon string out of Ira's tiny fist before she could chew on it. Ira was in her best mood. Gautam headed out to bring something needed for the party.

Nitya's dad was walking in the small hallway, phone to ear, greeting friends and family who were calling to send love to Ira.

And that's when Arjun and everyone stepped inside. Arjun knelt to start planning the setup, just quietly observing and deciding where things would fit best.

Aditi started blowing up balloons one by one. "Ira's going to pop one with her tiny fingers, just watch," she laughed. Every balloon she blew up had a tiny smiley, a little 'Happy B'day Ira!' on them.

Ashwin climbed up on a stool with fairy lights tangled around one arm. "Why do these always come out of the box like this?" he complained, carefully untwisting the knots.

Shaurya picked the best corner of the room near the window to set up a small handmade banner that read 'Ira Turns One.' He fixed it with tape and then began placing soft cushions around the floor.

And Arjun... he pulled out a small cardboard box labeled in bold letters *Ira's Firsts.* Inside were printed mini cards with titles: *First Smile*, *First Tooth*, *First Step.* One by one, he placed them across the living room, near the photos, beside the cake table, and tucked into little corners like a scavenger hunt of memories. And when Ritu saw it, her eyes welled up with tears.

Though they were known for organizing grand events and managing high-profile launches, this day was different. There were no client calls, no checklists, no rehearsals. This wasn't Spectra at work, this was just Arjun, Ashwin and Shaurya showing up as friends. They were here because they cared.

While others were busy decorating and setting up, Nitya moved quietly between the rooms, making sure everything was in place but her eyes kept drifting towards Arjun. Her hair tied up, her kurti slightly creased from all the running around. It was like she wasn't doing anything specific, but she was everywhere.

But in between all of it she'd pause, take in the moment, and just... feel it. And Nitya felt that tiny skip in her chest. *He was here. He was trying.*

She stood beside him, "This means a lot, Arjun."

"Anything that makes you happy," he whispered in her ears.

The moment didn't go unnoticed by Ritu, and she was happy for Nitya.

In the bedroom, things weren't going smoothly. Ira, dressed halfway, was crying at full volume with her little legs kicking at every attempt to put on her frock.

"It's okay, Ira... just two more minutes," Ritu tried to calm her.

But the baby wasn't having it. Arjun stepped inside, holding a soft little plush toy he had found on the table outside. He held it out in front of Ira. And she paused mid-cry.

The little pink dress was finally on. Ira blinked slowly, momentarily distracted. Ritu sighed in relief, "Let's just hope she doesn't cry again."

And then... it began. She started crying louder this time, pushing the toy aside.

"Oh no," Ritu shouted, "Not again..."

"I think she's just overwhelmed. Maybe too many people, too much happening around her," Arjun said trying to cradle Ira. He held and began walking towards the gate to catch some fresh air.

That's when Gautam returned from the nearby store with a few last-minute items. The moment Ira spotted him, her face lit up. With an excited little squeal, she leaned forward.

"Hey, baby girl," Gautam said, walking over quickly.

Arjun carefully handed Ira over. "Now we know why she cried," he said with a smile.

"Alright," Shaurya said, looking around at the others, "We've got just enough time to run home, freshen up, and be back before the guests arrive."

Ashwin nodded, glancing at the clock. "Yeah, I need to get out of this t-shirt before someone mistakes me for the balloon guy."

"Okay, quick roundtrip," Aditi said, brushing off her jeans. "Let's not be late for the party we helped set up."

That evening, one by one, close friends and family started arriving. Soon, Arjun and others returned freshly dressed.

Arjun was dressed in a simple black shirt and jeans, yet there was something about him that made people glance twice. His eyes immediately searched for Nitya. And then... she walked out of her room.

Nitya stepped out in a red saree paired with a black blouse. She wore no makeup, yet her face glowed like sunshine. Her hair fell in soft curls, a pair of earrings, simple bangles adorning her wrists, everything looked amazing to Arjun. He couldn't take his eyes off her. And she noticed it.

"You look adorable," he said as they stood in a quiet corner.

"Yes, I know," she replied, her voice turning playful. "Someone told me red suits me perfectly."

Arjun's lips curved into a smile. "Well then, that 'someone' was damn right." This time, she couldn't help but blush.

Before she could respond, her mother called out her name, breaking the moment.

Everyone gathered around the table. Ira, sitting in Gautam's lap, looked a little confused by the crowd, the attention, and especially the cake with her name on it.

Arjun stood at the back, phone in hand, capturing little moments. Ritu and Gautam posed with Ira, and Nitya joined them.

The next moment, she slowly pulled Arjun beside her for a quick picture. Just as the photo was taken, Ira reached out and grabbed Arjun's finger.

"That one's going to be framed," Aditi said.

Ritu couldn't stop teasing Nitya in a private moment. "You both look beautiful together."

Nitya just brushed it off, smiling.

Later, dinner was served. Simple and warm. Slowly, the guests started to leave. Hugs were exchanged at the door. And then it was just them again.

Nitya gathered everyone near the center of the living room. Her voice was full of emotion. "Thank you all of you. For helping us. Really."

Gautam and Ritu stood nearby, nodding. "Yes, it felt like family. You're all such a blessing."

Nitya's parents echoed the sentiment with full hearts.

Ritu excused herself soon after Ira started rubbing her eyes, her little head already leaning into her father's shoulder.

"Goodnight," Nitya whispered as Gautam and Ritu walked towards the bedroom.

Ashwin and Shaurya stood up too. "We'll get going," Shaurya stretched. "But what an evening, huh?" Ashwin gave a thumbs-up.

Arjun also was about to leave. But Nitya silently sent a text to him, "Stay a little longer". Now he didn't really know how to stay back.

Everyone left and it was just Arjun and Nitya's family at home now. Her father gently placed a hand around his shoulder, "Sit for some time, beta."

Arjun hesitated, then nodded and sat down.

The conversation was light at first. Nitya's father leaned back and looked over at Arjun, "I just want to say today was beautiful. Nitya is truly lucky to have you all." And he continued to know more about Arjun's family.

"Nitya told me about your mother earlier. I hope it's okay if I ask. I lost my father when I was about your age", her father added. "There's a strange ache that stays. But... I promise you beta, you will heal with time. And one day, the memories will hurt less."

"It's okay, uncle. Thank you for being kind," Arjun said. "Yes. It was exactly a year ago, *this day*."

Her father sat up slightly, concerned. "That's awful. Where exactly did it happen and how?

Arjun took a breath, and then slowly he began, "She had been hit by a car near a florist shop on RD Road. The impact had thrown her against a pole nearby..." he continued to narrate everything.

"Wasn't there a police complaint?" her father asked.

"We filed one," Arjun nodded. "But no one caught the vehicle's number. Also, there were no CCTV cameras near that stretch. Just a handful of shops. Nothing useful. The witnesses told they saw a green car turning into a narrow lane right after the hit... like the driver knew how to disappear."

In the bedroom, Gautam, who was overhearing the conversation, *stood frozen*.

~

THE TRUTH

Gautam's hand clenched tightly around the baby, his breathing short and quick. Arjun's words echoed in his ears. A florist shop. RD road. A woman been hit. "No. No, it couldn't be her," he whispered to himself. But deep down... he knew. It was her and it was him. *It was Gautam who hit Arjun's mother that day.*

A jolt passed through his chest. He took a step back, then another. His knees buckled before Ritu could even notice what was happening. He collapsed to the floor, still holding Ira.

"Gautam?" Ritu shouted.

But he was already on the floor. Convulsions. Again.

Ritu cried out, panic in her voice. Nitya ran toward the room, and everyone followed. Ritu immediately took Ira from his arms and placed her safely on the bed.

"Hold his head up," Arjun said.

Nitya's father shouted, "Water! Please bring water!" Nitya's mother rushed in to get water.

Arjun and Nitya's father tried to steady Gautam. His breathing was rapid. His fingers clenched into fists.

"Gautam... you're okay. You're safe," Ritu said, crying. She then turned to Arjun, "He's had convulsions before but... not this bad."

Arjun glanced at her, nodding gently. "Don't worry, Ritu. It'll pass. Let's give him a minute."

And then, slowly, painfully slowly, Gautam's body began to relax. The tension in his limbs faded.

"Let's lift him carefully," Arjun said, and with the help of Nitya's dad, they lifted Gautam gently onto the bed, covering him with a sheet.

This happened out of nowhere. No one had answers yet. The room was quiet. Gautam's breath was slow and even, his body finally at rest. Nitya sat beside him, brushing his hair from his forehead. Her

mother was still crying. Her father was on the phone with doctor, seeking advice. Arjun stood back for a while, letting the family stay close.

A few minutes later, when things had calmed just enough, he walked over to Ritu who was in the kitchen, "Ritu," he said gently. "Can I ask you something?"

She looked up, nodding.

Arjun asked softly. "You said he had convulsions before. When and why exactly did they start?"

Ritu took a moment. "Yeah. It happened a few times. It actually started on the day Ira was born."

Arjun waited.

She continued, "I had complications during my delivery. It was a couple of weeks ahead of my due date and Gautam was out of town. My contractions started out of nowhere and I was rushed to the hospital. Doctors said it could go either way – the baby or me, and the situation was tense. Knowing my condition, Gautam rushed back to Saanjhpur and reached the hospital."

"I was unconscious for a long time after the surgery. Gautam saw me hooked to machines. And Ira, barely breathing. He panicked. He hadn't even held her yet," Ritu looked away, tears welling up. "That night, he collapsed and had convulsions for the very first time. The doctors said it was due to extreme stress or could be psychological trauma."

Arjun nodded slowly, absorbing it.

Ritu added, "Since then, it happens... not often. But sometimes, when something hits too hard. Something emotional. He never talks about it."

"Don't worry, Ritu. He will be fine," Arjun tried to console her.

On the day of the accident —

After receiving the terrifying news about Ritu's condition, knowing her and the baby's lives were at risk, Gautam drove back to Saanjhpur recklessly, desperate to reach the hospital on time.

In that panic, he hit a woman on the road. And he didn't stop. He was scared. Shaken. But more than anything, he just wanted to get to Ritu. He didn't know the woman he hit would later pass away. He didn't know about the pole. Or the blood. Or anything. But the guilt of hitting someone and driving away stayed with him. He hadn't meant to hurt anyone; it was never intentional.

And when he finally reached the hospital, only to see Ritu unconscious, Ira fighting to survive, and his whole world on the edge, it broke something inside him.

The guilt multiplied. Since then, he had only spoken about what happened inside the hospital. He never told anyone what happened on the road. Never mentioned the woman or the accident.

When Ritu and his family asked him every time, he only said, "I thought I lost Ritu and Ira." And never mentioned anything about the accident. That remained a secret buried deep within him.

Back to present —

Arjun stayed close, moving between rooms quietly, checking in on everyone. His presence was helpful in a way. When Gautam finally opened his eyes, everyone rushed to him.

After everyone spoke, Arjun stepped forward, pulling the chair beside the bed and sat down gently. "Gautam," he said, "Everyone's fine. Nothing happened to Ira or Ritu. Everyone's calm. You just... need to rest, okay?"

Gautam nodded, his throat dry, his chest tight. He couldn't meet Arjun's eyes. Couldn't bear the kindness in his voice, not after what he knew. He swallowed hard. How could he speak now, when Arjun sat beside him, hand on his shoulder, trying to ease the pain of a man he'd unknowingly shattered. So, he didn't speak.

Few minutes later, Arjun left. The moment he reached his home, he collapsed onto his bed, clothes still on, and drifted off to sleep.

At Nitya's home, the atmosphere slowly returned to normal. Gautam, despite the storm brewing inside him, tried to hide the pain. He smiled and pretended as if everything was okay.

The next morning, the house still had traces of celebration with half-wilted balloons, glitter scattered in corners, empty paper cups on side tables. Nitya quietly moved around the living room, collecting everything.

Her hands worked, but her mind was elsewhere. She couldn't stop thinking about Arjun. He had been there the entire day, from helping with the arrangements, to calming a crying Ira, to supporting her family. And somehow, just the thought of him being around filled her with a feeling unexplainable.

She paused near the window, a gentle smile on her lips, slowly moving into a phase where her heart started whispering, "*What would I do without Arjun?*"

But somewhere else, Gupta was wondering – *What would he do* with *Arjun?*

~

IN HER PRESENCE

After Ira's birthday, Gautam, Ritu, and Ira returned to Rajnagar. Gautam tried hard to push away what he had overheard that night, but it stayed deep in his mind. The guilt was overwhelming every single day. At times, he felt an urge to confess everything, to finally face the consequences. But then came the selfish voice, the one that feared how much his life would change if the truth came out.

Both his work life and family life had begun to fall apart. Ritu noticed the changes, and was more concerned with each passing day. But he never opened up. He simply told her, as always, that it was just stress.

~

Meanwhile in Saanjhpur, it was the day of grand launch event that Arjun and the team had been working on for weeks. It turned out to be a huge success. Arjun stood to the side, arms folded. He didn't need applause. The smooth execution! That was enough.

As the show wrapped, the team gathered backstage. Ashwin fell onto a chair, "We actually pulled this off."

Shaurya shouted in excitement, "Cheers to us." Arjun looked around at his friends, at the tired but glowing faces, and finally at the empty stage.

His phone buzzed. "Saw live. You nailed it. Proud of you, Aru," her text came.

He smiled. This wasn't just a win. It was a reminder. That he still had it. That he could build again.

Arjun had run tirelessly on adrenaline for the past two months, and his body finally gave in. He was down with fever and headache the next morning. He didn't tell anyone. Especially Nitya. He didn't want her to worry.

But she knew. She could hear it in his voice. See it in his tired face. Feel it in his messages. The pauses, the way he said "I'm fine" without really meaning it.

The next day, Nitya stood outside his house and pressed the bell.

A few seconds passed. Then the door opened, just slightly. Arjun stood there, looking drowsy and visibly tired, in a loose T-shirt and tracks.

His hair was messy, and his eyes were duller than usual. But the surprise in them… that was real. "Nitya, you here?"

Inside, the house was quiet. Nitya stepped in slowly, her eyes scanning everything around. It was her first time at Arjun's house.

The house was big. A long hallway stretched ahead, with a staircase running along the right side, leading to the first floor. The walls held a few framed pictures of Arjun with his family.

To the right, just past the entrance, was a cozy sitting room, a smaller version of the main living area. It had soft yellow lights, a low coffee table, and a bookshelf with a few unevenly stacked novels and photo albums. A blanket was draped over the back of one of the couches, as if someone had just left it there.

To the left, she could see the dining hall and kitchen, clean, simple, with a few plants by the windows. Nitya stood there for a moment. It was a beautiful house. And somehow… it already felt familiar.

He sat on the couch, leaning against a cushion. Despite the dull ache in his head, he felt it – *her presence* and the comfort.

She walked straight to him and sat beside. "I wasn't sure if I could just come over without asking."

"You never have to ask. You're always welcome here," he replied gently.

"I was worried Arjun. And I knew something was off with you. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want to worry you, Nitya. But honestly, I was feeling down before you came," he admitted quietly.

"And now?" she asked, tilting her head.

He gave an innocent smile. "Look at my face… you tell me."

Her fingers, cool and gentle, touched his forehead. "You're still burning," she said, concern in her voice.

"No, I'm not." And he added slowly, "Now that you are here, I will be fine."

She reached into her bag and pulled out a small box. "I made something for you, Aru" she said, opening it carefully.

Arjun blinked, a little surprised. "Can I risk it? You know I am already sick right?" he said smiling.

She took out a spoon, scooped a small bite, and without saying a word, began feeding him, slowly.

Arjun sat there, overjoyed with pure emotion. The woman he is falling for, was here... at his home... sitting beside him as if she already belonged. He felt perfect, lost in a moment so indescribable, so real. Neither of them confessed anything yet, but they both knew.

He gently whispered in her ears, "If you care like this, I wouldn't mind falling sick forever."

"Come on, Aru. Don't say that," Nitya rolled her eyes.

Arjun slowly stood up, "Come, I'll show you around," he held her hand.

Nitya watched him as he showed around. She noticed how his eyes softened with every room, every memory.

"And..." he opened a door and stepped aside, "This is my room."

It was simple, neat. A bookshelf filled with novels and a few notebooks stacked carefully on a wooden table. A small plant sat quietly by the window, slightly leaning toward the light. A guitar rested against the wall clearly untouched for a while. And beside the table, put in the corner, were a couple of empty beer bottles.

Nitya spotted them immediately. "You drink?" she asked, eyes wide.

Arjun looked where she was pointing and smiled, "Not anymore," he said. "I haven't felt the need lately."

She was unsure of what to say. But his tone told her enough. Her eyes moved around again until it landed on a photo frame hung carefully on the wall. His mother's photo, smiling, the kind of smile that made you stop.

Beside that frame was another picture, Arjun and Shreya, laughing, her hands in some silly gesture while he looked equally amused. Their bond was visible clearly in the frame.

"She had just dumped a glass of cold water on me seconds before that photo," Arjun laughed.

Nitya chuckled, "I can already tell I'm going to love her."

"She's chaos," Arjun said, "Smart chaos, though. She can argue with you for an hour and still win even when she's wrong," Arjun added.

Nitya moved toward the shelf, scanning everything. "Sorry, I don't want to touch these. Any of these," she started to sulk, remembering the day when she picked up the Spectra inauguration file at his office and how Arjun had reacted.

Arjun looked up, "Nitya," he said, "That day... I was in a space I couldn't explain. But you didn't do anything wrong."

She didn't say anything. Just a silent sulk.

He moved closer, gently taking her hand and placing it over the closest file. "This time, I want you to touch everything."

As she picked up a random book from the shelf, a paper fell from it. It was a piece of poetry Arjun had written lately. She began to read it aloud.

Deep in your eyes
I see a quiet rhythm, tender and soft
A melody, an echo
Pulling me gently, like invisible strings, toward you
Your glances, they're like a light drizzle
Soaking into me one drop at a time
Slowly, steadily
Until I realize...
I'm completely drenched in you

But Arjun quickly took the paper from her hands and closed it. "Not this one, please," he said.

"Wait... let me finish it," Nitya reached for it again.

"Anything but this," he replied, pulling it slightly away, not letting her touch it.

"See? You're doing it again. Being rude for no reason."

Arjun looked at her for a second, then said simply, "*You'll understand one day.*" And just like that, he changed the subject, leaving the moment unfinished.

She just watched him. Like she was storing in her mind, every little piece of this version of him.

That night, before leaving, Nitya stood at the door, "Take your medicines," she instructed like a doctor.

He nodded, "Sure, ma'am."

And then just as she turned to go, he called her name. "Nitya..."

She turned back.

"I will sleep better today," he said.

She smiled and left. "Goodnight Aru".

As she left, Arjun sat by his desk. He opened his journal and without thinking too much, he started writing.

He brought the piece of paper Nitya read just before, carefully folded and tucked it into the journal, and smiled to himself saying, "You shouldn't have read this now, Nitya... *the time is yet to come*." He closed the journal and kept it back in the drawer.

Rajnagar, A few days later —

Gautam had just finished some paperwork at a bank and was returning home. Suddenly, he heard a familiar voice from behind. "Gautam beta?"

He turned to see Gupta standing behind, smiling, with a folder in his hand.

"Chacha! What a surprise!", said Gautam, extending a warm handshake.

"I come here for some bank work from time to time," Gupta explained.

"This bank is very close to our house," Gautam said, "Why don't you come over? Ritu will be happy to see you."

Gupta said he had some work, but Gautam insisted and later they both walked to Gautam's home.

At home, Ritu welcomed Gupta warmly.

"There's my little princess!" Gupta said, scooping Ira into his arms.

They all settled down in the living room with tea. After a few minutes of casual talk, Ritu turned to Gupta and insisted, "Chacha, this time you are not leaving without having lunch. Last time you and Jai were in a hurry, and we didn't get a chance to spend time."

Gupta couldn't say no and stayed back.

"Chacha, where do you stay in Rajnagar?" Gautam asked him.

Gupta replied, "We live in Sector 9. Not too far from here. A little quieter than this side."

Then he turned to Gautam, "When did you and Ritu move here?" he asked. And glancing at Ritu, he said, "I remember your dad once mentioning that you both had shifted to Rajnagar, but we never really spoke about it after that. Recently, I wanted to surprise you, so I took your address from him and thought I'd visit."

"We moved to Rajnagar almost a year ago," Gautam replied. "I accepted a new job here, so we had to relocate from Saanjhpur."

"Rajnagar is a lovely place, beta. You'll enjoy it here," Gupta said with a gentle smile.

"By the way how's Kamala aunty? I remember she used to teach at a school back then," Ritu asked Gupta.

"She still does. Keeps herself quite occupied with work... barely has time for her husband," Gupta said with a laugh. And everyone chuckled.

Later, Ritu quietly excused herself and made her way to the kitchen to get lunch ready.

Now alone with Gupta, Gautam tried to engage him in a conversation.

"So... since when do you know each other?" Gautam asked casually, trying to understand more.

"I met Ritu's father after moving to Rajnagar. We were in the same line of work back then, though we later moved on to different paths," Gupta replied.

"So where did you stay before, Chacha?" Gautam asked, curiosity evident in his voice.

Gupta paused. His expression shifted slightly. He wasn't keen on revisiting his past. For a brief moment, he hesitated, but there was no easy way out.

"We used to live in Saanjhpur, beta..." Gupta said, attempting to move past it.

Gautam's eyes widened. Having spent most of his time in Saanjhpur all these years, the revelation surprised him. His curiosity only grew.

"How long were you in Saanjhpur? What did you do there? Why did you move to Rajnagar?" he asked, one question following another.

Gupta leaned back slightly, composing himself. "Yes, beta... we came to Rajnagar many years ago," he said. "I had a decent job there... A few things happened and everything changed."

"Where did you work?" Gautam asked, leaning forward.

Gupta held his gaze for a second before replying, keeping his tone deliberately casual. "AS Industries."

"AS Industries... sounds familiar," Gautam muttered. Then, in a lighter tone, "So why did you move here?"

"Hmm.. Long story short. I was the manager there," Gupta said, voice a little heavier now. "Big place. Well-respected setup. But some misunderstandings came up. Had to step away and start fresh in Rajnagar. Anyways, it was many years ago."

Gautam offered an understanding nod. The room was silent for a second before the conversation drifted to lighter topics, local food, weather, and the chaos of parenting.

After lunch, Gupta stood to leave. "Thanks for having me, beta. The food was lovely. It felt good to reconnect."

"Always, Chacha," Ritu said warmly.

As Gupta stepped out, Gautam's mind was still thinking about AS Industries. Once he left, Gautam sat at the table with his laptop. The name wouldn't leave his mind.

A few search results popped up. He clicked on the official website. And there it was. A photo. Arjun's father. And Gautam realized that Gupta worked at Arjun's father's factory before.

His mind was swirling. *He wanted to know more.*

~

The next time they met privately, Gautam steered the conversation towards AS Industries and Gupta started explaining to him that he was in a good position until things went sour.

Gautam tried to sound casual. "What happened exactly?"

Gupta responded, "Office politics, beta. You know how it is... too much interference from people who didn't understand how things worked."

"Who do you mean?" Gautam asked.

"The owner's wife," Gupta said. "She was an ill-informed woman. She got involved in everything, questioned every decision, tried to take control in everything. It became unbearable after a point for all of us."

"Owner's wife?" Gautam repeated, eyebrows raised.

Gupta nodded slowly. "Yes. She thought she was being clever, but honestly, she only created more problems. I couldn't take the chaos anymore. Eventually, I left."

"Hmm," Gautam replied quietly. "Must've been difficult."

Gupta laughed darkly. As the conversation continued and Gupta left the place, Gautam stared blankly at the floor.

So, it was her. The woman he hit... Arjun's mother. And Gupta had known her, too. And hated her.

~

But what Gautam didn't know was that the truth was far from what Gupta had just told him.

Arjun's mother had always been right. She was a kind, dignified woman who stood for what was right. But Gupta was never the kind to accept that. Manipulative and cunning, he had a way of twisting truths.

Back then, he had created a completely false story, trying to defame AS Industries after being exposed. Instead of accepting his mistakes, he created a version that showed him as the victim, a story he repeated enough times to believe it himself. And now he was doing it again.

Even though he knew what he did was wrong, he spoke as if Arjun's family was wrong, not the other way around. He made himself look like the one who had been mistreated, the one forced to leave. And Gautam, unaware of the real story, believed every word. Gupta had once again done what he was best at: Lying and making it sound like the truth.

To Gautam, Gupta was just Ritu's respected Chacha. And so, when Gupta shared his version of the events surrounding AS Industries, Gautam believed him.

He began to believe that perhaps Arjun's family wasn't as good as they seemed. And slowly, without realizing it, he began building a plan. A plan to keep Nitya away from Arjun.

What he didn't know, what he failed to see, was that Nitya and Arjun weren't just casually getting to know each other anymore. They had already found something rare. Something real.

~

RECHARGE

Saanjhpur, A few days later —

The park near Nitya's house had become a little escape to Arjun and Nitya. It wasn't fancy, just a stretch of green with a few benches, a swing, and trees that swayed gently in the evening breeze. But to them, it was something else. Peace. Silence. And over time, they named it as *Recharge*.

Whenever one of them sent this code word, the other would understand. No questions asked. It simply meant *I'm tired. Meet me. Let's not talk too much. Just be there.*

One evening, Nitya had a very long day at the office. Endless meetings, unread emails, noise. Her shoulders felt heavy. She picked up her phone and typed one word. "Recharge?"

A few seconds later, Arjun's reply came, "On my way." Arjun had a long day too. But when he saw her message, his eyes sparked with excitement.

They met near the usual bench. Nitya simply sat down. Arjun joined her without saying a word. A cool breeze rustled through the leaves. And slowly, Nitya leaned her head on Arjun's shoulder. Neither of them spoke. *Just the tired hearts... quietly recharging, side by side.*

"What's this called?" Nitya asked softly, her head still resting on his shoulder.

Arjun turned slightly. "What's called what?"

"This..." she said, her voice quieter but clearer. "This feeling."

He paused for a second, then he covered it up with a light chuckle. "We're just tired, it's been a long week."

Nitya lifted her head slightly and gave him a slow side glance. Arjun couldn't help it, he laughed under his breath, shaking his head. "Fine," he said. "I don't know."

Her eyes were still on him. “Me neither.”

Minutes later, Arjun asked playfully, “Where’s my chai today?”

Nitya sat up straight and turned toward him. “Ahh… sorry, Aru,” she said with an innocent smile.

Before he could respond, she got up, took his hand, and said, “Come on. I’ll take you somewhere. You have to try the best chai.”

“Where are you taking me?” Arjun asked.

“Just come,” she said, already pulling him along.

She led him to a small tea point nearby. As they settled down, she ordered two cups of tea.

Taking her first sip, she looked at him expectantly. “Isn’t this the best?”

Arjun didn’t answer immediately. He had been quietly watching her, the way she waited for his response. A soft smile formed on his lips.

“Honestly,” he said, “I know someone who makes it even better.”

“Oh… I see,” Nitya replied, trying to hide her disappointment.

Arjun let out a quiet laugh. “And that beautiful lady is sitting right across from me.”

Nitya looked away, unable to stop herself from blushing.

He leaned a little closer, his voice softer now. “Recharge and your chai are the best, Nitya. Nothing comes close.”

On their way back to the park, they walked side by side, her fingers still wrapped around his.

She glanced up at him. “You really know how to impress people with your words.”

Arjun smirked slightly. “Hmm… Esha used to tell me the same thing.”

For a brief moment, Nitya said nothing. Then quietly, she pulled her hand away. “Fine…” she said, walking a few steps ahead of him.

Arjun quickened his pace to catch up, a smile tugging at his lips. “What happened all of a sudden?”

Nitya turned her face away and kept walking.

He moved to her other side. She turned away again.

Now he stepped in front of her, stretching his arms out to block her path.

Nitya stopped. Her gaze dropped to the ground.

"Do you want me to kneel now?" he asked playfully.

She stayed silent. That only made it harder for him to stop laughing.

"Don't laugh," she said, her voice low but firm.

But Arjun couldn't help it.

"I don't want to hear about your past. Ever," she added, walking ahead again.

"Okay, ma'am, okay," he said, still laughing as he followed her.

"Especially about Esha…" she warned.

Then, as if remembering something, she stopped abruptly and turned to him.

"Tell me… you didn't write it for her, did you?"

"What did I write?" Arjun asked, feigning confusion.

"That poem I read at your home the other day," she said.

Arjun pressed his finger lightly to his lips, still smiling.

"Tell me," she insisted.

"You're the one who told me not to talk about my past," he replied calmly.

Now her anger was unmistakable. She turned and began walking faster.

Before she could go too far, Arjun caught her hand and gently pulled her back. Then, holding her close, he said softly, "You'll understand everything one day."

And just like that, Arjun confessed it all without actually confessing a thing.

Rajnagar —

Gupta and Jai called Gautam for a casual meet. One evening, the three of them met at a restaurant. The kind of place with warm lights and wooden benches, where conversations stretched for an hour or so.

Jai was polite and soft-spoken. Smartly dressed and well-mannered. Gautam found him decent. The kind of guy he believed would bring peace to a home.

Over the next few days, the meetings continued, a lunch here, a dinner there, visiting each other often.

Ritu noticed the growing closeness. "I'm glad you have been spending a lot of time with Chacha and Jai lately," she said one day.

Gautam nodded, "Yes, they are really good people."

But the truth was more complicated. And the more Jai spoke, the more Gautam saw a future with him and Nitya.

~

Gupta had his own reasons for showing up. Meeting Gautam and Ritu was never a coincidence. Not even close. Gupta had been watching from afar, *Everything!*

Gupta already knew Arjun had visited Nitya's home in Saanjhpur. He had seen the growing closeness between Arjun and Nitya, and had sensed the affection building between the two families.

This wasn't just a friendly visit to reconnect with Ritu's side of the family. This was strategy. Revenge.

Gupta, who once lost everything in Saanjhpur, his position, his reputation, his grip on power, wasn't going to sit back and watch the son of that family rise freely.

Getting close to Gautam was only step one. And Gautam, unaware of the true nature of the man he trusted, was already playing into his hands.

~

A few days later, Gautam met Gupta again. That night, the two of them sat across a small table at a restaurant, their conversation flowing easily over dinner.

Gupta leaned back in his chair, as if the question had just crossed his mind, "So Gautam... you and Ritu mentioned that you have a younger sister, right? How's she?"

Gautam smiled. "Yeah... Nitya. She's doing well. Works in tech... very smart."

Gupta nodded slowly. "That's nice... good to hear."

A moment later, Gautam took out his phone and pulled up a picture. "This is her," he said, turning the screen toward Gupta.

Gupta leaned in, as if seeing her for the first time. His expression shifted to pleasant surprise. "She's beautiful."

Gautam's smile deepened. "She's a wonderful person too..."

Gupta nodded thoughtfully, his gaze still on the screen. "I can already see that."

He handed the phone back, "She sounds like a great woman."

Gautam smiled, still looking at the picture. "I miss her so much. She's very caring and genuine. She understands people easily. And once she trusts someone, she gives her heart," he said, almost proudly.

Gupta listened quietly, nodding along. "Hmm... rare," he said softly. "Not many people like that anymore."

Gautam nodded.

For a brief moment, Gupta said nothing. Then, as if a thought had just crossed his mind, "Tell me, Gautam... have you ever thought about her future? I mean... what she wants next?" he asked, his tone casual.

It took Gautam a second to realize what Gupta was hinting at. Then he chuckled, "I've thought about it... but it's not easy to find the right person."

"You're right," Gupta said. "But sometimes... the right person is already around. You just haven't looked closely enough yet."

Gautam raised an eyebrow. "I didn't quite get you, Chacha..."

Gupta let out a light laugh. "Perhaps I'm being a bit direct," he said. "But I thought... there's no harm in asking."

He paused briefly, watching Gautam's reaction.

"I just felt Jai and Nitya might make a good pair," Gupta added.

Gautam's lips curved into a smile.

Gupta leaned forward, his tone still easy. "Jai is a good person... stable and well-settled. He gets along well with people. I thought it might be worth considering."

Gautam fell silent for a moment. The thought didn't seem unreasonable. He started to like the proposal as he wanted Nitya to be away from Arjun. And Jai felt safer.

"I mean no pressure," Gupta added. "Just putting it out there. You are family now. We trust you. And honestly… a girl like Nitya would be a blessing."

Gautam didn't respond immediately. He couldn't say yes outright. But somewhere within, the idea had already begun to settle strongly.

He nodded slowly. "Sounds like a good thought, Chacha," he said. "I'll discuss it with the family."

Gupta's smile widened. He got up from his chair and extended his hand. "Awesome then," he said.

Gautam shook it.

And just like that, they parted.

That night, Gupta's words resonated in Gautam's head. He didn't tell anyone about the conversation. He just kept thinking… wondering… and realizing this was how he could fix everything.

If Arjun was no longer a part of Nitya's life, the secret about the accident would never need to surface. The guilt would remain, yes… but at least he wouldn't have to face Arjun every day, carrying the weight of what he had done.

Saanjhpur, Spectra events —

Aditi and Nitya had dropped by after work, under the pretext of 'just five minutes' but everyone knew they'd stay longer.

Arjun's room was filled with casual chatter. Everyone was still talking when Arjun cleared his throat. "On a serious note…" he began, and the group slowly quieted. "I've been working on something," he said, "A story. It started out as a bunch of thoughts I couldn't say out loud. Now, it's turning into a *book*. It might take time. But it's happening."

There was a beat of silence. Then…

"Whoa," Shaurya said, genuinely impressed. "Is this the *book* book?"

"That's the plan," Arjun said, looking at them all.

Ashwin leaned back, "Damn. Finally!"

Nitya, sitting quietly, looked at him. And in that look was pride. Soft, quiet pride.

Aditi spoke up, her tone filled with excitement. "Tell it your way, Arjun. We'll be waiting to know what's inside it."

The chatter resumed, and after a while, Arjun stepped out of the room for a moment. Nitya followed him. He didn't realize she was behind him. He sat on a sofa in the hallway, already on a call with a client.

Nitya stood in front of him, mimicking the way he spoke, exaggerating his tone.

Arjun glanced at her and gestured softly, "Shh…" trying to signal that he was on an important call.

She rolled her eyes and sat beside him, turning away, her face slightly puffed.

Once he ended the call, Arjun turned to her and tapped her shoulder. She didn't respond. He shifted closer, then moved in front of her.

"Okay… What did I do now?" he asked, a smile playing on his lips.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Nitya asked, her voice soft but pointed.

"About the book?" he asked.

"So… I'm just one among them now?" she said, folding her arms. "You'll tell me things along with everyone else… okay, fine."

"Nitya… I wasn't even sure I'd write it," he said honestly. "It just started… as something I was writing for myself."

She studied him for a moment. "You still haven't answered my question."

Arjun paused. "So, you really think you're just one among them?" he asked quietly.

"I don't want questions," Nitya said, making a small face. "I want an answer."

He held her gaze. Then, gently tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear, he said softly, "You're special. You mean a lot to me... I..." The words got stuck.

"You... what?" Nitya asked, now curious.

Her hand rested lightly on the sofa, her fingers close to his. And then... Arjun reached out, his fingers finding hers, interlocking them. She looked down.

He lifted her chin, meeting her eyes once more. "One day," he said quietly, *"You'll read my book. And then maybe you'll know everything I never said."*

She smiled, unaware of what the pages ahead would hold. And that's when Nitya said it, almost in a whisper, like it had been sitting on the edge of her lips for a while, "I like you, Aru." Her eyes didn't shift. She didn't take it back. She meant it.

Arjun smiled. Not surprised. Not unsure. Just... full. He rubbed his thumb slowly over her knuckles, and then leaned in just a little enough for only her to hear. "I... I really like you too."

There was no big moment. No kiss. No confetti in the sky. Just a delicate phase. *The 'I like you, and you like me too' kind of quiet.*

~

ALREADY CHOSEN

Rajnagar —

Gautam hadn't said anything immediately about the proposal Gupta had placed on the table, about Jai and Nitya. There was no urgency in Gupta's tone, just a suggestion. A possibility.

And yet, the more Gautam sat with it, the more it began to make sense. At least, that's what he tried to convince himself. But deep down, he knew, this wasn't just about Nitya's future. It was about his past. And what he was trying, desperately, to leave behind.

One evening he brought it up to Ritu by saying, "Ritu, Chacha brought up something the other day... a proposal. For Nitya. He's suggesting Jai. I've been thinking about it a lot. Jai is a great guy. And Chacha, well... he's been close to your father. It's not some unknown match."

Ritu studied his face for a second. She didn't say much in response, just lost in her thoughts remembering the bond Nitya shared with Arjun.

Later that night, Gautam stepped into the balcony with his phone and dialed home and explained everything about Jai and Gupta's family to his parents.

There was silence on the line. His father took over. "And what about Nitya? Have you spoken to her?"

"Not yet," Gautam replied. "I thought I would speak to you first. Nitya will surely agree."

His mother asked more about Gupta's family.

"Yes, Ma," Gautam replied. "We know them well. They're nice people."

"Well, if you say they're decent people and you've met Jai yourself... we can't say no," his father said, carefully. "But we don't know Nitya's thoughts yet."

Gautam nodded slowly. “Of course. I will speak to her.”

They didn’t sound overly excited, but they gave a cautious go-ahead. “If you think it’s good for her, we trust you, beta,” his mom said. “But let’s speak to her gently. Let’s not rush it.”

Gautam nodded and hung up.

Back home, Ritu sat quietly on the bed, absentmindedly. Her mind drifted, not toward Jai, but toward Arjun. She remembered the moments at their home between Arjun and Nitya, their calls, and more than anything, how much Nitya liked him.

“You’re not saying anything,” Gautam asked.

“I’m just… thinking,” she replied honestly. “I mean, yes, Jai seemed nice. But Nitya hasn’t said anything about wanting this. And I don’t know. After seeing her and Arjun…” She stopped.

Gautam looked away, tightening his jaw for a moment. “They’re just friends,” he said, perhaps a little too quickly. “And even if there’s something more… it’s better we guide her while there’s still time.”

Ritu didn’t argue. But her heart felt uneasy.

~

Gautam and his parents had decided it was time to bring up the proposal and talk to Nitya. At first, they had been hesitant, but the more they thought about Nitya’s future, the more they started to like this. And now, like Gautam, they were also ready. Hopeful. Excited.

While Gautam was on the call, her parents called Nitya into the living room excitedly. Her father sighed, “Come, Nitya,” he said, patting the seat beside him on the sofa.

He looked at her gently, “Gautam got a proposal for you. A family he knows well, through Ritu’s side. He is Jai. And we believe… it’s time to think about your future.”

Nitya stared at him, stunned. “Wait… what?” She blinked. “A proposal? Are you serious, Dad? I’m not ready for this. Where is this even coming from?”

“What is going on, Gautam?” she asked him.

Gautam's voice came in, "Nitya, they're good people. I've met them. We are close family now. Jai is a good guy. I just want you to consider it. That's all."

"I haven't even… I'm not in that headspace right now, Gautam" she replied.

"But sometimes, we don't see what's good for us, I'm only thinking about your future," he added.

"Gautam… I know you're thinking for my good. I just… I'm not ready for this right now," she paused, choosing her words carefully, "I have a lot going on at work, I have to focus on my career now… you know that. Everything is still settling in. Marriage is not something I'm prepared for yet."

The truth was, it wasn't the career. It wasn't even the timing. *It was Arjun*.

Gautam was frustrated but chose to remain calm. And Nitya hung up the call before her voice could shake. She simply said what she had to. And her parents finally nodded, accepting her words.

But that night, as she was scrolling through Arjun's photos, she landed on one of their favorites. She tapped it. Zoomed in. There was something in that frame. They looked… like they belonged. Nitya stared at the image for a long time.

And in that stillness, she knew she wasn't even an inch close to imagining someone else in her life. Her heart had *'already chosen'*. Even if she hadn't told him. He was already there. In every thought. In every plan. In every quiet picture she didn't want to stop looking at.

Seconds later, her screen lit up, Ritu Calling…

Nitya answered quickly and in a soft tone, "I was waiting for you to call." There was silence for a second. Then Nitya sighed, "I'm not okay, Ritu."

"I know," Ritu said gently. "I could hear it in your voice earlier."

Nitya sat up on the bed. "Why didn't you say anything? Why does it feel like you're also okay with this proposal?"

"I'm not," Ritu replied instantly. "But Gautam is insisting." She opened up.

"Ritu... I don't want this. Not even a little. I haven't told them properly, but there's someone else in my mind and you know." Nitya finally shared with Ritu.

"I know Nitya." Ritu whispered. "I know how much you like Arjun."

Nitya's eyes welled up. "Thank you for understanding me."

"I do. I always have. I'll talk to Gautam," Ritu promised. "I'll slow him down. Buy you time."

Nitya smiled through the tears. "You've always been the sister I never had."

"And you've always been mine," Ritu said warmly.

"Get some sleep," Ritu whispered. "This isn't the end. I've got your back."

"I know," Nitya said and hung up the call.

~

The next evening, the TV played softly in the background, some news channel neither of them were paying attention to.

"Gautam?" Ritu began casually, not looking at him directly.

"Hmm?" Gautam replied.

"You've been thinking a lot about this match lately. I mean... Jai and Nitya," said Ritu.

He didn't respond immediately, just a distracted "Yeah."

"Why are you so fixed on this? You've never pushed something this much before."

Gautam looked up and said, "Because I care about Nitya. Because I don't want her to end up with someone who..." he stopped himself.

"Who what?" Ritu asked, finally meeting his eyes.

He shook his head and said, "I just think this is safer. There's nothing... unpredictable here."

Ritu spoke gently, "I'm just asking because... I've never seen you this uneasy. And Nitya, she's not a kid. You know she likes Arjun, right?" she finally asked.

Gautam set his phone aside, and leaned forward. “I didn’t want to say anything earlier because I wasn’t sure how to… but Chacha and I spoke about a few things.”

Ritu was now curious.

Gautam continued, “You remember, he told us he worked for AS Industries. That belongs to Arjun’s parents. He told me many things about their family. Things I didn’t know, and I don’t want to sound like I’m judging, but… it didn’t sound good.”

Ritu’s expression shifted slightly. She stayed quiet, letting him continue.

“Chacha said there were a lot of internal issues at the factory, fights with the workers, and rumors about Arjun’s parents. Apparently, the family wasn’t… as good as they seem,” Gautam paused.

Ritu’s brows furrowed, “What do you mean?”

Gautam hesitated and continued, “There were whispers about his mother creating troubles among the staff. And Arjun’s father, he apparently fought with everyone. As for Shreya… Chacha said there were a lot of things said about her back in college, that the family sent her abroad to avoid it all becoming public. And I heard something unsettling about Arjun too. His habits, his past, nothing sounded good.”

Ritu looked away for a second, her mind racing.

“I know it’s a lot,” Gautam said gently. “But you should know. Especially considering how close Nitya has become to Arjun. We’ve been seeing all this from the outside, but maybe we don’t know who Arjun really is. What kind of baggage he’s bringing.”

Ritu glanced down. She was silent. She had liked Arjun. She still did. He was kind, thoughtful, and respectful. But hearing all this, hearing it from Gautam, who had never once interfered in Nitya’s friendships or connections until now, made her pause.

“I just want what’s best for Nitya. That’s all.” Gautam added cleverly, softly.

Ritu nodded slowly. And just like that... the seed was planted. Not hatred. But doubt. *And sometimes... that's all it takes to change the course of a story.*

~

In the days that followed, Ritu had been holding on to everything Gautam told her, about the accusations on Arjun's family. She didn't know whether all of it was true. But she trusted Gautam and her Chacha.

She began to see Arjun differently, through the lens of what she'd been told.

Nitya, meanwhile, didn't notice it. She was used to Ritu being her safe space, the person she could go to with anything, and often did. Even more than with Gautam. But now, things have changed.

Later one night, unable to hold it in, Nitya called Ritu, "Did you talk to Gautam?" she asked.

A pause. And then "I think it's better if you stay away from Arjun," Ritu replied. The words landed like a stone.

Nitya sat up straighter. "What happened Ritu?" she asked, trying to calm down.

Ritu didn't rush into it. Her voice was firm. "I don't know how to explain it all right now. But do you really know Arjun that well?"

Nitya's heart sank. She responded firmly, saying, "Of course Ritu, and that is why I like him."

And that's when Ritu clearly told her everything, the proposal Gautam was considering, the visit from Gupta, the person named Jai. And then... the things they had been told about Arjun's family. Rumors. Assumptions. Judgements.

Nitya sat frozen, her chest felt tight. "What do you mean...?" she asked.

"I didn't know how to," Ritu said honestly. "And I didn't want to hurt you. I know how close you have gotten to Arjun. But after everything Gautam said... after the way Gupta uncle explained things... I just... I'm unsure about him".

Nitya didn't respond right away. Everything Ritu said... it didn't match the person she knew. And quietly, she said to herself, "They don't know Arjun. Not the way I do."

Nitya never doubted Arjun. Not for a second. But a voice in her heart kept repeating, this can't be true. The stories didn't match.

She didn't want to argue with Ritu. She didn't want to prove anyone wrong out of stubbornness. But she needed to know, not out of distrust, but to prove to her family what Arjun really was.

That night, all Nitya wanted was to see Arjun. And then she typed it. "Recharge." The one word that always brought him to her.

Usually, Arjun replied within seconds. A call. A "Be there in ten." Something. But this time... nothing. She waited. Ten minutes. Twenty. A full hour. Still nothing.

She dialed him multiple times, but he didn't answer. She curled into her blanket, phone still in her hand. She waited, eyes open every few minutes, hoping to see his name light up the screen. But it didn't and she finally dozed off as her thoughts were already heavy.

Somewhere else, across the city, Arjun's world looked very different. He was lost in his work. The phone was in silent mode, on his desk, face down. He hadn't seen her messages or calls.

A couple of hours later, Arjun's eyes drifted to his phone. He turned it over, stretching his back and that's when he saw it. Recharge.

He quickly typed, "I'm so sorry... just saw this." But she didn't reply. She was asleep. *She needed him. And he wasn't there.*

Without thinking twice, he grabbed his keys, slid on a hoodie, and stepped outside. It was already midnight. Arjun parked the car quietly near Nitya's home. The street was silent. He dialed her number, heartbeat racing. A few rings. Then her sleepy voice, soft, "Aru...?"

"I'm outside," he said gently.

She opened the balcony door, her blanket still wrapped around her, hair messy from sleep. And there he was. Standing there. At her gate. For her.

Nitya slipped down the back stairs and opened the gate, careful not to wake anyone. A few feet away, under the soft light spilling from the streetlamp, Arjun stood, his hands in his pockets, waiting for her.

She just ran to him and wrapped her arms around him. Just like that night when Arjun came to her doorstep, broken and hugged her. And this time, it was her pain that spoke. She didn't want to hear anything about the marriage proposal. She didn't want to imagine anyone else other than Arjun.

She didn't want to tell him anything. She just wanted this moment, their moment, untouched and unbroken.

Arjun froze for a second, "Nitya..." he whispered, "What happened?" he asked softly.

But she didn't answer. She just buried her face deeper into his shoulder, her hands holding the back of his hoodie.

He pulled her just a little closer.

"Promise me..." she said. "Promise me you'll never leave," she said again.

Nodding slowly, Arjun made a promise to her, and *that's all she wanted to hear.*

~

The next day, it was nearly evening when Nitya stepped out of her office building and walked towards Arjun's car which was parked by the curb. Arjun came to pick her up from office. She got into the car and for a few minutes, there was only silence between them. Lost in her own thoughts, she appeared dull to him.

He had one hand on the steering wheel and the other held her tightly, asking, "Something happened Nitya? You are not your usual self. Tell me what's bothering you?"

Nitya paused for a few seconds and finally spoke, "There's something I need to show you." She opened her phone, unlocked it slowly, and pulled up a picture and showed him.

Arjun glanced, then looked back at the road. "Who's that?" he asked.

"He is Jai. Gautam got a marriage proposal for me," she said with a dull voice.

Arjun didn't speak, didn't flinch. But she noticed the way his hand tightened on the steering wheel, and how his other hand, the one holding hers, slowly loosened its grip.

She turned to him, held his hand tighter, and with a steady voice, "I said no. I told them I'm not ready. That I'm focusing on other things."

Though Arjun felt relieved hearing that, he asked softly, "Is that the only reason?"

"No," she replied, tightening her grip on his hand and slowly resting her head on his shoulder. That was enough for Arjun to understand exactly what she meant.

Rajnagar —

Elsewhere, the evening unfolded differently. Gupta met Gautam at his office.

After a few pleasantries, Gupta got to the point casually. "So... any update on Nitya? I mean, from the family side?" he asked stirring his tea lazily.

Gautam nodded slowly. "Yes, Chacha. We spoke to her but she's not ready yet. Told us she needs time."

Gupta smiled. "Understandable beta. I spoke with Jai too. Ever since he saw Nitya's picture, he's just completely into her, " he chuckled, "Keeps saying she's the one. He's gotten serious about Nitya."

Gautam sipped his tea and replied honestly, "When the time's right, we'll talk again Chacha."

Gupta nodded, but inside, *his thoughts were already weaving another plan.*

~

FLASHBACK

The day of the accident —

Gupta happened to be in Saanjhpur on the day Ira was born – the very same day as the accident. Since he was a close friend of Ritu's father, Gupta decided to visit the hospital after hearing there were complications during Ritu's delivery.

The route from Gupta's hotel to the hospital passed by the florist shop on RD Road, the street where Arjun's mother was hit. As he was passing through, he noticed a handful of people gathered in the middle of the road, helping an injured woman get into a car. A moment later, he realized she was *Arjun's mother* – the woman he hated to the core.

Gupta, who had spent years trying to harm Arjun's family, felt a dark satisfaction rise within him. Seeing her unconscious and bleeding, he thought to himself, "Finally.... She got what she deserved."

Curious to know more about the accident, Gupta parked his bike nearby and walked into the florist shop. The shop owner was Gupta's old friend. They had been close friends as Gupta often helped the florist with small favors. Although they haven't met in years, they have stayed in touch.

As Gupta walked inside the shop, the florist greeted him immediately, excited about his sudden appearance. "Gupta saab!" he exclaimed hurrying forward to hug him. "I didn't expect to see you here!"

Gupta returned the hug warmly. "It's been so long, Mahesh ji. How are you?"

"What brings you to Saanjhpur after all these years?" Mahesh asked.

"I'm here on some work," Gupta replied smoothly. "And my friend's daughter is in the hospital. I was on my way to visit the family, but I stopped when I saw there had been an accident outside."

"I thought you came to visit this old friend."

"Of course, Mahesh ji," Gupta said with a soft smile. "I was planning to stop by on my way back." He paused, then added casually, "By the way... what exactly happened outside?"

The florist lowered his voice. "It's a hit-and-run case. Just minutes ago. A car came speeding through and hit a woman. It seemed she crashed into a pole and lost a lot of blood," he said.

"That's terrible," Gupta said, shaking his head as if he was sad to hear that.

"This area is usually quiet at this hour," Mahesh continued, still unsettled. "So, no one really saw what happened from the beginning. And the woman had just bought a bouquet from here a few minutes ago."

"How cruel," Gupta muttered. "People hit and run like it means nothing. By the way, did you see the car?"

"Not clearly as I was inside the shop," Mahesh said. "I think it was a **grey** sedan, but I'm not completely sure. It all happened in seconds."

As Mahesh spoke, Gupta's eyes drifted around and then he noticed the CCTV camera mounted above the entrance, facing the road.

Gupta's mind began to work instantly. He knew, if this went to the police, they would track it and figure out who was driving it. He was curious to look at the recording. "I think we should check the recording once," Gupta said casually.

The florist replied, "I don't know anything about the cameras, Gupta ji. It just records by itself. I don't even know how to check it. Usually, my son takes care of it."

"Let me see if I can help," Gupta offered, already stepping behind the counter and settling into the chair. He noticed a USB was already plugged in. While pretending to go through the recordings, Gupta smoothly managed the situation by telling the florist, "Your system is

such a mess, it's not working properly." All the while, he kept Mahesh distracted with small talk, never letting him notice what he was really doing.

Quickly, Gupta exported that day's footage onto the USB. Then without the florist noticing, he slipped it into his pocket. Next, he slowly deleted that day's footage from the system, making sure the only evidence rested in his hands now.

He turned back to the florist and said lightly, "Mahesh ji, you know what? There's no recording from today. Looks like the camera didn't capture anything. See for yourself."

"Oh... really? I don't know how any of this works," the florist said helplessly. He wasn't tech-savvy and was a little older, so he couldn't really understand what Gupta was pointing at. "Let me call my son," he said, reaching for his phone.

"You can call him if you want," Gupta replied smoothly. "But there's not much anyone can do. Maybe your cameras are damaged. I'm not sure why nothing was recorded today," Gupta said, weaving a story. All the while, his voice remained calm.

Now, it was time to trap the florist in his web. There was no backup on this system, hence the truth rested only in Gupta's hands now.

The florist stood there, confused and unsure what to do next.

Gupta leaned in slightly and said, "This could turn into a serious case, Mahesh ji. The police will definitely come here for questioning. And when they find out that there's no recording, especially for today, they'll start doubting you. You know how it is... endless questions, paperwork, court visits... all that trouble. They might even begin to suspect you."

The florist's throat went dry. He looked at Gupta anxiously. "I don't want to get dragged into this issue. What should I do to stay out of it?"

Gupta pretended to think for a moment, then nodded with a reassuring smile. "I'll help you, don't worry," he said, gently patting his shoulder.

"Those cameras, both inside and outside, take them down. Now that there's no footage, it's better if no one even knows the cameras existed. If the police don't see them, they won't ask questions." He paused before adding, "This way, you can simply tell them you didn't see what happened outside."

The florist swallowed hard but felt relieved that Gupta was guiding him. He simply nodded as he trusted Gupta. He also knew there were no other CCTVs nearby; his was the only shop with a camera. And he didn't want any unnecessary trouble with police. So, he simply nodded to whatever Gupta said.

Gupta patted his shoulder again, his tone reassuring, "I just wanted to help you, as a good friend. I really don't want you to get dragged into this accident mess."

"Of course, Gupta saab. Thank you so much," the florist said, hugging him tightly. "I'm glad you were here to help me out."

Gupta added, "One more thing... Don't tell the police anything they haven't asked. Outside, I heard a few people say the car was **green**."

The florist, with a confused tone, said, "But... I remember it as **grey**... but like I said, I'm not completely sure."

Gupta placed a hand on his shoulder. "Grey, green, black... does it matter? You didn't see it clearly. Now, you just have to nod along and say it was **green**. Okay?"

The florist hesitated, but finally agreed. He decided to follow Gupta's advice and say the car was **green**.

A few minutes later, Gupta stepped out of the shop, helmet in hand, and waved goodbye to his friend.

That night, Gupta sat in his hotel room, at a small desk, the USB plugged into his old laptop. A cunning smile touched the edge of his lips as he clicked "Copy" — and the footage, the only real evidence of what had happened that day, lived inside his folder now. He deleted the footage from the USB completely. *And that was it. The camera at the florist shop was never seen again.*

~

The next morning after the accident, as the sleepy florist opened his shutters and was busy setting up everything, Gupta returned.

"Mahesh ji," Gupta said, walking in casually. "You opened early today."

The florist looked up, surprised but smiling. "Ah... Gupta saab. I thought you'd left to Rajnagar already."

"Just had to finish a few things here," Gupta replied.

"I called you last night to inform that we removed the cameras but you haven't answered the call," the florist said.

As the florist turned to pour tea, in one smooth move, Gupta slipped the USB drive back into the place where he had taken it from. The florist didn't even notice anything.

After a moment, Gupta lowered his voice. "Just wanted to let you know. That woman..." He paused, pretending to be sad... "She passed away last night."

The florist froze. "Oh no... so unfortunate."

Gupta, in a sad tone, replied, "Yes. Very sad. But listen carefully now..." and looked him in the eye. "Now that she is dead, you have got to be extra careful. From now on, don't talk about yesterday to anyone. Not about the bouquet, not about the car, and especially not about cameras. If police come, which they will, just say the cameras haven't been working for months. Your son removed them recently. Only if asked. That's it. You didn't see anything. You don't know anything," Gupta said in a serious and firm tone.

The florist nodded along and said, "Yes, yes... I won't say anything. I'll just say they were removed."

Gupta gave a faint smile. "Yes... Keep it that way."

After a few minutes, he walked out of the shop like nothing had happened.

After leaving the florist shop, Gupta drove straight to the hospital to meet Ritu's parents. He walked into the maternity ward. Ritu was asleep. Her mother sat by her bedside, gently massaging her hand. Ritu's father stood up as he saw Gupta and greeted him warmly.

"I meant to visit yesterday, but I got caught up with some urgent work," Gupta said in an apologetic tone. "How is Ritu now?"

"She's resting," her father replied. "There was a lot of stress during the delivery... but the baby is fine now."

A little later, the conversation shifted to Gautam and everything that had happened the previous night. Ritu's father told Gupta how tense the situation had been. To make things worse, Gautam had been out of town and had rushed back to Saanjhpur in a panic when he heard the news, anxious, shaken and was barely able to speak.

Gupta nodded slowly in an understanding tone. "Moments like these... they shake everyone. Hope he is doing okay now."

"He was awake the whole night," Ritu's father said. "We sent him home to rest for a while."

Gupta placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "You did the right thing."

They moved to the chairs outside the room. For the next hour, Gupta sat with Ritu's parents, sipping tea, asking gentle questions, nodding empathetically, playing the part of a concerned family friend.

When it was finally time to leave, Gupta stood up, adjusted his sleeves, and made his way toward the hospital exit. As he passed through the parking area, something caught his eye.

A green sedan.

He paused. His steps slowed. He moved closer, his gaze fixing on the number plate. The same number – the one he saw in the footage the last night. Gupta stopped breathing for a second. He needed to know who the car belonged to, so he stood nearby, waiting.

A few minutes later he was surprised to see Ritu's father walking toward that car. Gupta's eyes widened as this came with a shock.

Gupta rushed to Ritu's father, voice calm, and asked casually "Is this your car?"

"Oh.. Gupta! I thought you had already left," Ritu's father replied.

"I had to take an important call and was waiting nearby. And I saw you coming," replied Gupta. He paused, then asked again, "Is this your car?"

"No no," Ritu's father replied. "This is Gautam's car."

Gupta instantly started to connect with every detail Ritu's father had said.

"Gautam came yesterday in a hurry..."

"...rushed straight from wherever he was..."

"...was anxious, shaken, and barely able to speak..."

Gupta exhaled sharply through his nose. His mind was already racing. "So, Gautam it is," he thought to himself.

~

THE MEETING

Although Gupta knew it was Gautam who hit Arjun's mother, he hadn't interfered back then since they were a close family. He had kept the truth safely, hidden behind zipped folders and silence.

But now... when he saw the closeness between Arjun and Nitya, he couldn't bear it. The thought of Arjun finding happiness, the two families coming together, that's something he wouldn't let happen.

So, now he came into Gautam's life with a smart plan. Gupta was playing a game of chess to separate Arjun and Nitya. Unknowingly, Gautam and Ritu turned into his pawns.

Back to the present, Rajnagar —

One day, Gupta asked Gautam, "Just a small request, beta. Jai and I don't want to pressure any of you. But Jai would like to meet Nitya once. That's all. No talks of marriage or decisions. Just... meet her. Let him talk to her. If it doesn't work, he will step back, I promise."

It seemed reasonable to Gautam and he agreed, saying that he would speak to Nitya about it.

Later, when he brought it up to Nitya, she immediately frowned, "Why?" she asked. "What's left to talk about when I've already said I'm not ready?"

"It's not about commitment, Nitya," Gautam replied, little frustrated. "They just want to talk. Jai wants to meet you once. If you're not comfortable, say No. I won't push. They are a close family now, so I just don't want us to be rude."

Gautam was very persuasive, and Nitya finally agreed. "Okay. Fine. I'll meet. But only once. I'm just agreeing to this because they

are close to Ritu's family and I don't want to be disrespectful. And I want to be honest, Gautam. I'm not going to keep any hopes hanging."

Gautam nodded, "Okay, that's all I ask," and hung up the call.

Little did she know the decision to meet Jai would turn her life upside down.

~

Nitya agreed to meet Jai at a quiet café, a place close to her office. This meant nothing for her. All she wanted... was to say it clearly, with respect, and walk away.

The café wasn't crowded. Just a few soft conversations in the background, clinking cups, and the low hum of a playlist. Nitya sat at a corner table, her phone in hand, glancing toward the door every now and then. She didn't want to be there. But she had to.

Then, Jai walked in with a polite smile. He spotted her and waved. "Hi Nitya," he said, offering a handshake. "Thank you for coming."

Nitya shook his hand, nodded and just smiled.

"Honestly, I wasn't expecting much. But I just wanted to meet you once. Have a casual conversation." he added.

She kept silent and managed to smile.

"I'm not here to convince you. Just... wanted to know who you are. And maybe let you know a bit about me," he said.

She sipped her coffee. "Okay, hmm", these were her only responses pretty much.

The conversation was simple. Dry. He asked about her work, her favorite movie. Talked about how his work life was going. He was trying, that much was clear.

But Nitya was distant. Her answers were brief. Her mind elsewhere. *Arjun.* His name echoed quietly in her thoughts.

"You don't talk much, do you?" he said, trying to keep the tone light.

"I do... just not when I'm uncomfortable."

That made him blink. "I'm sorry," he said slowly.

She shook her head. "No. This isn't about you, Jai. Really. And I'm sorry if I sounded rude." She placed her cup down and sat up straighter. "I just... want to be honest with you. I agreed to meet today only because my brother asked. And I wanted to respectfully close this, not leave it hanging."

He nodded, quiet now.

"I'm not in a place to think about marriage. I've said this before. I have other things to focus on, my career, my peace... and some parts of my heart that are still figuring things out."

"This isn't personal. I'm sure you're a great guy. But I don't want to build any expectations. I hope you understand."

Jai stayed quiet for a moment, then gave a slow nod. "I really liked you, Nitya. The moment I saw your pictures, I was hooked. And the more Gautam spoke about you, the more I wanted to meet you." His eyes stayed on her longer than necessary. "You're honestly too beautiful to resist."

Hearing his comment, "Excuse me?" Nitya's voice came sharper and louder than she intended.

Jai didn't flinch. He simply gave a faint smile. "You look even more beautiful when you are angry," he complimented once again and Nitya was clearly uncomfortable now.

And suddenly, a voice interrupted from behind. "How's it going, you both?"

She turned, and there he was. Gupta. Smiling. "Hi uncle, you're here?" Nitya asked, not expecting him there.

"Hey dad," Jai waved his hand.

Gupta replied, "I was nearby. Thought I'd say hello. Beta, you didn't even touch your food."

"I wasn't hungry," she said plainly. Just a minute earlier, Nitya had felt uncomfortable around Jai, but she hid it carefully not wanting to give Gupta any hint. She sat composed, her expression normal.

"By the way, Nitya... it's good you met us. This is how we build connections. Good families. Trust. Unlike some others who... don't have much of that to begin with," Gupta said.

Nitya's eyes narrowed slightly. "Sorry, what?"

Gupta smiled as if he hadn't said anything strange. "I mean, it's always good to know new people."

Something about the way he said it chilled her. But she didn't react.

"There's something I've been holding on to," he said, gently sliding his phone on the table. "A piece of truth... that could affect people. Especially Arjun."

The moment his name was spoken, Nitya's spine stiffened. "Arjun? How do you know him?" she asked with her eyes wide.

Gupta tapped the screen. A still from a CCTV recording flashed – a green car, the edge of the florist shop, and blurred motion across the street. Nitya's heart dropped as she looked at the video carefully, replaying it twice and thrice.

"This..." Gupta said, "was the day his mother died."

Nitya didn't speak. She just froze.

Gupta's voice stayed soft. "I know who was driving the car."

Her eyes were broad, "What...? Who?"

"And I know," Gupta continued, "that he has a good heart. It wasn't intentional. He was scared. He ran. But now... imagine if Arjun ever finds out. Not through the police. Not through anyone else. But through me. What would he do, Nitya? He's finally smiling again. Do you want to take that from him?"

Her throat went dry, "Why are you telling me this?"

He zoomed in and pointed to the sticker on the back of the car. "Sahni's", their surname, the sticker was clearly visible. The number plate was blurred, but still readable. "I'm sure you know whose car this is," he smiled cunningly.

Nitya now understood that Gupta was talking about Gautam. She could clearly see Arjun's mother coming out of the florist shop and Gautam's car hit her as she was crossing the road. And Gupta immediately stopped the video. He showed just seconds of it and turned off the screen, just enough for Nitya to understand it was Gautam's car.

Gupta looked at her, "Now listen to me carefully," he said. "You still have a choice. To walk away and let Arjun live his life. Think about

it. If truth comes out… it won't ruin just one life. Do you think Arjun would forgive Gautam? He would just hate you and your family."

He slid the phone back into his pocket. She stared at him, stunned.

Gupta stood, voice still firm. "You have your career. Your family. And a future that could be… safe, with someone who truly wants to make you happy. With Jai." And then he added gently, "Sometimes protecting someone means… stepping away."

And then Jai and Gupta left just like that, leaving Nitya alone in the café.

That night, the house was quiet. And Nitya's thoughts were louder than ever. She sat on her bed, the conversation with Gupta still echoing in her mind.

Her mind wasn't still. It was clearly Gautam's car, she saw it, but refused to accept the truth. She thought back. Now she remembered the day of Ira's birth vividly and how Gautam had arrived at the hospital in a hurry. Alone. In his car.

That florist shop… it's on the way to the hospital. She thought to herself. Coincidence. That's all. But then… she remembered something else. His convulsions. They started that day. And returned again. "Was that from guilt?" she asked herself.

She recalled the way he collapsed on Ira's first birthday… it was after Arjun spoke about his mother. She swallowed hard. Her hands trembled. It all connected now. It all aligned now. And the truth shattered her completely.

Nitya leaned forward, burying her face in her hands. This can't be true. She cried loudly. Her heart broke that night. And in that silence, she whispered to herself, "What do I do now?"

The image of Arjun's mother on the road played in her mind like a haunting loop. "I trusted Gautam so much… but how could he hide it from us?" she whispered. The realization was unbearable.

And Arjun? She closed her eyes, the tears continued rolling. *Arjun, who had trusted her. Arjun, who had held her hand through everything. Arjun, whose pain she now carried inside her.*

~

ONE LAST TIME

Arjun's mind had been restless from the moment Nitya showed Jai's picture to him. Although she made her intentions clear, a storm rose within him. He couldn't bear the idea of someone else holding Nitya's hand.

He had never planned a proposal. Never waited for the perfect moment. He always wanted things to unfold organically, silently, without forcing a single emotion. But today... He decided to do the one thing he never had – To take a chance.

His fingers brushed gently against the edges of the book he had written for Nitya. **ARYA – A Story of Hearts**.

All these days, he penned down his feelings for her. The way they met, their little moments, the bond they shared, the way she healed him... He poured out every emotion, and the pages knew more than what Nitya did.

It was magical how his feelings turned into words, words into pages, and pages into a book he was holding now. And today, he was going to give it to her and *propose*. And deep down, he knew she would say yes.

The spark in her eyes every time they met, the way she looked at him like he meant everything, the way she softly admitted, "I like you," just days ago. He smiled like a child just thinking about it – her reaction, her smile, her yes.

To the girl who pulled him out of his darkest nights
To the girl who healed wounds no one else dared to touch
To the girl who isn't just hope but the whole sunshine

Thanks to Spectra, Arjun knew how to turn even the smallest corner into something magical and grand. He had a plan in his head.

A book in his hand. A heart full of dreams. But what he didn't realize... *was just how hard it was going to hit.*

Meanwhile at Nitya's home, she was in her most vulnerable phase. And suddenly a message came from Arjun, "Recharge?"

Nitya blinked. The phone buzzed again. She reached for it half-heartedly, assuming it was someone else. And then she saw it.

She sat up. Heart suddenly awake. She stared at that single word for a long time. Her mind said No, firmly, logically. But her heart whispered Yes, softly, stubbornly.

A quiet war began inside her, between staying back and meeting him. That single word had made her both ache and glow at once. And finally, she decided she wanted to see him. She didn't know what she was walking into. She didn't know if it would break her more. *One last time*, she told herself. Just once more. And then I'll let go.

~

Arjun was waiting at the park. The air was still. The path, quiet. Their usual meeting spot now glowed with soft fairy lights draped on tree branches. A wooden bench they usually sit on looked different today with petals scattered on it. Resting on the bench was a book, tied with a string, waiting to hear Nitya's YES.

The stars shimmered in the sky, the moon hung low, as if pausing to witness how this moment would unfold. The pathway leading to the bench was lined with lights on either side guiding her, softly.

Arjun was waiting for her. This time, with a heart full of love. No more silence, no more holding back. All the words he hid for so long, he was ready to speak them out loud.

He wore her favorite black shirt, neatly ironed. A small gift in his hand, and a glow in his eyes that no one can look away.

And then... She came.

Nitya arrived in her tracks, completely unprepared for what was waiting for her. Her eyes were puffy. Red. She looked like she hadn't slept all night. As she stepped into the softly lit path, her eyes landed on the glowing setup... and then on Arjun. She paused. Confused and overwhelmed.

Arjun took a step closer. He looked different today. He wanted to say so much, but all that came was a nervous smile.

"What's all this, Arjun?" Nitya asked, her voice low. He didn't answer. Instead, he handed her the small gift in his hand quietly. Then, with a deep breath, he took the book and handed it to her.

"Nitya, every word I never said... is in here. It's our story. I always said, *you will read one day* and here it is," he said calmly.

Her fingers gripped the book tightly, wondering what's inside. She saw the name of the book, *Arya – The story of hearts.*

Arjun slowly dropped to one knee, just like any man would. And then came the words, soft but certain. *"I love you, Nitya."*

She blinked, unsure if this was reality or some daydream. Her hand instinctively rose to her lips. Was this really happening? Was Arjun proposing to her?

The man she loved had just given her his soul in pages. And she... she was carrying a truth that could destroy him. Nitya's legs shook. She sat down on the bench. No, she collapsed. The weight of everything was finally too much to hold. She couldn't take it anymore. The book was still pressed against her chest, but now her hands covered her face. The tears fell.

Arjun froze. "Nitya...?" He stood there, confused, concern on his face. He had pictured this moment a thousand times before going there. Her smile. Her laugh. A soft 'yes.' Maybe even a few happy tears. But this? This was not joy. This was pain.

She couldn't say a word. And Arjun? He watched the woman he loved cry; in a moment he thought would be magical. And her silence spoke more than any rejection ever could.

This was supposed to be their moment. A romantic night. An intimate confession. Fairy lights around, stars glowing above them. His heart in her hands. A novel about them, for her. What more could she have wished for?

And yet, here she was. Broken and falling apart. And in the middle of that silence, her heart whispered to herself.

Oh, little heart, I love you too
But you don't have a clue
A moment I can never forget
A moment I'll replay a million times
But this poor heart – it cannot say yes
All my feelings, I cannot express
Because my soul is such a mess
This poor heart – it cannot control her tears
She's been waiting for true love for years
But she cannot accept, not with all these fears
A gift so close to my heart
But this moment... I know we would part

Nitya didn't say a word. Not a yes. Not a no. She just sat there in pure silence. She didn't want to tell him the truth, she wasn't ready. And Arjun... he sat beside her. Close enough that she could hear his breath, the ache in his heart.

"Nitya," he began, holding her hand in his. She didn't look at him. But she heard it. Every syllable.

"I think... I always loved you," he continued, eyes fixed on the stars above. "But I was never strong enough to say it. Because every time I've loved someone in my life... they've left. They gave me pain. They walked away."

His voice cracked just a little, but he kept going. "But you... with you, I always knew. You were the one. The one who felt like home. And I believed, I *still* believe you'll never leave me."

He turned to her gently, wiped the tears from her cheeks. His touch was featherlight.

"I don't know what's on your mind. I don't know what this silence is hiding. But I do know this... nothing in this world can separate us... not if we fight together. I can't even think of you with someone else."

He paused. His voice softened even more, childlike, "I know you love me too."

His eyes searched for hers, not for confirmation, but for understanding. She looked at him. The man who was willing to fight through anything... for her. And she? She was about to break that heart into a million pieces. And finally... with the softest voice, barely audible, she said, "No, Arjun."

Two words. But they shattered everything inside him. He just stared at her, like he didn't hear it... or didn't want to believe he had.

Her voice trembled, just enough to say what she had to, "I'm sorry. I can't.... I don't feel the same."

It was a lie. But it was all she could give. And that hurt more than any truth. She stood slowly, "I should go. Take care, Arjun." And just like that she walked away.

Arjun stood frozen. He watched her leave. "Nitya..." he called out once. But she didn't pause. Didn't turn. *Their book* stayed untouched on the bench. She didn't take it. She couldn't. Because holding it felt like saying yes. And tonight, all she had was a trembling 'No'.

Arjun didn't shed a tear. The pain sat too deep, like something that couldn't find a way out. He stood there, staring at the spot she had just left. Like a man who had just lost something too precious to name. And then.... A notification appeared on his phone. His eyes dropped down immediately, hoping it was a message from Nitya. But it was something else... A photo from an anonymous sender that showed Nitya sitting at a café with Jai.

Gupta sent their photo to Arjun anonymously. At a very wrong time. Arjun recognized Jai's face immediately. "So, she met Jai..." he thought to himself and froze.

Meanwhile, Nitya stood outside the park, a storm of thoughts racing through her mind. She wanted to see him, just once more. She knew... this was the last time she would ever see him. And maybe this was the goodbye she never learned how to say.

Without thinking, she rushed back inside the park. Arjun was still there, standing at the same spot. Before he could react, she wrapped her arms around him from behind. Tight. So tight that it almost hurt.

Arjun didn't move. His eyes remained fixed on his phone. A moment later, he turned slightly and showed the photo to Nitya.

"So, this is why you said no?" he said with tears rolling down his cheeks now. And then he didn't wait for a response. He simply turned his head, picked the book up and walked away.

Her heart ached as she saw his tears, but she didn't stop him. She knew that he misunderstood. She didn't know how to fix it. And... a part of her didn't want to. "Maybe this was how it was supposed to end. If Arjun had walked away because of what he assumed, maybe this distance is needed. Maybe he wouldn't question my silence now. Maybe he would stop holding on. And maybe... he needs it."

Because what waited on the other side of the truth was something she couldn't imagine giving him. Not the pain he would feel when he found out what her brother had done. She looked around. The lights. The décor. The bench. The way he set up everything. "I'm sorry Aru," she screamed louder.

And with that, she made a silent decision. No more calls. No more messages. Let fate and distance do what she couldn't.

Arjun had driven for nearly an hour, without a destination. He stopped by the lake road outside Saanjhpur. Leaning back in the seat, eyes shut, he tried to breathe. "She didn't deny it. She didn't stop me," his mind said.

"Why am I feeling this way? What right do I have? It's her life. She can do whatever she wants. She doesn't owe me an explanation. Why does it feel like I lost something I never really had?"

Despite the thoughts in his mind, his heart still believed her. Of course it did. Somewhere deep down, he knew this couldn't be the end. He still believed he could win her back. He wasn't ready to let her go. Just not yet. He whispered to himself, *"Nitya... maybe our story isn't meant to begin with a yes."*

~

Nitya was wide awake the entire night. Her world had shifted in a day. *Gautam. Jai. Gupta. The footage. And now... Arjun.* Her eyes burning red, face pale, mind restless, and heart aching for him.

Her mind began replaying everything. Gupta had shown her the footage from the accident.

"Was it only to me? Or does Gautam know about it too?" her thoughts raced. "Did Gupta blackmail Gautam into fixing my alliance with Jai?" The more she thought about it, the more confused she was. All she had were questions and not a single answer. She needed to understand Gupta's real intentions.

Wiping away her tears, she steadied herself, "I need to know who Gupta and Jai truly are. And why were they making false accusations against Arjun's family."

She decided she had to learn the truth about Gupta before confronting Gautam who had been hiding something so terrible from her all this time.

She knew she was alone in this. She was strong, yet a small voice inside her whispered, "You need someone... someone who listens, understands, and holds your pain with you." She knew she couldn't approach her family. And so, in that moment, her heart spoke only one name – Shaurya. The only person she felt she could trust.

She wanted to tell him everything... how much Arjun meant to her, how deeply she loved him, and why she had forced herself to say no. But another thought rose sharply in her mind. "No. I cannot tell him about the footage. I cannot tell anyone about it." So, she decided she would only speak about the accusations and nothing more.

Nitya picked up her phone and dialed Shaurya. She silently wished he wouldn't be at Spectra when he answered. After a few rings, his voice came through, "Nitya? How are you?"

Nitya's voice was different. He sensed it immediately and asked, "Are you okay?"

She swallowed hard. "Shaurya, I... I need to talk to you."

"Now?" he asked gently.

"Please come home. I really need to talk to you about something important," Nitya said.

Shaurya was tense and concerned at the same time. Handing off his responsibilities to the team, he rushed to her place.

The house was quiet when he arrived. Nitya opened the door slowly, stepped aside, and said, "Come in." And they walked towards her room.

Nitya sat cross-legged on the bed while Shaurya pulled a chair closer and settled beside her. Looking at her face, he understood something was terribly wrong.

He broke the silence, "Nitya... you look vulnerable. What happened?"

"I wanted to tell you something. But promise me, this stays between us," she said, her voice still trembling.

"Of course, Nitya. I promise," Shaurya replied gently, reaching for her hand. "Is this about Arjun?"

"Yes," she whispered. "Arjun proposed to me yesterday... and I said no."

"What...?" Shaurya almost got up from his chair. "You said no?" His eyes widened in disbelief. Nitya's response came as a complete shock to Shaurya.

"I had to," she murmured. "Shaurya, I didn't tell Arjun yet. But there's someone who is poisoning everything behind – Gupta. This person has been spreading things about Arjun's family."

Shaurya frowned immediately.

She continued, "Accusations against his parents. About the factory. Lies. Half-truths. I'm sure he is twisting stories. And the worst part... Gautam and Ritu... they believed it. My family started pushing me to marry Jai."

Shaurya's fists clenched.

"I don't believe any of it, Shaurya. I know Arjun. I trust him. But I need proof. I know Gupta is up to something. I need to know who exactly he is."

"I was already in such a vulnerable state... and then to my surprise, Arjun confessed his feelings last night. He means the world to me..." she said, pouring her heart out. "But still.... I said No."

"There's something else. Something I can't talk about just yet. I can't tell you the real reason right now. Please... trust me, Shaurya," she said.

Just like that she narrated everything to him. Everything... *except the footage*.

Shaurya sat quietly, still trying to process it. He listened patiently without interrupting her. As she fell silent, he looked at her and assured her that everything would be okay.

"Nitya... Arjun and I are close. Really close. He's not just a friend. He's like family to me. He was very different back then. Loud. Mischievous. But somewhere along the way... after his mom... he changed. He became quieter. Carried everything inside. Stopped trusting people easily. But Ashwin and I... we stayed. We stayed because we know the real him."

"Whether you believe it or not, he started changing for the better only after you came into his life. And we saw it. We saw him become more hopeful. Alive again."

Nitya's eyes welled up.

Shaurya continued, "I'm relieved to know you love him too... I understand you have your own reasons. But I am here to help you... I just want the two of you to be together."

She wiped her tears and thanked him for his understanding words.

"We have to find out the truth about Gupta. About what really happened back then at AS Industries. I need to prove that Arjun's family didn't deserve what they're being accused of," she said firmly.

Shaurya gave a nod, "That's exactly what we'll do."

And he continued, "There is something else I want to share with you. Arjun, Ashwin, and I have been friends since childhood. Always together. And back then... my family wasn't doing well. Financially, I mean... My dad lost his job during a bad phase and we were struggling. And it was Arjun's mother who offered him a job at their factory when he needed it the most. She was a very kind-hearted woman."

Nitya was listening carefully, taking in every detail.

"And Arjun..." Shaurya continued, "He's been like that forever. Even today, though I technically work for Arjun at Spectra... he never treated me like an employee. Never once. Not even in private. He always treated me like his equal. Like a brother."

"His family... they're the same. Always down to earth. Humble," Shaurya smiled. "And Shreya? One of the brilliant girls you'll ever meet. And their father is a gentleman in every sense. Dignified."

He leaned forward, "My family owes everything we have today to them. And they never once made us feel like we owed them," he said quietly.

Nitya absorbed all his words and was overwhelmed to hear about Arjun's family.

Shaurya smiled gently, "I just... wanted to share it with you. Because you deserve to know. And let's find out who this Gupta really is. Together."

He continued, "My dad might know something about Gupta. Even if he doesn't... we'll try to get to know, maybe through his old friends or mutual contacts at AS Industries. Okay?"

Nitya reached out, holding his wrist lightly. Her eyes pleading, "Promise me again..." she said. "Promise me you won't tell anyone about this. Especially Arjun."

Shaurya placed his other hand over hers, squeezing it gently. "I will never tell him, Nitya. Don't worry," he said firmly, meaning every word. "This stays between us."

~

THE HUNT BEGINS

That night, Nitya thought to herself, "If Gupta is manipulative, if this whole proposal is being pushed with hidden intentions... then the first thread to pull is Jai."

Meanwhile, on the other end, Shaurya quietly began making his own inquiries about Jai. By the end of it, he found a useful lead through Siddhant. Without wasting a second, he called Nitya and assured her that he would learn more about Jai through him.

Siddhant had been Shaurya's schoolmate... not a close friend, but someone he remembered well. They went to the same school for a few years. Friendly enough, just not the kind of person you'd share secrets with.

So, Shaurya texted him casually. They chatted for a while about work, moving cities, and their school memories. He didn't rush. He let the conversation settle into its own rhythm.

The next evening, he sent Jai's photo with a simple message, "Hey Siddhant, do you know him?"

There was a pause. The typing bubble appeared. Disappeared. And appeared again. Finally, Siddhant replied, "Uhh... yeah. That's Jai. How do you know him?"

Shaurya chose his words carefully. "One of my friends got a marriage proposal. We're just trying to know more about him."

A long silence followed. Then Siddhant replied hesitantly, "I don't want to say anything that isn't my place... but since you asked, and since this might matter, just be careful, okay?"

Shaurya's heart began to race. "Can you tell me more?" he typed.

Siddhant, after another long pause, replied, "I really shouldn't be saying all this... but I would feel worse keeping quiet."

And then came the story. "Jai was in my college. He was charming. But... the kind of guy who would cross lines and laugh about it. He wasn't exactly respectful toward women. There were many

complaints about him. Eventually, he got into trouble during a college event for misbehaving. I remember the girl's family made quite a scene, but the matter was hushed up."

Shaurya sat frozen, staring at the screen as Siddhant continued to share a few more disturbing incidents.

Finally, Siddhant added, "I don't know what he's like now. People change, I guess. But... I'd be lying if I said I ever trusted him."

Shaurya exhaled slowly and replied, "Thank you. I think you said exactly what I needed to know. I appreciate you for being honest."

Without wasting time, Shaurya forwarded all the messages to Nitya. She read every single word. "So, this is who Jai really is," she thought to herself, "And Gupta... that cunning, calculated man had painted him as an ideal person to Gautam and Ritu. This is manipulation. Deceit."

And if this was the first thread to pull, then she was ready to pull every last one of them. The truth began to unravel.

~

Later that night, Shaurya was having dinner alongside his father. After a few minutes, he looked up, "Dad... do you remember anyone named Gupta at AS Industries? I think he worked there many years ago," he asked casually.

His father thought for a second, then shook his head. "No, beta. I don't know anyone by that name."

"Are you sure?" Shaurya pressed.

His father smiled a little. "I'm sure. Maybe Gupta left the company before I joined. Why do you ask?"

"Need some information, Dad. Just trying to help someone with something important." He paused, then added, "I could've asked Arjun's father, but prefer not to do at this point. I'll explain everything to you later."

His father replied, "In that case, you'll need someone older. I think Raghuveer can help you. He is retired now but he was with AS Industries for a very long time, much before I joined. If there's anyone who can tell you about those times... it's probably him."

Shaurya leaned in slightly, "That's perfect, dad. Can I meet him once?"

"Of course, you can," his father replied, "but I'm still curious why are you so desperate?"

"Don't worry dad, I'm not going to pull any of your company's secrets," Shaurya chuckled.

His father gave a nod, "Raghuveer lives in the old part of the town. He is a bit hard of hearing these days, but he is very sharp. I will give him a call and inform that you will be coming."

"Thank you very much, dad," Shaurya said in a hurry and walked away.

Seeing the way he rushed, his father smiled to himself, "I don't know what he is up to."

~

The next evening, Nitya and Shaurya waited near an old residential lane. The neighborhood was calm, tucked away from the rush of Saanjhpur main roads. They stepped through the half-open gate of a two-story building. Its paint had begun to crack with age, a few potted plants sat by the entrance.

They rang the bell gently. The door creaked open after a few seconds, revealing a man in his late sixties . Lean, kind eyes behind thick glasses, and a soft cotton shawl wrapped around his shoulders.

"Hello uncle!" Nitya and Shaurya greeted, folding hands respectfully.

"Hello beta," Raghuveer replied warmly. He stepped aside and welcomed them in. The house smelled of coffee, sandalwood, and old books.

"I hope the lane wasn't too confusing. People still get lost here," Raghuveer said lightly, settling into his armchair with effort. Nitya and Shaurya smiled and sat down on the sofa.

Shaurya took a moment, then spoke gently, "Thank you again for agreeing to meet us. I know this must feel a little unusual..."

He nodded patiently. "That's alright beta."

Shaurya looked at him, "I just wanted to ask about someone who used to work at AS Industries long time ago. A man named... Gupta."

At that, Raghuveer paused. He leaned back slowly, reaching for water from the nearby table. He took a sip, "Ah... Gupta," he said after a moment. "Now that's a name I haven't spoken aloud in a long time." Then, he asked, "But why do you want to know about him?"

Nitya was relieved to know that Raghuveer knew Gupta. Curiously, she jumped in and said, "I recently received a marriage proposal from his son Jai. So, we wanted to know the family better."

She exhaled and continued, "On paper, everything looks perfect. Too perfect, actually. But something about it... it doesn't sit right with me. But I need to be sure before I talk to my family. That's why..."

Raghuveer studied her face for a moment. He thought to himself, "A woman is trying to make an important life decision. She deserves to know the truth."

He gave a small nod. "Alright," he said gently. "I'll tell you what I remember."

Nitya and Shaurya didn't interrupt. They waited patiently.

"Gupta was sharp," he began. "Very sharp. He was the factory manager back then. He knew how to talk. Knew how to win people over. That was his biggest strength and maybe his worst trait, too. For a while, he rose through the ranks quickly. Everyone thought he was a star."

He paused, and rubbed the bridge of his nose gently. "But there was always something slippery about him... Like he was always two steps ahead of everyone else, but not in a good way."

Nitya leaned in, her voice low, "What happened uncle? Could you please share the details?"

"Why do you want to dig into all this, beta? I don't really know much about his son. But knowing Gupta, I would advise you to stay away from them," he replied.

"But... I really want to know," Nitya said softly, still trying to persuade him.

Raghuveer was now curious and asked himself, "Why was Nitya so determined to know more than necessary?"

Then he replied to her, "It's all internal factory matters, beta. I don't want to get into those details. And it all happened a long time ago. So, there's no point discussing them now."

A moment later, Shaurya spoke up, "Uncle, this isn't just about Jai. It has something to do with Arjun's family."

"How?" Raghuveer asked, surprised.

"Arjun and Nitya love each other," Shaurya explained. "But Gupta, who happens to be a distant relative of Nitya's family, has been spreading rumors about Arjun's parents, accusing them of all kinds of things.

Raghuveer's eyes widened listening to this.

Shaurya continued, "Nitya and I don't believe any of it, because we know what kind of people they are. She just wants to know the truth and prove it to her family."

Nitya moved closer and gently took Raghuveer's hands in hers. "I need your help, uncle. Please. I just want to know the truth... *for Arjun*," she pleaded.

Shaurya added, "We know we could have asked Arjun's father directly. But Nitya doesn't want to involve them at this moment."

Raghuveer placed his hand gently on Nitya's head. He could see honesty in her eyes and the depth of what Arjun meant to her.

He took a deep breath and began, "Back then, Gupta was caught forging financial documents. During an audit, some discrepancies showed up and when they looked deeper, they realized he had been doing it for a long time. Quietly. Cleverly."

He continued, "Initially, nobody knew. But it was Arjun's mother who spotted it first. She realized Gupta had manipulated the records and was using the company's money for his own gain. That day, she was furious. She exposed him and humiliated him in front of everyone saying she would never allow someone like him tarnish the company her family had built and eventually she threw him out."

Nitya's eyes widened as she listened carefully.

"There was chaos in the company," Raghuveer continued. "The owners were furious. They took legal action against Gupta, and he was eventually sentenced to jail."

Nitya's throat tightened as she heard Gupta was imprisoned. Meanwhile, Shaurya asked, curiosity in his voice, "What about his family?"

Raghuveer replied, "His wife was a teacher. She was soft-spoken and always very quiet. I heard that after Gupta was sent to jail, that poor lady took their son and fled to another city."

And suddenly, everything began to make sense to Nitya. She realized Gupta's family must have moved to Rajnagar. Ritu's family must have met Gupta only after he was released from jail, which meant they had no idea about his past. That was why Gautam and Ritu trusted Gupta so blindly.

Raghuveer looked at Nitya and said gently, "I've been loyal to AS Industries for a long time. I've seen the family up close. When I heard about Arjun's mother, I felt truly heartbroken. She was such a pure soul. I'm only telling you all this because I can't bear to see someone like Gupta accuse such a good family. I hope this helps you."

Nitya nodded, her voice soft. "Thank you, Uncle. Really... this means a lot to me." She hugged his arm tightly.

"I'm glad to see how much you care for Arjun and his family. God bless you both," Raghuveer said kindly.

After a while, Shaurya and Nitya prepared to leave with their hearts lighter, but thoughts heavier. As they stepped outside, *Nitya quietly stopped the recording on her phone.*

~

From where she stood now, Nitya knew enough. Jai wasn't who he pretended to be and Gupta wasn't just manipulative but dangerous. Raghuveer's words still echoed in her ears. She could now see how cleverly Gupta had concealed his past from Ritu's family, painting a picture that was never real.

But one question still remained. The question that held the key to everything. How did Gupta manage to get the CCTV footage? And more importantly, from where?

She had no idea. She couldn't talk to Arjun. Not now. Not after everything. She was walking this path alone. But she knew one thing

for certain, somewhere, somehow, she had to find the truth. She wanted to uncover the truth behind that CCTV footage which affected both the men she loved – Arjun and Gautam.

She wanted to know what had really happened after Gupta's imprisonment, when and how his family ended up in Rajnagar. She knew she couldn't expect honesty from Gupta or Jai. The only other person she could get the truth out was from Kamala – Gupta's wife.

And since Raghuveer had mentioned that Kamala was nothing like Gupta... maybe, just maybe, Nitya thought she could get closer to the truth through her. But she wasn't entirely sure what kind of person Kamala truly was. She just trusted her instincts as it was the only best thing she could do in that moment.

~

One afternoon, Nitya called Shaurya and said, "Shaurya... I think it's time I go to Rajnagar. I need to meet Gautam and Ritu and tell them everything about Jai and Gupta."

But what Shaurya didn't know was that Nitya had an entirely different plan in mind.

Shaurya nodded slowly, trusting her. "I think you're doing the right thing. And if you need me, just call. Anytime."

"Thank you for everything you've done. It really means a lot," Nitya replied.

"Don't thank me, Nitya," he said. "We're in this together. And I'm glad Arjun found someone like you. Just clear this mess and come back to him soon. I can't wait to see you both together again."

As the call ended, Shaurya's words echoed in her mind. Tears filled her eyes as she thought to herself, "No, Shaurya... I can never go back to Arjun. This mess is bigger than you know. How can I return to him after knowing what my brother had done."

Nitya needed a way to go to Rajnagar without raising suspicions. One evening at dinner, as naturally as she could, she spoke to her parents, "I've been thinking... it's been a while since I saw Gautam, Ritu and Ira. I miss Ira so much. I thought maybe I could go stay with them for a few days and work from there."

Her parents were touched, "That's a good idea," her mother said, smiling. "It'll be a nice change. And they'll be thrilled too. Give Ira a kiss from us," she added gently. And her father agreed too.

That night, as she lay on her bed, Nitya received a call from Aditi.

"Nitz! Where have you been?" Aditi literally screamed the moment Nitya answered.

Nitya swallowed her emotions and replied casually, "Hey Aditi... I wasn't feeling well the past few days, so I was just resting at home."

"Oh no, Nitya! I'll come over tomorrow. Why didn't anyone tell me? Are you okay?" Aditi asked, and then she laughed lightly, "Of course you must be okay. I'm sure Arjun's been taking care of you."

Nitya managed a fake smile not knowing what to answer. "By the way, Aditi... I'm going to Rajnagar tomorrow to spend some time with Ira. I've been missing her lately."

"Oh really? Say hi to everyone for me. I wish I could come too but I'm stuck with this dumb job," Aditi sighed.

When the call finally ended, Nitya tried hard to sleep but she couldn't. All she could think about was Arjun. *Aru... I miss you. This is getting so difficult. Living without you hurts more every day. My heart, my mind, my soul... everything is craving your Recharge. Badly.*

~

The next morning, she packed her bags and left for Rajnagar. It was already evening by the time she reached Gautam's home.

When Ritu opened the door, her face lit up in pure joy. "Nitya!" Ritu exclaimed. "You didn't even tell us!"

Nitya smiled, hugging her tightly. She scooped Ira up, kissed her cheeks, and held her close.

The house was warm. Filled with the kind of love she always cherished. Neither Nitya nor Ritu brought up any topic about Arjun. The day had passed with laughter and catching up.

That night, as Nitya lay on the bed in the guest room, the house quiet around her, her heart wasn't resting. It was just her and *the silence*. And her thoughts drifted to Kamala. She told herself,

"Tomorrow, I'll find her." And with that thought, Nitya closed her eyes.

~

Back in Saanjhpur, Arjun was lost in his own world. It had been a few days now. No messages. No calls. No sign of Nitya. He kept checking his phone, hoping and waiting. Maybe a message explaining why she said no. Maybe a missed call. Something. But there was nothing. Her *silence* shattered him.

One afternoon, while Arjun was trying hard to focus on his work, Shaurya, Ashwin, and Aditi entered his room. Shaurya already knew the full story but couldn't say a word. Couldn't say anything to Arjun about Nitya. Ashwin and Aditi, on the other hand, were unaware of what happened. Aditi only knew that Nitya had gone to Rajnagar to visit Gautam and Ritu.

Arjun tried to act fine, but it was written all over his face. Breaking the silence, Ashwin casually suggested, "Guys, we're thinking of going for a movie tonight. Aditi and I are in, thought we'd drag you two along."

Arjun shook his head. "Sorry, Ashwin. You guys go ahead."

Aditi looked at Arjun with her usual mischief tone, "I know why you're saying no... Someone isn't here, that's why, right?" she teased.

Ashwin laughed. "Yeah, if Nitya was here, you'd be the first to say yes."

Arjun forced a smile. "Nothing like that. You guys go have fun." Shaurya glanced at Arjun, unsure how to shield him from the teasing.

Aditi leaned back dramatically. "If Nitya was in Saanjhpur, we'd have dragged her to the theatre with us today."

That made Arjun pause. "Where is Nitya?" he suddenly wondered to himself. Before he could ask, Aditi added lightly, "Yeah.. Anyways, let her enjoy with Ira for now!"

Now it clicked for Arjun. He understood that Nitya was in Rajnagar.

~

A GLIMPSE

Rajnagar —

The next afternoon, Ira was napping and Gautam was at work. Nitya told Ritu she was stepping out to meet a friend. She didn't want anyone to know she was actually going to meet Kamala. She couldn't go to Gupta's home directly. So, she decided she would meet Kamala at her school.

As Nitya entered the school premises, the receptionist offered a warm greeting. "Yes, how can I help you?"

"I was hoping to meet Kamala Gupta," Nitya said with a smile.

The lady nodded. "She's just finishing her class. You can wait in the visitors' room."

Nitya sat on the wooden bench; her heart racing faster than she wanted to admit. Her hands fidgeted with her dupatta. She wasn't sure what she would say. She only knew she had to see her. Trust her instincts.

And then the door opened. A graceful woman in a cotton saree and neatly tied hair walked in.

Before Nitya could react, she heard an excited voice. "Hey, Nitya!" Kamala beamed.

Nitya blinked. "You... you know me, ma'am?"

Kamala walked toward her, already reaching out to hold her hands. "Of course I do, my daughter-in-law..." she said, pulling her into a warm hug.

Nitya froze, eyes widening, "Ma'am.."

But Kamala continued brightly, "I've seen your photos. Gupta-ji showed me everything. He told me you met Jai... and that you said yes. Oh, I couldn't be happier. Truly. You're even more beautiful than your pictures."

Nitya stood frozen. *She hadn't said yes.*

Kamala continued, still smiling, "Jai is so lucky. Congratulations... I hope you know how thrilled I'm right now."

Nitya's throat went dry. She didn't know whether to correct her or stay quiet. She realized Gupta had lied. Twisted the story and told his wife a different version.

But Nitya smiled and said, "Thank you... I wasn't expecting you to recognize me."

"How could I not?" Kamala chuckled.

Nitya tried not to show the storm inside her. "I'm actually here in Rajnagar for a few days," she said casually. "Thought I'd come see the school since I heard you taught here."

Kamala smiled, "Let's sit outside," and they walked out of the room.

They sat under a shaded neem tree, children's laughter echoing from a nearby classroom. Kamala looked at Nitya with kindness, the kind that made her wonder. And Nitya sensed something in that moment. "Maybe Kamala wasn't a player in this web. Maybe she is a part of the damage. Another person Gupta had quietly deceived."

~

Kamala didn't know the truth. Not about Gupta. Not about Jai. Not about any of it. She believed her family at every step. Fully, deeply, without a question.

At home, Gupta had spun a very different version of the past. He had painted himself as the loyal manager who was unfairly pushed out of AS Industries. A man betrayed by politics, humiliated by the factory owners, wrongfully imprisoned for the mistakes he never committed, and forced his family to start over in a new city. To his wife, he was the one who suffered, not the one who caused suffering.

Gupta had defamed Arjun's mother even more. He called her cunning and claimed she had turned everyone against him. That she had used him as a pawn to hide the factory's mistakes.

Kamala never questioned it. She was gentle by nature, a schoolteacher who believed in honesty and hard work. And it was

perhaps that same simplicity that made her vulnerable to her husband's stories.

And now, even about Nitya… she was misled.

Gupta told Kamala that Nitya had agreed to the proposal. That the marriage was only a matter of time. That she just needed a few days before everything would be official. So, when Kamala met Nitya, she was warm. Excited. She welcomed her like a daughter-in-law already.

~

Nitya folded her hands respectfully. "Aunty… I've heard so much about you. Everyone says you're a kind and honest person."

Kamala smiled, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. "Oh beta, I just try to do the right thing."

Nitya's voice lowered, "That's why I wanted to speak with you. I hope… whatever I share today only helps us all in the right way."

Kamala's expression shifted slightly.

Nitya took a breath. "I need to be honest with you. I never agreed to this marriage."

There was a pause. A long one. Kamala looked at her with wide, confused eyes. "You didn't agree to the marriage?" she asked. "But Gupta ji told me you had. That you just needed some time. He said you liked Jai."

Nitya took a slow breath. "I never said yes. Not even once. I was forced to meet him, that's all. And after I said no, things started to… shift. That's why I'm here. Because I feel something is not right."

Nitya tried to ask her not to trust Gupta. Kamala's hands folded in her lap. Her fingers tightened.

"No, beta…" she said softly, "You must be mistaken. My husband is a very respected man. You may have misunderstood something. Sometimes situations appear different from what they really are."

Nitya gave a small nod and continued, "Maybe. But… if there is even a chance something is being hidden, wouldn't you want to know?"

Kamala looked at Nitya with the same calm smile on her lips. "I'm sure it's all a misunderstanding."

Nitya didn't push further now, she simply reached for her phone and glanced at Kamala and spoke softly, "I know you don't believe me right now... but I just want you to hear this. Just once."

She opened the voice recordings. Scrolled. Tapped. From the speaker, Jai's voice came out. Their awkward, small talk in the café, and Nitya's firm and clear response saying 'No' to the proposal.

The recording played just a few more seconds, then Nitya stopped it. She didn't include Gupta's part, where he blackmailed her showing the footage – not yet.

When the recording ended, Kamala was confused. She raised her eyebrows, trying to understand. Nitya didn't explain anything else. She just pulled out a small piece of paper, scribbled her phone number, and put it beside her.

"I know you don't believe me right now," she said, "And that's okay. But when you're ready... when your heart starts to ask questions, call me. I'll be there. I'll tell you everything."

Kamala still hadn't moved. Her fingers rested lightly over the folded slip of paper. Nitya stood slowly, offered a small nod of respect, and turned to leave.

~

The next morning, Nitya woke up from a terrible dream about Arjun. As soon as she opened her eyes, she tried to slow down her thoughts and calm herself.

She wanted to know how Arjun was, how his days were without her. Was he fine or was he lost? Multiple questions. She even tried to click dial; however, her heart urged her not to. She gently touched her phone screen, traced his photo with her fingers, and tears started falling down her cheeks.

She started talking to him, as if he was right in front of her. "Aru, I love you," she spoke to the screen.

Unable to hold it any longer, Nitya dialed Shaurya's number. The line rang twice before he answered.

"Hey, Nitya," he said, "You okay?"

There was a small pause. And then, she replied, "I'm trying to be..." and she whispered, "I miss Arjun."

Shaurya's tone softened instantly. "Who would know that better than me, Nitya? I'm just waiting for you to come back. By the way, how did Gautam and Ritu react?"

"I'm waiting for the right time to tell them," she murmured, closing her eyes. "I miss Arjun... so much that it hurts," her voice cracked this time.

"Nitya, I have a client coming in. Stay on the call for a minute, okay? Just mute yourself. I'll be back."

She nodded and muted herself.

Shaurya walked straight to Arjun's room and casually began discussing work *just enough for Nitya to hear his voice.*

The moment Arjun spoke, her heart swelled. His voice was low. Just hearing him felt like breathing again.

When Shaurya stepped out, he asked gently, "Are you happy now?"

"This is all I wanted, Shaurya," she replied, smiling through the pain. "You don't know how badly I needed to hear his voice." And she continued, "Please take care of him."

"I already am and I always will. But Nitya... are you sure you're not hiding anything else?"

She took a deep breath, "No, Shaurya. Nothing else. I'll talk to Arjun once I'm back in Saanjhpur."

Trusting her, Shaurya didn't press further. The call ended and a soft smile crept over her face.

Saanjhpur, Arjun's home —

Nitya's rejection echoed in Arjun's mind like a song he couldn't turn off. For days now, he hadn't seen her, he hadn't talked to her.

The fairy lights he once kept folded in a box near his bookshelf were still lying there, untouched. So was the book *Arya*. He hadn't

opened it since. He would go to their park alone, watching the same sky they once sat under. Same stars. Same breeze. But no Nitya.

Somewhere... somewhere within him, he still had hope. Maybe not today. Maybe not tomorrow. But someday... she'd come back. Or maybe, he would finally understand why she didn't.

That night, Arjun sat alone on the bench at their usual Recharge spot. Her absence hurt. Every minute without her felt heavier than the last. And as he stared at the empty space beside him, his heart ached for just one *glimpse*.

Not to speak. Not to ask questions. Just to see her. From a distance. His mind said no, it was foolish, unnecessary. But his heart? It told him to go. Right now. He stood up slowly, his decision already made. He was going to Rajnagar that night. Not to meet her. But simply to see her. Just once.

Rajnagar —

For years, Kamala had blindly trusted her husband. Everything he said. Everything he did. But that day, something changed. No confrontation, no questions. A change in the way she looked at Gupta and Jai.

Kamala served dinner like she always did. Quietly placed the rotis in the plates, poured dal into their bowls. She watched Gupta as he scrolled on his phone while eating. She noticed how quickly he changed the screens when she passed behind him. The seed of doubt planted by Nitya made her observe closely everything Gupta was doing.

That night, Kamala sat by the edge of the bed. The lights were off. The fan making sounds. Beside her, Gupta slept with one hand gripping the edge of his pillow, the other resting beside his phone.

She couldn't fall asleep. Wanting to check the time, she reached for Gupta's phone. But almost suddenly, Gupta's voice came like thunder, "What are you doing?"

Kamala froze. Gupta sat up instantly, snatching the phone in a hurry. She noticed a slight change in his expression. "I... I was just... checking the time," she replied casually.

"It's 1:30 Kamala. Get back to sleep," Gupta said, gently tapping her shoulder.

Kamala turned her face away, towards the curtain, blinking. "What was that reaction? Why did he snatch the phone? Is he hiding something from me?" she asked herself and dozed off to sleep.

The next morning, the house buzzed with casual chores. Kamala moved around the kitchen as usual. She poured tea into three cups, set them carefully on the table, and called out, "Tea is ready!"

Gupta walked in first, Jai behind, yawning and scrolling through his phone. They settled around the table, exchanging a few lazy comments about the day ahead.

It was then, Kamala spoke casually, sweetly, "By the way... I was thinking," she said, settling into her chair. "Now that everything is moving forward so nicely, I would love to meet Nitya. Spend some time with my daughter-in-law."

Both Gupta and Jai froze for a second, so quickly. But Kamala noticed. Every glance.

Still smiling, she added, "Maybe I'll call her today itself. Jai, give me her number? I want to talk to her and invite her to our home." She looked so genuinely excited. For a moment, Jai and Gupta didn't know how to respond.

Finally, Gupta chuckled in a light tone, "Hold on.. hold on... dear Kamala. We know you are excited to meet her. But I think now is not a good time. Jai and I have some important work. We'll arrange everything properly later. No need to rush these things," he said taking casual sip of his tea.

Jai nodded quickly, "Yeah, Mom... let it happen nicely, with planning. Anyways, she's a bit shy."

Kamala tilted her head slightly, "Of course! Sure." She sipped her tea slowly, watching them carefully from behind her glasses. But inside, questions were already rising. *Why had they lied to her?*

~

The next afternoon, Nitya received a message from Kamala, "Can we talk once? Come to the school if you're free."

Nitya replied immediately, "I'll be there."

She quickly gathered her things and stepped out of the house. Meanwhile, not far from Gautam's house, Arjun sat waiting inside a parked car. He had been there for hours, just for one glimpse of her. One quiet moment. He had promised himself that once he saw her, he would return to Saanjhpur.

So, when the gate creaked open, his eyes sparkled with hope. The moment he saw her, it felt as if the entire world had shifted back into focus. She stepped outside, unaware of the eyes watching her with so much longing.

She called an auto and climbed in. Arjun couldn't resist himself and followed her. But as the auto stopped in front of a school, Arjun's curiosity deepened. "What is she doing here?" he wondered.

He parked nearby and quietly made his way inside. He watched her, keeping a distance. He saw Nitya walking across the school ground and approaching someone standing under the tree.

Arjun slowed his steps, narrowing his eyes, trying to recognize the woman Nitya was talking to. Someone older. He had no idea who this woman was. Or what Nitya was doing there.

Meanwhile, on the other end, Kamala held Nitya's hand and asked, "What is it that you wanted to tell me, Nitya?" she asked. "What exactly do you think you know?"

Nitya took a moment before replying. "Before I say anything, I want to know one thing. What brought your family to Rajnagar? I know you were in Saanjhpur before."

Kamala stiffened. The question caught her off guard, but she didn't hesitate. "Because of what happened there," she said, "The kind of people at my husband's factory... that place was toxic for him and for our family. So, we left."

Nitya drew a slow breath. "Aunty... is that why Gupta-ji was imprisoned?"

Kamala froze. She hadn't expected that. No one in Rajnagar, not even Ritu's father, knew their past. "How did Nitya know?" she questioned herself but stayed silent.

"I know this must be shocking," Nitya continued. "And I know you must have a hundred questions right now. But before I tell you anything, I need to understand your side of the story."

Kamala straightened, her voice suddenly firm. "I'm not afraid to speak," she said. "My husband was innocent. The owner's wife trapped him, insulted and humiliated him in front of everyone before throwing him out of the factory. Later, they made false allegations against him and sent him jail for mistakes the company had made."

Her tone began to tremble with anger. "Those owners... they were corrupt people. They used my husband like a pawn to protect themselves, to save their image. And they destroyed my family in the process."

Tears welled in Kamala's eyes as she went on, "They were very influential. And in a single moment, they changed our fate by painting my husband guilty and forcing us to leave Saanjhpur forever. Jai was a small kid at that time. I was alone and helpless. We moved to Rajnagar to make a fresh start."

Nitya couldn't help but smile at the version of events Gupta had fed his wife. But at the same time, her heart ached for Kamala. She gently took Kamala's hand and said softly, "With all due respect... that isn't the truth."

Kamala's expression shifted. "First you dig into my past and when I finally share it with you, you dismiss everything I've said?" her voice came out sharper.

"Because I know," Nitya replied, steady and firm. "I know what really happened. Your husband wasn't the victim he claimed to be. I spoke to someone who worked at AS Industries. Someone who was there through all of it."

Kamala couldn't take it anymore. "So now you want me to trust a person I barely know, who is accusing my husband based on the words of someone I don't even know?" Kamala blurted. "My husband had been my strength and support all these years and I trust him."

Nitya didn't reply. She simply played Raghuveer's recording.

Kamala listened carefully. When the recording ended, she sat still. But after a long pause, she shook her head slowly. "Anyone can edit a recording these days," she said, not looking at Nitya. "Voices can be changed. Things can be made up. You're young, maybe Raghuveer told you what you wanted to hear."

Nitya didn't argue. She just looked at her and said, "I'm not asking you to believe me. Try knowing the truth yourself."

She stood up and walked away, leaving Kamala behind and a thousand unanswered questions racing through her head. Kamala hadn't admitted it to Nitya, but doubts started to creep in, and an emotional *storm* begun inside her.

~

SECRET ALLIANCE

That evening, Arjun quietly followed Kamala on her way back home. Something about the meeting between her and Nitya didn't sit right with him. Why had Nitya come to a school to meet this woman? Who was she? His curiosity grew stronger.

So, Arjun followed Kamala at a safe distance, careful not to draw attention. Kamala eventually reached a residential street and walked inside her house. Arjun parked his car a short distance away.

Meanwhile, Kamala walked inside and sat on the sofa. Nitya's words echoed in her mind. She recalled how calm Nitya was. Her lack of drama. It wasn't anger. It was something else. Truth? Pain?

She thought to herself, "If she didn't like Jai, she could've simply refused. Why dig into our past? Why come all the way to Rajnagar to meet me? How is any of this connected to her? What is she trying to do?"

As Kamala was lost in her thoughts, Nitya attached screenshots of conversation with Siddhant where he opens up about Jai. Kamala's brows rose as she read through them. She put her phone down and sat back. Her head began to ache badly. The weight of everything stressed her and she almost fainted.

Meanwhile outside the house, Arjun was still waiting in his car, eyes fixed on the Kamala's building. Just then, a man walked through the gate and entered into her house. At first, Arjun didn't recognize him. But as the man moved around, he kept watching, his eyes narrowing.

And then he saw it. Parked outside the house was a car. On its rear glass, in bold letters, was written: JAI.

Arjun's heart skipped a beat. He looked again at the man, his face, and everything clicked into place. He understood it was Jai. "So, this must be Jai's house?" he thought to himself.

Moments later, Jai walked out of the house, this time with Kamala by his side. She looked unwell and visibly in discomfort. Jai helped her get into the car. Arjun watched as they drove off.

He now understood that Kamala was Jai's mother. And she was the woman Nitya had come to meet. He assumed Nitya had come to Rajnagar to meet Jai's family. There was no second thought. His mind rushed to a painful conclusion, "*She chose Jai. And that's why she left me without an explanation.*"

That realization crushed him. The ache in his heart grew unbearable. He couldn't take it anymore. Couldn't stay there for another second. Without waiting, without even trying to think twice, he turned away and drove straight to the airport – his heart in pieces, his soul exhausted, and everything inside him... *broken*.

That night after reaching home, Arjun sat quietly in his room, feeling lost. He didn't want to believe what he saw but his mind kept circling back to one question, "*Did she chose Jai over me?*" Maybe her family had persuaded her. Maybe not.

His anger grew. Without thinking, he reached for the book he had written for her. He stared at it for a moment... Then, with trembling hands, he threw the book into the corner.

His eyes burned. He picked up a bottle. One after another, he drank all night, trying to forget her.

~

The next morning, Kamala felt a little better. She made up her mind to stay strong and dig deeper into the truth.

As Jai left for work, she walked into the bedroom to place some clothes in the cupboard. She noticed Gupta was in the bathroom and saw his phone placed on the side table.

There was a ping. A notification light blinking. She unlocked his phone and slowly opened his messages.

In the chats, she was shocked to see Nitya's name. And her eyes froze on the words:

Gupta (A week ago): "Say yes to the proposal. You don't want me to show the footage to Arjun, do you?"

Gupta (follow-up): "You think he'll still love you once he knows who caused his mother's death?"

Nitya (reply): "Please… don't hurt him."

Kamala dropped onto the bed. Her hands trembled, tears gathering in her eyes.

"Gupta-ji was blackmailing Nitya. He forced her to agree to marry Jai. So… Nitya was right all along? And what video was he talking about? I need to know. I need the truth."

~

A quiet corner of the school. The same tree. Nitya sat waiting for Kamala. Her heart was restless. The breeze rustled through the trees. Kamala arrived, holding a bottle of water.

She just sat beside Nitya and gently held her hand, and said, "I am sorry, beta! I haven't trusted you earlier. But now…. I do."

Nitya was happy to hear that and before she responded, Kamala's voice came in, "I opened my husband's phone today. I saw your messages."

Nitya turned to her, startled. Her eyes welled up.

"I read everything. I'm… ashamed," Kamala started to weep. "What's that video he was blackmailing you about?" she asked.

Nitya couldn't hold herself when Kamala asked that question. And then… the dam broke and tears rolled down her cheeks. She buried these emotions within herself for a while now.

"The video… it's a CCTV footage from a hit-and-run case involving my brother, Gautam," she said, her voice shaking. "And the woman he hit… was the owner of AS Industries. The same family you've hated all these years."

She paused, then whispered, "And I'm in love with their son, Arjun."

Kamala eyes widened.

"Gupta-ji blackmailed me. He said he would show the video to Arjun. I… I didn't know what to do," her voice shattered and she collapsed into Kamala's lap feeling helpless and exhausted.

Kamala gently placed her hand over Nitya's head, "I believe you," she whispered through her tears.

Nitya continued, "I didn't know who to trust. I didn't tell anyone. I didn't know how. I was scared... of what the truth would do."

Kamala held her hand and whispered, "And yet you carried all of this... alone?"

Nitya looked down. "I had to. For Arjun. For my brother."

Kamala nodded gently, wiping the tears from Nitya's cheek with her thumb. "No more crying," she said softly. "You're not alone anymore. I promise I'll help you in every way I can. And I won't let Gupta blackmail you again. *Not while I'm here.*"

~

That day, Kamala returned from school earlier than usual. She placed her handbag on the side table and quietly shut the door. She glanced at the clock. Still a couple of hours before her husband would return.

Her hands trembled slightly as she walked to his desk. The laptop sat there closed as usual. She had been observing Gupta and his passwords for the last two days. She opened the laptop and entered the password, hoping to find the CCTV footage.

She searched folder after folder. Video files, documents, she opened everything. Her heart was shouting louder with every failed attempt. She found nothing. She leaned back in the chair, almost ready to give up.

That's when she saw it. She opened his mail and scrolled to the date of the accident. She thought she might find the video there. And then she saw *something different altogether – something even terrible* – it wasn't a video but an anonymous mail log.

She gasped as she read through the conversation.

Gupta (as Anonymous): *Send me the amount by tomorrow. Or the video goes out.*

Then, there was a video of a young girl (Shreya), edited and morphed to make it look otherwise.

Kamala was breathing hard. As she scrolled down, she saw Arjun's mother's name in the emails, that's when she realized these messages were sent by **Gupta to Arjun's mother** back then.

Kamala couldn't believe what she was reading. She gathered courage to read the rest of it.

Gupta (as Anonymous): *Your daughter's future, your family's respect – it's all in your hands. You know what to do.*

Arjun's mother: *Please... please don't do this. I'll send the money. Just delete the video. I'm begging you.*

Gupta (as Anonymous): *Pay me and I'll delete it.*

Gupta (as Anonymous): *My account's frozen. Meet the person at the KK florist shop near RD Road. White hoodie. Don't talk to him. Just give the money and leave.*

Arjun's mother: *Okay. I'll go. Please don't let the video out. I've deleted all our conversations from my phone.*

Gupta (as Anonymous): *He's waiting. Go now.*

Kamala stared at those words. A woman's desperate plea. It crushed her. Her fingers slipped off the mouse. Her breath caught in her throat. She closed the laptop, tears falling quietly.

She whispered, voice cracking: "What have you done Gupta...?" She sank back in the chair. "Did I... never really see my husband's true colors? Was I so blinded by love that I never questioned the worst in him? I was a fool."

She wiped her tears, swallowed the tightness in her throat, and murmured, "What have I done... standing beside lies and calling them love?

She immediately texted Nitya asking her to meet at a restaurant. She sat opposite Nitya, her hands trembling as she placed her phone on the table between them.

"I opened his laptop," she began quietly. "I didn't find the accident footage anywhere. But then... I found something even worse.

I... I don't know how I found the courage, but I read through the e-mail thread," she cried.

"I didn't know, Nitya," Kamala whispered, her voice breaking. "I didn't know what my husband had done. What kind of monster he is."

Nitya sat frozen as she read through the messages. And everything clicked. The dots in her mind connected like never before. Each message, each timeline, every suspicion with painful clarity. She closed her eyes.

"Now I understand," Nitya said.

"Arjun told me before..." she began, "That his mother was going to meet her friend that day. He dropped her; however, she wanted to give the newly married couple a bouquet as she was meeting them for the first time. He dropped her at the florist shop and left."

"So, she stopped by the florist shop on RD Road. The place Gupta asked her to come. The place she was last seen."

Kamala held her breath.

Nitya pressed her hand to her mouth, "She forgot her phone. That's why Arjun went back to give it. Now I understand why she asked Arjun to leave and why she went alone to the shop. She was blackmailed into handing over that money." Nitya paused. "And that's when, my brother accidentally hit her."

Kamala sat frozen. Her tears had no place to go now, they just kept falling, unstoppable. She was trying to let the truth settle inside her like a storm.

"By the way, I also remember Arjun telling me that there were no CCTV cameras near the accident spot. That's what the police told them. They searched the area, it was a quiet, almost residential stretch. No official footage came up. So, there was no way to track the car. And the case just... faded."

Kamala's brows furrowed, "But then... how did Gupta get that accident footage?"

They stared at each other.

And then, Nitya said slowly, "What if... he got it from the florist shop? That's the only place near that spot. She stopped to buy flowers.

That's where she handed over the money. But if the police didn't find any cameras, then maybe...."

Kamala filled in, "Then maybe... Gupta made sure they didn't."

Nitya nodded slowly, the pieces clicking into place now. "Yes. Think about it. Once he got to know about the accident, he might have been afraid that the truth would come out. So, maybe he manipulated the florist to take the cameras down before the police could get to it."

Kamala's voice dropped, "So... He did this to protect the person who collected money from Arjun's mother."

Nitya continued, "Yes. If police saw the CCTV footage, they would know that she had come to the shop to hand over the money. Then the police would start digging. They would investigate who she gave the money to. Why. For what. And eventually... Gupta's name would surface. So, he hid it to protect himself."

"He blackmailed Arjun's mother anonymously. And when she died... he made sure the only copy of that truth stayed in his hands."

Kamala leaned back slowly, everything spinning.

"And this time," Nitya continued, "He used it on me. To blackmail me to marry Jai."

Kamala's throat dried. Her face filled with disbelief and guilt, "What kind of man did I live with all these years?"

And they both sat there in silence, forming a *secret alliance*, determined to expose Gupta's true colors.

~

THE CONFRONTATION

Rajnagar, Gautam's home —

Nitya was sitting in her room, quietly recalling everything Kamala shared the other day. Just then, Gautam entered the room holding two cups of tea.

"I made it just the way you like," he smiled, handing one to her.

"Thanks, Gautam," Nitya replied.

They sat in silence for a minute, sipping slowly. Then Gautam cleared his throat, "Can I ask you something?"

She looked up, "Hmm?"

"You've been meeting Kamala aunty quite a bit these days... I have been observing you."

She stayed quiet, unsure where this was going.

"I was just wondering... Maybe you've made up your mind. About Jai," he said, teasing his sister.

She looked at him raising her eyebrows.

"I mean, if you're spending time with his family... maybe you're seeing the good in them. Jai's a nice guy. Kamala aunty and Gupta Chacha genuinely likes you. Maybe... it's a good match for you after all?"

Nitya didn't speak but heart was screaming loud.

Gautam continued further, "I'm only saying this because... I care. And I know, after everything, you deserve someone who'll give you a good, peaceful life. Jai could...."

"Stop it, Gautam. Just stop it! I can't take this anymore" Nitya said, her voice furious.

Gautam was confused at her reaction. He blinked, "What do you mean? What happened?"

"I can't pretend I'm okay. I can't pretend this makes any sense," her jaw tightened.

Gautam asked, "Then why are you meeting her?"

She looked at him, "*Because I love someone else*," she said, voice breaking. "*I love Arjun*," she finally admitted. The words are in the air like thunder.

Gautam looked stunned. "You... what?" as if he didn't guess it earlier.

"I didn't tell you because I didn't want to complicate things," she said, "But yes. I love him. And I've been staying away from him *just because of you*."

"I know what you want... You want me to marry Jai... You want me to stay away from Arjun... But why, Gautam?"

Gautam could see the anger in her eyes. In all their years together, he had never seen her this way. His hands started to shiver.

Just then, Ritu walked in. Seeing the look on their faces, she slowed, sensing something was wrong.

Nitya continued, "All this time, you were only worried about your past. Not once did you think about my future. This match... this whole plan of setting me up with Jai... It's wrong. It's very wrong," she burst out.

Gautam stood frozen, unable to speak, "Does Nitya know the truth? What past?" he asked himself.

A moment later Nitya walked to her bag and pulled out her phone, "I wasn't going to say anything today. But you deserve to know what you've done, knowingly or unknowingly," she said placing the phone in his hand, "See for yourself who you've trusted."

Gautam scrolled through Siddhant's messages, then listened to Raghuveer's voice. Slowly, he sank into a chair.

"Why... why didn't you tell me earlier?" his voice was shaky.

"Wait, Gautam. There's more..." she played the voice from the cafe where Gupta blackmailed her to marry Jai using the footage.

Nitya swallowed the pain in her throat, and finally said, "This is the footage of you hitting Arjun's mother... The footage of the accident you hid from us all this time... The footage that destroyed you inside."

"And this doesn't end here!" Nitya continued to explain everything – about Gupta blackmailing Arjun's mother... the CCTV footage... the florist shop... Kamala... Jai... Everything.

Hearing what Nitya had just said, Gautam felt like the world beneath him had begun to crumble.

"You've been carrying this inside you for so long, trying to make it right by setting me up with Jai," Nitya said, tears brimming, "How could you be so selfish, Gautam?" her anger slowly turned into pain.

Ritu's mouth opened in disbelief. "Tell me this isn't true Gautam... Tell me whatever she just said is wrong."

Gautam stared at the floor. His lips parted, but no words came. The silence itself answered.

Then, he broke. "I'm the reason, Ritu," he whispered. "I'm the one. I've been hiding it... all this time. I'm sorry! I didn't mean to hit her... it just happened so fast. I didn't even see her. I panicked and I ran. I didn't know she was dead... not until I heard it from Arjun."

And then, his breath shortened. His shoulders jerked. "Gautam..." Ritu cried, as his body began to tense. His fingers curled, jaw clenched. It was happening again. The convulsions.

Nitya cried, catching hold of him as he fell on the floor, eyes blinking rapidly.

"Breathe slowly," Ritu whispered, holding his hand. "Listen to me. We're here."

Nitya placed a hand on his back, rubbing gently. "Shh... It's over. It's over now. We know the truth. You don't have to carry this anymore. You don't have to run from it," she said crying as she couldn't see Gautam in that state.

Slowly, his breathing began to settle with time. The worst had passed. He leaned back against the wall, closing his eyes.

Nitya wiped the sweat from Gautam's forehead, "Gautam..." she said. "I know your intentions were never wrong. I know you didn't mean to hit her. It was an accident. It just happened."

"You have to be strong now. You can't break down like this. I need my brother... I know you're hurting, but you can't let guilt drown you anymore."

It took a while for the room to breathe again. For the first time, Gautam wasn't alone in his guilt. And that made a lot of difference.

Later that night, sleep didn't come easily. Not for anyone. Gautam was wide awake, eyes fixed on the ceiling, his chest heavy with guilt. Ritu slept beside him, pretending to rest, but her eyes remained open, watching him, afraid of what he might do in the silence.

"I regret everything I've done, Ritu..." he said, voice shaking. "I was so selfish all this time. I can't even look Nitya in the eyes anymore. I don't know how to make this right. She fought for me, protected me without a word, without blame. And what did I do in return? I tried to separate her from the one person she loved the most."

Tears streamed down his face as he spoke. The more he thought, the worse he felt.

Ritu took his hand gently. "We'll fix this. Together" she whispered. "I'm with you."

Gautam blinked, his chest still rising unevenly. "Arjun..." he murmured. "What if he..."

"No," Ritu cut in softly, "I know how much they love each other. We'll do everything we can to help him understand. He deserves to know the truth and we owe it to him."

He nodded slowly returning to normal. An hour passed. The quietness around them settled like dust after a storm.

He walked slowly to Nitya's room and sat beside her, eyes red. And then, he hugged her tightly.

"I'm the reason you're in this mess, Nitya. I'm the reason you're staying away from Arjun, carrying all of this alone, fighting like this... All this time, I thought I was fixing things. But I only ruined more."

"I'm sorry... I didn't realize how toxic Gupta and Jai were," he whispered, his arms wrapped around her like a lost child.

Nitya didn't say anything. She just held him back.

And that night, as he sat beside her, Gautam decided to himself, he would go to Saanjhpur, he would meet Arjun, and he would ask for forgiveness.

~

The first light of dawn spilled through the windows. Ritu blinked her eyes, her mind still tired, her heart heavy from the night before. She looked around. Gautam wasn't there. She got up, walked out into the living room – no sign of him.

A message from Gautam waited on her screen. "I'm going to Saanjhpur. To Arjun's house. It's time I face him. I've got to bring Nitya and Arjun back together. This is the only way I can make things right."

Nitya took the phone and read the message. Her eyes filled instantly. "What if Arjun doesn't forgive him?" she whispered.

Ritu turned to her gently. "He will, Nitya. And even if he doesn't... Gautam and I will keep trying."

She squeezed Nitya's hand and said, "We need to go to Saanjhpur too."

A couple of hours later, the bags were packed and they were on their way.

Saanjhpur, Arjun's home —

Gautam didn't know what he would say. He just knew it's time and he would face the consequences no matter what.

A knock. Arjun blinked.

Another knock. Not loud.

Arjun opened the door slowly. And there stood Gautam. He didn't look like himself. Sleepless. Guilt dripping from his eyes.

Arjun didn't speak. Neither did Gautam. Until Gautam stepped in and collapsed on the floor, breaking down.

Arjun stepped forward, "Gautam?"

But Gautam stopped him. "I... I don't deserve to stand," he whispered. "Not here."

Arjun was confused, "What are you talking about?"

Gautam looked up at him now. Voice broken.

"It was me," he said. "The car. The one that... that hit your mother," he couldn't breathe properly now. The words came out jagged, from his soul.

"I didn't see her. I swear I didn't. I was rushing to the hospital. I panicked... and I left." Tears continued to fall. "I left her there. I kept driving. And I've lived with that guilt every single day."

Arjun stood frozen.

"But I swear, Arjun... I had no idea she would die. I... I never imagined it would take her life," he said.

"And how selfish was I really! I thought if I could keep Nitya away from you, maybe... maybe I'd never have to face this. Maybe I could protect my secret." He sobbed. "But she chose you and fought for you. For your family. And I realized, I couldn't live with myself anymore. Not after what she has done to protect me."

Silence. Just the fan humming softly above.

Gautam looked up again, "I came here to ask for your forgiveness. I know I don't deserve that. I just needed to tell you the truth myself. And I need you to know... Because no matter what happens next, you should hear it from me," his voice cracked, "I thought of my family. But I didn't think of yours... I didn't think of your mother... This guilt has been eating me alive, Arjun. And I can't carry it anymore in silence."

"I was so scared of losing everything that I didn't realize I had already taken everything from someone else."

A long silence passed before he looked Arjun in the eye again. "I deserve whatever you decide. If you want to go to the police... I won't stop you. I won't justify it."

He repeated again and again, "I didn't know it would lead to her death. I thought maybe she'd get treated, maybe it wasn't that serious."

A long pause. And Arjun looked him in the eye, "I have imagined the car, I've imagined the person who did it, a million times," Arjun said, "And somehow, I never imagined it would be you."

Gautam dropped his eyes.

"I always hated that person whom I imagined," Arjun continued. "It was easier that way. But now..." he let out a breath, "Now, I don't even know what to feel."

Arjun's hands clenched. He was shaking, but from something deeper than anger. From heartbreak. He just stood there... silent. Still.

Every word Gautam had said echoed through his bones; the truth was here now.

He looked at Gautam – the man with whom he sat at the same dinner table, laughed in the same room, the man Nitya had trusted beyond anything else.

"I would've killed you right here," Arjun said, voice high, shaking, "If you weren't Nitya's brother..."

Gautam didn't flinch.

Arjun took a step forward, "You left her there. On the road. Bleeding. Alone."

"My mother... my mother... she was everything to me. Do you know how I lived after that day? Do you know what it did to me? Do you know what it did to my family?"

He turned away, fighting the scream inside him. "I looked for that car. Every damn day in my head. Wondering who it was. Wondering how someone could do that. And now I know... It was you. The brother of the girl I..." he stopped. Choked.

Gautam remained silent because nothing he says could heal Arjun.

"I should hate you," Arjun whispered. "And a part of me does. But another part... remembers Nitya – the woman who waited by my side when I broke. Who held my hand when I had no strength left. Who gave me a reason to keep going."

Gautam was desperate now. "Arjun... please. Don't hate Nitya for this. Never. She doesn't deserve it. She's suffering every second from the moment she knew this truth... you just don't know how much."

Arjun raised his eyes. His hands curled into fists. He took a long, shaky breath. "I love her. I love her so madly... and I don't know what to do with that love now."

Then he said slowly, "I don't want to see you here. Not today. Please leave."

Gautam opened his mouth, but nothing came out. So, he nodded quietly and walked toward the door. Just as his hand touched the handle, Arjun's voice came again.

"If this were anyone else... I don't know what I would've done."

Gautam's chest collapsed with emotion, but he didn't speak. He opened the door and left.

Arjun sat there for a long time... unmoving. He then walked to the cabinet. Opened the drawer. Took out a bottle again.

First drink. It burned, but not enough to match what was burning inside him.

Second drink. The image of his mother's blood on the street came back. Her handbag, bouquet scattered on the floor, her eyes half open.

Third drink. Gautam on the floor, crying. Apologizing...

Fourth drink. Nitya... Everything about her. Her face. Her love. Her care. And her silence when she walked away.

And suddenly, he was on the floor. Bottles beside him. He punched the carpet. Once. Twice. His throat let out a choked sound.

"What should I do, Ma?" he asked looking at his mother's photo. He tried to stop the flood of thoughts, but they came anyway.

Gautam didn't lie when he said he didn't intend it. Arjun saw it. He saw guilt. Regret. The man was broken. But so was he. And forgiveness? Forgiveness felt like betrayal. Betrayal of his own grief. He wanted to hate him. But Nitya? Arjun loved her... So deeply.

So, what was he supposed to do? The answers didn't come. Only tears did. And somewhere between midnight and dawn, with empty bottles and a heavy heart, Arjun fell asleep on the floor. A moment for him when *he wanted to hate, but love complicated it.*

Meanwhile, Nitya and Ritu were back in Saanjhpur. Gautam confessed everything to their parents – the accident, the guilt, Gupta's trap, Nitya's confrontation, and finally his confession to Arjun.

Their parents didn't have any words looking at the plight of their son. They tried to provide comfort, unable to bear to see the hurt in his eyes.

"I've lived with it every day," Gautam said. "When I saw Nitya with Arjun... now I realize, maybe I had ruined the one good thing in her life."

Nitya broke then. Her tears came fast. "You didn't ruin anything," she said. "You made a mistake. You asked for forgiveness. This is just fate."

The room had quieted. Everyone had spoken, cried, broken a little... and mended, just enough.

And then from the far corner, Ritu's voice came, "They love each other. So madly. So deeply. We took something from his life... and now it's time we give something back. We can't undo the past. But we can choose what we do with what's left."

Nitya couldn't hold back her tears now. It wasn't loud crying, just silent. The kind of emotion that only comes when your heart starts to feel light after carrying too much for too long.

~

A HEART'S PLEA

That night, Nitya wanted to see Arjun. To sit beside him and speak truly from every corner of her heart. She stared at his name on her phone screen for a long time. Her fingers hovered over the keyboard.

Arjun... I want to meet you. Please. She typed. But she knew he wouldn't come. Not after what he found out about Gautam. She locked her phone, hugged her pillow to her chest, and whispered, *'Please Aru... come back.'*

Sleep didn't come easily. Her mind was full of chaos. She believed she was protecting him from a truth that was too painful to bear. She thought distance might be the kinder option, yet it tore her apart.

She closed her eyes, replaying every word Arjun had spoken the night he proposed to her. The way he poured his heart out. The way he said he wanted to be with her for the rest of his life. The way he said those magical words on his knees. The way he said, 'Let's fight together, no matter what it is.'

She knew she had been unfair to Arjun. She was the one who drew him close and then disappeared, leaving him in the dark. But now, she had made up her mind. No more running. No more silence. She would find him and tell him just how deeply she loves him.

She began to text him, one message at a time, pouring out everything her heart had been holding back.

"Arjun... ever since I saw you, I've been in love with you. The moment I saw you at the music event, I knew my heart had already fallen for you. Even during the days you had hurt me, I still waited to see you, to talk to you, to just be near you.

The way you called me 'client'... the way you said I looked beautiful... the day you held my hand and whispered that you liked

me too. Every moment, every little detail is etched in my heart. Every single day with you felt like a beautiful beginning and an even more beautiful ending with you by my side.

How did you believe me when I said I didn't love you? How did you trust my words and not my eyes? Didn't they tell you that I loved you more than words ever could?

I know I shouldn't have let you go. But I just didn't have the courage to face you after I found out the truth about Gautam. I thought that truth would destroy you, so I chose to walk away, thinking you'd be better off never having to face it.

And when you misunderstood everything that day, when you thought there was something between me and Jai, I took it as a sign from the universe. As if that misunderstanding was meant to end us. That maybe it was best for both of us. After that... I couldn't say a word. Not because I didn't want to... but because I didn't know how.

But trust me, Arjun... I have so much to tell you. You can't even imagine what I found out. I didn't go to Rajnagar just to see my family. I went there to uncover the truth. About Jai. About his family. Please... believe me. I will tell you when the time is right.

Aruu... *I love you*. And even now... I'm not sure if you'll ever come back to me. I don't know if you'll still want me. But here I am, your Nitya, standing with arms wide open, ready to love you more than ever. Without you, my days have meant nothing."

She sent all the messages, typing them one by one with trembling fingers and a hopeful heart.

On the other end, Arjun's phone kept vibrating in the middle of the night. He woke up, confused, and reached for his phone. As he opened the chat and read each message, he saw the growing heaviness in his chest. He read every single word.

But his heart? It wasn't ready. Not yet. It was bleeding with pain.

Nitya saw the 'read' ticks appear. For a brief moment, her heart jumped, hope lighting up her eyes. But minutes passed. No reply. No typing bubble.

Meanwhile, Arjun sat in the dark, unmoving. His heart felt unbearably heavy already. All these days, he had believed Nitya said

no because of Jai. But today, he realized she said no because of what Gautam had done. Arjun's mind was spiraling, caught between all the painful thoughts. Jai... Gautam... silence... love. His thoughts twisted into knots, and his head was a storm of confusion.

And worst of all... *He missed her.* In this moment of his deepest vulnerability, all he needed was her.

He wanted to forgive her. But his heart couldn't take it. He was not angry... just deeply sad. Sad for everything that had happened. Sad why things aligned this way. He melted a little while reading her messages, but still chose not to reply. Because silence was all his broken heart could manage at that moment.

Nitya's messages kept coming. "Arjun... I know you're reading my messages. I know you're choosing not to reply. I know you can never forgive Gautam. There's no excuse, no justification. He shouldn't have left her alone on the road, and he shouldn't have hidden the truth for so long. I know how much you love your mother. I know how sacred that bond was to you.

I'm not here to ask you to forgive Gautam. But my heart... it's carrying so much pain. I don't know how to handle any of this, Arjun. I feel so lost without you."

But this time, Arjun didn't read her messages. Nitya, on the other hand, couldn't sleep even for a moment.

~

FORGIVENESS

The next morning, outside the arrival gate of Saanjhpur airport, Arjun's father waited with a nervous smile on his face. Shreya, Arjun's sister, had completed her final semester in UK and decided to return home for a few weeks before graduation.

Shreya wheeled her suitcase toward her father, eyes bright. The moment he spotted her; he opened his arms.

"Papa..." she whispered, and the next second, she was in his arms hugging him tight like she used to when she was a little girl.

"I missed you so much," she said, the words against his shoulder. He chuckled softly, stroking her hair. "My little one's back, finally."

She pulled back to look at him. "How's Arjun? Don't tell me that he knows I'm coming, he doesn't right?"

Her father shook his head, "No beta. It's a surprise as we planned"

She smiled, "I love you Papa. It wasn't easy for me to stay away from both of you."

Her father nodded gently, "It hasn't been easy... for any of us Shreya."

And they drove back home.

The gates creaked open as the car pulled in. They quietly stepped inside, careful not to make any noise.

"Where is Arjun?" Shreya asked and tiptoed to the door and slowly pushed it open.

The curtains were half open. The room was dim, and in the soft morning light spilling in through the side window, Arjun slept on the floor with half-thrown blanket and empty bottles on the rug nearby. His face looked tired.

Shreya rushed to him in excitement, "Arjun..." and woke him up.

His eyes opened slowly, heavy from the night before. His head ached and when he turned and saw Shreya, his breath caught. There, sitting beside him with a small smile and teary eyes, was his little sister. The one who hadn't come back since their mother's funeral.

He sat up slowly. Disbelieving. And then she whispered again, "I'm home."

That was all it took. Arjun pulled her into the tightest hug. He held her like he couldn't let go. Like he needed this moment very badly. "I missed you so much, Shreya... I missed you."

Shreya held him tighter. "Me too, bhai. Every day."

He didn't speak. Just buried his face in her shoulder, letting the tears fall freely.

"Arjun," she said quietly, kneeling in front of him. "What's all this? Why were you drinking?"

Arjun took a long breath. He didn't want to burden his father and Shreya with the truth. Not when Shreya had just come home. He looked up and forced a smile. "A story for later."

Shreya didn't press.

"So..." Arjun said, standing and brushing himself off like nothing had happened, "How was abroad, huh? Tell me everything..."

Shreya gave him a soft smile, not fooled by the sudden cheer, but played along.

He gently ruffled her hair, "I'll make something special for you! I don't want to make you feel mom's absence at home."

Later in the living room, as the house warmed with the scent of Arjun's cooking, Shreya sat cross-legged on the rug with a small suitcase open in front of her, filled with carefully wrapped gifts.

She held out a box to her father. "For you, Papa. I know you'll say it's too expensive, but you better wear it." He chuckled, accepting it with a proud smile.

"And for you, Arjun..." she turned to him holding out a smaller box.

And for the first time in days, the house breathed a little lighter.

~

The next evening, while Arjun was out, Shreya decided to clean his room to surprise him. His room was a mess from the previous day's drinking and crying.

She removed all the bottles and neatly arranged the bed sheet. As she was cleaning his desk, something near the corner caught her attention. A book. Curious, she stepped closer. She picked it up carefully and her thumb brushed the title, "Arya – The Story of Hearts" By Arjun.

"What... Bhai wrote this book?" she was stunned. Something about it felt sacred. Private. She turned the pages slowly. At first, she thought it was just a story written by Arjun, but soon she realized it was about Arjun and Nitya – Arya.

She knew Nitya just as Arjun's friend. She knew all the stories about Ashwin, Aditi, Shaurya, Nitya and everything at Spectra. Arjun had mentioned multiple times about them. But Shreya never realized Arjun was in love with Nitya.

She placed the book down carefully, and walked out of the room. But her mind was swirling with thoughts. She realized how much Nitya meant to him. In that quiet moment, Shreya knew one thing for certain – her brother was so deeply in love that it had begun to rewrite the way he lived.

A smile slowly crossed her face. She felt genuinely happy for him, happier than she had been in a long time. And she could hardly contain her excitement. She waited eagerly for him to return, wanting nothing more than to talk to him about it. But Shreya had no clue what was happening in the background.

The next day, Arjun was sitting in his room and then Shreya's voice echoed, *To the girl who made silence feel like music,* Shreya recited as she leaned against the doorframe.

Arjun's head jerked as he was shocked.

Shreya walked in, raising her eyebrows. "Arya. Isn't that a lovely name bhai?" she teased, settling beside him.

Arjun thought to himself, confused, "How does she know about Arya?"

"*Nitya*..." she repeated in a sing-song tone teasing him further. "You're in love with Nitya. I never imagined you'd fall this hard, this deep, for someone."

Now it was clear to Arjun that she had read his book. He gave her a serious look, asking her to stop.

She held his hand dramatically, "I want to meet her right away! Where is she? Did you propose to her?"

At the same time, Arjun's phone buzzed with notifications from Nitya. Shreya, ever the playful sibling, picked it up with a teasing smile.

"I'm going to tell her you love her," she joked, unlocking the screen.

But the moment she opened the chat, her expression changed. As she scrolled through the flood of messages from Nitya, she could sense they carried pain and apologies.

Arjun reached out to get his phone back, but Shreya resisted, her concern growing. "What happened, bhai?" she asked. "What is all this?"

Arjun turned his face away, silent. Shreya could sense the sudden shift in his energy.

"Please tell me," she insisted.

Finally, after a long pause, he spoke, his voice quiet and heavy, "She said no."

Shreya blinked. Her voice wasn't teasing anymore. It was full of concern. "Why? Did something happen?"

Arjun let out a broken laugh. Just then, their father walked into the room. Noticing the stillness, he sat down on the armchair nearby asking what happened. Shreya sat on the floor beside Arjun. The three of them sat there, wrapped in silence.

She gently picked up the book and showed it to their father. A soft smile appeared on his face. "Did you really write this, Arjun?" he asked, though deep down, he already knew the answer.

Shreya leaned in, "Nitya means a lot to him, Papa," she said. "I've never seen Arjun this way before. The way he wrote about her... She's really special."

After a moment, Arjun murmured, "I realized, she had to say no after she found out the truth. And that truth... it's so heavy... I don't know how to tell you both. But it's breaking me from inside. I feel lost. And I don't know what to do anymore."

He looked so vulnerable, so broken. Shreya and their father sat still, startled.

"What happened, Arjun?" they both asked at once, with worry in their voices.

Arjun looked down, swallowing hard. He forced the words out, "It was Gautam... Nitya's brother... He was the one who hit Mom that day..." his voice cracked.

The room fell completely silent.

Arjun continued, "Gautam came here the night before you came, Shreya. He confessed everything. The accident. The guilt. The truth." He paused. "And Nitya... she knew it already. She carried that secret. And when I proposed her, she said No."

Shreya and their father didn't react immediately. It took a moment for the words to land.

Arjun continued slowly, sharing everything Gautam had confessed. Shreya's eyes didn't move. His father's shoulders drooped as the truth settled in.

Their father spoke, "Every night I sleep... I see your mother's face. Every time I walk past our house or factory... it reminds me of her, of that day. The sirens. The call from the hospital," his jaw clenched and his words dropped like stone in still water.

Shreya was equally furious to learn the truth. But looking at Arjun, and the feelings he had for Nitya, she couldn't say a word. She realized what her brother had been going through, and slowly her anger started to melt.

She tried to speak in an understanding tone, calming down her emotions. "Papa..." she said gently, "You're right. It's unfair. And it hurts. But... do we really want to hold onto that hurt forever?" Their father didn't respond.

Shreya turned to Arjun. "Bhai...?"

Arjun looked at her, took a deep breath and finally said, "I can't forget. I can't face Gautam again... not yet. Maybe not ever. But I'm tired of living in that moment. I'm trying to step out of it... but I'm unable to."

Shreya wiping her tears, held Arjun's hand and said, "What happened that day... it wasn't right. But it was also Mom's destiny. Even if it wasn't Gautam... it might've happened another way. Sometimes, it's just how fate lines up everything. Even if it wasn't him, maybe..." she tried to be supportive when the two men were lost in their own thoughts.

"Can I say something, Arjun?" she said softly.

He looked at her and nodded.

"Gautam... he made a mistake. A terrible one. But you said it yourself. He didn't run because he wanted to escape the truth. He ran because he was afraid. And he's been carrying that fear ever since.

Ma wouldn't have wanted us to carry this hatred in our hearts. She raised us to be kind. To be strong. If loving Ma has taught us anything... it is that people are layered. But we have to find the courage to deal with such situations no matter how hard they are.

I know this isn't easy for any of us. I imagined that car, that person, a million times in my head too. For months, I couldn't shake the memory of that day. But eventually, I tried. I fought hard to forget. I fought hard to live without you both. And we survived nearly two years without her.

I don't believe Gautam did this intentionally. No one would do that unless they held a grudge. And we all know he didn't. You've told me so many good things about Nitya's family before.

Maybe Ma was crossing the road, and she didn't notice the car. We don't know what happened exactly. But think about it, Gautam wouldn't have hit her if she wasn't in the middle of the road, right? She must have been there, and he likely didn't see her as he was rushing to the hospital.

Yes, he was selfish. He didn't stop. He hid the truth all these days. It's hurting me deeply too. But I think he was just a scared man trying to protect his family.

I'm not asking you to forget... But maybe, just maybe, we can at least try to forgive. I'm asking you to see what's ahead of you. You wrote a whole book about Nitya. I never knew you could love someone like this. I don't want you to lose her."

Though his emotions had been overwhelming, Arjun felt some of that heaviness at ease as he listened to Shreya's reassuring words.

Their father listened to Shreya carefully. He wanted Arjun's future more than anything now. He said, voice heavy, "I think Shreya is right. We don't have to forgive him now. Or tomorrow. But holding on to this pain, I think it'll only hurt us more. You lost your mother, Arjun. Don't lose the woman you love," his father said with a heavy heart.

The room was quiet for a long time. Arjun sat still. Their voices echoed in his ears. Shreya pulled Arjun into a side hug. "You've always been my hero," she whispered. "Be one now too."

Their father's heart swelled as he watched them. He knew Shreya was hurt too, yet the way she stood by her brother, steady and supportive, brought a genuine smile to his face. He placed his hand on her head, brushing her hair softly, and asked, "Shreya... where did you learn to speak like that?"

Shreya smiled, "I guess... somewhere between missing you both and missing home, I grew up a little."

Their father said, "A little? That wasn't a little. That was... something we both have never seen."

Arjun turned fully toward his sister now, "You were always the loud one, the stubborn one, the naughty one... But today... you spoke like the wisest among us. I couldn't be prouder of you."

Shreya laughed softly, already tearing up. Before she could say anything else, Arjun pulled her into a tight hug. And then their father joined too, wrapping his arms around both his children. There they were, the three of them... holding each other and learning to heal together as a family.

After hours of tears, silent screams and hard decisions, they decided. *To forgive. To move forward. Together.*

~

FINALLY WHOLE

The next couple of days, life went quiet for Arjun and his family. Though they tried to move on, it wasn't easy. Each of them needed space and there were only occasional exchanges. Shreya and their father stood by Arjun, offering quiet support, yet they left the decision to him. Still, in their hearts, they hoped he would let go of this hurt and find his way back to Nitya.

On the other end, Nitya was emotionally shattered. She had said everything she needed to say, yet Arjun remained silent. She knew he read her messages and chosen not to respond. The silence crushed her heart, slowly wearing her down. The thought that he might never come back grew heavier with every passing day.

Later one night, Arjun lay awake on his bed, his thoughts filled with Nitya. He picked up his phone and began rereading her messages, one by one, this time love took over pain. With every word, his heart felt lighter, starting to fall for her again. He missed her deeply.

A moment later, a notification popped up on his screen. A new message from Nitya. But this time, it wasn't a message. It was a photo – Nitya sitting at their recharge spot. Beneath the image were just a few words, "*Please come back, Aru. I'm waiting for you.*"

I feel like a shell, lost in your sea
How did you not hear this heart's gentle plea?
I feel like a star, lost in your sky
How did you not see these eyes' silent cry?
I feel so numb, without you beside
How did you not feel this soul's quiet void?
This distance, this ache, is more than I can take
Come back to me
Come stay with me

His heartbeat raced. Seeing her face after so many days, nothing else mattered to him right now. His love for her hadn't faded, not even a little. If anything, it had only grown stronger through the pain. His heart whispered to him, "*She's waiting for you to come back. Just go.*"

Arjun didn't reply to Nitya. Instead, he rushed to his father and Shreya and said just this, "I'm going to meet Nitya now. I don't know what will happen. I just know I have to see her." He grabbed his car keys and drove straight to the park.

At the park —

Wrapped in a soft jacket, her fingers tucked inside her pockets, Nitya stood beside their bench. The air was cold. So was the ground.

Arjun hadn't replied to her message, but she held on to hope. Maybe he'll come now, maybe later. She told herself she would wait until he came. She took small steps around the bench, her eyes gazing at the entrance again and again.

And then... *She saw him.*

Arjun, walking slowly through the gate, head slightly lowered, hands in his pockets, eyes searching. *Searching for her.*

The moment she saw him, she didn't wait, she didn't speak. She just ran straight into him. And without a word, she wrapped her arms around him tight, like she'd been holding her breath for months and could finally exhale.

And he held her back just as tight.

And in that embrace, every broken piece of them began to melt. Every silence, every distance, every ache.

The wind rustled. The leaves danced. The stars whistled. The moon hung down, once again, now witnessing something beautiful. Something meaningful.

A moment no longer an imagination. A love finally home. Under the quiet moonlight, and the twinkling stars, the moment had its own intimacy.

How can I tell you
How long I waited for you?
How can you walk away
And let it all go?
How can this heart
Survive without you?
And tell me
How could I ever
Say no to you?

Nitya slowly pulled away from the hug, her hands sliding down to gently hold Arjun's. She looked into his eyes, and he looked right back. Then, without a pause, she bent down on one knee. Just like he had done before.

"*I.. I love you, Arjun...*"

And then a deep breath.

"*Do you love me too?*"

For a second, Arjun's heart skipped a beat. He forgot everything. His lips formed the softest smile. He knelt down in front of her, not to match the gesture but to meet her at eye level. His forehead gently touched hers as he whispered, "I love you too..." He exhaled, voice shaky, "I always have."

Nitya laughed through her tears. And Arjun finally breathed, as if that one moment brought him back to life. They sat there, still on the ground, both smiling like fools, hearts beating like home.

Two broken souls, *finally whole*.

This was a moment so sacred for both of them. Their tears kept falling, but this time they were of relief and love.

Arjun gently cupped her face, his thumbs brushing away her tears, "I'm here for you. You don't have to feel alone anymore. Ever again."

Nitya looked into his eyes, her face shimmering. She stood up slowly, her heart still racing. "Arjun... I'm sorry..."

He stood up too, gently placing his fingers on her lips. "Don't. I don't want to hear anything," he said, "Not now."

Nitya blinked.

"I think all I know is... I need you, Nitya. That's it," he continued, looking at her like she was the only thing that mattered in this world.

"Everything else... it's all behind us. You're here. With me. And that's all I want."

She stared at him, stunned. And then, without another word, she fell into his arms again. This time not from guilt, not from pain, but because she finally felt safe.

"*Not everything was healed yet... but she was here. That was enough for Arjun tonight.*"

~

After their meeting the previous night, Arjun finally felt lighter. The ache was still there. A quiet pain in the background that refused to fade.

He knew none of this was her fault. She didn't deserve his distance. But he wasn't ready to face Gautam. Talking to him, even seeing him, felt impossible. Nitya, though? He couldn't stay away from her anymore.

That night, he picked her up in his car. They sat in silence, the world passing by quietly outside.

After a moment, Nitya finally spoke. "Aru..."

He turned slightly. "Hmm?"

"Where are we going?" she asked, and almost immediately, "Anyways, it doesn't matter... as long as I'm with you," and she rested her head on his shoulder.

Everything already felt too heavy, too much to process. So, Nitya chose to wait. She wouldn't tell Arjun about Gupta just yet. She didn't want to burden him further, not now, not when he had just come back.

After a while, Arjun said quietly, "I usually drive like this when my mind is chaos... or when it's at peace. But today, it's neither." He paused, searching for the right words. "But I have you, Nitya. I don't

know if this is peace or happiness or something else... but having you beside me, my heart feels... content."

"Aru..." her voice full of affection. "You don't know how much you mean to me. Every thought of mine was about you. Every single day."

Then, more softly, "I know how hard it is for you to forgive Gautam. I couldn't even look into your eyes and ask for it. I just... don't know how to handle this anymore."

Arjun went quiet. He didn't want Gautam's name in the air tonight. He just listened. "Let's talk about something else, Nitya?" he said gently.

She nodded, simply holding his arm and resting her head back on his shoulder.

Arjun opened up quietly, "There's something I need to tell you."

"What is it?" she asked.

"I came to Rajnagar. To see you. But when I saw you with Jai's mother at the school... I just couldn't take it. And then... I left."

"You came to Rajnagar?" she whispered, stunned.

He nodded lightly.

Nitya exhaled slowly. "I'll tell you everything... who they really are, what they've done... All of it. I promise. But just not tonight. Please?"

Arjun frowned slightly. "Nitya, tell me now," he asked, his voice filled with concern.

But she gently shook her head. "Not now. Please..."

He hesitated but eventually nodded, trusting her. What Arjun didn't know was that the truth Nitya carried would circle back to his own past... To his mother... So, for now, he stayed calm thinking it was about something else entirely.

After a few minutes, he pulled over near a quiet lake. "This is where I came the night you said No," he said, looking at her.

He stepped out of the car, walked around, and opened her door, holding out his hand. Nitya placed her hand in his and got down.

The wind was strong. Her hair brushed against her face, and her dupatta flew a little with the breeze. He caught it gently and draped it back over her shoulders.

"You bought me this dress... you remember?" Nitya asked.

"How could I forget?" he said, his voice low. "And tonight... you look beautiful than ever."

Nitya's heart jumped in joy.

As they sat beside each other, she tried hard to talk about something else. She knew Arjun did not want to talk about Gautam, or any of it. She did not know what to talk about, so she simply asked the first random question that came to her mind.

"So... I call you Aru all the time. Didn't you ever think of a special name for me?" she asked playfully.

"Wow! So... it took you this long to ask me that?" Arjun smiled teasingly. "Anyways... Nitya itself is beautiful. I don't want to change it."

"Oh really?" she teased. "Not even Nitu? Nia? Nitz? Niti?" and she kept on reading the names.

He laughed softly. "Arjun and Nitya. Nothing else fits better. Your name... it's perfect. It already sounds beautiful to me. Okay?"

He then reached for her hand and gently interlocked their fingers. That's when he noticed something on her wrist. *A tattoo.*

Instinctively, Nitya pulled her hand back, trying to hide it beneath her dupatta.

"What is that?" Arjun asked softly, as he drew her hand toward him again. Now he saw it clearly – a small tattoo of the letter A on her wrist.

"Really?" he said, stunned. "Are you serious?" He stood up and sank to his knees in front of her, resting his elbows lightly against her lap. "I know how sensitive you are... why did you even... did it hurt?" he asked, as his fingers brushed softly over her wrist. And then he lifted her wrist and placed a gentle *kiss*.

Nitya cupped his face and kissed his forehead and whispered, "Anything for you, Aru..."

And beneath a heart once heavy with silence,
Laughter returned like calm after a storm.
Love can heal the deepest wounds.
Love can light up the darkest days.
Love can stitch the broken pieces.
Love can pull you out of your worst nightmares.

Spectra Events —

The next evening, Nitya decided to meet Shaurya to thank him in person for being there when she needed someone the most. Shaurya asked her to come to Spectra, reminding her that it had been too long since they had all met at their *second home*.

When Nitya stepped inside Spectra, she felt peaceful. All of them sat together in the same room again. The easy laughter and their friendship… wrapped around Arjun and Nitya.

"Arjun… come on," Aditi teased, nudging him. "Why do you look so serious today? Nitya is back in Saanjhpur, right? You should be happy."

Ashwin cut in instantly. "She's back. That's exactly why he looks like that," he said, giving Arjun a high-five.

Arjun smirked. "Well, I can't deny that, Ashwin. It was peaceful all these days."

Nitya gasped, pretending to sulk. "Oh really? Fine, then. I'll leave!" She walked towards the door, fully expecting Arjun to stop her.

But he didn't.

She turned back, "You better call me back, Arjun. Or you know what's going to happen."

Arjun stood up, smiling as if he was going to stop her. But instead, he walked past her, reached the door, and opened it slightly – gesturing for her to leave.

The gang burst into laughter.

Offended, Nitya switched to full tantrum mode and stepped outside. The very next second, Arjun pulled her back in and made her sit on her chair.

"Ahem... ahem..." the gang chorused.

The banter continued for a while. Though there were storm of thoughts hiding in the background, Arjun and Nitya tried their best to get involved in the conversations.

A few hours passed and everyone left. The moment they were gone, Nitya immediately stood up and said firmly, "Arjun.."

"Oh.. No Aru today?" Arjun asked.

"You should have thought about it before gesturing for me to leave. So now, get up," she said, still sulking.

Arjun asked, "Why? What happened?" putting on an innocent face.

"Just get up," she insisted, already trying to suppress her smile.

He finally stood up, his face still confused.

And before he could say anything else, Nitya slipped into his chair, straightened her posture, one elbow on the armrest, and pretended to stare seriously at the laptop. Within seconds, *she* became *Arjun* and started to act like him.

Now he understood and a smile broke across his face. So, he played along.

He walked out of the room dramatically, only to enter again, *this time as* Nitya. He walked the same way she usually did, dragged the chair just like her, placed an imaginary handbag on one side of the chair, her phone neatly on the table – every little habit of hers, copied with accuracy.

Nitya was trying hard to control her laughter.

He sat down, looked at Nitya and said gently, "Arjun... can I say something?"

Nitya deepened her voice a little and responded like Arjun, "Hmm. Yes, please?" eyes still glued to the laptop.

Arjun chuckled. Then, staying committed to the role, he continued in a serious tone, "You should be kind to your staff, Arjun... and also to your clients."

Nitya now over-acted his reaction from the past, jumping up from the chair and imitating his serious voice, "Nitya... stop. I know

how to behave, okay?" Then she walked to the door and shut it a bit louder than necessary, just like he once did back then.

Arjun couldn't control his laughter looking at her.

She peeked back inside, eyes sparkling. "You're not supposed to laugh, Arjun. You have to cry, like I did," she said adorably. "Don't spoil the drama."

That only made him laugh harder.

Nitya walked toward him, "I love it when you smile," she whispered in his ears.

Arjun looked into her eyes, "You stay with me. I'll smile forever... *Nitu*." He added the last word playfully remembering how she had asked him for a name the previous night.

Nitya scrunched her nose immediately. "No... good try! Just call me Nitya. Please," she laughed.

"Isn't that what I said yesterday, Nitu?" he smirked.

"Please, Aru. I take that back."

Arjun smiled with his heart full of love. And just like that... life felt a bit normal again.

~

FOOTAGE

Rajnagar —

Ever since Nitya left Rajnagar, Kamala had been living through an emotional storm. Her mind circled back to the day she met Nitya at the restaurant – the day they found out the truth about Gupta blackmailing Arjun's mother.

The last few days had taken a toll on her. At home, life still looked the same. The same routine, the same rhythm. But her thoughts wandered constantly between Saanjhpur and Rajnagar.

Something inside her whispered that this wasn't the end of the story. There was still a missing piece, something she hadn't yet seen. Her doubts crept back, replaying the florist shop in her mind.

The next afternoon, Kamala dialed Nitya. After they exchanged pleasantries, Nitya shared everything that had happened since she had left Rajnagar. Kamala felt a deep sense of relief as she learnt that Arjun and Nitya were back together. She knew how much Arjun meant to Nitya and everything she had endured to reach this moment. She felt genuinely happy for her.

Later, Kamala poured her heart out – how she was crumbling inside after knowing the true colors of Gupta. Nitya tried to console her.

After a pause, Kamala asked quietly, "Nitya... are we missing anything here? I feel like there's still something hiding somewhere."

And they started to recall every little detail from that day. A series of questions stirred within Nitya's mind, "Who was the man in the white hoodie Gupta mentioned? Did Gupta go to the florist shop himself? Or did he send someone else to collect the money from Arjun's mother?"

"There's no way Gupta would go himself," Kamala replied. "Arjun's mother would've recognized him immediately."

Nitya asked, "So... who went to the florist shop that day? Does Gupta have people working for him?"

"I don't know," Kamala answered. "I can't even imagine what he was truly capable of."

Nitya hesitated, then asked gently, "Please don't mind me asking this. But... do you think Jai had anything to do with it?"

Kamala's heart was stuck at the thought. "No, beta. My heart says no. I trust him." Her voice trembled. "I know I once trusted my husband the same way and I realized how wrong I was. But with Jai... I can say this much. He is not that kind of a person. He is not someone who would get involved in something so dark." Her eyes burned red, even the slightest doubt felt unbearable.

"I understand..." Nitya said softly, and took a pause before continuing, "But why would Gupta ask Arjun's mother to meet him at the florist shop of all places, when he knew there was CCTV there?"

Kamala froze. "Yes... and why choose a place with cameras, only to later destroy the footage?" she murmured.

Nitya added, "Doesn't that sound like... maybe he didn't plan to take out the footage at first?"

"Exactly," Kamala said. "They could've met anywhere else as well."

They fell silent. None of the pieces were fitting yet. After a while, they ended the call, both lost in their own thoughts.

Kamala removed her glasses and leaned back on the sofa, closing her eyes, but her mind wouldn't stop racing. "Was Jai somehow involved that day?" The thought terrified her.

Her mind replayed the scene again and again, a man in a white hoodie taking money from Arjun's mother. And now, her heart whispered the question she had been running away from, "Was that man... Jai?"

"No..." she said out loud to herself. She hadn't slept properly in days. Exhaustion finally broke her, and the tears rolled down.

In silence, she made a promise – to find the footage, to know for certain whether Jai was involved or not. And if he was, she would make sure Gupta and Jai paid for everything they had done.

The next evening, as Kamala returned home, she decided she would check Jai's laptop somehow. She had already gone through Gupta's laptop before and didn't find anything about the footage. So now, a fragile hope clung to her – maybe the video was on Jai's laptop.

Getting into Gupta's laptop had been easy as she closely observed him from time to time. But Jai's was impossible. So, this time she knew she needed a different way.

Kamala sat in her room with her laptop open. She wasn't really working, but the screen in front of her looked busy enough with a few open tabs, a half-written document, a presentation slide. Just enough to create the picture of someone lost in work.

A few minutes later, she heard Jai open the main door. Keys clinked into the bowl. The sound of his footsteps. And a short, casual exchange with Gupta who was sitting in the living room.

And then Jai walked towards her door calling out, "Mom...where are you?"

"Just two minutes, Jai," she replied without looking up, fingers gently moving across the keyboard.

Jai leaned against the doorframe. "You seem so busy today."

"Yes, Jai. There's an important class tomorrow. I'm preparing a presentation for it. So much work to finish."

Later, she went out to make tea, and soon everyone was seated in their usual places. Kamala thought this might be the right moment to bring up Saanjhpur.

So, she began slowly, as if it had just crossed her mind. "By the way... one of my friends called me this afternoon. You remember her, Gupta ji? Suchi... She used to work with me at the school in Saanjhpur."

Gupta looked up, "Yes, Kamala. I remember. How is she now?"

"She's fine. But after talking to her... I don't know why... something has been bothering me since then."

Both Gupta and Jai glanced at her, curious now.

"What happened, Mom?" Jai asked.

Kamala sighed gently, "She spoke so much about our days back in Saanjhpur, about the school, the people... and ever since, my mind has been restless."

Gupta reached over and patted her shoulder, "Don't think about those days, Kamala. Let them go."

She nodded slowly, "Sometimes it isn't so easy, Gupta ji. Especially remembering the time when we had to move to Rajnagar... when you were imprisoned. I still don't know how I managed through those days." Her voice sounded fragile and convincing, but inside, she was watching them carefully.

Gupta leaned back in his chair, "It all began with the owner's wife. If not for her..." he paused, and continued, "Anyway... in the end, they got what they deserved."

"Yes, Gupta ji," Kamala added quietly, as if she was agreeing. "She ruined our lives."

Jai let out a faint laugh. "And now her family is paying for it, Mom. Don't worry."

Kamala nodded slowly. She brought up the topic just to see whether anger might loosen their tongues... whether, in their rage, they might reveal something.

"And what about that family now?" Kamala asked, as if out of simple curiosity. "I remember their son's name was... Arun? Or something like that?"

"Arjun," Gupta corrected calmly.

"Yes. Arjun.." she nodded, as if the memory had just resurfaced. "Do you know what he's doing now? Any idea?"

Gupta shook his head. "No, Kamala. I've no idea. And honestly, I don't even want to know. I don't want to waste my time on such people."

Jai's jaw tightened, "They're the reason my childhood was a nightmare."

"It's alright, Jai. God sees everything. Don't worry," Kamala said as if she was consoling her son. She didn't add anything more. She didn't want to sound curious.

Slowly, the conversation faded. The teacups were cleared, the dining table emptied, and one by one they drifted back to their rooms.

After a while, Kamala called Jai to her room. "Jai... can you help me for a minute? My laptop is acting strange. I need to prepare a presentation for tomorrow. Could I please use yours?" It was a completely normal request. Nothing suspicious.

Jai hesitated just for a moment, "What do you need to do, Ma? I can help you."

"No, no. I've already done it half... I'll just finish the rest," her voice was calm.

Jai handed his laptop to her and walked back to the living room. He wasn't worried. This laptop didn't carry any secrets – at least, that's what he believed.

Kamala opened the laptop and her heartbeat quickened. She opened the presentation and began typing a few random lines, all the while keeping an eye on the living room, listening for Jai or Gupta's movements.

Then she browsed through the files. There were countless folders. Too many. No clear starting point. No time to go through them, not while Jai and Gupta were still around.

After a few minutes, almost absently, as if it was nothing, she opened a web browser. Several tabs were already open. And there it was. *The messaging app.* It was still logged in. Jai hadn't realized it.

For a brief second, her thoughts raced. Then she steadied herself and clicked on it. The chat list appeared. She scrolled down and clicked on Gupta's name. The chat opened. Nothing suspicious in the recent messages. Just casual, ordinary conversations.

From the living room, she could hear the sound of the television. Jai and Gupta were relaxed. Unaware.

Now, she searched for the accident date. No conversation from that day. So, she scrolled down further. Then she saw it.

A short message from Gupta, "Jai... Did you copy the video safely to the hard drive?"

Jai replied, "Yes Dad, it's safe. Don't worry."

They never mentioned which video. To anyone else, it would have sounded harmless. Just a normal conversation about a file. But Kamala froze. She assumed it was *the footage*. She didn't know where the hard drive was, but now she knew what to look for.

Just then, footsteps approached her room. Without a second's hesitation, she closed the browser and everything else. Only the presentation remained on the screen.

"All good, Ma?" Jai asked.

She looked up and smiled. "Yes... almost done. Few more minutes, Jai."

And the moment passed.

Now she knew two things with certainty. *There was a hard drive. And the footage was almost certainly inside it.*

~

The next day, Kamala returned home early in the afternoon. Gupta and Jai were still at work. Ever since the previous night, only one word had been echoing in her mind, over and over again. *Hard drive.*

She didn't waste time. She began searching for it. Drawers. Cabinets. Desk shelves. Her fingers moved quickly until she found one – a hard drive tucked inside a drawer, placed casually among old papers in Jai's room.

Her heart jumped. She connected it to her laptop, and waited. Files loaded. Nothing. No video. Nothing unusual at all.

She stared at the screen for a long moment. *No... this can't be it.* She was certain of one thing. Whatever they were hiding, they wouldn't delete it. Not something this important. And they wouldn't leave the hard drive lying around so carelessly. Slowly, she disconnected the hard drive and set it aside.

"If this mattered so much to them... they wouldn't keep it in a desk. Just like that. There had to be another one."

She started again. First, her own room. Cupboards. Drawers. Literally everything. Even the suitcases under the bed. She found

nothing. Then she moved to Jai's room again. She opened his cupboards one by one. Shifted stacks of folded clothes. Checked everything.

Her heart was beating faster now. And then she noticed it. There was a small case, pushed deep inside the cupboard, hidden behind a row of neatly hung shirts. She pulled it out. Inside the case was another hard drive. "This might be the one," she thought.

She rushed back to her room and connected the hard drive to her laptop. She closed her eyes and whispered a prayer to God. A folder opened. Inside, there were several videos.

Her fingers trembled as she clicked on them, one after the another.

And then, the accident footage began to play.

She froze. Her eyes remained fixed on the screen, as the video unfolded. When it ended, the silence in the room shattered.

"No... no... this can't be..." her voice broke mid-sentence. Her throat went dry and her hands flew to her mouth. Tears spilled without warning, blurring the screen. The video revealed something she had never imagined. Not even close.

Rage surged through her. She replayed it. Once. Twice. She sank back into the chair, her whole body shivering. She felt sick and betrayed.

Minutes passed. When the storm inside her finally slowed, she wiped her face and forced herself to breathe. And then, through the wreckage of her emotions, one thought rose – *this cannot stay buried.* No matter the consequences.

She copied the footage onto her laptop. Once it was done, she moved quickly around the home and placed everything exactly where they were.

Later, she picked up her phone and dialed Nitya's number. The call connected almost immediately.

Kamala closed her eyes, struggling to steady her breath, "I... I found something, something very important Nitya," she said, "I can't explain it now."

There was a pause on the other end.

"I will come to Saanjhpur," Kamala continued quickly before Nitya could ask anything. "I'll meet you there and explain you everything myself. I'll find a reason to come."

"You're scaring me now," Nitya said. "What is it?"

"No," Kamala interrupted, "Not on the phone." Then her voice softened, "I want you to tell everything to Arjun. Everything. It's time. Don't wait anymore."

Nitya tried to press her again, but Kamala remained resolute. After a long, uneasy pause, the call ended.

Kamala lowered the phone to her lap and stared at the wall, her mind still replaying what she saw.

~

THE RAGE

Spectra Events —

It was late in the evening. The office was almost empty. One by one, the lights had gone off, voices faded as the day ended. But Arjun was still at Spectra, alone in his room.

Nitya finally gathered the courage to speak to him. She dialed his number. "I need to see you."

"I'm still at the office," he replied. "Do you want to come here?"

"Yes," Nitya said right away.

His voice softened on the line. "Come fast. I'm waiting," he said planting a kiss through the phone.

A little while later, Nitya walked into Arjun's cabin. The moment he saw her, his eyes lit up. Without saying a word, he reached for her hand and drew her closer.

"Arjun..." she began softly.

He smiled, already moving, held her hand and guided her into a slow rhythm. A few easy steps forward, a soft turn, a quiet sway as if there was a song playing in the background. A slow salsa, just for them.

She tried to pull her hand back slightly, interrupting him, "Arjun... I need to talk to you."

He didn't hear it or pretended not to. He was lost in his own mood.

He hummed a song softly, spinning her gently back to him, "Nitya..." he murmured, "You know," he said, smiling, "This place feels different when you're here."

Nitya forced a faint smile. She matched his steps even though she knew she would soon break him. *He was dancing in happiness, and she was about to stop the music.*

Swallowing hard, she called out to him, this time firmly. "Arjun..."

He stopped.

She gently guided him back to his chair and took a breath before speaking. "Listen to me… I've stopped myself from telling you something all these days," she said quietly, "Do you remember I told you I'd explain why I went to Rajnagar?" she asked.

Arjun straightened at once. "Yes," he said, "Tell me, Nitya. Is there something I should be worried about?"

She squeezed his hand, her fingers cold against his. "I couldn't say no to that question."

"Is it about me?" he asked immediately.

"Yes," she replied. "About you… and your family."

Arjun froze. "My family? What about them?"

"Okay. Listen to me carefully," she said, "Please try to stay calm. There's a lot I need to tell you."

Arjun leaned forward.

"When Jai's proposal came, I said no to my family. But Gautam kept insisting. When I called Ritu and told her what I feel about you, she finally opened up. She said they had heard a few rumors about you… and your family."

Arjun's brows knit together.

Nitya continued, "Jai's father – Gupta – he used to work at AS Industries back then. I don't know how much you know about him. But he poisoned everything about your family. So many accusations. Things you never deserved."

"When everyone kept pushing, I agreed to meet Jai once. But that day… something else happened."

Arjun squeezed her hand, voice shaky, "What happened, Nitya?"

"I met Jai at a café and to my surprise, Gupta walked in a little later and showed me a video," her grip tightened around Arjun's hand. "A footage of Gautam… hitting your mother."

Arjun froze. "What are you saying, Nitya? I don't understand…" confusion and pain flooded his face.

"Gupta blackmailed me saying he would show you the video if I didn't agree to marry Jai."

Arjun's fists clenched at his sides.

"You remember that night when you proposed me," Nitya continued. "All I could do was just hold you and cry. I didn't know what else to do... Gautam's truth and Gupta's blackmail... I couldn't undo what Gautam did. But I knew one thing for sure – that your family was never wrong and I wanted to prove it. And I had to understand who Gupta really was, and why he was doing all this."

She paused, then went on. "The very next day, I met Shaurya. We decided to find out more about Jai and Gupta."

"Shaurya?" Arjun asked, stunned. "He knew all this?"

"He didn't know about the footage," she clarified immediately.

"Shaurya spoke to one of his friends," Nitya continued, "And that's when we realized Jai wasn't the person he pretended to be. Later, we also met Raghuveer uncle and he revealed everything he knew about Gupta."

Arjun nodded slowly. "My father mentioned about Gupta once. He told me he was a terrible person and eventually was sent to jail."

"Yes," Nitya said softly. "Back then... your mother confronted him in front of everyone. Humiliated him. And that's when Gupta started to hate your family."

Arjun's jaw tightened.

Nitya continued, "After Gupta was imprisoned, his family moved to Rajnagar. Once I knew all this, I felt I had to meet Kamala, his wife. My instincts kept pushing me toward her. I already met Gupta and Jai, and I knew how poisonous they were. But if there was anyone who knew what really happened after they moved to Rajnagar... it was her."

She looked at Arjun steadily. "I didn't trust her completely. Not at first. But I tried. And I succeeded."

Arjun stared at her; his face flushed with emotion.

"I was honest with her. And eventually... she believed me when she saw the truth herself." Nitya paused, then continued, explaining everything they had uncovered so far.

"We found out why your mother was at the florist shop that day," Nitya said quietly.

Arjun's breath caught.

"Gupta had blackmailed her," Nitya went on. "He sent her videos of Shreya anonymously, and threatened her for money. She had been told to hand over the money to a man waiting at the florist shop."

Arjun's world tilted. For a second, he didn't move. His eyes locked on the floor. And just like that, memories from the past flashed in his mind – the way his mother seemed restless the night before the accident, the way she walked into Shreya's room in the middle of the night, the urgency in her voice when she insisted on meeting a friend late that evening, despite his resistance.

Suddenly, he stood up. Uncontrolled. Before Nitya could stop him, he turned and punched the wall beside him hard. Repeatedly. The sound echoed in the room.

"Who the hell is this Gupta..." he roared, the sound came from someplace deep in his heart. "Why did she have to go through all of this... Why didn't she tell me?" His fist stayed pressed to the wall.

Nitya rushed to his side. "Arjun..." she whispered, holding his arm.

"He blackmailed my mother..." his face burned with *rage*. "How dare he? He used my sister's videos...?" The words came out broken. Anger tore through him. He cursed Gupta. Every word spilling out in a rush, all the grief and helplessness pouring out at once.

Nitya stayed beside him, silent, letting the storm pass through him.

His voice was fierce now. His movements rushed. In one sharp motion, he opened the drawer, grabbed his keys, and turned toward the door.

Nitya stepped in front of him. "Arjun, please... where are you going?" she pleaded. "Listen to me once."

"I'll find him," he snapped, the words lashing out at her. "I'll find where Gupta is."

"Arjun..." she tried to control him.

"Get out of my way, Nitya!" he shouted, his voice cracking with fury.

She tried again, holding his arm.

"What do you expect me to do?" he burst out. "Stay silent after hearing all this?" His voice was completely out of control.

"Aru... please," she said. "Sit here. Please. For me."

Nitya pulled a chair close, sat beside him, and held his hand tightly. She looked straight into his eyes.

"You have every right to feel this... It's sudden. It's brutal. It's a shock. I know. I truly do," her voice trembled, "but listen to me..."

She lifted her hand and cupped his face, forcing him to meet her gaze.

"There is a way to handle this. Not every answer needs to come from rage. Gupta played a clever and dirty game. If we lose ourselves to anger now, he wins." Her thumb brushed his cheek. "Please... don't let that happen."

"You know what?" Arjun said harshly. "If Gautam weren't your brother, he would have already faced me. I would've killed him right there," his voice ferocious. "And now this truth?" he laughed bitterly. "Do you think it's easy for me to take all this in, Nitya?" He shook his head.

"It's very easy to say the right things," he added, "But it's damn hard to absorb them."

Nitya's heart ached as she listened. She understood his pain, every bit of it, but seeing Arjun like this tore her apart.

She knew his anger wasn't just about today's truth. Gautam had always been there in the background. All these days, Arjun had been careful. Gentle. He had chosen his words, swallowed his anger, calmed himself down *for her*. He avoided facing things he wasn't ready to face. But tonight, he couldn't hold any of it back.

He dragged a hand through his hair, pacing the room again. "You know what hurts the most, Nitya?" Arjun said suddenly.

"*It's that everywhere I turn... it's all connected to you*." His voice was sharp, exhausted. "*Your brother. Your family. Rajnagar. Gupta. Jai. My mother*."

He paused and continued, "I love you, Nitya," he said, "But today, even loving you feels heavy..." The words landed harder than he meant to.

Nitya froze. Her lips parted slightly, but no words came out. She looked at him, stunned.

"It would've been easier if I never loved you," Arjun said.

Slowly, her eyes welled up. She didn't argue. She didn't defend herself. A tear slipped down her cheek. Then another.

He looked up at her, regret in his eyes for what he just said.

Nitya didn't question his words or replayed them in her mind. She understood. She knew how deeply he loved her and she knew that everything he said came out of pain. *So, she stayed.*

She wiped her tears with the back of her hand, her voice softer now. "I won't stop you today. Go. Do whatever you think you need to do. But all I want right now is for you to think ahead with a calm mind. We will make sure Gupta pays for everything he did."

His jaw tightened. "I won't leave him, Nitya."

"I know. But listen to me." She took a breath before continuing. "Kamala aunty is coming to Saanjhpur tomorrow. She called me and said she found something very important. I don't know what it is yet. Please remember, anything you do in anger will only weigh you down more. It will only add to your pain... and your regrets."

Arjun nodded, absorbing her words.

Nitya gently ran her thumb slowly over his bruised knuckles, the ones he slammed into the wall just before. "I can't see you hurting yourself, Arjun..."

Arjun stayed silent.

Nitya sat there quietly for a while, waiting, hoping that he would say something. But there was no response. Not a word. Not even a glance. Slowly, she understood that he needed space. With a heavy heart, she gathered her belongings.

"I need to leave now Arjun..." She lingered for a second, as if wishing he would stop her, and then quietly left the room.

After the door closed behind her, Arjun remained frozen in his chair. The truth weighed on him so heavily that his mind could think of nothing else. Lost in thoughts of his family, he didn't even realize how deeply he had hurt Nitya. His heart was overflowing with

emotions he didn't know how to release. All he wanted in that moment was silence.

The thought of Gupta morphing Shreya's videos and blackmailing his mother cut him deeper. Back then, when he learned the truth about Gautam, he was helpless. He was trapped in a pain so intense that he couldn't even scream it out. But today, that buried pain resurfaced too.

Suddenly, in a swift, furious motion, he swept everything off his table. Papers flew, objects clattered to the floor, yet nothing eased the chaos inside him. He tried to stay calm, but his restlessness wouldn't let him. For hours, he sat alone in his room.

Gradually, the thoughts began to settle. In the quiet aftermath, Nitya came back to his mind – her compassionate eyes, her gentle voice and the warmth of her love.

And then the realization hit him – *Loving her never burdened him, it only healed him. Without her, he would still be the same distant, silent Arjun, living in darkness. Her love only pulled him out of pain. He became whole, alive, and human again only after he fell in love with her.*

Then his mother's voice echoed in his memory, "*You'll find a woman beautiful in her heart. A kind and pure soul. That is the love you deserve, my beta.*"

He began to realize what Nitya had done for him. At every step of his way, she had been there. She stood beside him like an anchor. *His hope amidst all the shadows*.

He thought of the risks she had taken and the pain she endured for him. Now, he saw it clearly. If not for Nitya, the truth would have remained buried. If not for her, he might have lost himself completely.

"What... what did I say to her?" he spoke to himself, horrified. "Nitya... I didn't mean to," his words whispered in the air. He sank back into the chair and covered his face with his hands. "I'm sorry," he murmured to himself. "I'm so sorry, Nitya."

The more he thought about her, the more he wanted to see her. Without another thought, he drove straight to her house.

This time, there was no hesitation, no hiding in corners, no watching from a distance. He knocked on their door, hoping Nitya would open it. But instead, *Gautam opened it*.

For a moment, he stood stunned, clearly taken aback to see Arjun there so late at night. "Arjun... you... here?" he stammered slightly. "Please, come in."

Arjun's voice came out in a single, heavy word, "Nitya...?"

"She's in her room," Gautam said quickly, pointing upstairs. He called out, "Nitya!" but there was no response.

Arjun climbed the stairs and went straight to her door and knocked on it.

Nitya opened the door and saw Arjun standing there. She wasn't expecting him at all. "Arjun... you? Here?" she said and stepped aside to let him in.

He walked inside and fell into her arms. "I'm sorry, Nitya..." he whispered, holding her tighter. "I didn't mean it. I really didn't."

She wrapped her arms around him and held him close. "I know," she said softly in his ear. "I know you didn't, Aru."

She was hurt before but the way he came to her and apologized melted her completely.

He held her even tighter, overwhelmed with gratitude. "I can't just say thank you," he said, "It isn't enough for everything you've done for me, Nitya. You are the best I could ever have."

He slowly pulled back from the hug. "Nitya, your love has only made me stronger. It made me complete. You were there for me every single day. You fought for me and my family. You prayed for my well-being and stood by my side when I couldn't stand for myself."

He paused, his voice softening. "My mother would have loved you deeply if she were alive. She always told me I would find true love. And she was right," he said looking straight into her eyes. "And I promise you... I won't leave you until my last breath."

Almost instinctively, he leaned in and gently kissed her on her cheek.

A soft smile broke across her face.

"Come with me," he said, gently taking her hand and walking towards their living room.

Nitya was confused but followed his steps.

Gautam, who had been waiting anxiously to speak to Arjun, stepped forward. As soon as he came close, Arjun simply placed his hand on Gautam's shoulder and offered a quiet, reassuring smile – no words but an understanding nod.

Then Arjun turned toward Nitya's parents. He bowed slightly and touched their feet in respect. "Nitya means the world to me," he said calmly. "I love her, and I'm ready to forget the past and move on. *For her*."

That was all he needed to say. The room grew emotional; tears welled up in their eyes.

Arjun finally stepped out, waved softly, and drove back home. It was a simple gesture from him, but it conveyed everything he felt. His heart felt lighter now. He chose forgiveness and peace.

He didn't know what the next day would bring, but tonight, he held on to one truth... *Nitya's love was all he needed.*

~

BURIED TRUTH

Saanjhpur Airport —

The next day, Nitya and Arjun stood at the arrival gate, eyes scanning the passengers. Just then Kamala arrived, walking slowly with a laptop bag in hand. Her posture was tired, her shoulders slightly hunched from travel, her hair tied in a loose braid with a few strands slipping out.

Kamala rushed towards Nitya with shaky steps and pulled her into a tight embrace. Slowly, her gaze shifted to Arjun who was standing beside them. She held his hand, "Arjun, you remember me? Kamala aunty..." she said with tears.

Arjun simply gave a respectful nod. He didn't remember much but there was something about her voice that made him feel good.

"I'm so sorry," Kamala said, this time directly to Arjun. He swallowed the lump in his throat. No words came.

The three of them headed to Arjun's home. The drive was silent. Even though Arjun knew Kamala had no part in any of this, he couldn't bring himself to look at her. His thoughts were too heavy. Nitya sat quietly beside him, her mind curious to know the truth Kamala was about to reveal.

Shortly after Nitya, Arjun, and Kamala arrived, Nitya's family reached as well.

Everyone settled in the living room. Kamala sat beside Arjun on the sofa. Nitya stood quietly behind him. Shreya and her father took their seats next to Arjun, while Gautam and his parents occupied the opposite side of the sofa. Nearby, Ritu sat on the couch, cradling a sleeping Ira in her arms. They were all seated together in the same room, yet separated by an unspoken tension.

Arjun's words from the previous night still echoed in the minds of Shreya and her father as they grappled with the truth about Gupta.

Shreya's heart tightened knowing the turmoil her mother went through, for her. Arjun's father sat rigid, determined to see the end of Gupta for ruining their peace again.

Kamala broke the silence, "Arjun, beta..." she began by turning towards his family. "I didn't have the strength to face you all today. Not after what my family did to yours. But if I stay quiet, my heart will never forgive me. I can't ignore this and pretend everything is normal."

"I want to show you all something," she said reaching out to her laptop bag. She turned on her laptop and played the footage. Arjun's eyes remained fixed on the screen. Everyone watched carefully as the footage rolled.

A quiet street in front of the florist shop. Then, a young man in a white hoodie appeared outside the shop, a cap pulled over his head. A couple of other men were with him. They stood near the florist shop for a while, glancing around repeatedly. Their faces nervous and alert.

After a moment, the man in the white hoodie stepped inside the shop. The others stayed back – one stood nearby, the other moved farther away, keeping watch on the road, as if he was making sure no one was approaching, as if making sure Arjun's mother wasn't coming with the police... or someone else.

Arjun switched between the camera angles.

Inside the shop, the man in the white hoodie wandered slowly, pretending to check bouquets. His hands stayed tucked casually inside the pockets.

A few minutes later, Arjun's mother entered the shop. As she walked past the man, she handed over a small bag to him. He didn't look at her. Didn't pause. He merely nodded and walked out of the shop.

Arjun's mother moved through the shop as if she were there to buy flowers. She spoke briefly to the florist, picked up a bouquet, and then reached into her bag searching, checking again. Her expression changed. She searched more urgently now, her fingers digging through the bag. Perhaps she was trying to text Gupta... to tell him that the money had been handed over. But her phone wasn't there. She stepped out of the shop, her eyes scanning the ground.

Through the outside camera, they watched her walk slowly along the pavement, searching. She crossed the small road, the same stretch where Arjun had dropped her earlier, checking if she had lost it there.

And then a **green sedan** entered the frame. **Gautam's car**. It was moving fast. Fast enough not to notice a pedestrian crossing that narrow road. He wasn't expecting her there. The car hit her. She was thrown into the air before crashing onto the ground.

And then within seconds, Gautam's car vanished into *a narrow lane to the right*.

They could see Arjun's mother attempting to move a little, clutching her leg, and looking around for help. She was hurt and bleeding badly. *But she was alive*.

Gupta's men who were keeping watch outside were distant, but still seen in the frame. They made no move towards her. Apart from them, no one was close enough to the shop to react. There were no clear witnesses nearby, at least none within the camera's view.

Now, through the inside camera, Arjun could see that the florist was not at the counter. He might have stepped away momentarily. Completely unaware of what just happened outside.

Then in the outside camera, suddenly another car appeared in the frame. A **grey sedan** now. Faster. It didn't slow down. It struck Arjun's mother head-on and *drove straight ahead*. Her body was thrown against the electric pole nearby.

The room fell into a heavy silence. Arjun couldn't believe what he just saw. He rubbed his blurry eyes and replayed the footage. He sat frozen as the footage revealed there were indeed *two cars* involved in the accident – a *truth that was buried* all these days. The reality pressed down on him like a weight he couldn't lift.

Nitya clutched his shoulders tightly; her eyes were in disbelief.

Shreya, her voice shaky, "Mom was... alive," she whispered. "After the first car hit her... she was alive," she swallowed hard, forcing the words out.

Immediately, Arjun's words came out sharper, "Who the hell was in the second car?"

Kamala began to weep quietly. She knew the truth. She knew whose car it was, but she couldn't say it herself.

Arjun paused the footage just as the grey sedan passed by. Slowly, he zoomed in. The screen blurred for a second, and then came into focus. A mountain graphic sticker on the side of the car clearly visible. The color. The shape. The mark.

He zoomed in further. On the rear window of the car are the letters **JAI**.

Arjun's mind flashed back to the day he went to Rajnagar for Nitya. He saw Jai's car back then outside their house. He remembered the mountain graphic sticker and the same bold letters on the rear window. Then, he shouted aloud, "*That's Jai's car.*"

Arjun's father turned towards him, shocked. "What?" he asked. "How can you be so sure, Arjun?"

Kamala interrupted now, her voice trembling. "Yes, that's Jai's car," she said, pointing to the screen.

With tears rolling down her cheeks, she continued, "I remember Jai and Gupta drove to Saanjhpur in the same car that day. They told me they weren't flying because they had to stop in another town for some work. They went by road." Her voice broke and she began to wail unable to hold herself any longer.

Arjun sat motionless, his elbow on the table, his hands holding his head tight. His father's fists tightened as he was burning in rage. Shreya covered her mouth in disbelief.

Gautam closed his eyes, thoughts spiraling. "But... but who was driving it?" he asked, "Was it Gupta? Or... was it Jai?"

Kamala's throat went dry, "It couldn't have been my husband," she said. "Gupta hasn't driven a car in years. He always asks Jai to drive even for short distances. That day, they travelled together. I'm sure Jai was the one behind the wheel."

Gautam frowned, "So... that means, it was Jai who killed her. And Gupta cleverly managed to put the complete blame on me?"

"This is why he hid the footage all these days," Nitya said slowly, connecting the final dots. "To protect Jai. To protect his son from everything."

Kamala spoke, "Also Gupta was supposed to go meet Ritu in the hospital that evening, but I remember... he went the next morning."

Ritu shook her head slowly. "Yes, my father told me that he visited us the next morning. I was still resting so I didn't meet him myself," her voice faltering slightly.

Then Ritu turned towards Arjun, her eyes filled with sorrow. "I'm truly sorry, Arjun... We never imagined Gupta Uncle was capable of something so terrible. My family only knew him after moving to Rajnagar. We were completely unaware of anything from his past in Saanjhpur. I'm sorry your family had to endure all of this."

She carefully handed Ira to Nitya and walked towards Kamala. Taking Kamala's hand in hers, she said softly, "Thank you for bringing the truth to light. If not for you, we might never have known what really happened that day. You stood against your own family to help us and that takes immense courage. Thank you, Aunty."

Nitya replayed everything in her mind, and a question troubled her. "But what were Jai and Gupta doing near the florist shop?" she asked slowly. "If they had already sent men to collect the money, why did they go there themselves?"

Gautam chimed in, "Maybe they were waiting nearby to collect the money from their men. And perhaps they planned to go to the hospital right after that" he paused. "And on the way... my car hit her. And maybe Jai didn't see her either and hit her too."

Arjun's father stood up, his voice firm, "You're wrong, Gautam."

Gautam looked up.

Arjun's father continued, "Jai was behind you, but he could have stopped in time. I don't believe that the accident was unfortunate. It surely was intentional," his voice filled with fury.

"They have always looked for ways to hurt my family," he went on, "Do you really think Gupta would have missed a chance like this? She was alone, in an isolated area, lying helpless on the road. Everything worked in his favor. I am certain this was planned," his voice finally broke.

Gautam swallowed hard, "And I... I appeared out of nowhere and hit her first. That gave Gupta the perfect opportunity. He used it to shift all the blame onto me."

Arjun stood motionless as the room spoke around him. His father reached out and held his hand. He didn't pull away. He was listening. Absorbing. Fighting every emotion making its way to the surface, as the truth revealed piece by piece.

In his mind, he saw it again – Jai's car rushing toward his mother, striking her head-on, her body thrown against the pole. All these days, he had replayed the accident in his head with an imagined vehicle. Now, the picture was no longer blurred. He knew the car. He knew the driver. And most painfully, he knew the intention behind it.

In that moment, only one thing resonated in his mind, that he would see Gupta's end.

Shreya looked at her brother, tears brimming in her eyes. "Mom died protecting me, Bhai... and we didn't even know."

Arjun stepped towards her, his movements sharp. His voice came out loud and absolute, "I promise you, Shreya... We will make that man pay for everything. For every wound he inflicted on our family."

Arjun's eyes looked sharp and dangerous. But Nitya's words echoed in his mind – *Be calm... think ahead... don't lose yourself to rage*. So, he tried today. He forced himself to breathe. To think. To stay composed.

He drew in a deep breath trying to ground himself. Because now, anger alone wouldn't be enough. He needed clarity.

"Arjun..." Kamala called out softly.

She looked shattered now. "I never imagined them to be these monsters. Not like this. I lived with them. I was with them the entire time... and I never saw it. I trusted my son. I stood by my husband. I defended them every time... And what did they do? They killed a woman. Destroyed a family. They manipulated innocence."

Her shoulders shook. "And I..." She sobbed. "I was blinded in a house full of secrets and called it a family."

"I don't want them anymore," she cried. "I only want to heal what they've broken." Her eyes were swollen, but there was resolve in

them now. “I cannot undo what happened, but I want to help you all in whatever way I can.”

The silence that followed was heavy.

Kamala sat quietly, her face dry now. The tears had stopped. Her heart was no longer searching for comfort; it was searching for justice. For a brief moment, she was no longer Jai’s mother or Gupta’s wife. She was simply a woman… *A woman who had seen enough.*

~

TRAP

The next day, Arjun called the florist shop to pull the truth out of the florist. He wanted to know how Gupta got hold of the footage... and if the florist was involved in any of this.

It didn't take long to find the number. He dialed. It rang twice before the florist answered, "Hello?"

Arjun leaned back in his chair, his tone dangerously calm. "Am I speaking to Mahesh?"

"Haan ji," the florist replied casually. "Who is this?"

"That doesn't matter," Arjun said. "I'm calling about something important. And the more carefully you listen, the better it is for you."

There was a pause.

"What? Who are you? And what do you want?" the florist asked, curiosity edging into unease.

"This is about a day... two years ago," Arjun said slowly. "About the accident."

The florist grew visibly nervous, his hands trembled as soon as he heard it was about the accident. Quickly, he stepped into a room, closing the door behind him.

"What accident?" he asked, pretending not to remember.

"You know it better than anyone," Arjun replied, his tone sharp. "Why did you remove the cameras, Mahesh?"

"Cameras? What?" the florist asked casually, though his heart was racing.

"I know you removed them," Arjun's voice was authoritative. "And if you don't tell me exactly what happened, you will soon be answering these questions to the police."

"I don't even know what you're talking about," the florist snapped, panic creeping into his voice. "I think you dialed a wrong number. I'm hanging up." The florist was just about to end the call.

"I have clear footage from that day," Arjun said suddenly. "A woman walking into your shop, buying a bouquet, the accident… Your cameras recorded everything. I know you removed them before police came." He paused and then added, "And I also know you were helping Gupta…"

Mahesh went still the moment he heard Gupta's name. And when he realized the cameras had captured everything, a chill ran down his spine.

"Who is this man? How does he know Gupta? Why did Gupta tell me there was no footage from that day?" questions flooded his mind, one after the other. Doubt gnawed at him, but fear held him back. He wasn't ready to confess to Arjun. So, he swallowed hard and repeated that he knew nothing.

Arjun didn't argue. His voice stayed low, controlled. "There's someone just outside your shop. Go meet him."

Gautam was waiting near the shop. The moment Mahesh stepped out, Gautam silently played a short clip of the footage just enough for the florist to believe them.

Mahesh froze. His eyes widened in disbelief. Seconds passed and his forehead began to sweat.

Now he dialed Arjun back.

"What do you want from me?" the florist asked, his voice shaky.

"Just tell me what happened that day," Arjun replied calmly.

The florist had no way out now. He hurried back into the room and began, "I don't know much… but minutes after the accident, Gupta came to my shop on his bike. He said he was on his way to the hospital to meet someone and stopped when he saw the accident."

"Later, while going through the system, he told me there was no footage from that day, that the cameras hadn't recorded anything. He warned me this could become a serious case and that police would definitely come for questioning. And if they found out there was no recording, especially for that day, they would start doubting me." Mahesh's voice shook.

"I was scared. I didn't want to get dragged into that mess. So, I quietly listened to whatever Gupta said. And I later removed the cameras as he suggested."

Arjun's throat went dry. It all made sense now. He understood the florist was innocent. Gupta might have manipulated him and saved a copy somehow. He destroyed the evidence and got the cameras removed.

The florist was frightened, his voice pleading, "Please don't tell anything to the police. I didn't even know there was a recording." He let out a shaky breath.

Arjun added calmly, "There is one thing you need to do."

Mahesh stiffened. "Yes... yes, tell me."

"Don't contact Gupta. If you call him, message him, or warn him in any way... this conversation, this footage, and everything you just told me will go straight to the police."

"I... I understand, I won't," Mahesh said.

"And forget that I ever called," Arjun hung up.

Nitya and Kamala had been sitting quietly beside Arjun throughout the call.

After a moment, Arjun spoke again, thinking aloud. "So, the florist said Gupta came to the shop on his bike, just minutes after the accident. That means Gupta wasn't in the car."

Nitya nodded slowly. "Yes. Do you think Jai was alone in the car?"

That thought lingered between them.

Arjun's expression hardened, "We never know. We need proof that Jai was the one driving that car. And also, we need to know how everyone was made to believe that a **green** car hit her and not the **grey** one."

"For that, we need to hunt down one of the three men who went to the shop that day to collect the money."

Nitya looked at him gently. "Arjun... let's just go to the police," she said, "They'll find out more."

Arjun shook his head slowly. "Not yet, Nitya. If we go now, Gupta might slip away. We need to know the full truth first. Every

piece of proof. All these days, Gupta managed to escape and I'm not giving him that chance now. We need solid evidence. Enough to trap him so tightly... he won't even know when the door closes."

She nodded, ready to stand by him in whatever way she could. "How do you think we can find one of those men?"

Arjun showed the stills again to Kamala, hoping for recognition. The man in the white hoodie couldn't be identified as his face was hidden behind a mask. That left them with the other two men.

Kamala studied them carefully, then shook her head. "I don't know them. I've never seen them before."

Later that evening, Arjun sat with his father and relayed what the florist said. His father said he knew a local contact, someone he trusted deeply. A man with influence, who could get things done quietly.

They called him. After a brief exchange of pleasantries, Arjun's father spoke calmly, "I need a favor." He didn't explain what happened that day. He simply said he would send a few pictures and asked the person to find out who the men were – discreetly.

"I'll take care of it, sir. Don't worry," the man on the other end said.

~

The next morning, Kamala's phone rang. The name on the screen displayed – Gupta ji.

Gupta had no idea what happened all these days. No clue that Kamala now saw him through a different lens. For him, it was just another casual morning call to his wife.

Before coming to Saanjhpur, Kamala made sure everything sounded normal. She told Gupta and Jai that the school had planned an educational field trip in another city, and she would be out of Rajnagar for a few days, accompanying the students. And they believed her. Of course they did.

As she was about to answer Gupta's call, Nitya and Gautam cautioned her to be careful, to speak as she always did. The phone was put on speaker.

"Good morning, Kamala," Gupta's voice came through warm, "You've become so busy. Have you forgotten your husband?"

Kamala's heart now hated the sound of his voice. But she had to force the words out. "No, Gupta ji," she replied lightly. "How could I forget you? Yesterday was hectic." She paused, then added casually, "How's everything over there? How's Jai?"

"Everything's fine here," he said. "I'm on my way to work, and Jai had already left. Come back soon, we are missing you."

"I will," Kamala replied. "I have to rush now, Gupta ji. It's an important day. We'll talk tomorrow." She ended the call before he could say anything more. The room remained silent for a moment.

~

That evening, Arjun dialed Gautam and said, "I want you to do something for me."

"Sure, Arjun," Gautam replied.

"I want Gupta and Jai to believe that Nitya has agreed to marry Jai."

Gautam's voice startled, "Arjun..." he said, caught between shock and confusion. He was trying to understand what his plan was.

Arjun continued, "I need them to believe it completely. Let's start here. Call Gupta and speak normally as you do. And when the moment feels right, tell him that Nitya has finally agreed to the marriage."

Gautam nodded in agreement.

An hour later, just after Gupta returned home, his phone rang. A call from Gautam.

They had prepared for this moment carefully. Gautam took a slow breath, steadied himself, and spoke, "Hi, Chacha. How are you?" he asked, keeping his voice light.

"Gautam beta," Gupta replied warmly. "I'm great, as always. How are you? How's Ritu and my little one?"

"We're all doing well, Chacha," Gautam said. "Actually... I have some good news for you."

After a small pause, he continued, "We've been thinking a lot about this match," he tried to sound as casual as he could. "Nitya says she's ready now. My parents are on board as well." He forced a hint of excitement into his voice.

"Wow Gautam...," Gupta exclaimed in joy. "That's wonderful news! I'm so glad Nitya has agreed. Marrying Jai will change her life. He'll take care of her like no one else. And you know Kamala aunty... she already loves her. Jai will be thrilled to hear this news."

"Yes," Gautam replied. "We're happy too... that Nitya agreed."

"Of course," Gupta said. "We're all family after all. And more than anything, Jai loves Nitya deeply. He hasn't come home yet. I'll surprise him with this news... and soon we can start discussing the formalities."

"Yeah, let's do that," Gautam said.

And the call ended just like that.

An hour later, Jai returned home. The moment he stepped inside, Gupta pulled him into a tight hug, his face glowing with triumph.

Jai was on cloud nine after hearing the news. From the day he saw Nitya's photo, he was drawn to her completely. All he wanted, all he imagined, was her. And now, he couldn't contain his excitement.

"Dad... am I dreaming?" Jai asked in disbelief.

"No, beta," Gupta said, smiling broadly. "Gautam called. His family is ready. Nitya is ready." Satisfaction seeping into his voice, "My plan worked," he whispered.

Jai let out a breathless laugh. "Whatever it is... Nitya agreed. That's all that matters. Thank you, dad! I couldn't be happier."

A while later, Gupta's phone buzzed. A message from Nitya. *Nothing is more important than Arjun's happiness. Please don't ever show the video to him. I'm ready to marry Jai.*

Gupta smirked as he read the message. He typed back letting out a faint laugh. *You made the right choice. Welcome to my family.*

Gupta and Jai were convinced now – convinced of Nitya's innocence, her quiet acceptance of the marriage. Then Gupta's tone shifted. Another message followed from him, slightly colder this time.

The video will stay with me forever. I'm sure you know what you need to do from now on.

In those few lines, Gupta's cruelty stood exposed. Arjun's jaw tightened. And yet, he said nothing. In his mind, he struck Gupta and Jai again and again – a hundred times over. But he knew the *trap* was in motion and it was working.

~

The next morning, Arjun's father got a call from his contact who shared details about the two men who were seen in the footage near the florist shop. He informed that one of them is a driver and the other works at a small shop in Saanjhpur.

Later, Arjun managed to get hold of the driver's number and placed the call.

"Hello," Arjun greeted casually.

"Hello... who's this?" the man replied.

"I got your number through a mutual contact," Arjun said. "We need a driver this evening."

There was a brief pause. "I'm out of town right now," the driver replied, "but I'll be back in Saanjhpur by evening. I can come, sir. Please send me the location."

They spoke for a few more minutes about where they were going, the payment and other routine and the call ended.

Later that evening, the driver arrived at Arjun's house. He greeted them politely as he walked inside. "Shall we leave, sir?" he asked. "The car is ready outside."

Arjun's father looked at him calmly. "Come, sit for a moment."

The driver hesitated, then sat down slowly, his eyes moving across the room.

Arjun took the seat beside him. "Don't look at us," he said evenly. "Look there." He gestured toward his mother's framed photograph on the wall.

The driver followed his gaze.

"Do you recognize her?" Arjun asked quietly.

The man swallowed. "No... I don't know her."

"Are you sure you don't know her?" Arjun dragged him closer to the photo. "Do you recognize her now?" he asked.

Panic took over and the driver pushed Arjun aside. He tried to escape, running towards the door. Arjun caught hold of his shirt, yanked him back, and forced him down onto the chair.

Gautam played the CCTV footage. The driver's breathing changed as he knew he had no way out.

"Who are you, and why were you helping them?" Arjun asked firmly, his voice burning with fury.

"Sir... I don't know anything. Please, leave me," the driver pleaded.

"This CCTV footage will go straight to the police if you don't confess what happened," Arjun said.

"Sir..." His voice cracked. "I didn't know anything. I didn't know who she was. I swear. We were just told to watch the area. We were promised money. That's all."

"Tell me every damn thing," Arjun said, gripping his collar.

"Gupta came to me and asked me to go with my friend to the florist shop that evening," he said, his voice shaking. "He told us we'd be paid a good amount of money if we just stood outside the florist shop and kept watch. So, my friend and I went there, along with another man – the one in the white hoodie. We didn't even know who he was."

"Gupta said he would wait nearby. Once the money was taken, his son, Jai, would come and pick us up. That's all," the driver said.

And he continued, "Then... the accident happened. I swear... I didn't know this would happen. Please believe me."

"Who was driving that car?" Nitya asked.

"Jai was driving," the driver said. "Gupta was waiting nearby on his bike."

"And why did everyone believe the car was **green** and not **grey**?" Gautam asked.

The driver swallowed hard. "While we were waiting there, out of nowhere, a green car hit her. She fell onto the road. My friend and I

panicked. We didn't know what to do. So, we just stayed back. No one else was around. And we were scared to get involved."

And he continued, "Then we saw Jai's car coming towards us and we were relieved that we could just leave that place and never be dragged into this."

His voice shook. "But then... we were shocked to see *Jai hit her*. The first car turned into the right lane. Jai's car drove straight ahead. After that, people started arriving from different directions. Some said they saw a green car passed by. Some said they saw a grey car."

He looked down, ashamed. "Gupta called me immediately and instructed us to convince everyone that it was a green car. We were the only people standing right in front of the florist shop and knew the truth about the two cars. But because we said it was green, everyone believed us. And that was what registered with the police as well."

His voice broke. "I made a terrible mistake. Gupta told me he had taken care of the CCTV cameras, the police, and everything. He assured me the truth would never come out."

His voice broke. "I was greedy and listened to him. I'm sorry..." he begged them to let him go.

Arjun straightened slowly. "You're not leaving anywhere. If Gupta finds out what you said, you're dead. If you stay silent until the police arrive, you will at least get an opportunity to walk out alive."

~

CHECKMATE

The next morning, once the plan was set, Gautam called Gupta. "Hello, Chacha," he greeted respectfully.

"Ah, Gautam beta," Gupta said, sounding almost too warm. "I was just about to call you myself."

"We were thinking it's time we sit together and discuss the wedding formalities," Gautam said. "We want to invite you and your family to Saanjhpur."

"Of course, beta," Gupta said at once. "That makes sense. Even we're looking forward to meeting you all." Then he added smoothly, "Kamala is out of town right now. We'll plan to visit you all once she returns."

"That would be great," Gautam said. "We'll be waiting."

"Give my regards to everyone at home, and blessings to Nitya," Gupta said affectionately and ended the call.

A few minutes later, Gupta dialed Kamala. She answered at once. She knew exactly why he was calling and was sure what she had to say.

"Kamala," Gupta began, his voice low. "Can you talk for a minute? It's important."

"Yes, Gupta ji," she replied briskly. "Let me step outside," she said to make it sound real.

"Gautam called me just before and invited all of us to their home in Saanjhpur. You've been waiting for so long to speak to Nitya. Now is your chance. When are you returning to Rajnagar?"

Kamala smiled to herself. "That's wonderful news, Gupta ji. Of course. I'll wrap everything up by tomorrow." Then almost casually, she added, "Actually why don't I fly directly to Saanjhpur? I'll meet you both there, and we can go together."

"Absolutely, Kamala," Gupta said, pleased. "That sounds like a plan. I'll call you once I finalize everything."

Every piece of the plan had just fallen into place.

A couple of days passed.

Gupta called Kamala to say they had started for Saanjhpur by car and would reach by evening. Kamala responded casually that she will be at her friend's place and asked them to pick her up from there. Gupta agreed without a second thought.

The plan was moving exactly as Arjun intended. He had guided Kamala on how to lead them without raising suspicion.

That evening, once Gupta and Jai reached Saanjhpur, Kamala shared her location. Minutes later, their car began moving toward the spot.

As they got closer to her location, Jai's grip tightened on the steering wheel. His hands began to tremble. He glanced at Gupta, "Dad... I think we are heading toward the florist shop."

Gupta's eyes carefully scanned the surroundings. Slowly, the place came into view, and with it, the memories they had buried deep.

The florist shop.

The road.

The accident.

Kamala stood a few meters away, waiting. Jai pulled over, and both men stepped out. Kamala greeted them with a brightness that looked real enough.

"Jai beta," she said, pulling him into a hug. "I'm so happy for you." But deep inside, she knew, perhaps this might be her last hug. A few silent tears slipped down her cheek.

They spoke for a couple of minutes beside the car, exchanging small pleasantries.

Then Kamala paused, as if a thought had suddenly struck her. "Jai..." she said lightly, her gaze drifting towards the florist shop. "There's a flower store right there. Why don't you buy a bouquet for Nitya? You're meeting her family for the first time. It will be nice."

Gupta and Jai swallowed hard.

"Mom... it's... it's not needed," Jai stammered.

"Yes, Kamala," Gupta added quickly, too quickly. "Jai already bought a gift for Nitya."

Kamala shook her head gently, as if she hadn't even heard them. "No, Jai. A bouquet will be perfect." Then, with a small wink, she added, "Surprise her with roses."

And she began walking towards the shop holding Jai's hand.

Gupta and Jai exchanged a brief, uneasy glance. Then they followed her… slowly.

The bell above the door rang softly as they stepped into the shop. Gupta and Jai took a deep breath as they were relieved to see Mahesh was not at the counter.

The air inside smelled of jasmine and wet leaves. Flowers were neatly arranged in buckets. Garlands hung from the ceiling. Everything looked normal.

Kamala turned to Jai, her voice playful. "Go on, beta. Choose something nice for Nitya."

Jai stood stiff, as if his feet had turned into stone. His eyes drifted around the shop, but all he could see was that road outside… that evening… that fear.

"Jai," Gupta murmured under his breath, impatient. "Just do it and let's get out of this place."

Kamala moved ahead instead. She picked up a bouquet of red roses and held it up with a smile. "Jai… this looks perfect."

Gupta snatched it from her hand, almost too fast, and handed it to the person at the counter. "Pack this," he said sharply.

Kamala was watching their reactions. Everything. Gupta's tightened jaw, Jai's stiff shoulders, the fear in their eyes they couldn't hide. Panic had started to show.

They collected the bouquet and began walking out. As soon as they stepped outside, they saw Arjun and his father walking towards them. They stopped right in front of them. No shouting. No chaos. Just a cold look that struck like thunder.

Gupta's face went blank. His eyes froze in disbelief. Jai stood rooted to the spot, his breath caught in his throat.

Now there was no more running. No more pretending. Only the truth… standing right in front of them.

Gupta understood this wasn't coincidence. His gaze flicked to Kamala. She met his eyes. For the first time in years, he saw hatred in them.

"Kamala..." Gupta tried to call her.

"Don't you dare speak to me," she cried. Her voice shook, "You're a liar. A cheater. I know everything you did."

"What are you talking about, Kamala?" Gupta said softly, wearing confusion like a mask. "And why are these people here?"

Arjun stepped forward. His eyes burning. Before Gupta could blink, he grabbed Jai's collar and slapped him hard. The sound echoed through the air.

Jai stumbled back, his eyes wide with panic. Arjun grabbed him by the neck and dragged him toward the pole near the road – the very spot where his mother had been hit.

Jai struggled, choking on his fear.

Arjun hit him again and again. Not just out of anger, but out of grief that had waited far too long to be released. Gupta stood frozen, surrounded by the truth he had buried. This time, there was no escape.

Jai pushed Arjun aside, eyes wild as he lashed out, "Yes!" he roared. "I did it! I killed her!" He laughed bitterly, "She deserved it. My family suffered because of her... and when I got the chance to finish her off, why would I let it go?"

He stepped forward, laughing like he'd lost his senses. "So, what now?" he taunted. "What will you do?"

Arjun couldn't listen anymore. In one sharp move, he slammed him back against the pole. Harder.

Jai choked.

"Arjun..." everyone rushed forward and pulled him back.

Gupta stumbled towards Jai, shaken. He planned everything carefully all these days, yet Jai had destroyed all of it in seconds. He pulled Jai aside, his voice low and furious. "Enough. Don't speak. Not one more word."

As he turned back, Kamala's hand landed across Gupta's face. *A slap.*

"Look at him... Look at what you've turned our son into." She grabbed Gupta's collar, "I stood by you... Through everything. I trusted you. And this is how you are paying me back?"

Gupta didn't answer. He realized he had lost. Not just the game, but everything. His life. His family. *Checkmate* – with everyone around him just like pieces on the chessboard.

Arjun's father stepped forward. *The man who stayed silent for many years. The man who buried his grief under layers of strength. The man who carried dignity while his heart bled.*

Now he stood just inches away from Gupta. When his voice finally came, it was loud because it had truth in it. "You betrayed AS Industries – the very place that fed you, clothed you, gave you a chance when you had nothing. You stole from the very people who trusted you."

His breath came heavy now, "And... You didn't stop there. You chose blackmail. You chose threats. You destroyed our family's peace." Years of grief pouring out.

"You blackmailed her when she was alive. And you blackmailed her memory after she was gone," he said, his voice thunderous. "And today... you deserve every second of what's coming to you."

A tear slipped from his eye, but he didn't wipe it away. "You are not a father. You are not even a man. You are a coward."

Then he turned slowly and walked back towards Arjun who was standing there motionless. He gently wrapped his arm around his son, providing comfort.

The police arrived. Gupta and Jai were arrested. It was a moment where justice finally stood tall. A scene turned into reality, one that everyone present there had silently wished for. A scene that changed hearts, that made them stand like rock-solid support for one another.

Kamala's heart ached as she saw her son walk away. Even though Jai had become a monster in every sense... she was still a mother. That part of her still existed. She closed her eyes and stood still. *Torn between the ache of a mother... and the fury of a woman who had seen too much.*

Kamala walked towards Nitya, "If you hadn't come that day to the school... if you hadn't spoken, if you hadn't shown me the truth...

None of this would've happened." And she pulled Nitya into a tight hug.

Arjun walked towards Kamala, "It takes immense courage to do what you did. To stand against your own family. You've been incredibly brave. I owe everything to you."

Kamala hugged Arjun and cried, deep pain visible in her eyes and words. Yes, she had been strong. But she was still a mother.

And in that embrace, *was a son longing for his mother, and a mother yearning for her son*, and fate in its strange way brought them together just at the right time.

The story started at the same place and ended there
The story of an accident. The story of an arrest
The story etched in everyone's hearts... so deeply
The story of deep love... and pure hate

~

ARYA

Days passed. The storm had settled. Truths were no longer hidden. Saanjhpur healed slowly and quietly.

Arjun and Nitya sat together at the park. *The final recharge of the story.* The moonlight bathed them softly; stars scattered like blessings above.

Arjun's eyes stayed locked on Nitya. He kept staring at her. At first, she blushed. But Arjun didn't look away. She raised her eyebrows, silently asking him to stop. He didn't. Unable to stay quiet, she squeezed his hand lightly. Then ruffled his hair, pulled his cheek, trying everything to break his silence. Nothing worked.

Finally, she lowered her gaze pretending she didn't care. But she couldn't hold it for long. A moment later, she turned to him again, "If you don't talk to me," she warned softly, "I will leave."

How can this woman, who fought every hurdle for me, who stayed brave through everything, still be this playful? Arjun smiled to himself. *If pain was the price for having her... I'd choose this love. A hundred times over. Because in the end... she's home.*

Arjun finally spoke, a playful glint in his eyes. "Hmm... you still don't remember something, do you?"

Nitya looked at him, her brows knitting slightly. "What did I forget?"

"You owe me something..." he said, leaning back.

Nitya paused. Her thoughts wandered. But nothing came to her. "I do?" she asked, unsure.

Arjun watched her for a second, enjoying the moment a little too much. Then, with a smile, he said, "You owe me a read..."

He slowly pulled his book '*Arya – The Story of Hearts*' out of the bag and held it out to her.

Nitya's hand flew to her mouth as she realized she had completely forgotten about it.

"Aru... I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm really sorry."

Then she added, half-guilty, half-playful, "But it's your fault. You gave me this at the worst possible time."

"So that's why you never bothered to ask me for it again?" Arjun teased, reaching forward as if to snatch it back.

Nitya clutched it to her chest immediately. "No way. This is mine now."

Arjun smiled softly, "It was always yours, Nitya..."

She had never really been interested in books. But this book... *his* book... *their* book... she held onto it as if it was the only thing she needed.

As she turned the pages, she smiled through her tears, remembering their moments. He had turned it all into something she could feel, all over again.

Love is touching the deepest layers of a soul
reading a heart through misty eyes
tracing old scars with gentle hands
and holding their pain like it's your own
Love is not letting go... no matter the odds
It is sacrifice, support, and surrender
Love is realizing it will never be perfect
and still choosing, every day, to fight every battle together

Her heart squeezed as she turned the last page. She leaned closer, forehead resting on his shoulder.

"So beautifully written... This is not just a story you read – it's a story you feel, and wish to live in. I love you Aru," she whispered and kissed him.

Their eyes closed. Their breaths mingled. Finally. Completely. No more running. No more waiting. Just two hearts, stronger than ever, with the book ARYA resting between them.

A story... not of endings, but of beginnings
A love so pure, so emotional, so raw
Souls met, hearts spoke, and love bloomed
And then... there were broken hearts and silent tears
This is the story of Arjun and Nitya
A journey through love, loss, healing, and hope
And now... it gently waves goodbye
The story ends for them, but it begins within you

~ THE END ~