

Almost Together

*A Love Story of Ocean,
Distance and Unfinished promises.*

ANIKET GUPTA



BlueRoseONE.com
Stories Matter
New Delhi • London

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

India | U.K.

Copyright © Aniket Gupta 2026

All rights reserved by author. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author. Although every precaution has been taken to verify the accuracy of the information contained herein, the publisher assumes no responsibility for any errors or omissions. No liability is assumed for damages that may result from the use of information contained within.

BlueRose Publishers takes no responsibility for any damages, losses, or liabilities that may arise from the use or misuse of the information, products, or services provided in this publication.



BlueRose ONE[®]
Stories Matter
New Delhi • London

For permissions requests or inquiries regarding this publication,
please contact:

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

www.BlueRoseONE.com

info@bluerosepublishers.com

+91 8882 898 898

+4407342408967

ISBN: 978-81-69906-41-8

Cover design: Ajay Dhyani

Typesetting: Sagar

First Edition: August 2026

With the blessings of my beloved Grandmother and in loving memory of my beloved Grandfather, Late Mr. Bhagwan Das Gupta. One continues to bless me with her presence, and the other continues to guide me through his memories. Though he is no longer with us, his values, strength and blessings continue to guide me everyday. I hope this small achievement of publishing my own book made you smile with pride, with deepest love and eternal gratitude.

Your presence may no longer be seen, but it is forever felt in every step I take. Miss You.....

About the Author

Aniket Gupta is a debut author from Jaipur, Rajasthan, with his roots in a small village near Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh. Alongside his passion for writing, he enjoys travelling, exploring new places, and capturing memories through photography. Many of the thoughts that shaped this book were written during quiet nights and solitary moments at sea. What began as scattered midnight reflections slowly transformed into an entire story—one that now lives in the pages of *Almost Together*.

He is currently pursuing a Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) from Lovely Professional University. His experiences of life at sea, discipline, distance, and human emotions have deeply influenced his writing.

Through his stories, Aniket hopes to remind readers that some of the strongest connections are built not by being together every day, but by never giving up on each other.

"Every journey leaves behind a story, the same journey became my first book."

— Aniket Gupta

Email: aaravmaani1326@gmail.com

Instagram: [@aaravmaani1326](https://www.instagram.com/aaravmaani1326)

Acknowledgements

Behind every story, there are people, memories, places, and moments that quietly become part of it. And *Almost Together* was never written alone.

First of all, a heartfelt thank you to Versha Ma'am. Your creation, *The Universe Had Other Plans*, inspired me deeply. The emotions, the realism, and the way you made readers feel every moment gave me courage to write my own story from the heart. Without your work, it would have been much more difficult for me to shape *Almost Together* the way I imagined it.

A special thanks to the Team Navigation as they unknowingly became part of this journey too. Life at sea teaches emotions differently. Somewhere between duties, sailings, and lonely nights, this story slowly found its new world.

To the Bridge, Quarter Deck, and Good Galleys of Saryu and Vikramaditya — thank you for becoming silent backgrounds to countless memories, overthinking sessions, late-night thoughts, and hidden emotions that eventually became chapters of this book.

To my parents — thank you for becoming the quiet strength behind every phase of my life. This book may carry my name on the cover, but the patience, values, and strength behind it belongs to you. No matter how far oceans, duties, or life take me, home will always begin with you. And somewhere between uniforms, responsibilities, and growing up, your love remained the only thing in life which never changed. Thank you for

giving me the freedom to dream, the courage to continue, and the comfort of knowing that no matter how difficult life becomes, I will always have a place to return to.

To my seniors and shipmates — thank you for the lessons, guidance, laughter, pressure, discipline, and memories that shaped not only my naval journey but also my perspective towards life & people.

A Special Thanks to the Late Legendary Actor Sushant Singh Rajput - Although I never had the opportunity to meet him, his thoughts, curiosity, and approach towards life inspired me deeply. One statement of his that stayed with me was that he took motivation from himself. That idea changed the way I looked at ambition and personal growth. Instead of waiting for motivation from the world, I started learning to find it within myself. Your "50 Ambitious Dreams" list taught me that life is not measured by years but by experiences, passions, and the courage to pursue them. This book became one of the dreams I wanted to complete, and in some way, your philosophy played a part in making it possible. Though you are no longer with us, your ideas continue to inspire people like me every day. WE MISS YOU SUSHANT.....

Then I would like to mention the legendary bed bugs — Thank you for making sleep impossible and indirectly contributing to half the late-night writing sessions of this book. Some chapters were written because of emotions. Others because sleep was never an option.

Lastly, thank you to every reader who picked up this story and stayed till the end.

Aarav and Maani may be characters on paper for the world—
But for me, they were emotions lived in real life.

— Your Sailor, *Aniket Gupta*

From the Sailor's Pen

Some stories are written with imagination, and some are written with memories that refuse to fade away. *Almost Together* belongs to the second kind. This is not just a story about love. It is about distance, waiting, silence, misunderstandings, hope, and the strange beauty of two people who were never completely together, yet never truly apart. The story revolves around Aarav and Maani — two souls living in different corners of India, connected by nothing but feelings they could never properly explain. Aarav, a sailor in the Navy, carried the discipline of the sea within him, while Maani, a defence aspirant, carried dreams larger than her fears. Their lives were different, their cities were different, and even their futures seemed to move in opposite directions, yet destiny somehow kept bringing their hearts back to each other. But beyond these fictional names exist two real people.

Aarav carries pieces of me — *Aniket Gupta*

And behind Maani lives the soul of a girl who unknowingly changed my life.

This book was never planned. It was written slowly from my late-night thoughts, unread messages, screenshots of old conversations, voice notes saved for no reason, and memories that continued to breathe long after moments had ended. Every chapter carries emotions I once felt but never fully spoke about. Sometimes while writing, I smiled remembering the smallest things — her random Instagram reels, the memes she used to send, her sudden anger, her care hidden behind simple

words, and those conversations that made ordinary nights feel important. People often believe love stories are built on grand moments. Mine was built on little things. A “take care” message before sleeping. Waiting for a reply while pretending not to care. Checking online status without any reason. Reading old chats during lonely nights. Missing someone even while talking to them every single day. That is the kind of love this story carries.

There were times when distance felt stronger than emotions. I belonged to Rajasthan, while she belonged to Jammu. Different cultures, different environments, different struggles — yet somehow the feelings remained the same. We were separated by miles but connected by memories. Sometimes life felt unfair because two people who understood each other deeply still could not stay close enough. And maybe that is why the title *Almost Together* felt perfect. Because some people come into our lives not to stay forever, but to change us forever. While writing this book, I realized how deeply a person can become part of your everyday existence. There were moments when I opened our old WhatsApp chats just to remember how naturally happiness once arrived. Some conversations looked childish, some emotional, some incomplete — but every single message carried life inside it. Those chats became my inspiration during nights when words refused to come out. I did not just write a story; I relived memories while creating it.

Maani’s character is not written as a perfect girl. She is emotional, stubborn, caring, confusing, strong, and soft at the same time — exactly how real people are. I wanted her character to feel alive because she *was* alive in my memories while I wrote every page. Her silence affected me, her happiness mattered to me, and even today certain songs, places, and timings remind me of her without warning. Aarav, on the other hand, is someone who learns that loving deeply is both beautiful and painful. He learns how difficult it is to

balance dreams, responsibilities, and emotions together. He learns that sometimes men stay silent not because they do not feel, but because they feel too much. Through him, I tried to express emotions many people hide behind jokes, work, and normal conversations. This story is not meant to show a perfect relationship. It is meant to show a real one. Real love is not always dramatic. Sometimes it exists quietly in waiting. Sometimes it survives through misunderstandings. Sometimes two people care deeply for each other but still fail to stay together in the way they imagined. And still, the feelings remain genuine. There is a different kind of pain in loving someone honestly.

Not the pain of heartbreak alone, but the pain of watching time change things you once believed would never change. The pain of becoming strangers to someone who once knew your every mood. The pain of typing long messages and deleting them. The pain of wanting to tell someone how important they are, but choosing silence because life has already become complicated.

Many readers may think this book is only a romantic story, but for me it is also a memory preserved in words. Years from now, even if everything changes, these pages will remind me that once there existed a girl whose presence made ordinary days feel lighter. And maybe she will never fully know how much she inspired these pages. I do not know whether every love story needs a perfect ending. Sometimes people are meant to meet only to teach each other something important. Some become home, even if they never stay forever. Some remain in our prayers long after conversations end. This book is for everyone who has ever loved silently.

For those who waited for one notification.

For those who replay old memories before sleeping.

For those who smiled while reading old chats and cried immediately after.

For those who met the right person at the wrong time.

And for those who were *almost together*.

Lastly, I want to thank the girl who unknowingly became the heartbeat of this story. Whether life keeps us close or far apart, a part of her will always exist in these pages. Not as just a character, but as a feeling I could never fully explain.

Some people become chapters. She became my entire book

There are some people who unknowingly become the reason behind our strength, our growth, and sometimes even our dreams.

This book would never have been possible without her presence in my life. Every emotion written in these pages carries a memory connected to her in some way. From the happiest conversations to the silent misunderstandings, from late-night chats to moments of distance — every feeling became a part of this story. I want to thank her for inspiring words that I never knew existed inside me. There were nights when old conversations with her gave life to entire chapters. Her support, her care, her anger, her laughter, and even her silence helped me understand emotions more deeply than ever before. Without realizing it, she became the soul behind every page of this book.

Thank you, *Shawty* for being the reason this story feels real instead of fictional. Thank you for giving me memories strong enough to turn into words. Even the smallest moments with you became inspiration during the writing process. This book is not just written with imagination — it is written with emotions that were felt genuinely. No matter where life takes

us, a part of your presence will always remain alive within these pages. You supported this journey in ways you may never fully realize, and for that, I will always be grateful. Some people help us write stories. You helped me feel one.

Dedicated to the girl who unknowingly became home during the loneliest phase of my life. ~ for her, my Good Girl, I Love you more.....

Contents

Chapter 1: The First Message (Her POV).....	1
Chapter 2: A Platform between Us (His POV).....	8
Chapter 3: They were still “Just Friends”	16
Chapter 4: Nothing confessed yet everything felt.....	31
Chapter 5: When silence finally spoke and suddenly it was love.	46
Chapter 6: Ordinary Days, extra ordinary love.....	58
Chapter 7: She slept with hope, he slept with Her picture.	71
Chapter 8: The night we refused to end	88
Chapter 9: The Day I Couldn’t say I’m okay.....	101
Chapter 10: What a sailor writes when he misses someone too much.	111
Chapter 11: The Brightest Night, Still the loneliest Us.....	128
Chapter 12: The Middle Watch.....	137
Chapter 13: The “You Changed” Fight	145
Chapter 14: If the Distance Didn't Exist.....	152
Chapter 15: When the Sailor Finally Met His Home.....	159

Final Chapter : I don't want to write it but the reality
always hit hard..... 175

A Public Letter to Maani 182

A Final Note to the Readers..... 185

Chapter 1:

The First Message (Her POV)

It started the way most important things do these days—quietly, without warning, and on a screen that didn't seem like it could change anything. Maani wasn't looking for a conversation that night. The hostel rooms were unusually calm, the kind of silence that makes you aware of your own thoughts. She scrolled through her phone without interest, half-reading messages, half ignoring the world. It was just another night, another routine pause between College lectures. And then his name appeared. It wasn't dramatic. No music, no sudden realization. Just a notification—simple, almost forgettable.

"Hi Buddy." That was it.

For a moment, She stared at the screen, debating whether to reply. Messages like that came and went all the time. Most of them led nowhere. But something about this one felt... different. Maybe it was the timing. Maybe it was the quiet. Or maybe, later, She would realize it was never just a message. She replied.

A single word. Casual. Safe.

The conversation should have ended there. But it didn't. His name was Aarav.

At first, it was nothing more than small talk—the kind you don't remember. Where are you from? What do you do? How

was your day? Questions that fill space rather than create meaning. But slowly, almost unnoticed, those questions began to carry weight. There was an unnoticed magic between the Convo.

The conversation flowed so naturally that neither of them noticed how quickly time was passing. What had started with casual replies slowly turned into endless questions, teasing remarks, and random stories shared between two strangers who already sounded familiar to each other.

Somewhere in between the conversation, he mentioned how peaceful railway stations felt at night. The noise, the announcements, the people constantly moving—it somehow made waiting less lonely. He told her he was sitting at the station, waiting for his train back home to Jaipur after days away.

The topic drifted from cities to travelling, and then somehow to islands and beaches. That was when he casually mentioned Port Blair, almost like it was just another place to him. But the way he spoke about it carried familiarity, as if the sea had become a part of his life long ago.

Her curiosity immediately caught onto it. She asked how he knew the place so well, expecting a simple answer. Instead, after a small pause, he admitted that his work had taken him there many times.

That answer only made her more curious.

When she finally asked what he actually did, he tried avoiding the question at first, brushing it off with short replies. But eventually he gave in. Quietly, casually, like it was no big deal at all, he told her that he is a sailor in the Navy.

And suddenly, little things about him started making sense.

The discipline in the way he spoke.

The calmness hidden behind his words.

Even the strange attachment he seemed to have with the sea.

For the first time since their conversation had started, she paused before replying. Not because she was shocked, but because somehow the image she had created of him in her mind finally felt complete.

Now the talks about Port Blair started.

Maani: "You know... I've actually been to Port Blair once." Aarav looked at the screen with slight surprise.

Aarav: "Seriously?"

Maani: "Mhm."

Maani: "NCC trip."

Aarav smiled faintly.

Of course.

Maani always spoke proudly whenever NCC was involved.

Aarav: "SUO things?"

Maani: "Exactly"

He laughed softly.

Then another message appeared.

Maani: "Honestly..."Port Blair felt peaceful in a very strange way."

Aarav leaned back slowly while reading her message again.

Peaceful.

That wasn't a word most people used for military islands. But somehow, hearing her describe it that way felt nice.

Aarav: "Where all did you go?"

Almost instantly, messages started flooding in.

Maani: "Cellular Jail."

Maani: "Corbyn's Cove."

Maani: "Ross Island too."

Maani: "And some beach where literally everyone clicked photos for Instagram"

Aarav smiled while imagining her walking around the same places he passed almost every week.

Same roads. Same sea breeze. Same sunsets.

Yet back then...

They didn't even know each other existed. That thought felt strangely beautiful.

Maani sent another message.

Maani: "You know what's weird?"

Aarav: "What?"

A small pause. Then— **Maani:** "At that time, you were probably already somewhere on that island."

Aarav's eyes stayed fixed on the screen quietly.

Because he had thought the exact same thing.

Maybe while she was laughing with her NCC group near the beach...

He was somewhere nearby standing for evening duty.

Maybe they crossed the same streets unknowingly. Maybe life had already placed them close once before introducing them properly.

The idea stayed in his mind longer than expected.

He finally replied slowly.

Aarav: "Funny how strangers can exist so close to each other without knowing they'll matter one day." For almost a minute, Maani didn't reply.

Then finally— **Maani:** "That sounded dangerously poetic, sailor." Aarav smiled faintly.

But somewhere deep inside...

The thought refused to leave him. Because long before they became part of each other's daily lives...

The same island had already witnessed both of them under the same sky.

Night had become unusually quiet.

Maani lay on her bed with the room lights turned off, her phone glowing softly against the darkness while the ceiling fan hummed above her.

2:37 AM

And somehow...

She was still smiling at the chat screen.

Her mother had already scolded her twice to sleep earlier. Her NCC group was inactive. The entire house was silent. Yet her mind still stayed inside that conversation with Aarav.

Port Blair.

The same island he was posted on now.

It felt strange thinking about it.

Back then, during her NCC trip as an SUO, Port Blair had only been another beautiful place — beaches, sea breeze, group photos, endless marching, and chaotic memories with cadets. But now?

Now every place there somehow reminded her of him. Maybe because once a person becomes emotionally important...

Even cities start feeling personal.

She opened their chat again unconsciously.

Scrolled upward slowly.

A soft smile appeared on her face.

"Funny how strangers can exist so close to each other without knowing they'll matter one day." Maani stared at the sentence again.

Her heartbeat slowed quietly.

Because somewhere deep down...

She knew he mattered already.

Maybe more than he realized.

Maybe more than she should allow.

But feelings like this never arrive with warnings.

They grow slowly.

Softly.

Inside ordinary conversations.

Her eyes shifted toward his profile picture.

A tired sailor standing near the ocean under a sunset sky.

She smiled faintly.

Then typed instinctively—

"Take care."

But after staring at the message for a few seconds...

She deleted it.

Too emotional.

Too obvious.

Instead she simply sent:

Maani: "Okay... sleep now, sailor." Aarav replied almost instantly.

Aarav: "Yeah. You too, SUO."

Then after a short pause— **Aarav:** "Goodnight, Maani."

She didn't know why...

But seeing her name from him felt different tonight.

Warmer somehow.

Maani locked her phone slowly and placed it beside her pillow.

Outside her window, the city slept peacefully.

But inside herself..

Something had quietly changed.

And as sleep slowly pulled her away...

One thought stayed behind longer than the rest.

Maybe some people start feeling like home... Long before you ever meet them.

Chapter 2:

A Platform between Us (His POV)

Late night, 2300 hrs in Fauj terms. The station was louder than usual, or maybe Aarav just noticed it more that night.

Announcements echoed through the air, blending with the restless murmur of people moving in every direction. The sharp whistle of a departing train cut through the noise, followed by the metallic rhythm of wheels dragging against the tracks. Somewhere nearby, a chai vendor called out repeatedly, his voice rising above the chaos as if it had memorized the urgency of departures.

Aarav stood on Platform 3, his bag resting beside his feet, his eyes fixed on the digital board that flickered between delays and arrivals. His train was late.

Of course, it was.

He checked his phone.

No new messages.

For a moment, he just stared at the screen, as if waiting long enough might force it to light up. It didn't.

He locked it again.

Around him, life was moving forward—families hugging goodbye, friends laughing too loudly, strangers brushing past without a second glance. Everyone seemed to be going somewhere, meeting someone, leaving something behind.

Aarav was doing all of it at once.

The night air carried a mix of dust, diesel, and something strangely nostalgic. It reminded him of journeys he had taken before—transfers, duties, places that blurred into one another over time. But this one felt different as he was going back to his home.

He was sitting on the bench maybe waiting for someone, looking at his phone.

His phone buzzed.

His heart reacted before his mind could.

He picked it up quickly.

Her name.

Maani. She just liked his Story on Instagram.

For a second, he didn't open the app. He just looked at it, as if the words inside could change something he wasn't ready to face yet.

Then he tapped through her id and sent "Hii buddy"

Simple. Normal.

But it didn't feel normal.

Her reply came with a warm "hey"

Aarav exhaled slowly before typing.

"You! Still awake."

She paused... then added:

"Yup, just finished college assignment"

The typing indicator appeared almost instantly.

"What about you." Maani replied

That was it.

No complaints. No long message. Just those three words.

And somehow, they carried more weight than anything else she could have said.

Aarav leaned back against the cold metal bench, his eyes drifting toward the dark tracks stretching into the distance. The station lights reflected faintly on the rails, like broken lines trying to connect somewhere far away.

For a moment, he imagined it—her walking through the crowd, searching for him, stopping right in front of him like distance had never existed. No screens. No calls. Just... real.

But reality wasn't that kind.

Aarav: "What does your normal day even look like?" For a few seconds, she didn't reply.

Then suddenly messages started appearing one after another.

Maani: "I'm pursuing BSc currently."

Maani: "Usually hostel life only."

Maani: "I stay with 3 other girls."

Maani: "So peace doesn't exist there"

Aarav smiled while reading the messages carefully.

For some reason, he liked hearing ordinary details about her life.

It made her feel more real somehow.

More present.

Aarav: "And you survive all that?"

Maani: "Barely."

Maani: "One girl talks in her sleep."

Maani: "One steals everyone's snacks."

Maani: "And the third one behaves like my mother." Aarav laughed quietly, shaking his head.

The image in his mind felt strangely comforting. Chaotic hostel rooms. Girls laughing loudly. Late-night gossip. Messy study tables.

A completely different world from his own.

His life was built around discipline, uniforms, sea duties, and lonely nights near the ocean.

Hers sounded loud. Warm.

Alive.

Then another message appeared.

Maani: "But currently I'm home for a few days."

Aarav leaned back slowly while staring at the screen.

Home.

The word felt soft coming from her.

He found himself wondering what her life looked like there. What kind of room she had.

Whether she sat near windows while texting him.

Whether her family knew how much she smiled at her phone these days.

The thought made him quieter than expected.

His phone vibrated again.

Maani: "Why are you suddenly so silent?"

Aarav: "Nothing."

Maani: "Liar."

Aarav smiled faintly before finally replying honestly.

Aarav: "Just trying to imagine your life."

This time, Maani took longer to respond.

For a few seconds, no message came. Only sea wind moved around him quietly.

Then finally— **Maani:** "Maybe because your life is full of emotionally unavailable sailors."

Aarav burst out laughing softly.

Then another message appeared.

Maani: "Honestly hostel gets exhausting sometimes though."

Aarav: "Why?"

Maani: "Too much noise."

Maani: "Too many people around all the time."

Maani: "Sometimes I just sit on the hostel terrace alone."
Aarav's expression softened slightly while reading that.
Because suddenly... She sounded a little like him.

He typed carefully.

Aarav: "And what do you think about there?" This time, her typing appeared instantly.

Then disappeared.

Appeared again.

As if she was thinking too much before answering.

Finally— **Maani:** "Life mostly."

Then another message.

Maani: "Future." A pause.

Then— **Maani:** "And sometimes people."

Aarav stared at the screen quietly.

For some reason, he wanted to ask one dangerous question.

"Which people?"

But he stopped himself. Instead he typed— **Aarav:** "You sound very philosophical for someone who fights over stolen snacks."

Maani: "Both personalities can coexist." He smiled faintly.

Then suddenly—

A picture appeared in the chat.

Maani had sent a photo.

A blurry one.

Her hostel balcony during sunset.

Orange sky. Messy railing. A cup of coffee resting near the edge.

Maani: "This is my overthinking spot."

Aarav looked at the picture longer than necessary.

Not because it was beautiful.

But because it belonged to her world.

And lately...

Every small piece of her life had started mattering to him more than it should.

He saved the picture unconsciously.

Then leaned back slowly, staring toward the train with a quiet smile on his face.

Because somewhere between random conversations, latenight talks, and ordinary check-ins...

Maani had stopped feeling like just another person online. She had become part of his peace.

The convo continued till **0200 AM**. Giggles, Jokes and Smiling faces were everywhere. The convo was going swiftly.

Not because he want it—but because wanting had never been enough. An announcement interrupted his thoughts.

His train would arrive shortly. Aarav picked up his bag, but his feet didn't move immediately.

Instead, he looked at his phone again. The chat. The memories. that lived inside a device he could carry but never fully hold.

"Take care," she sent.

He stared at those words longer than he should have.

Take care.

Not "I'll miss you."

Not "Don't go."

Just something safe. Something distant.

Just like them.

The train lights appeared in the distance, growing brighter with every passing second.

Aarav typed one last message.

"I will."

Then, after a pause:

"You too."

The train arrived with a rush of wind and noise, drowning out everything else. People moved quickly now—boarding, calling out, finding their seats.

Aarav stepped forward.

For a brief second, he looked back—not at anyone in particular, but at the space he was about to leave behind.

At the feeling he couldn't take with him.

And then he got on the train.

Some journeys begin with excitement.

Others begin with silence.

His began with a message he wished had said more.

Aarav sighed softly and stepped inside the train. The coach smelled of iron, dust and old blankets.

He found his seat near the window and placed his bag. Outside, the station lights blurred through the glass as passengers settled down. He leaned back and closed his eyes.

The First time he met Maani flashed in his mind like an old movie scene. Aarav plugged on his ear phones and slept peacefully.

Chapter 3:

They were still “Just Friends”

6:12 AM

The train moved slowly through the misty morning while most passengers inside the coach were still asleep. Outside the window, green fields passed quietly under the soft orange light of sunrise. Aarav sat near the window with earphones plugged in, staring at his phone screen.

One unread message.

From Maani.

The same girl he just met accidentally.

He opened the message slowly.

Maani: "Good morning, Sailor."

Aarav smiled unconsciously.

It was strange how one message from her could change his entire mood.

He typed back.

Aarav: "Why are you awake this early?"

The reply came instantly.

Maani: "Because someone said he was finally going home today."

Aarav looked outside the window quietly.

Home.

The word felt warm.

But lately, some part of him had started connecting that feeling with her too.

His phone vibrated again.

Maani: "Send me a picture from the train."

He clicked a random blurry photo of the sunrise outside his window and sent it.

A few seconds later—

Maani: "This looks peaceful."

Aarav: "Unlike my sleep schedule."

Maani: "Military people don't sleep. You all just stare dramatically at oceans."

Aarav laughed softly, shaking his head.

An old man sleeping nearby glanced at him irritably before turning again.

A few seconds later—

Maani: "so..."

Maani: "How does it feel going home after so many months?"

Aarav stared at the question for a moment. Then looked outside the moving train quietly.

How did it feel?

Peaceful. Strange. Emotional. But also unfamiliar somehow. He typed slowly.

Aarav: "Feels like life is slowing down again."

Maani: "That bad?" He smiled faintly.

Aarav: "No... just different."

Another message came instantly.

Maani: "You missed home a lot, didn't you?"

Aarav leaned his head back against the seat.

He remembered sleepless naval nights. Long duties. Storms in the middle of the sea. Birthdays missed. Festivals spent on ships far away from family.

And through all those nights... There was always one notification waiting for him.

He finally replied.

Aarav: "I did."

A small pause.

Then he added— **Aarav:** "But honestly...Somewhere along the way, talking to you also started feeling like home."

For almost a full minute, no reply came from her side.

Only the sound of train tracks filled the silence. Then finally—

Maani: "You say dangerous things this early in the morning."
Aarav's fingers stopped over the keyboard.

Three dots appeared immediately.

Maani: "And?"

Aarav smiled faintly.

Aarav: "I think it'll be awkward for the first five minutes."

Maani: "Only five?"

Aarav: "Then you'll start talking too much."

Maani: "Excuse me?"

Aarav: "And I'll just keep listening."

For almost a minute, she didn't reply.

Then finally—

Maani: "That honestly sounds nice."

Aarav stared at the message longer than necessary.

Something about her words felt softer lately.

Different.

Not friendship exactly.

Not love either.

Just... Something slowly changing between them.

The train crossed a bridge as sunlight filled the compartment completely.

Another message appeared.

Maani: "Promise me one thing?"

Aarav: "What?"

Maani: "Even when you get busy there..."

"Don't disappear."

His expression softened instantly.

Because she didn't know this...

But her messages had already become the calmest part of his hardest days.

Aarav leaned back and typed slowly.

Aarav: "I don't think I can disappear from you anymore."

This time, Maani didn't reply immediately.

Maybe because some feelings begin quietly...or she is afraid of being Ghosted.

The Talks continued till Maani told her she is currently at her home and had to go to Market with her sisters.

Aarav: (On his mind) Don't go like this, stay for some more time.....

But he replied with a simple Enjoy! and have Fun

Maani: "Text me when you reach home safely, okay?"

Aarav looked at the screen for a second longer.

Nobody had said those words to him in a very long time.

Not in this way.

Not like they genuinely cared. He typed slowly.

Aarav: "I will."

A few seconds later—

Maani: "Bye Sailor :)"

And just like that, the conversation ended.

Simple. Ordinary. Short.

Yet Aarav kept staring at the empty chat screen long after she went offline.

Because somewhere between casual jokes, random morning texts, and unfinished conversations...

Maani had unknowingly become the part of his day he waited for the most.

After Maani went offline, silence slowly returned to Aarav's screen.

The train continued moving steadily through the morning sunlight, but something about the journey suddenly felt quieter than before. He locked his phone.

Unlocked it again after thirty seconds. No new message.

Aarav smiled at himself lightly.

This is bad, he thought.

Because he had started expecting her presence without realizing it.

Outside the window, small stations passed one after another. Families boarded trains carrying bags, children laughed loudly, tea sellers walked through compartments shouting endlessly.

But Aarav's mind stayed inside one conversation. "Text me when you reach home safely, okay?" Simple words. Yet nobody outside his family had ever cared enough to say them like that.

He leaned his head back against the seat and closed his eyes for a moment.

Then suddenly—

His phone vibrated again.

Aarav instantly picked it up.

But it wasn't Maani.

Just a service message from the railway network.

For the first time, he realized how deeply someone could become part of your routine without physically being there.

He opened Instagram absentmindedly.

Maani was offline.

Still, he entered their chat.

Scrolled through old messages.

At around 1600 hrs the train reached his hometown Jaipur. As soon as he stepped onto the platform, warm air hit his face. Everything felt familiar — the noise, the smell of chai, the crowded station, even the auto drivers yelling for passengers.

Home.

His mother hugged him tightly the moment she saw him outside the station.

"You've become thinner," she complained instantly. "And you started with emotional damage already," Aarav laughed.

His father smiled proudly while taking his duffel bag silently.

For the first time in months... Aarav felt peaceful.

The entire evening disappeared in family conversations, homemade food, and endless questions from relatives about naval life.

"How many countries have you seen?"

"Is life on ships dangerous?"

Aarav somehow survived all of it with tired smiles and sarcastic answers.

But even in the middle of everyone...

He checked his phone repeatedly. Still offline.

The sky outside turned orange.

A cool breeze entered through the terrace while Aarav sat alone near the edge wall, finally getting a moment of peace after the exhausting day.

Coming home after months at sea always felt strange to Aarav. The house remained the same. Same walls. Same balcony. Same

evening tea. Same mother shouting from the kitchen because he left his bag in the middle of the room again.

But somehow—He had changed quietly. Maybe love changes people in ways families notice before the person himself does.

That evening, Aarav sat with his parents during dinner after a long time. Homemade food. Ceiling fan noise. News channel running unnecessarily in the background.

His mother kept serving extra food despite him refusing repeatedly.

“Maa bas... enough.”

“Ship pe khaana nahi milta kya?” Aarav laughed softly.

“Aap logon ko lagta hai Navy mein torture karte hain.”

His father smiled faintly while eating silently.

For a while, the conversation stayed normal. Relatives. Work. Leave duration. Neighbors asking about him.

Then suddenly—Like every Indian household eventually does—The topic shifted towards marriage.

“Sharma ji ki beti ki shaadi fix ho gayi.”

Aarav nodded casually while eating. Then his mother looked at him carefully.

“Tumhari bhi age ho jayegi dekhte dekhte.” Aarav almost choked on water.

“Maa please.” She laughed immediately. “Kya please? 21 ke ho gaye ho.”

“Exactly. ONLY 21.” His father smiled faintly hearing his panic.

But Aarav’s mother continued purposely. “Navy wale toh jaldi settle ho jaate hain.”

Aarav instantly shook his head. “Mujhe nahi hona.”

“Accha?” “At least 5-6 years more.” His mother stared at him suspiciously now. “Itna time kyun?” Aarav looked down at his plate quietly for two seconds.

Because the real answer sitting inside his heart had a name. Maani. But he wasn't ready to explain her existence yet. Not to family. Not to the world. So instead he smiled casually.

“Abhi life enjoy karni hai.” His mother narrowed her eyes immediately. “Navy mein kisi ko pasand toh nahi kar liya?” That sentence hit Aarav so unexpectedly that he started coughing instantly.

His father laughed quietly for the first time. Meanwhile Aarav tried controlling his expression.

“Maa...” “Acha sach sach bata.”

“Kuch nahi hai.” Lie. Very obvious lie. And mothers somehow always know.

Aarav sat alone in his old room scrolling through Maani's chat while hearing distant TV sounds from the hall.

Later that night, the house had already gone quiet.

The television in the hall had finally stopped making noise, the kitchen lights were off, and the entire house carried that familiar stillness that only existed after midnight.

But sleep refused to come to him.

He lay on his bed with one arm behind his head while his phone rested beside him, screen lighting up every few seconds because he kept checking it unnecessarily.

Their conversation from earlier was still open. Her last message sat there untouched, simple and ordinary, yet somehow enough to keep his attention trapped for hours.

It was strange.

He had spent months at sea surviving exhaustion, sleepless watches, storms, and endless silence without ever feeling restless like this. But waiting for one girl's reply somehow tested his patience more than the ocean ever had.

Every notification sound made him check his phone instantly, only to be disappointed by random group messages or useless promotions. He sighed quietly, locking the screen again before unlocking it less than a minute later.

And then finally—

Her message appeared.

A small smile immediately found its way onto his face before he could stop it. The kind that happened naturally. Effortlessly.

He stared at the screen for two seconds longer than necessary before replying, pretending he hadn't been waiting at all.

Maani: "Survived the market."

Aarav laughed instantly.

A real laugh this time.

The kind that appears naturally without effort.

He replied quickly.

Aarav: "Congratulations. I was worried."

Maani: "As you should be."

Aarav: "How many bags?"

Maani: "Too many. I deserve respect." Aarav shook his head smiling. Then another message appeared.

Maani: "Reached home safely?"

For a second, Aarav just stared at the screen quietly.

It was such a small question.

But nobody outside family had asked him that in a very long time.

And somehow...

Hearing it from her felt different.

Softer.

More personal.

He typed slowly.

Aarav: "Yeah. Reached a few hours ago."

A few seconds later— **Maani:** "Good."

Then another message.

Maani: "Now your mom can finally stop worrying." Aarav smiled faintly.

If only she knew...

Someone else had been worrying too.

The conversation continued casually after that — small jokes, random complaints, meaningless topics.

Nothing romantic.

Nothing extraordinary.

Yet Aarav noticed something quietly while talking to her beneath the evening sky.

No matter how tiring his day felt...

Her messages somehow made it lighter. And maybe that's how feelings truly begin.

Not loudly.

Not suddenly.

But softly...

Through comfort becoming attachment before either person realizes it.

Night had settled quietly around the house.

Maani sat near her window with her knees pulled close, phone resting in her hands while cool air moved softly through the curtains. Her half-packed suitcase lay open on the bed behind her, silently reminding her of tomorrow.

Tomorrow she had to leave again.

Back to hostel life. Back to assignments, noisy roommates, attendance, and crowded routines.

Honestly...

She didn't feel ready for it yet.

Her phone vibrated softly.

Aarav: "Why are you so quiet tonight?"

Maani smiled faintly at the screen.

He noticed small things too easily these days.

She typed slowly.

Maani: "Because I have to go back to hostel tomorrow." For a few seconds, Aarav didn't reply.

Then finally— **Aarav:** "That explains the sadness, SUO."

Maani leaned her head against the wall quietly.

Maybe it did.

Home had slowed life down in a comforting way.

Late mornings. Homemade food. Peaceful evenings. Long conversations with Aarav without hostel interruptions. Tomorrow all of that would disappear again.

Her phone vibrated once more.

Aarav: "You really don't want to go, huh?"

She stared at the message for a moment before replying honestly.

Maani: "Not really."

Then after a pause— **Maani:** "Hostel gets exhausting sometimes." Aarav replied almost instantly.

Aarav: "Then don't overthink it tonight."

Aarav: "Just survive tomorrow first."

A small smile appeared on her face.

It amazed her sometimes how easily he calmed her mind without even trying.

The conversation slowed after that.

Not awkward silence.

Comfortable silence.

The kind where both people stay online without necessarily knowing what to say next.

Then suddenly— **Aarav:** "Will you still text me after going back?"

Maani's heartbeat slowed unexpectedly reading that.

Such a simple question.

Yet something about it felt softer than usual. She smiled faintly before replying.

Maani: "Depends."

"Whether the sailor survives without me till tomorrow."
Aarav instantly reacted with a laughing emoji.

But Maani kept staring at the screen quietly afterward.

Because hidden beneath the teasing...

Both of them had already started fearing the same thing a little

Distance creating silence.

And maybe that's how feelings deepen unknowingly.

When someone's absence starts becoming a thought before they've even left.

Aarav stayed awake longer than usual.

His room was quiet now. The lights in the rest of the house had already been turned off, and faint sounds of the ceiling fan filled the silence around him.

From outside the window, cool night air entered softly while distant street dogs barked somewhere far away.

But Aarav's mind stayed stuck on one thought repeatedly—
Tomorrow, Maani would go back to her hostel.

Back to crowded rooms, assignments, noisy roommates, and a routine where she would probably become busier than before.
Strangely...

That thought bothered him more than it should have.

He unlocked his phone again and opened their chat absentmindedly, scrolling through random conversations from the past few days.

Her dramatic complaints. Her blurry sunset picture. Her teasing messages. Her random "good morning sailor" texts.

A faint smile appeared on his face unconsciously. Because somewhere along the way, these ordinary little conversations

had quietly become part of his everyday peace. And maybe that was the dangerous thing about emotional attachment—

You don't realize how important someone has become while it's happening.

You only notice it when the thought of them becoming less available suddenly leaves a strange emptiness inside you.

The phrase "Is This Love.....?" revolved softly in the background of his thoughts every time her name appeared on his screen.

At first, he ignored it, convincing himself it was just friendship, just habit. But slowly, Maani became the calm in his restless days and the first thought after every tiring evening.

Somewhere between her random rants, sleepy goodnights, and stolen midnight conversations, Aarav had already fallen for her long before she confessed.

Good Night!!

Chapter 4:

Nothing confessed yet everything felt

08:17 AM

The morning Maani had to leave for her hostel felt unusually heavy.

Her suitcase lay open on the bed while her mother folded clothes carefully, slipping in extra snacks as always.

The smell of freshly made aloo parathas filled the house, but for once, Maani wasn't excited about breakfast.

Vacations always ended too quickly.

Her father stood near the door checking his car keys pretending to be busy while secretly feeling emotional. Maani noticed it but said nothing.

"Take care of yourself," her mother reminded for the hundredth time.

"I will, Mumma," Maani replied softly.

But her heart already felt strange.

Not because she was leaving home.

Because somewhere deep inside, she knew she would miss someone else too.

Aarav.

Over the holidays, talking to him had become part of her daily routine. Morning texts, random teasing, late-night conversations—everything felt natural now.

Sometimes she caught herself smiling at her phone for no reason. And that scared her a little.

Still, neither of them believed in love.

At least that's what they kept saying.

While sitting in the car, her phone vibrated.

Aarav: "So hostel girl is leaving again?" She smiled instantly.

Maani: "Sadly yes."

Aarav: "Good luck surviving hostel food."

Maani: "Excuse me, I'm strong."

Aarav: "Emotionally? No."

She rolled her eyes.

Maani: "You know what? You're very annoying."

Aarav: "Yet you reply in 2 seconds."

Maani quickly locked her phone to hide her smile from her parents.

After reaching the hostel, chaos surrounded her immediately—girls dragging suitcases, roommates screaming after meeting each other again, wardens giving unnecessary instructions.

But amid all that noise, one message still mattered most.

Aarav: "Reached safely?"

And somehow, the hostel felt less lonely after that.

Days passed.

Their friendship deepened in ways neither of them noticed at first.

Aarav would text her before sleeping no matter how tired he was. Maani started telling him things she never shared with anyone else.

Yet every time their conversations became emotional, one of them would joke about relationships. Almost like both were scared.

One night—

Maani: "You know relationships are exhausting."

Aarav: "Exactly."

Maani: "Too much drama."

Aarav: "Too much expectations."

Maani: "And heartbreak."

Aarav: "That's why I stay away." He smiled while typing.

Maani: "Same. Never falling in love."

Aarav: "Deal."

But ironically, after that conversation, they talked till 3 AM.
Again.

And again.

Another evening—

Aarav: "What kind of boys do girls even like these days?"

Maani: "Definitely not overconfident navy sailors."

Aarav: "Good thing I'm humble."

Maani: "You literally called yourself handsome yesterday."

Aarav: "Because I am."

She laughed loudly in the middle of her classroom and earned strange looks from everyone around.

Without realizing it, Aarav had become her comfort place. And Maani had become the first person Aarav searched for every day.

Still, both denied what was happening.

That night, the hostel was unusually quiet.

Her roommates were asleep, the lights were off, and only the faint moonlight entered through the curtains. Maani lay on her bed staring at Aarav's chat.

Then his message came.

Aarav: "Still awake?"

Maani: "Maybe."

Aarav: "You wait for my texts, don't you?" Her heart skipped.

Maani: "Wow. Such confidence."

Aarav: "Admit it."

Maani: "Never."

He replied instantly.

Aarav: "Liar."

Maani bit her lip, smiling helplessly.

Meanwhile, Aarav sat alone on his terrace under the dark sky.

His holidays will be ending soon.

In few days, he would leave again for duty.

And for the first time, leaving felt difficult.

Because of one girl who claimed she never wanted love.

Aarav: "You know... I have to leave in few days." Maani stared at the message.

Her chest tightened unexpectedly.

Maani: "Hmm."

Aarav: "That's all?"

Maani: "What else should I say?"

After a pause—

Aarav: "Say you'll miss me."

Her fingers froze above the keyboard.

Because she would.

Too much.

Maani: "Maybe."

Aarav: "Again this maybe."

Maani: "Fine. I'll miss you."

A small smile appeared on Aarav's face.

Aarav: "Good. Because I think I'll miss you more." The conversation slowed after that.

Not awkward.

Just... intense.

Like both suddenly became aware of something they had ignored for days.

Then Aarav sent:

Aarav: "Can I ask something honestly?"

Maani: "Hmm."

Aarav: "Why are you so attached to me?" Her heartbeat quickened instantly.

Attached.

The word scared her because it was true.

She stared at the ceiling.

Why was she attached?

Why did his absence affect her mood?

Why did she smile at every notification?

Why did nobody else feel like him?

Her fingers trembled while typing.

Maani: "I don't know."

Aarav: "I think you do." Silence.

Then suddenly—

Maani: "You know what's funny?"

Aarav: "What?"

Maani: "We both kept saying we don't want love." Aarav smiled softly at the screen.

Aarav: "Yeah."

Maani: "And look at us now."

His heartbeat raced.

For the first time, neither of them joked.

Neither changed the topic.

The truth stood between them quietly.

Maani closed her eyes for a moment.

Then at exactly 02:41 she finally typed what had been sitting in her heart for days

Maani: "Because I think I'm falling for you, I like you! Aarav."

The message got delivered.

And panic hit instantly.

She buried her face in the pillow.

On the terrace, Aarav stopped breathing for a second while reading her text.

Then he laughed softly to himself.

Not because it was funny.

Because finally—finally—someone had said what both were hiding.

He typed slowly.

Aarav: "You idiot."

Maani's eyes widened.

Before she could overthink, another message arrived.

Aarav: "We were never just friends, were we?" Tears filled her eyes.

Then came the message that changed everything.

Aarav: "And for the record... I like you too."

Maani smiled into her pillow like a fool while her heart raced uncontrollably.

Outside, the night stayed calm.

But somewhere between a hostel room and a lonely terrace, two people who never believed in love had unknowingly started finding it in each other.

Then suddenly—

Aarav asked something unexpected.

Aarav: "Tell me something honestly."

Maani: "What?"

Aarav: "How can someone start liking a person after talking for just a few days?"

Maani stared at the screen silently.

Her heartbeat slowed slightly.

Because the question felt simple...

But she somehow understood what he was actually asking.

She smiled faintly before typing slowly.

Maani: "I don't know about others."

Maani: "But I can tell why I started liking you."

Aarav went quiet.

No reply came for a few seconds.

Maybe he was reading her message repeatedly the same way she reread his.

Maani continued typing before fear could stop her.

Maani: "Because you respect me."

Maani: "The way you talk..."

Maani: "The way you treat me..."

Maani: "It feels genuine."

Her fingers paused above the keyboard for a moment.

Then slowly— **Maani:** "I trust you."

The message stayed on Aarav's screen for a long time before he finally replied.

Aarav: "You trust me that much?"

Maani smiled softly.

Honestly...

She didn't even know why.

But with him, things felt safe.

Comfortable.

Easy.

And that scared her a little too.

Still, she typed honestly.

Maani: "Yeah."

Then after a pause—

Maani: "And I like talking to you."

Aarav's reply came almost instantly this time.

Aarav: "I like talking to you too."

Simple words.

But somehow they carried more emotion than either of them admitted.

The conversation became quieter after that.

Not awkward.

Just heavier.

Like both hearts were slowly standing near a truth neither knew how to handle yet.

Then Maani typed the sentence she had been overthinking for days.

Deleted. Typed again. Deleted again.

Finally—

Maani: "Aarav..."

Maani: "I want to say something."

Aarav's heartbeat rose without reason.

Aarav: "Say it."

For a few seconds, nothing came.

Then finally—

Maani: "I'm sorry if this sounds sudden..."

Another pause.

And then the message appeared.

The one that changed everything quietly.

Maani: "I don't think I just like you anymore."

Aarav sat frozen staring at the screen.

His chest tightened unexpectedly.

The typing bubble appeared again.

Maani: "I think I'm falling in love with you."

Silence.

Complete silence.

Even the world around Aarav suddenly felt distant.

He reread the sentence once. Then again.

As if his mind needed time to believe it was real.

Because somewhere deep inside...

He had been falling too.

Slowly. Quietly. Without noticing the exact moment, it happened.

Aarav smiled faintly at the screen before finally replying.

Aarav: "And what's wrong with that?"

Maani stared at the message while her heartbeat refused to calm down.

Then Aarav sent another one.

Softer this time.

More honest.

Aarav: "Because I think I'm in love with you too."

Maani covered her face instantly, smiling like an idiot alone in her room.

Her heart felt too full suddenly.

Too warm.

Too real.

And for the first time since they met...

Neither of them hid behind jokes anymore.

No teasing. No sarcasm.

Just honesty.

Pure and terrifying honesty.

Then slowly, reality returned again.

Maani typed carefully.

Maani: "But my parents are strict."

Maani: "Very."

Maani: "And you know... I'm Sharma."

Aarav smiled softly while reading the message.

Even in this moment...

She was worried about family, future, and responsibilities.

That was so her.

He replied calmly.

Aarav: "We'll figure things out together."

And somehow...

Those words calmed her more than any love confession could.

Because love wasn't what made Aarav different.

It was the safety he gave her.

The certainty. The patience. The feeling that she didn't have to face life alone anymore.

Outside both their windows, the night remained silent.

But inside two hearts separated by distance, cities, and screens...

Something real had finally begun.

After that, neither of them spoke for a while.

The chat remained open. Both online. Both silent.

But for the first time, the silence didn't feel empty.

It felt peaceful.

Comfortable.

Like two hearts had finally stopped hiding from each other.

Aarav lay quietly on his bed staring at the ceiling, a faint smile resting on his face while his phone stayed close beside him.

Miles away, Maani curled herself inside her blanket, re-reading the conversation again and again as if she was afraid the night would disappear by morning.

Then finally—

Maani: "You should sleep now, sailor."

Aarav smiled softly before replying.

Aarav: "Only if you sleep too."

Maani: A small pause.

Then one final message appeared on Aarav's screen.

Maani: "Goodnight... and thank you for happening to me."

His heart softened instantly reading that.

He typed slowly.

Aarav: "Goodnight, Maani. Take Care!!!"

Aarav: "And thank you for making distance feel less lonely."

A few seconds later, her online status disappeared.

The room around Aarav became quiet again.

But tonight, the silence felt different.

Lighter.

Warmer.

Because somewhere far away, someone was falling asleep while thinking about him too.

And under two different ceilings, in two different cities a sailor and an NCC girl closed their eyes carrying the same peace in their hearts.

The chat window became quiet.

For the first time that night, there were no messages to type, no words left to confess.

Only silence.

But neither of them slept.

Aarav placed his phone beside his pillow and imagining as his ship continued cutting through the dark sea as if nothing extraordinary had happened. His watch would begin in a few hours. Duties remained the same. The ocean remained the same.

Yet somehow...

Everything felt different.

A faint smile refused to leave his face.

He replayed every message they had exchanged that night, reading them again and again, smiling at lines he had already memorized.

He couldn't believe that the girl he had admired from far had finally become the girl who called him hers.

Hundreds of kilometres away, Maani was going through the same battle with sleep.

She again curled herself inside her blanket, unlocked her phone for what felt like the hundredth time, and reread the entire conversation from the beginning.

Every "baby," every "Shawty," every confession made her smile a little wider.

She hugged her pillow tightly, trying to hide the excitement that had taken over her heart.

Sleep had no chance against happiness.

Every few minutes, both unlocked their phones.

Not to send another message.

Just to check whether the other person was still online.

Sometimes Aarav saw "Online" beneath her name and smiled.

A few minutes later, Maani noticed "Online" beneath his.

Neither said anything.

Both knew exactly why.

Finally, at around three in the morning, Maani sent one last message.

"You're still awake, aren't you?"

Within seconds, Aarav replied.

"I thought you were sleeping."

She smiled.

"I can't."

Aarav laughed softly.

"Me neither."

No more words were needed.

That night, sleep lost to love.

And somewhere between midnight and sunrise, two people who had spent months wondering "What if?" finally found the answer they had been waiting for.

For the first time, they didn't fall asleep as two people hoping for a future together.

They fell asleep knowing they had already become each other's present.

Good Night People!!!

Chapter 5:

When silence finally spoke and suddenly it was love.

Some connections feel different once you hear the other person's voice for the first time.

Until then, love lives inside texts. Inside typing bubbles. Inside carefully written words.

But voices...

Voices make emotions real.

It happened unexpectedly.

A normal day-light conversation after Maani's College lectures, slowly turned quieter than usual.

Both of them were online, but the messages had become slower, softer.

Then suddenly—

Maani: "Should we call?"

Aarav stared at the screen for a few seconds.

His heartbeat instantly became faster for no reason. They had talked for weeks.

Shared emotions.

Shared fears.

Shared parts of themselves they never shared with others.

Yet somehow...

A phone call felt more intimate than all of it.

Aarav: "Now?"

Maani: "Yes, sailor.

Don't panic."

He smiled nervously at the screen before finally pressing the call button. The ringing sound felt unusually loud inside his quiet room.

Then—

"Hello?"

For a second, Aarav forgot how to respond.

Her voice was softer than he imagined.

Calm.

Warm.

Comfortable.

And somehow, hearing her say hello felt like meeting someone emotionally after knowing them for months already.

Aarav cleared his throat awkwardly.

Aarav: "Hi."

Maani laughed immediately.

Not loudly.

Softly.

The kind of laugh that instantly removes nervousness.

Maani: “Why are you sounding so scared?”

Aarav: “I’m not scared.”

Maani: “You literally sound like you’re attending an interview.”

Aarav smiled despite himself while looking down at the floor.

Maybe he was nervous.

Not because she was a stranger.

But because she wasn’t anymore.

The conversation started slowly after that.

Small pauses. Awkward laughter. Both speaking at the same time sometimes.

But strangely...

Nothing felt uncomfortable.

Maani spoke freely like she always did.

About her hostel. Her friends. Random college drama. How terrible hostel food was.

And Aarav mostly listened quietly, smiling every few minutes hearing her voice become more expressive than it ever sounded through texts.

Somewhere during the call, he realized something dangerous—

He could get addicted to this.

The way she said his name. The way she laughed between sentences. The way silence with her didn’t feel awkward.

Hours passed without either noticing.

At one point, Maani suddenly asked—

Maani: “Why are you so quiet?”

Aarav smiled faintly before replying honestly.

Aarav: “Just listening.”

There was a small silence after that.

Then softly—

Maani: “Good.”

That single word stayed with him longer than it should have.

After that night, calls became part of their routine.

Not every day.

But enough to make distance feel smaller.

After their first call, something changed between them quietly.

The awkwardness became softer. The comfort became deeper.

Now calls no longer felt unusual.

They felt expected.

And maybe that’s what made the next incident hurt Maani more than it should have.

It started one afternoon when Maani called Aarav excitedly after college.

Her voice sounded unusually energetic.

Maani: “Guess what?”

Aarav: “You finally stopped overthinking?”

Maani: “Shut up.”

He laughed softly while lying on his bed.

Then she continued— **Maani:** “Tomorrow is our college farewell.”

Aarav: “Ohhh.”

Maani: “And I’m wearing a saree.”

Aarav smiled faintly hearing the excitement in her voice.

For some reason, he could already imagine her smiling proudly while saying that.

Then suddenly—

Maani: “So tomorrow evening we’re doing a video call.”

Aarav froze immediately.

Aarav: “Why?”

Maani: “Because I want to show you my saree obviously.”

His heartbeat betrayed him instantly.

Maani noticed the silence and laughed.

Maani:

“Why do you sound nervous already?”

Aarav: “I’m not nervous.”

Maani: “Liar.”

He smiled helplessly.

Truthfully, Aarav still wasn’t completely comfortable with video calls.

Hearing her voice was easy now.

Seeing her still made him shy in ways he couldn’t explain.

Especially when she looked beautiful.

And somewhere deep inside, he already knew tomorrow would ruin his emotional stability completely.

The next evening, Maani got ready for her farewell.

The hostel room was chaotic.

Girls running around. Makeup products everywhere.

Someone fixing pleats. Someone taking pictures nonstop.

But between all the noise, Maani kept checking one thing repeatedly.

Her phone.

Waiting for Aarav's call.

She had worn a dark blue saree with cyan electric blue details, silver earrings, and loose hair falling softly around her shoulders.

For the first time in weeks, she had genuinely taken extra time getting ready.

Not for college.

For him.

Meanwhile, Aarav sat alone staring at her messages nervously.

Maani: "Call me when free."

Then after ten minutes—

Maani: "Aarav?"

Then another one—

Maani: "I know you're online."

Aarav looked at the screen and smiled anxiously.

He wanted to call.

He really did.

But the thought of seeing her all dressed up somehow made him unbelievably shy.

So instead of calling...

He delayed.

One hour passed.

Then another.

Slowly, Maani's excitement disappeared.

The messages stopped.

And that silence felt heavier than anger.

At night, Aarav finally gathered courage and called her.

She picked up after a few rings.

But unlike usual—

She sounded cold.

Maani: "What?"

Aarav immediately realized he had messed up.

Aarav: "You're angry."

Maani: "Wow. Good observation skills."

He sighed quietly.

Aarav: "I'm sorry."

Maani stayed silent.

Then finally—

Maani: "Do you know how stupid I felt today?"

Her voice sounded softer now.

Not dramatic.

Just hurt.

Maani: "I waited like an idiot."

Aarav closed his eyes briefly.

Guilt settled heavily inside him.

Because he knew she wasn't upset about the call itself.

She was upset because she wanted to share something important with him.

And he disappeared.

Maani continued quietly.

Maani: "Everyone was getting calls."

Maani: "Everyone was showing themselves to people they cared about."

A small pause.

Then softly—

Maani: "I wanted that too."

That sentence broke something inside Aarav immediately.

Because beneath all her anger...

There was only emotional expectation.

And expectations are born only where feelings become real.

Aarav rubbed his forehead before speaking honestly.

Aarav: "I was shy."

Silence.

Then suddenly—

Maani: "...What?"

Aarav: "I knew you'd look beautiful."

Another silence.

This one different.

Softer.

Aarav continued awkwardly.

Aarav: “And video calls already make me nervous.”

Aarav: “So I kept delaying it like an idiot.”

For a few seconds, Maani said nothing.

Then finally—

A tiny laugh escaped her.

Frustrated. Disbelieving.

But softer now.

Maani: “You’re genuinely impossible.”

Aarav smiled faintly for the first time that night.

Aarav: “Still angry?”

Maani: “Very.”

A pause.

Then quietly—

Maani: “But less now.”

The next evening, Aarav called her himself.

This time without delaying.

The video connected slowly.

And there she was again.

No farewell makeup now. No loud hostel room. No fancy lighting.

Just Maani sitting casually near her hostel window wearing an oversized t-shirt, hair tied loosely, looking tired after the previous day.

Yet somehow...

Aarav still forgot how to speak for a few seconds.

Maani noticed immediately and smiled.

Maani: “See? I told you the saree wasn’t that dangerous.”

Aarav laughed softly while shaking his head.

Then finally, after gathering courage, he looked directly at her through the screen and said quietly—

Aarav: “You looked beautiful yesterday.”

Maani’s expression softened instantly.

Because maybe compliments matter more after disappointment.

And maybe love deepens most in moments where two people learn how to handle each other’s hurt gently.

That night, their conversation lasted for hours again.

But this time, Aarav looked at the screen more often.

And Maani smiled a little more than usual.

The call ended but the connection doesn’t.

Aarav didn't tell her one thing that night.

It wasn't that he hadn't wanted to see her.

He had.

More than anything.

But every time the camera turned towards Maani, dressed in that saree with her hair neatly done and excitement shining in her eyes, he forgot how to behave.

He wasn't the kind of man who could shower someone with compliments every few seconds.

He wasn't the kind who could confidently flirt without feeling embarrassed.

Instead, he became unusually quiet.

And unfortunately, silence often looks exactly like disinterest.

Maani had spent nearly an hour getting ready.

Not for the farewell.

Not for the photographs.

But because somewhere in her heart, she wanted the first person to see her in a saree to be Aarav.

She wanted him to smile.

To tease her.

To say she looked beautiful.

To make that effort feel worthwhile.

Instead, all she received was a shy smile and a boy who couldn't stop looking away from the screen.

She thought he didn't like how she looked.

The truth was exactly the opposite.

He was looking away because he couldn't stop looking at her.

Later that night, Aarav plugged in his earphones and lay quietly on his bed.

Song after song played in the background, but his mind wasn't listening to the music anymore.

It kept replaying the few seconds when Maani had appeared on the screen in that saree.

The way she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

The tiny earrings she had chosen.

The excitement in her eyes while asking,

"How am I looking?"

He smiled to himself.

"Beautiful..."

The word came so easily now.

Ironically, the only time she couldn't hear it.

He wished he had said it when it mattered.

Because sometimes, love isn't about feeling something deeply.

It's about finding the courage to say it out loud.

Good Night!!

Chapter 6:

Ordinary Days, extra ordinary love

Long-distance relationships teach people many things.

Patience. Waiting. Communication. Emotional attachment.

But sometimes—

They also expose how emotionally clueless boys can be.

Especially Aarav.

That week, Maani had been unusually irritated.

Not angry-angry.

Just emotionally unstable in small ways.

Dry replies. Random mood swings. Getting upset over tiny things. Then apologizing herself two minutes later.

Meanwhile Aarav, being the intelligent future admiral he thought he was, assumed—

Maybe she's just overthinking again.

Wrong answer.

Very wrong answer.

One evening Aarav called her after getting free from work.

The moment Maani picked up—

“What?”

Aarav blinked.

Maani's Aggressive greeting.

Aarav on the other hand detected the danger.

Aarav: "Accha... hello?"

Maani: "Hmm."

Aarav: "Why do you sound angry?"

Maani: "I'm not."

Classic lie.

Aarav sighed.

Aarav: "Oyee! what happened now?"

Silence.

Then suddenly—

Maani: "Nothing. You won't understand anyway."

Now Aarav genuinely got confused.

Because according to him:

he called her

he replied properly

he even remembered to ask if she ate food

What crime had he committed now?

Poor man was mentally checking old conversations like a lawyer preparing defense evidence.

Meanwhile Maani sat on her hostel bed completely frustrated.

Because somehow—

This boy still hadn't understood.

Not even slightly.

Whole day she felt terrible: body pain, cramps, mood swings, exhaustion.

And Aarav?

Talking normally as if life was peaceful.

Not once: “Are you okay?” “Did your periods start?” “Rest properly.”

Nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

Finally Maani snapped softly—

“You don’t even notice these things.”

Aarav frowned.

“What things?”

Silence.

Then slowly—

“Periods.”

Aarav froze immediately.

Oh.

oH.

OH.

Suddenly the last two days replayed inside his head perfectly.

Mood swings.

Random irritation.

Emotional sensitivity.

Sleepiness.

How did he miss such obvious signs?

Because he was Aarav.

That's how.

Poor guy genuinely looked guilty now.

Aarav: "Wait... you got periods?"

Maani stared at the phone in disbelief.

Maani: "WOW."

Wrong sentence again.

Very wrong.

Aarav: "No actually I mean—"

Maani: "Leave it."

Aarav: "Shawty listen—"

Maani: "Next time I'm not telling you anything."

Aarav sat up instantly.

Aarav: "Arrey sorry yaar."

But Maani was emotionally done now.

Not because Aarav was bad.

Just because sometimes girls don't want solutions during periods.

They want effort.

Attention.

Softness.

And Aarav, despite loving her deeply, genuinely had no idea how to handle these situations properly yet.

After a few seconds Aarav asked carefully—

Aarav: "Are you hurting a lot?"

Maani stayed quiet.

Then softly—

Maani: “Hmm.”

That one hum changed his tone immediately.

Now the Sailor disappeared.

Only worried boyfriend remained.

Aarav: “Did you eat?”

Maani: “No mood.”

Aarav: “Medicine li?”

Maani: “No.”

Aarav: “WHY?”

Maani: “Because I’m irritated.”

Aarav rubbed his forehead tiredly.

Women during periods genuinely scared Men sometimes.

One minute emotional. One minute angry. One minute wanting attention. Next minute wanting silence.

No naval training had prepared him for this battlefield.

Still—

He tried.

Very sincerely.

Aarav: “Okay listen.”

Maani: “Hmm.”

Aarav: “Go drink water first.”

Maani: “Not going.”

Aarav: “Maani please.”

Maani: “No.”

Aarav: “I’ll count till three.”

Maani: “Shut up.”

Despite irritation, Maani smiled slightly.

Because honestly—

His clueless efforts looked cute.

A little dumb.

But cute.

After ten minutes of forcing, convincing, and emotionally negotiating like a hostage mediator, Aarav somehow managed to make her:

drink water

eat something

take medicine

Then finally she became calmer.

A little.

During silence, Aarav suddenly spoke softly—

“You should’ve told me properly.”

Maani sighed.

“You should’ve understood yourself.”

That sentence stayed with him quietly.

Because maybe she was right.

Love is also noticing.

Not just loving loudly.

Aarav leaned back against the wall before speaking honestly—

“I really don’t know these things properly.”

Maani’s anger softened immediately hearing his tone.

No excuses. No ego. Just honesty.

Then Aarav continued quietly—

“But teach me naa.”

Silence.

Then suddenly Maani laughed softly for the first time during the call.

“Teach you?”

“Haan.”

“What are you, a child?”

“Currently yes.”

Now she was smiling properly.

Mission successful.

Later that night, while Maani slowly became sleepy during the call, Aarav kept talking softly just to distract her from cramps.

Random stories. Ship incidents. Funny observations.

And somewhere in between those sleepy conversations, Aarav silently made a mental note:

Next time— he would notice first.

Because loving someone also means learning the parts of their pain you were never taught before.

Not every part of love looks cinematic. Sometimes love looks like unfinished conversations, sleepy arguments, dry replies, mood swings, and two emotionally tired people.

Still choosing to stay connected at the end of the day. And honestly—That’s exactly what Aarav and Maani had slowly become.

Comfort. By now, their relationship no longer felt new. It felt familiar. Like habit.

The kind where both people unconsciously become part of each other’s daily routine without realizing how deeply attached they already are.

Most nights ended the same way now. Phone calls. Long ones.

Sometimes meaningful. Sometimes completely useless. Maani talking endlessly about hostel drama while Aarav listened half-asleep from his cabin after duty hours.

Sometimes she would suddenly stop speaking. “Are you sleeping?” And Aarav, whose eyes were already closing, would reply after five seconds — “No”

Silence.

Then Maani would hear faint breathing from the other side and immediately smile to herself.

“This sailor sleeps faster than old people.”

Aarav would mumble something incomprehensible while drifting completely asleep on call.

And strangely...Those became Maani’s favorite nights. Because nothing feels more intimate than someone falling asleep peacefully while listening to your voice.

Some mornings started with fights too. Tiny stupid fights.

One day Maani woke up unusually early just to text him first.

“Good morning sailor :)” No reply.

Two hours later, Aarav finally replied — “Morning.” that’s it. One dry word.

Maani immediately got irritated.

Maani: “Wow.”

Aarav: “What wow?”

Maani: “Nothing.”

Aarav instantly understood something was wrong. Because girls somehow turn one-word replies into emotional investigations.

Later he found out she had expected something softer because she woke up early only for him.

So that evening Aarav sent her a random voice note saying — “GOOD MORNING MAANI JI” in the most dramatic voice possible.

Maani laughed for almost five minutes straight listening to it. And somehow, the entire fight disappeared.

There were evenings when Maani forced Aarav to stay awake even when he had morning duty.

“Don’t sleep yet.”

“I have duty at 4.”

“Five minutes more.”

Those five minutes always became one hour.

Then later she herself would scold him — “You don’t take care of your sleep schedule at all.”

Aarav used to laugh hearing that hypocrisy. Some nights Maani became extremely emotional out of nowhere.

Especially during her hostel days. When loneliness mixed with overthinking, she started needing reassurance more than usual.

One rainy evening she video called Aarav from the hostel terrace. The lights behind her looked blurry because of rainwater on the camera. She sounded unusually quiet.

“What happened?”

“Nothing.”

Classic Maani answer.

After ten minutes of silence she finally admitted softly —
“I just miss you today.”

Aarav didn’t know why that sentence affected him so deeply.

Maybe because she rarely admitted vulnerability directly. So instead of giving dramatic reassurance, he simply stayed on call quietly while she watched the rain.

And somehow, that silence comforted her more than words. There were also days when Aarav became emotionally unavailable because his work life exhausted him beyond explanation.

One sailing period had been especially difficult.

Less sleep.

Senior pressure.

Constant work.

By the time he came online, his replies had lost warmth completely. Maani noticed immediately.

Girls always notice emotional distance before men do.

“You changed.”

Aarav sighed tiredly while staring at the screen.

“Maani please.”

“See? Earlier you used to explain things calmly.”

He read the message three times but lacked energy to argue. So he accidentally did the worst thing possible — He disappeared mid-conversation.

No reply for hours. That night Maani cried quietly while pretending to study beside her roommates.

Meanwhile Aarav sat alone near the deck feeling guilty for hurting the one person who waited for him through everything.

Around 1:30 AM, he finally called her. Maani picked up instantly despite pretending she was angry.

Aarav smiled faintly at that.

Maani: “You were awake.”

Aarav: “No.”

Maani: “Liar.”

Silence.

Then softly — “I’m trying, Maani.”

That sentence changed everything. Because suddenly she could hear the tired sailor behind the dry replies.

Not lack of love. Just exhaustion. And maybe real relationships survive because two people slowly learn how to separate temporary frustration from permanent feelings.

Their jealousy became cute sometimes too.

One evening Aarav saw a new boy commenting repeatedly under Maani’s Instagram posts. Completely harmless comments.

Still — Aarav became strangely irritated. Maani enjoyed it immediately.

Maani: “Why are you stalking my comments?”

Aarav: “I’m not stalking.”

Maani: “Then how do you know his username?”

Silence.

Maani laughed uncontrollably while Aarav tried defending himself.

Aarav: “He comments too much.”

Maani: “You’re jealous.”

Aarav: “I’m observant.”

For the next two days Maani intentionally liked that boy’s comments just to annoy Aarav further.

And Aarav suffered emotionally in silence like a true sailor. Their relationship slowly became filled with these stupid little moments.

Random selfies.

Blurred screenshots from calls.

Voice notes saved secretly.

Pictures of sunsets.

Complaints about food.

“Did you eat?”

“Reached?”

“Sleep now.”

“Call me when free.”

Ordinary things. But ordinary things repeated daily eventually become love itself.

One habit especially stayed between them — Neither liked disconnecting calls first. Every night the same conversation happened.

“You cut.”

“No you.”

“Maani sleep.”

“You first.”

Then both stayed silent for another ten minutes doing absolutely nothing. Just existing together through a screen.

And honestly...That became enough sometimes. Because slowly, without realizing it, Aarav and Maani had crossed the stage of exciting romance.

Now they had entered something quieter. Something deeper. The stage where love no longer survives only through feelings.

But through patience, adjustment, understanding, timing, effort, and repeatedly choosing the same person even on emotionally difficult days.

That night, while half asleep on call again, Maani whispered softly — “Promise me one thing.”

Aarav hummed sleepily.

“Hmm?”

“No matter how busy life gets... don’t become emotionally distant from me.”

Aarav stayed silent for a few seconds after hearing that.

Then very softly — “Never intentionally.”

And somehow, that answer felt more real than any perfect promise ever could.

Chapter 7:

She slept with hope, he slept with Her picture

The holidays ended more quietly than either of them expected.

No dramatic goodbye. No emotional promises

Just silence hidden behind normal conversations because both of them knew the truth already—

Aarav had to leave again.

Early that morning, while the city was still half asleep, Aarav stood near the railway platform with his bag resting beside him. The cold air carried the familiar feeling he hated the most.

Leaving.

His phone vibrated softly.

Maani: “Reached station?”

A faint smile appeared on his face instantly.

Aarav: “Yeah.”

A few seconds later—

Maani: “Take care of yourself there.”

Simple words.

Yet somehow, they felt heavier now than before.

Because things had changed between them.

Now distance no longer felt ordinary.

Now it hurt.

The journey back felt longer this time.

Maybe because his mind kept returning to her repeatedly—her voice, her laughter, their late-night calls, the way she got angry, the way she waited for him emotionally without ever asking for too much.

By the time Aarav finally returned to his ship in Port Blair, reality had already started settling around him again.

Uniforms. Duty timings. Metal corridors. Sea wind. Discipline.

The familiar loneliness of naval life returned quietly like it had never left.

But now something felt different.

This time, someone was waiting for him somewhere far away.

That evening before sailing, Aarav called Maani for a few minutes.

The network around the dock kept breaking constantly.

Her voice cracked between interruptions.

Maani: “When will you come online again?”

Aarav leaned against the ship railing while looking toward the dark ocean ahead.

Aarav: “Don’t know.”

A small silence followed.

Both understood what that meant.

Days without proper conversations. No calls. No late-night talks.

Just waiting.

Maani tried sounding normal.

Maani: “Okay.”

But Aarav could hear the sadness hidden beneath that one word.

And honestly...

It hurt him too.

Before disconnecting, he spoke softly.

Aarav: “Don’t overthink if I disappear, alright?”

Maani smiled faintly on the other side.

Maani: “That’s literally impossible.”

The call disconnected a few moments later.

And suddenly, silence returned.

The ship sailed out slowly into endless dark water while city lights disappeared farther and farther away behind him.

Soon, network vanished completely.

No messages. No notifications. Nothing.

Only ocean.

At night, after duties ended, Aarav sat alone near one side of the ship while cold sea wind hit his face continuously. Around him, everything looked endless.

Black water. Dark sky. Quiet waves.

And somewhere inside all that silence, he opened his gallery.

Maani’s picture appeared on the screen.

The one from her farewell.

Same saree. Loose hair. That soft smile she tried acting casual about.

Aarav stared at the picture longer than necessary.

Then smiled unconsciously.

It amazed him how someone living so far away had slowly become his emotional home.

Miles separated them. Entire oceans existed between them.

Yet somehow...

She still felt close during his loneliest moments.

Meanwhile, back in her hostel room, Maani kept checking her phone repeatedly despite knowing there would be no network now.

Still she checked.

Out of habit. Out of attachment. Out of hope.

Her roommates laughed, talked, played songs loudly around her.

But her mind stayed somewhere far away near the sea.

She opened Aarav's chat again quietly.

Last seen hours ago.

The emptiness of that small detail affected her more than she admitted.

Because distance becomes emotional once someone becomes part of your daily life.

You start missing ordinary things.

A notification. A random call. A "did you eat?" A sleepy goodnight text.

And when those things disappear suddenly...

Silence becomes loud.

That night, under two completely different skies—

A sailor sat alone in the middle of the ocean admiring a girl's picture like it carried peace.

And a girl inside a crowded hostel room kept staring at an inactive chat as if waiting itself had become an emotion.

Maybe that is the cruelest part about love separated by distance.

The world keeps moving normally for everyone else.

But for two people emotionally attached to each other...

Even silence starts feeling heavy.

Aarav again looked at the top corner of his phone screen for a few extra seconds anyway.

As if waiting could somehow bring the network back.

But the ocean does not care about emotions.

The ship kept moving forward steadily while dark water surrounded them endlessly from every side.

Aarav locked his phone slowly and slipped it back into his pocket. For years, sailing without network had never bothered him much.

This was routine. Part of naval life.

No calls.

No social media.

No emotional dependency.

Just duty.

But tonight felt different.

Because for the first time, someone existed on land whose absence he could physically feel.

That realization disturbed him quietly.

Later that night, Aarav climbed toward the outer deck again. The wind was colder now, stronger, carrying salt and silence together.

Above him, the sky looked endless.

Below him, only black ocean.

And somewhere in between all that loneliness, his mind kept returning to one person.

Maani.

He wondered what she was doing now.

Probably checking her phone repeatedly. Probably pretending not to care in front of her roommates. Probably angry at him for disappearing even though she understood why.

That thought made him smile softly.

Then slowly, without thinking much, Aarav opened his gallery again.

Aarav stared at the screen quietly while sea wind moved against his face.

It amazed him sometimes—

How one person could enter your life so softly yet become emotionally important enough to affect silence itself.

Before Maani, loneliness at sea felt manageable.

Now it felt heavier.

Because somewhere during late-night conversations, random calls, fights, teasing, and emotional confessions...

A nearby sailor passed by and laughed lightly.

“Girlfriend?”

Aarav immediately locked his phone.

But the small smile on his face gave away the answer anyway.

Hours later, when he finally lay down inside his cabin, sleep still refused to come easily.

Not because of the ocean. Not because of duties.

But because somewhere far away in a crowded hostel room, a girl was probably missing him at the exact same moment.

And somehow...

That thought made the middle of the ocean feel both lonelier and less lonely at the same time.

The ship had docked in Thailand for a short duration.

For everyone else, it was just another foreign port.

For Aarav, it became another reminder that no matter where he travelled, his thoughts somehow kept returning to the same person.

That evening, he wandered through crowded market streets filled with lights, music, tourists, and small souvenir shops lined one after another.

Sailors around him were busy buying chocolates, perfumes, clothes, and random gifts for families back home.

Aarav kept walking quietly until one small shop caught his attention.

Leather accessories hung neatly outside— wallets,
journals, passport holders.

And somehow, the moment he saw one simple beige passport holder, Maani instantly came to his mind.

Not because she needed it.

Not because it was expensive.

Just because he could suddenly imagine her holding it.

That alone felt enough reason to buy it.

The shopkeeper noticed him observing it carefully.

“Custom possible, sir.”

Aarav smiled faintly before sitting near the counter.

And slowly, without realizing how emotionally involved he already was, he started designing it for her.

First—

Her name.

Maani, He wrote it on a Blank paper.

“M-A-A-N-I”

Written neatly across the front.

He stared at those letters for a second longer than necessary.

Because there was something intimate about seeing her name attached to something he personally chose for her from another country.

Then came the stickers.

A tiny anchor.

Because oceans had become part of his life long before she entered it.

And somehow, now, he wanted pieces of his world to stay connected with hers too.

Then a small stethoscope sticker.

The moment he saw it, he smiled immediately.

Maani would definitely like this.

She was a biology student, always talking about practicals, exams, future plans, and a special place in her heart for medical dreams.

Even during random conversations, she carried ambition so naturally.

So Aarav added the stethoscope carefully beside her name.

Like silently telling her—

I notice your dreams too.

And finally—

A small airplane sticker.

Not because of travel.

But because their entire story survived through distance.

Cities. Stations. Ships. Hostels. Airports. Different lives moving separately while their hearts somehow stayed emotionally connected.

When everything was finished, Aarav looked at the passport holder quietly for a few moments.

It wasn't perfect.

The stickers were slightly uneven. The design looked simple.

But emotionally...

It carried pieces of both of them together.

His ocean. Her dreams. Their distance.

All resting on one small gift.

That night back on the ship, Aarav clicked a picture of it under the dim yellow cabin light before packing it carefully inside his bag.

Then he sent the picture to Maani.

A few seconds later—

Maani: “WAIT.”

Another message instantly followed.

Maani: “You made this for me?”

Aarav smiled softly at the screen.

Aarav: “Nope, it is for someone who is more special to me.”

Maani smiled

There was a long pause after that.

Then finally—

Maani: “You added a stethoscope.”

He could almost imagine her expression while typing that.

Soft. Emotional. Trying not to smile too much.

Aarav: “Bio student things.”

For a few moments, she didn’t reply.

And Aarav already understood why.

Because sometimes the smallest efforts affect the heart the most.

Not grand confessions.

Not dramatic romance.

Just someone quietly paying attention to details you never thought they noticed.

Thousands of Miles and Kilometres away, Maani kept staring at the picture again and again that night.

The anchor. The airplane. Her name.

Everything looked simple individually.

But together, it felt deeply personal.

Because it wasn't just a passport holder anymore.

It was proof.

Proof that even while standing in a crowded foreign market in Thailand, surrounded by strangers and another country entirely—

A sailor still searched for ways to carry her into his world.

After days surrounded by nothing except endless water, routines, metal corridors, and silence, the first sight of Port Blair felt strangely comforting to Aarav.

Land always looked different after sailing.

Closer. Warmer. Alive.

The ship moved slowly toward the harbour while morning light spread softly across the water.

Sailors around him had already started checking their phones impatiently, waiting for the network to return after days of complete disconnection.

And honestly—

Aarav was no different this time.

A few months ago, network returning only meant calls from family, pending notifications, random social media messages.

Now it meant one specific person.

Maani.

The moment the first signal bar appeared on his phone, notifications flooded instantly.

Family texts. Duty messages. Random group chats.

But Aarav ignored everything else first

His fingers opened only one chat.

Maani.

Dozens of unread messages waited there like tiny pieces of the days he had missed.

“Reached?”

“Still alive sailor?”

“I hate the ocean.”

“Today hostel food was horrible.”

“I saw someone wearing your favourite colour.”

“You better reply once network comes back.”

Aarav smiled unconsciously while reading them slowly one by one.

Because even without replies...

She had continued talking to him.

As if silence between them was never strong enough to stop sharing life.

Then one message made him pause completely.

“It feels weird not telling you about my day anymore.”

Something about that sentence stayed with him.

Because somewhere in the middle of sailing duties, dark oceans, and sleepless nights—

He had felt the same emptiness too.

The absence of her voice. Her random complaints. Her unnecessary overthinking.

He never realized when she became part of his routine emotionally.

But now, her absence was visible.

Aarav leaned quietly against the ship railing while cold wind moved across the harbour.

Then finally he typed—

Aarav: “Back.”

The reply came instantly.

Maani: “OH MY GOD.”

Another message immediately followed.

Maani: “YOU REMEMBERED ME.”

Aarav laughed softly while shaking his head.

Aarav: “Barely.”

Maani: “Shut up.”

For the first time in days, the heaviness inside him started feeling lighter again.

Later that evening, after settling back onboard, Aarav finally video called her.

The screen connected after a few seconds.

Maani appeared sitting casually on her hostel bed, hair tied messily, looking both annoyed and relieved at the same time.

Maani: “Do you know how irritating you are?”

Aarav smiled tiredly.

Aarav: “Missed you too.”

She rolled her eyes but failed to hide her smile afterward.

Then like always, she started talking nonstop.

Hostel gossip. Assignments. Random things she saved to tell him. How boring the week felt without fighting with him properly.

And Aarav simply listened quietly.

Comfortably.

Because after days of ocean silence, hearing her voice again felt strangely like returning home emotionally.

At one point during the call, Aarav reached beside his bag looking for something

The customized passport cover slipped slightly into view.

Maani noticed immediately.

Maani: “Wait... show me that again properly.”

Aarav picked it up slowly and turned it toward the camera.

The beige leather reflected softly under the dim cabin light.

She softly adored the cover again

Her name.

The tiny anchor sticker.

The airplane.

And the small stethoscope placed carefully beside everything else.

For a few seconds, Maani said nothing.

Her expression softened quietly while staring at it.

Because suddenly it no longer looked like a simple gift.

It looked personal.

Intentionally personal.

Aarav smiled faintly.

Maani: “You notice small things too much.”

Aarav didn’t reply immediately.

Because honestly, she was right.

He noticed everything about her now.

The things she mentioned casually. The dreams she spoke about half-seriously. The way her mood changed through texts alone.

And maybe that is what love quietly becomes after a point—

Attention to details nobody else sees.

Maani kept staring at the passport cover through the screen for a few moments longer.

Then finally asked quietly—

Maani: “When are you giving it to me?”

Aarav leaned back against the wall smiling softly.

Aarav: “Oneday for sure.”

Neither of them realized it then...

But that one small word carried hope bigger than both of them were ready to admit aloud.

The Night feels more comfortable after weeks.

Aarav slept quietly on his bed describing Maani.....

For a few moments, Maani didn't say anything.

She simply looked at the passport cover through the screen, gently tracing its outline with her finger as if she could somehow feel it despite the distance.

She wasn't emotional because it was expensive.

She wasn't even emotional because it was a gift.

She was emotional because someone, hundreds of kilometres away, had looked at a simple passport cover and thought of her.

A small smile appeared on her face, but her eyes slowly became watery.

She whispered softly,

"I can't wait to hold it in my hands."

Aarav smiled.

"Soon, Shawty."

She nodded, still staring at it.

In her heart, she wasn't waiting only to touch the passport cover.

She was waiting to touch the hands that had chosen it.

She imagined the moment over and over again—Aarav standing in front of her, smiling shyly before handing it over, watching her open it like a little child opening her favourite gift.

The passport cover had quietly become something much bigger.

It had become a promise.

A promise that one day the screen between them would disappear.

One day, the gifts wouldn't have to be shown through a video call.

They would be exchanged hand in hand.

Until then, she smiled at the screen, memorizing every little detail of it.

Not because she wanted the gift.

But because every time she looked at it, she saw a future she hoped would one day become real.

Good Night!!

Chapter 8:

The night we refused to end

The strange thing about happiness is that sometimes it scares people more than pain.

Because pain feels familiar. Predictable.

But happiness?

Happiness gives you something to lose.

And maybe that is exactly what started happening to Maani.

Everything between them had been going beautifully for weeks.

Despite the distance, despite Aarav's sailings, despite unstable networks and different routines — they had somehow learned how to exist in each other's lives naturally.

Morning texts became habit. Late-night calls became comfort. Random fights became part of affection.

Aarav had unknowingly become part of her everyday life in the most dangerous way possible—

Quietly.

Now every small thing reminded her of him.

A naval ship passing through reels. A white shirt. Late-night rain. Even silence.

And perhaps that is the moment love starts becoming frightening.

When another person slowly gains the power to affect your peace without even trying.

At first, Maani ignored the thoughts.

But overthinking never arrives loudly.

It enters softly.

One question at a time.

What happens later?

Then another.

Will distance always remain between us?

Then another.

Can two people from completely different worlds actually stay together forever?

And slowly, the same relationship that once felt comforting started feeling fragile inside her mind.

Because the more real Aarav became to her heart...

The more terrified she became of losing him someday.

And somewhere beneath all the overthinking, one fear stayed heavier than the rest.

Her family.

Maani knew her world too well.

She knew the expectations silently placed on daughters. The careful boundaries families create around love, future, and marriage.

The way practical decisions slowly overpower emotional ones with time.

And deep inside...

She already knew the truth she was trying to avoid.

Her family would probably never agree to this relationship in the future.

Not because Aarav was a bad person.

But because life outside love is complicated.

Different lifestyles. Different futures. Different expectations. Distance. Military life.

The more she thought about it, the more impossible everything started feeling inside her head.

And that is what hurt her the most—

Because for the first time in her life, she had found someone who genuinely felt like emotional peace.

Yet reality stood silently between them like something neither love nor attachment could easily erase.

That realization slowly started breaking her from inside.

Not loudly. Quietly.

Like someone preparing their own heart for pain before life even delivers it.

Weeks passed the same way they always did.

Aarav sailed. Maani waited.

The ocean continued taking him away repeatedly, and life continued teaching both of them how painful attachment could become when distance never truly ended.

Some nights they laughed for hours. Some nights they fought over small things.

Some nights they simply stayed on call silently because hearing each other breathe somehow felt comforting enough.

And slowly, without either admitting it openly—

Their relationship became serious.

Not officially. Not loudly.

Emotionally.

But the deeper feelings became, the heavier reality started feeling too.

Because love alone does not silence practical fears forever.

One evening, while Aarav was out sailing again with unstable network, Maani sat alone near her hostel window after everyone had fallen asleep.

The room was dark except for faint yellow streetlights entering through the curtains.

Her phone rested quietly in her hands.

Aarav's chat remained open.

Unread messages. Half-finished conversations. Promises hidden casually between ordinary texts.

And suddenly, for the first time in months—

Her Fear again became louder than love.

A sailor constantly surrounded by uncertainty and postings.

A girl still building her career, her ambitions, her own identity, thinking about her family's strictness.

And somewhere inside all those thoughts, one painful realization kept repeating inside her mind—

What if love is not enough in real life?

The thought destroyed her slowly that night.

Because the deeper she fell for him, the more terrified she became of eventual heartbreak.

Maani began overthinking everything.

Would they survive distance forever?

Would families understand?

Would timings ever match?

Would life eventually separate them naturally no matter how deeply they loved each other?

And perhaps the saddest thing about overthinking is this—

It creates pain even before life actually does.

The next day when Aarav finally came online for a short while, Maani sounded unusually quiet during the call.

Too quiet.

Aarav noticed immediately.

Aarav: “What happened?”

For a few seconds, she said nothing.

Then softly—

Maani: “Do you ever think about our future?”

Aarav leaned silently against the ship railing while sea wind moved around him.

He already knew this conversation would hurt.

Still— he replied.

Aarav: “Every day.”

Her voice became weaker after hearing that.

Maani: “Then how are you so calm?”

Aarav didn’t answer immediately.

Because honestly...

He wasn't calm either.

He simply loved her more than he feared uncertainty.

But Maani was different.

She loved deeply, yet feared losing even more deeply.

And that fear had finally started consuming her.

That night, she spoke everything she had been hiding for weeks.

About distance. About careers. About different lifestyles. About uncertainty. About how impossible everything sometimes felt.

Then finally, with a trembling voice she tried controlling—

Maani: "Maybe we should stop this before it hurts more later."

Silence.

Complete silence.

Aarav didn't reply immediately.

Not because he had nothing to say.

But because sometimes pain becomes too heavy for instant words.

Maani continued softly, almost emotionally exhausted now.

Maani: "I don't want us to destroy each other later."

Those words broke him quietly.

Because beneath all her fear, he could still hear love.

Pure love.

The kind that worries more about future pain than present happiness.

Aarav closed his eyes briefly while listening to the ocean around him.

Then finally he spoke.

Very softly.

Aarav: “Do you want to leave?”

A long silence followed.

Then honestly—

Maani: “...No.”

That answer hurt even more.

Because it meant neither of them wanted distance from each other.

They were simply scared of life.

After that conversation, things became quieter between them for a few days.

The calls reduced. The teasing disappeared. Even texts started sounding careful instead of natural.

And somehow...

That emotional distance felt more painful than physical distance ever did.

Aarav understood something during those silent days.

Maani was not asking for separation because she stopped loving him.

She was asking because she loved him enough to fear losing him completely someday.

And maybe people who overthink love are often the ones who feel it most deeply.

One night, after hours of staring at their old chats during sailing, Aarav finally called her again.

Maani picked up quietly.

Neither spoke for a few seconds.

Then Aarav finally broke the silence.

Aarav: “You know what hurts the most?”

Maani stayed silent.

Aarav: “You talk like our story already ended.”

Her breathing became uneven slightly.

Aarav continued slowly.

Aarav: “Maybe the future will be difficult.”

Aarav: “Maybe distance will hurt.”

Aarav: “Maybe life will test us in every possible way.”

A pause.

Then softly—

Aarav: “But why are we deciding defeat before life even tries?”

Maani closed her eyes listening to him.

Because somewhere deep down...

That was exactly what she needed to hear.

Not fake promises.

Not dramatic reassurance.

Just belief.

Aarav’s voice became gentle now.

Aarav: “I don’t know what happens years later.”

Aarav: “But right now, I know I love talking to you.”

Aarav: “I know you matter to me.”

Aarav: “And I know losing you out of fear would hurt more than fighting for us.”

Silence filled the call again.

But this silence felt emotional instead of broken.

Then finally, Maani whispered softly—

Maani: “What if we fail someday?”

Aarav smiled faintly despite the heaviness in his chest.

Aarav: “Then at least we fail after trying.”

That sentence stayed between them for a long time.

Because love does not always survive through certainty.

Sometimes it survives simply because two people decide not to give up yet.

That night, they talked until sleep slowly softened their fears again.

No dramatic patch-up. No cinematic confession.

Just two emotionally tired hearts choosing each other one more time despite uncertainty.

And maybe that is the purest form of love—

Staying, even when leaving feels easier.

Aarav continued again.

“Are you really happy like this?”

That single question broke the wall Maani had been trying to build around her heart for days.

She closed her eyes instantly.

Because the truth was—

She wasn't happier.

She was just scared.

Aarav continued quietly.

Aarav: "You're trying to leave before life even asks us to."

Maani's breathing became uneven hearing that.

Because he understood her too well.

He understood that her fear was never lack of love.

It was the fear of loving too deeply and still losing everything later.

Then after a long silence, Aarav finally said the thing that stayed with her forever.

"Maani... if life becomes difficult later, we'll face it together."

A pause.

Then softly—

Aarav: "But why are we punishing ourselves right now for a future that hasn't even happened yet?"

Tears slowly rolled down her face hearing that.

Not because he promised forever.

But because he stayed calm while her mind was falling apart.

That night, Aarav didn't try to give dramatic assurances.

He simply held her emotionally through words.

Patiently.

Gently.

Like someone protecting a scared heart instead of fighting with it.

And maybe that is what brought Maani back to him completely.

Not promises.

Safety.

The feeling that even during her worst overthinking, he still chose understanding over anger.

By the end of the call, the distance between them had softened again.

The warmth slowly returned. The comfort returned. Even their silence felt familiar again.

And somewhere during that emotional night—

Aarav quietly grabbed her falling heart before fear could take her away completely.

The conversation slowly came to an end.

No arguments.

No dramatic promises.

No impossible vows.

Just two hearts that had finally understood each other a little better.

Maani wiped the last of her tears and looked at Aarav through the screen.

For the first time that night, she wasn't thinking about five years from now.

She wasn't thinking about families, society, distance, or the endless "what ifs."

She was simply looking at the man who had chosen to stay with her through every fear she had spoken aloud.

Aarav smiled gently.

Aarav: "Maaniiiiiii..."

Aarav: "Promise me one thing."

She nodded.

Aarav: "Whenever your mind runs years ahead..."

Aarav: "...come back to today."

Aarav: "Come back to this call."

Aarav: "Come back to us."

He paused before continuing.

"The future isn't asking anything from us tonight."

"Tonight only asks us to love each other honestly."

Maani smiled through her tears.

For the first time in weeks, the future didn't feel like an enemy.

It simply felt... distant.

Something that would arrive when it was meant to.

Not before.

Not after.

Aarav looked outside his cabin window.

The sea was as calm as ever.

The horizon was invisible in the darkness.

Yet he wasn't afraid.

Because sailors never see the entire journey at once.

They trust the next wave.

The next sunrise.

The next course.

Maybe love worked the same way.

You don't need to know where every wave will take you.

Sometimes, all you need is the courage to sail through the one in front of you.

That night, neither Aarav nor Maani found answers about their future.

But they found something far more valuable.

Peace.

And perhaps peace was never about knowing what tomorrow would bring.

Perhaps it was about trusting that, whatever tomorrow brought, today was still worth living.

The call finally ended.

This time, Maani didn't stare at the calendar.

She didn't calculate years.

She didn't count obstacles.

She simply smiled, whispered,

"Good night, Aarav."

And for the first time after long days of overthinking....

She fell asleep without trying to solve a future that hadn't even arrived yet.

Because sometimes, the bravest thing you can do is stop chasing tomorrow...

...and quietly hold the hand that is already with you today.

Chapter 9:

The Day I Couldn't say I'm okay.

There are days in the Navy when everything revolves around one thing.

Inspection.

Not an ordinary inspection.

The Annual Inspection.

The day when every corner of the ship is checked, every locker is opened, every uniform is expected to be spotless, and every sailor is expected to perform at his absolute best.

days before it, the entire ship transforms. Passageways are cleaned until they shine. Brass fittings are polished repeatedly.

Files are arranged with military precision. Every sailor moves with a different kind of urgency because one small mistake can be noticed.

Aarav and his batchmate had been working since morning.

Neither of them had sat down properly.

One task after another.

Cleaning.

Painting.

Checking equipment.

Running from one compartment to another.

By afternoon, both were exhausted.

Finally, they found a quiet corner near one of the compartments and decided to take a two-minute break.

Out came their phones.

Aarav smiled as he opened WhatsApp.

There were seven unread messages from Maani.

Maani: "Good morning, Aarav."

Maani: "Have you eaten?"

Maani: "Busy?"

Maani: "At least tell me you're alive."

He smiled.

Just as he was about to type—

"Miss you too, Maani."

A sharp voice echoed through the passage.

"What are you two doing?"

Both froze.

Slowly, they looked up.

Standing in front of them was one of the ship's officers.

His expression said everything.

No explanation was going to work.

Aarav and his buddy immediately stood at attention.

The officer stretched out his hand.

"Phones."

Neither spoke.

Both quietly handed them over.

The officer switched off both phones himself.

Then looked at them.

"Annual Inspection is around the corner, and you're busy using mobile phones?"

Neither had an answer.

Because there wasn't one.

"Collect them after inspection."

With that, he walked away carrying both phones.

Aarav watched helplessly.

Not because he was worried about the phone.

But because he knew someone would be waiting for a reply.

Miles away, Maani had no idea what had happened.

At first, she wasn't worried.

She knew Aarav got busy.

She sent another message.

"Call me when you're free."

No reply.

An hour passed.

Then another.

She checked WhatsApp.

Last seen unchanged.

She called.

Switched Off.

She frowned.

"Maybe battery khatam ho gayi hogi."

She tried again after some time.

Still switched off.

Now her mind started doing what it did best.

Overthinking.

"Did something happen?"

"Is he okay?"

"Why didn't he tell me?"

"What if the ship sailed?"

"What if..."

She stopped herself.

But overthinking never really stops.

It simply finds another direction.

She opened his chat.

Typed.

Deleted.

Typed again.

Maani: "Please text me once you get time."

Then another.

"I'm getting worried."

Then another.

"At least tell me you're okay."

The messages kept increasing.

The replies didn't.

Back on the ship, Aarav spent the rest of the day working without his phone.

Every few minutes, he instinctively reached for his pocket.

Only to remember—

It wasn't there.

For the first time, he realized how much a simple device had become a bridge between two worlds.

Not because of social media.

Not because of entertainment.

Because it carried one person.

Late in the evening, the inspection preparations finally slowed down.

Everyone let out a sigh of relief.

The ship slowly returned to its usual rhythm.

Aarav walked towards the officer, hoping to collect his phone.

Instead, he heard the words he didn't want to hear.

"Phones will be returned later."

His heart sank.

He wasn't worried about Instagram.

Or YouTube.

Or WhatsApp.

He was worried about one person.

By now, Maani would definitely be panicking.

He had disappeared without a single message.

No explanation.

No warning.

Nothing.

For the first time, Aarav felt helpless.

Just then, one of his junior walked past him.

He noticed Aarav's worried face and asked,

Arif: "Everything okay, Sir?"

that's Arif, One of Aarav's obedient and helpful Junior, most like a friend to him.

Aarav explained the situation.

Arif smiled.

Arif: "I have two phones. You can use one if you want."

For Aarav, it felt like someone had thrown a lifeline in the middle of the ocean.

He immediately thanked him, took the spare phone, connected it to the ship's network, and logged into his Instagram account.

The moment the chats loaded, his screen exploded with notifications.

Dozens of messages.

Several missed calls.

All from one person.

Maani.

His smile slowly faded.

Every unread message showed the same thing—

She had been scared.

Without wasting another second, he typed.

"Madam..."

Within seconds...

Online.

Three dots appeared immediately.

As if she had been staring at the screen the whole time.

"WHERE ARE YOU?"

"DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW SCARED I WAS?"

"PHONE KYU BAND THA?"

Aarav smiled softly before replying.

"Inspection preparation... Officer confiscated my phone."

"Still haven't got it back."

"Borrowed my junior's phone just to tell you I'm okay."

There was no reply for a few seconds.

Then a single message appeared.

"Pagal..."

Followed by another.

"Do you know I cried?"

Aarav looked at the screen for a long moment.

His heart felt heavy.

He typed slowly.

"I'm sorry, Yaar."

"The first thing I wanted to do was tell you that I'm fine."

A few seconds later, her anger melted into relief.

"Next time... somehow just tell me."

Aarav smiled.

"If I ever get the chance, you'll always be the first person I inform."

The conversation continued for only a few minutes before Aarav had to log out and return the phone to his junior.

Before logging out, he sent one last message.

"Thank you for waiting."

As he handed the phone back, Aarav realized something.

In the Navy, you can survive without your phone.

But when someone has become your home...

Even a few hours of silence feel far longer than an entire deployment.

The next two days passed in a blur.

The Annual Inspection was completed successfully, and gradually, the ship returned to its normal routine.

The rushed footsteps slowed down, compartments looked cleaner than ever, and the pressure that had filled the ship for weeks finally eased.

On the third day, Aarav and his batchmate were called to the officer's cabin.

Both of them entered, stood at attention, and waited.

The officer looked at them for a moment before opening the drawer.

Inside lay their mobile phones.

He picked them up and handed one to each of them.

"Take them."

Both thanked him.

Before they turned to leave, the officer spoke again.

"Remember one thing. Mobile phones are not the problem. Timing is. When the ship is preparing for an inspection, every sailor is expected to be fully focused on his duty. One person's distraction can affect the entire team."

Aarav nodded respectfully.

"Yes, Sir."

There was no anger.

No humiliation.

Just a lesson.

As they stepped out of the cabin, Aarav looked at his phone and smiled.

He wasn't upset anymore.

In fact, he understood why it had happened.

The Navy had never taught him that discipline was about punishment.

It had taught him that discipline was about responsibility.

On a warship, everyone depends on each other. Every sailor has a role, and every role matters. During important evolutions and inspections, personal comfort comes second to the ship's mission.

That was the life he had chosen the day he wore the white uniform.

Later that evening, while talking to Maani, he told her that he had finally got his phone back.

She laughed and said,

"So... lesson learnt?"

Aarav smiled.

Aarav: "Yes."

Maani: "No phones during work."

"Exactly."

Aarav: "And no making your girlfriend panic."

He laughed.

Maani: "That lesson was even more important."

Maani giggled.

"Good. Because next time I'll complain to your officer."

"Please don't."

Both burst into laughter.

Looking back, Aarav never remembered that incident as the day his phone was confiscated.

He remembered it as the day he was reminded of two responsibilities he had chosen in life.

One was to serve the nation with discipline.

The other was to never leave the person waiting for him without a reason.

Some lessons come from the uniform.

Some come from love.

And somehow, both were teaching him to become a better man.

Chapter 10:

What a sailor writes when he misses someone too much

People often misunderstood Maani. Some thought she was just emotional. Some thought she only knew how to overthink. Some only saw the girl who waited for calls and fought over dry replies.

But Aarav knew another version of her too. A stronger one. The version of Maani that wanted to build her own identity before becoming someone's future.

The version that refused to depend completely on anybody. Even love. Long before Aarav entered her life emotionally, Maani already carried dreams much bigger than relationships inside her heart.

She wanted a uniform. Not for attention. Not for aesthetic pictures. Not because Aarav was in the Navy.

But because somewhere deep inside herself, she genuinely wanted to become something meaningful on her own.

Something respected. Something earned. During her college days, Maani had joined NCC.

And slowly, that experience changed her completely. The shy emotional girl who once hesitated during introductions gradually became more confident, disciplined, and fearless.

Morning parades. Command practice. Camps. Physical training. Leadership responsibilities. She handled everything quietly.

And eventually—Maani became an SUO. Senior Under Officer. A position she secretly felt proud of but never showed off too much.

Because unlike many people around her, Maani never liked pretending. She preferred proving herself silently.

Aarav still remembered the way her voice changed whenever she spoke about NCC.

Confident. Sharp. Alive. As if a different version of her existed there.

One evening during a video call, Aarav saw her arranging NCC certificates carefully inside a folder.

“Still obsessed with these?”

Maani immediately looked offended.

“These are achievements.”

Aarav laughed softly.

“Ji madam.”

Then she suddenly held up one certificate proudly toward the camera.

Her “C Certificate.”

The one she worked hardest for. The same certificate carrying early morning exhaustion, discipline, stress, camps, and ambition behind it.

Aarav smiled quietly while looking at her expression instead of the certificate itself.

Because honestly—He loved watching people talk passionately about things they truly cared about. And Maani looked beautiful while talking about her dreams.

Not physically beautiful. Something deeper. The kind of beauty that comes from ambition.

After completing NCC, Maani slowly became serious about defence examinations too.

CDS.

AFCAT.

SSB preparation.

Her YouTube recommendations slowly transformed from random reels into current affairs, psychology test, video lecturettes of officer-like qualities, defence interviews and somehow, Aarav loved that change.

Not because he wanted her to become an officer for him. But because he admired the fact that she wanted to become something through her own effort.

There were days when Maani attended SSB capsule programs while balancing her BSc studies together. Classes during the day.

Preparation at night. Assignments in between. And despite all this—She still somehow managed to fight with Aarav daily over attention.

One night during a call, Aarav asked softly — “Why do you want this so badly?”

Maani stayed silent for a few seconds before replying honestly.

“Because I want my own identity.”

Aarav looked at her quietly through the screen. She continued softly — “I don’t want people to remember me only as someone’s daughter... or someone’s girlfriend.”

Silence.

Then — “I want to become something on my own.”

That sentence stayed with Aarav for a long time afterward. Because suddenly, he realized something important about her. Maani was emotional.

Very emotional. But she was not weak. There’s a difference. People often confuse soft hearts with fragile minds. But Maani carried ambition beneath all her overthinking.

Some evenings Aarav even helped her prepare casually during calls. Mock interviews. Random questions. Current affairs discussions.

Though half the time he intentionally distracted her instead.

“Future officer banogi aise?”

“Shut up.”

“IO (Interviewing Officer) ne poocha ‘why should we select you?’”

Maani instantly sat straight dramatically.

“Because I’m disciplined, determined, hardworking—”

“—and overthink professionally.”

Maani threw a pillow at the phone camera immediately. Aarav laughed loudly while she glared at him. But beneath the teasing, he genuinely admired her effort.

Because he knew how difficult it was to carry dreams while fighting emotional battles internally too. Especially during long-distance love.

There were nights when Maani became frustrated after difficult mock interviews or failed practice tests.

“Maybe I’m not made for this.”

Aarav hated hearing those sentences.

Because he had seen her dedication personally. So he always reminded her softly — “You survived NCC camps, hostel life, emotional breakdowns, and me together.”

Maani laughed weakly hearing that.

“Especially you.”

Then Aarav smiled before saying quietly — “You’re stronger than you think.” And honestly—That was true.

Behind all the mood swings, attachment, overthinking, and emotional chaos...Maani was still a girl trying to build her own future independently.

A girl carrying dreams bigger than her fears. And maybe that’s one of the reasons Aarav loved her so deeply. Not because she needed him. But because even while chasing her own identity—She still chose to stay beside him.

Maani once again on her late night thoughts describing the current situation she Wrote.....

Six months.

I couldn't believe it had already been six months since Aarav had quietly walked into my life.

It felt strange.

Not because time had passed quickly.

But because it had passed beautifully.

One evening, while they were talking, Maani suddenly became quieter than usual. Aarav noticed it immediately.

"What happened?" he asked softly.

She looked at him through the screen for a few seconds before speaking.

"Aarav... it's already been six months with you."

She smiled faintly.

"I don't even know where the time went."

Her smile slowly faded.

"I don't want time to pass this quickly when I'm with you."

After a brief pause, she whispered,

"Can it just... stop here?"

Aarav didn't interrupt.

He knew she wasn't looking for answers.

She simply wanted him to listen.

Maani took a deep breath.

"Why did you come into my life so unexpectedly?"

"And how did you become such an important part of it without me even realizing?"

She lowered her eyes.

Then asked the question that had been living inside her heart for months.

"Tell me honestly..."

"How long are you going to stay?"

She looked back at the screen.

"One day?"

"One year?"

"Ten years?"

Her voice almost broke.

"...Or forever?"

Silence filled the call.

Aarav still couldn't find the right words.

Maani smiled sadly.

"I know what's going on in your mind."

"You're waiting for me to become something... to become independent... to get out of this environment."

"You're waiting for me to stand on my own feet."

She paused.

"And then one day..."

"...you'll look at me with that same calm smile and say..."

"You deserve better."

Aarav immediately shook his head.

But she continued before he could speak.

"You'll say it because you think you're doing the right thing."

"You'll convince yourself that walking away is an act of love."

"And then you'll leave."

Her eyes slowly filled with tears.

"But have you ever thought about what would happen to me after that?"

Her voice had become softer now.

Not angry.

Just painfully honest.

"Fine..."

"Let's assume you're right."

"Let's assume I really do deserve better."

She looked straight into his eyes through the screen.

"But if I deserve better..."

"...can't you become better for me?"

The question stayed between them.

Neither of them knew how to answer it.

After a long silence, Maani spoke again.

"People think breakups are just a decision."

She shook her head gently.

"They're not."

"Maybe you'll learn to move on."

"Maybe you'll smile again."

"Maybe you'll meet new people."

A small laugh escaped her lips.

"But me?"

She looked away.

"I think it'll take me years just to shake hands with another man without comparing him to you."

"Years just to heal."

She smiled through her tears.

"Because after all this time..."

"I'm sure about one thing."

"We're good for each other."

She paused.

Then asked quietly,

"Don't you feel that too?"

Aarav remained silent.

Not because he disagreed.

But because every word she had spoken reflected the fear he had been carrying inside himself.

Maani wiped her eyes and smiled gently.

"Listen..."

"I don't think you need to give up."

"I think you just need to give yourself a chance."

She took a deep breath.

Then said the one sentence Aarav would remember for the rest of his life.

"And please..."

"Don't make me the purpose of your life."

"Let your dreams remain your purpose."

She smiled.

"I can be your motivation."

"...but I should never become the reason you stop chasing your dreams."

For the first time that night, Aarav had nothing to say.

Because sometimes love isn't about finding the perfect reply.

Sometimes it's about realizing that the person sitting on the other side of the screen understands your heart even before you do.

And in that moment, somewhere between tears and silence, both of them understood something profound:

Love doesn't ask someone to give up their dreams.

It simply asks them not to give up on each other.

Aarav listened her quietly.

Not once did he interrupt her.

Every word she spoke settled heavily in his heart.

After a long silence, he finally smiled—a smile that carried both love and helplessness.

"Shawty..."

"Do you know why I'm so scared of promising forever?"

He paused.

"Because I know life better than love."

"Life doesn't always ask us what we want. Sometimes it simply gives us orders, responsibilities, circumstances... and expects us to obey."

He looked down for a moment before continuing.

"You asked me how long I'll stay."

"The truth is... I don't know."

"Not because I want to leave."

"But because I don't know what tomorrow has planned for either of us."

He smiled faintly.

"If it were only my decision, I'd choose you every single day."

A tear rolled down Maani's cheek.

Aarav continued softly.

"You asked me... if you deserve better, why can't I become better for you?"

He nodded slowly.

"That's the most beautiful question anyone has ever asked me."

"And believe me..."

"Every day I wake up trying to become a better man."

"Not because I'm afraid of losing you..."

"But because loving you has already made me want to become someone I'm proud of."

He took a deep breath.

"But Shawty..."

"I don't want you to build your entire future around me either."

"I want to see you wearing the uniform you've dreamed about."

"I want to see you clear your exams."

"I want to see you become independent."

"And when that day comes..."

He smiled.

"I don't want people to say that Maani became successful because of Aarav."

"I want them to say..."

"She did it because she never gave up."

There was silence again.

Then Aarav looked directly into the camera.

"Listen carefully."

"I have never looked for reasons to leave you."

"I've only looked for reasons to protect you—even if sometimes that protection makes me look like the villain."

His voice grew softer.

"Maybe one day I'll overthink again."

"Maybe one day I'll tell you that you deserve better."

"If that day ever comes..."

"...don't let me run away without reminding me of this conversation."

He laughed quietly.

"Because sometimes even the strongest people need someone to remind them that they're enough."

Then he smiled, the kind of smile Maani had fallen in love with.

"And one more thing..."

"You said you can be my motivation, but not my purpose."

He nodded.

"You're right."

"My purpose is to become the best version of myself."

"But you..."

He paused for a few seconds.

"...you're the reason that journey doesn't feel lonely anymore."

"So I can't promise you 'forever,' because I don't control fate."

"But I can promise you this—while I'm here, you'll never have to question whether you're loved."

"And every single day that life allows me to stay beside you..."

"...I'll choose you again.

Some relationships become stronger after fights. Not because the problems disappear. But because two people finally realize how deeply they are attached to each other.

After the night they almost broke apart, something silently changed between Aarav and Maani.

The conversations became softer.

The reassurance became more real.

Even their silence carried comfort now. Maani still overthought sometimes. Aarav still disappeared during sailings.

Distance still existed between them like an ocean neither of them could erase. Yet somehow...Their hearts had started choosing each other more naturally than before.

And maybe that is why Aarav began feeling things he could never explain properly during calls.

There were emotions sitting heavily inside him now.

Gratitude.

Attachment.

Admiration.

Fear.

Love.

Too many things for ordinary conversations.

So one night, after duty hours while the ship rested quietly under dim harbor lights, Aarav sat alone with a pen and paper. And for the first time in his life — He tried writing everything he truly felt about her. Not perfectly.

Just honestly.

Because some emotions deserve ink instead of disappearing inside phone calls.

—Dear Maani, Sometimes I wonder how someone so far away slowly became the closest person in my life. Maybe it happened during our random late-night talks.

Maybe during your unnecessary scoldings. Maybe during the days you waited for my network to return from the middle of the ocean.

Or maybe it happened so slowly that I never even realized when “you” started becoming part of my everyday peace.

First of all, thank you. Not for loving me. But for understanding me. People think long-distance love survives through calls and messages.

But honestly, it survives through patience. And you... you handled me better than I ever expected someone would. You stayed during sailings.

You stayed during my mood swings. You stayed even during the days I became emotionally unavailable because of work, exhaustion, or responsibilities.

And trust me, I notice these things quietly. I know sometimes you feel I don't express enough. But the truth is — I feel too much.

I just don't always know how to explain it properly. A sailor's life is strange, Maani. One day we talk for hours. Another day the ocean takes away the network, time, energy, and sometimes even emotions temporarily.

But somehow, even in the middle of nowhere, my mind still searches for you first. That scares me sometimes. Because attachment becomes dangerous when another person starts affecting your peace this deeply.

And yes, I need more adoring from you. More unnecessary pampering. More dramatic anger. More “why were you late?” lectures. Because honestly, your love has become my safe place now.

But there’s something important I need you to understand too. Please don’t stop building yourself while loving me. Study hard. Focus on your future.

Become successful enough that one day you look back proudly at the girl you are becoming right now. I don’t want our love to become the reason you lose focus from your dreams.

In fact, I want it to become your strength. And please... stop overthinking so much.

Not every beautiful thing is meant to end painfully.

Not every relationship is temporary.

Sometimes life simply wants to see whether two people are brave enough to stay despite uncertainty. I know your fears.

I know you worry about family, future, distance, and situations beyond our control. Honestly? I worry too.

But I have learned something after loving you—The future will always remain uncertain. So instead of fearing tomorrow every day, maybe we should protect what we have today. Because what we share is rare.

Pure.

Comforting.

Emotionally safe.

And in today's world, that itself feels like a blessing. Also, madam... please stop fighting with me over time every evening. Poor sailor also has work sometimes.

While writing this letter itself, you are arguing that I don't give enough attention to you. But what can I do? You became important to me at the wrong phase of life.

Duty pulls me one side. You pull me the other side. And honestly... I willingly lose toward you every single time.

I know I cannot always stay beside you physically. I cannot attend your every bad day. Cannot stop your tears instantly. Cannot appear magically whenever you miss me.

But one thing I promise honestly—No matter where the ocean takes me, there will always be a part of me emotionally sitting beside you. Sometimes as comfort.

Sometimes as motivation. Sometimes simply as the person silently believing in you even when you doubt yourself.

And Maani... If someday life becomes difficult again and your mind tells you to give up on us—Please remember this letter.

Remember that somewhere in this huge world, a sailor once sat quietly at night writing pages about a girl he never wanted to lose — Aarav

After finishing the last line, Aarav kept staring at the paper silently for a long time. The ship around him had already grown quieter.

Some sailors were sleeping. Some were still on duty. The ocean outside moved slowly beneath the dark night sky. But Aarav's mind was somewhere else completely.

With her.

He slowly folded the letter carefully, making sure the pages did not crease too much. Almost instinctively, he smiled while

imagining Maani reading it for the first time. He could already picture everything perfectly. First, she would act normal.

Then after reading two or three lines, her expression would slowly change. Her eyes would soften quietly.

She would stop replying for a few minutes. Maybe she would even re-read certain lines again and again like she always did whenever something touched her emotionally.

And then finally—She would probably call him while pretending to be angry.

“Why do you write things like this?” Aarav smiled to himself imagining it.

Because he knew her too well now. She would definitely cry a little secretly. Then scold him for making her emotional.

Then ask unnecessary questions like —“Do you really think about me this much?” And honestly...The answer to that question scared Aarav himself sometimes. Because yes. He did. Far more than he should have.

The ocean had taught him many things during lonely nights at sea. But perhaps the biggest realization was this — No matter how far ships travel, the heart always keeps returning to the person it truly belongs to. Aarav looked once more at her name written above the letter softly. Maani.

Then quietly, almost like a prayer meant only for himself, he whispered — “Please stay.” Not just in his life. But in his future. In his peace.

In the parts of him she had unknowingly changed forever. Outside, the ocean remained endless.

Inside, a sailor sat smiling softly at a handwritten letter — Completely in love with a girl who was probably overthinking somewhere at that exact same moment.

Chapter 11:

The Brightest Night, Still the loneliest Us

Diwali had always meant one thing to Aarav.

Home.

The smell of sweets coming from the kitchen. His mother arranging diyas around the house. His father checking decorative lights that somehow stopped working every year. The laughter of relatives. The comfort of familiarity.

And just like every year, Aarav had imagined himself celebrating Diwali with his family.

But life had other plans.

A few weeks before Diwali, Aarav had already started counting days.

Not because he was excited about sweets or celebrations.

But because this time, he was finally supposed to be home.

For once, he had imagined a normal festival.

A few days with his parents. Home-cooked food. Family photographs. And maybe spending more time with Maani without worrying about network issues.

His leave application had already been approved.

Everything was planned.

Until it wasn't.

Just days before Diwali, operational requirements changed.

The ship was tasked for an important deployment, and manpower became critical.

One by one, sailors were informed.

Some would have to stay back.

Some leaves would be cancelled.

And unfortunately—

Aarav's name was on that list.

For a moment, he simply stared at the message.

No arguments. No complaints.

Just disappointment.

Because every sailor knows one thing:

The uniform gives many privileges.

But sometimes it asks for sacrifices too.

Aarav could have been angry.

Could have questioned it.

But deep down, he already knew the answer.

The ship came first.

Orders came first.

Duty came first.

That was the promise he made the day he wore the uniform.

So he folded away his travel plans.

Kept his disappointment to himself.

Called his mother.

And quietly informed everyone that he wouldn't be coming home for Diwali.

His mother tried to sound strong.

His father said he understood.

And Aarav smiled through the conversation as if it didn't affect him.

But after disconnecting the call, he sat alone for a long time.

Because sometimes the hardest part of service isn't the ocean.

It's watching life continue without you while you stay where duty asks you to be.

And that is how Aarav found himself on Diwali night—

Not at home.

Not with family.

Not with Maani.

But standing in the middle of the ocean, following the same orders he had once promised to obey.

For the first time, Diwali didn't feel like a festival.

It felt like another reminder of distance.

That evening, the sky slowly darkened.

Far away, there were no city lights.

No fireworks.

No crowded streets.

Only endless water and silence.

Aarav stood on the upper deck quietly looking at the horizon.

The sea was calm.

But his heart wasn't.

Because while he could accept missing the festival—
Missing his family and Maani on the same day felt heavier than usual.

Meanwhile, Diwali had arrived differently at Maani's home.
From early morning itself, the house felt alive.
The smell of homemade sweets filled every room.
Her mother was busy in the kitchen. Relatives kept calling.
The television played festive songs in the background.
Outside the house, colorful rangolis decorated the entrance.
Rows of diyas waited patiently for sunset.
The entire neighbourhood looked as if it had dressed itself for a celebration.
By evening, the house had transformed completely.
Golden fairy lights hung from balconies.
The warm glow of diyas illuminated every corner.
Children ran around excitedly with sparklers in their hands.
Laughter echoed from nearby homes.
Everything looked perfect.

And yet—

Every now and then, Maani's eyes drifted towards her phone.
Because no matter how beautiful the decorations were, a part of her attention remained somewhere in the middle of the ocean.
Her family noticed her smiling at random moments.
They didn't know she was reading Aarav's messages.
They didn't know she was waiting for his call.

They didn't know that while everyone around her was celebrating Diwali—

Her favorite person was spending it alone on a ship.

Before the evening prayers, Maani went to her room to get ready.

After trying multiple outfits and rejecting half of her wardrobe, she finally chose a beautiful silver-colored suit.

The silver fabric reflected the warm lights beautifully.

Simple.

Elegant.

Comfortably her.

She stood in front of the mirror for a few moments.

Adjusted her earrings.

Fixed her hair.

And then smiled.

Because she knew exactly who would see her first.

Not her relatives.

Not her friends.

Aarav.

Just then, Aarav's phone rang.

Maani Calling...

A smile immediately appeared on his face.

The kind that only one person could bring.

The moment the call connected, Aarav forgot about the ocean around him.

And for a second—

The loneliness disappeared.

"Happy Diwali, Shawty."

Maani smiled.

"Happy Diwali, sailor."

And just like that, the festival finally began.

Maani was standing in her room, ready for the evening prayers.

She wore a beautiful silver outfit.

Simple.

Elegant.

And absolutely breathtaking.

The fairy lights behind her reflected softly on her face.

For a moment, Aarav forgot how to speak.

Maani immediately noticed.

"What are you staring?"

Aarav shook his head.

"Nothing."

"Liar."

"Okay fine."

He smiled.

"You look beautiful."

Maani's cheeks turned slightly pink.

Even after all this time, compliments from Aarav still affected her.

Meanwhile, Aarav stood there wearing an old working uniform.

No special clothes.

No festive preparations.

Just another sailor spending Diwali away from home.

Maani looked at him carefully through the screen.

And somehow—

She knew exactly what he was trying to hide.

The disappointment.

The loneliness.

The homesickness.

So instead of talking about it, she simply stayed.

Sometimes presence itself becomes comfort.

A few minutes later, both joined their respective families for prayers.

Miles apart.

Yet somehow together.

The phone remained connected throughout.

While Aarav stood with folded hands on the ship.

Maani stood before the idols at home.

The same prayers.

The same festival.

The same moon above them.

Only different worlds beneath it.

For a few moments, distance lost.

Love won.

After the prayers ended, Maani returned to the screen.

"See? We celebrated Diwali together."

Aarav smiled softly.

"Almost together."

Both laughed.

Then silence followed.

Comfortable silence.

The kind that exists only between people who have become home to each other.

Outside, the ocean remained dark.

Inside the phone screen, Maani's smile continued shining brighter than any firework Aarav had seen that night.

And suddenly, the cancelled leave didn't hurt as much.

The distance didn't feel as cruel.

Because somewhere between unstable networks, oceans, prayers, and a silver outfit—

Maani had managed to bring Diwali to the middle of the sea.

That night before sleeping, Aarav opened a screenshot from the call.

Maani smiling.

Silver outfit.

Fairy lights behind her.

A moment frozen forever.

And while the world celebrated the Festival of Lights—

Aarav realized that his brightest light had appeared through a phone screen.

The ocean remained vast.

The distance remained real.

Yet somehow, on the brightest night of the year—

They were still each other's home.

Happy Diwali People!!

Chapter 12:

The Middle Watch

There is something strange about the sea after midnight.

During the day, ships feel alive.

Voices echo through passageways. Orders are passed.
Machines hum endlessly.

But after midnight—

Everything slows down.

The ocean becomes quieter.

And thoughts become louder.

For sailors, the watch between midnight and four in the morning is known as the Middle Watch.

For Aarav—

It was also the watch where he missed Maani the most.

That night, the ship sailed steadily through calm waters.

The sky was unusually clear.

Thousands of stars covered the darkness above.

The moon painted a silver trail across the ocean.

Beautiful.

Yet lonely.

Aarav stood on the bridge staring into the horizon.
Most people in the world were sleeping.
Cities were silent.
Homes were peaceful.
And somewhere hundreds of miles away—
Maani was probably asleep too.
Curled up in her blanket.
Phone charging beside her bed.
Maybe dreaming.
Maybe not.
Aarav smiled unknowingly.
The bridge remained quiet.
Only the occasional sound of navigational equipment
interrupted the silence.
The officer beside him remained busy with charts and routine
checks.
But Aarav's mind had already sailed somewhere else.
To a hostel room.
To late-night calls.
To a girl who somehow occupied more space in his thoughts
than the entire ocean before him.
He unlocked his phone.
No network.
No new messages.
Nothing.

Still, he opened her chat.

As if something magical would suddenly appear.

The last message remained the same.

"Goodnight baby"

Sent hours ago.

A simple message.

Yet enough to make him smile.

Aarav read it again.

And then again.

The sea has a funny way of making people emotional.

Maybe because when you're surrounded by nothingness, you begin appreciating the smallest things.

A message.

A voice note.

A picture.

A memory.

They become treasures.

Suddenly, Aarav remembered one particular call.

Maani had fallen asleep while talking to him.

Half the conversation was nonsense.

The other half was her fighting over sleep.

"I'm not sleepy."

Five minutes later—

Silence.

Then soft breathing.

Aarav had listened to that breathing for almost twenty minutes before disconnecting.

At that time it felt ordinary.

Now it felt precious.

The bridge lights reflected softly against the windows.

Outside, the ocean stretched endlessly.

Inside, Aarav continued scrolling through old pictures.

There she was.

Smiling in the silver outfit from Diwali.

Making funny faces.

Random hostel selfies.

Screenshots from video calls.

Tiny moments frozen forever.

A sailor's photo gallery never looks normal when he's in love.

Suddenly, footsteps approached.

One of his shipmates glanced at the screen.

Then laughed.

"Again?"

Aarav immediately locked his phone.

"What again?"

"You know exactly what again."

The sailor shook his head.

"Middle Watch. Same ocean. Same stars. Same girl."

Aarav couldn't even argue.

Because it was true.

The sailor walked away laughing.
And Aarav found himself smiling too.
A few minutes later, he stepped outside onto the bridge wing.
Cold wind hit his face immediately.
The sea looked black beneath the moonlight.
Infinite.
Powerful.
Beautiful.
And for some reason, he wished Maani could see it.
Not through pictures.
Not through videos.
With her own eyes.
He imagined standing beside her.
Explaining navigation lights.
Pointing at constellations.
Talking about nothing important.
Just existing together.
A simple dream.
Yet one that felt impossibly far away.
The watch continued.
Hours passed slowly.
The stars remained above.
The sea remained below.
And Maani remained somewhere in between.

Not physically present.

Yet present everywhere.

By the time the first hint of sunrise appeared on the horizon,
Aarav felt strangely peaceful.

Because the Middle Watch had taught him something.

Distance could take away touch.

It could take away presence.

It could take away ordinary moments.

But it could never take away the feeling of having someone
waiting for you at the end of the journey.

As dawn slowly replaced darkness, Aarav looked at the horizon
one last time.

Then quietly whispered—

"Good morning, Shawty."

Miles away, Maani was still asleep.

Yet somehow—

the ocean carried the words anyway.

The watch finally ended at 0400 hours.

Another Middle Watch completed.

Another night survived.

The horizon was slowly beginning to change colours.

Dark black skies gave way to deep blue shades.

The stars started disappearing one by one.

And with them, the loneliness of the night slowly faded away.

Aarav handed over the watch and stretched his tired shoulders.

Just as he was about to head towards his cabin, one of his friends appeared.

"Maggi?"

No sailor in history has ever refused Maggi after a Middle Watch.

Aarav immediately nodded.

Within minutes, a small group gathered in the pantry.

Sleep-deprived. Hungry. And somehow still energetic.

One sailor prepared the Maggi.

Another mixed cold coffee using whatever ingredients were available onboard.

The recipe was questionable.

The taste was even more questionable.

Yet somehow—

it felt perfect.

Soon, the pantry was filled with laughter.

Stories from previous sailings.

Random jokes.

Arguments about which port had the best food.

And the usual roasting that every friend group survives on.

For the first time that night, Aarav wasn't thinking about distance.

Or future.

Or overthinking.

He was simply enjoying the moment.

Sitting with people who understood this life better than anyone else.

A bowl of hot Maggi in one hand.

A steel mug of cold coffee in the other.

The sea outside remained endless.

But inside that tiny pantry, life felt simple.

Before taking another bite, Aarav unlocked his phone.

Still no network.

Still no messages.

Yet he smiled anyway.

Because he already knew what would be waiting for him once the ship reached signal range.

A sleepy good morning text.

A random complaint.

A demand for a video call.

Or maybe an argument over something completely unnecessary.

And honestly—

he was looking forward to all of it.

The sun slowly rose above the horizon.

A new day had begun.

The Middle Watch was over.

But the story of Aarav and Maani continued—

one call, one message, and one bowl of Maggi at a time.

Chapter 13:

The “You Changed” Fight

Every relationship has that one fight.

The one where one person becomes a detective.

And the other becomes the accused.

For Aarav and Maani, it started with an Instagram story.

A completely innocent story.

Or at least Aarav thought so.

That evening, Maani had gone out with her hostel friends.

A cute café. Good food. Good lighting.

The perfect combination for Instagram.

After clicking approximately 273 photos and selecting only one, she finally uploaded a story.

A simple picture.

Nothing special.

At least according to her.

Then the reactions started arriving.

Friends. Classmates. Hostel girls.

Everyone replied.

Everyone except the person she wanted a reply from.

Aarav.

After twenty minutes, she finally got a notification.

Liked by Aarav.

That's it.

No message.

No reaction.

No compliment.

Nothing.

Just a like.

Maani stared at her screen.

Then stared again.

Then zoomed in as if hidden text would appear.

Nothing.

Just a like.

Meanwhile, Aarav was completely unaware that he had accidentally started World War III.

For him, liking the story meant:

"You look beautiful."

"Nice picture."

"I noticed."

"I love you."

Everything combined into one tiny heart.

For Maani, however, it meant:

"Effort level: 0%"

A few minutes later.

Maani: "Nice."

Aarav: "What happened?"

Maani: "Nothing."

Every boyfriend knows.

When a girl says "Nothing"...

Something has definitely happened.

Aarav: "Tell me."

Maani: "You changed."

Aarav immediately stood up.

Not again.

Aarav: "What did I do now?"

Maani: "Everyone replied to my story."

Aarav: "Good."

Maani: "YOU ONLY LIKED IT."

Aarav: "Because I liked it."

Maani: "Bas?"

Aarav: "What else was I supposed to do?"

Maani: "Before you used to write paragraphs."

Aarav: "Before I had free time."

Maani: "See? YOU CHANGED."

Now Maani entered full investigation mode.

There was no escape.

No lawyer.

No witness protection.

Nothing.

Maani: "What's my favourite colour?"

Aarav froze.

Silence.

Dangerous silence.

His brain started working harder than a naval radar.

Blue?

Pink?

Black?

Yellow?

The problem wasn't that he didn't care.

The problem was that Maani changed her favourite colour every three weeks.

Aarav: "Blue?"

Maani: "Wrong."

Aarav: "Purple?"

Maani: "Wrong."

Aarav: "White?"

Maani: "WRONG."

Aarav: "You don't even know your favourite colour."

Maani: "I DO."

Aarav: "Then tell me."

Maani: "No."

Next question.

"What's my favourite chocolate?"

Aarav immediately answered.

"Dairy Milk Silk."

"Wrong."

"What?"

"It's KitKat now."

"SINCE WHEN?"

"Two weeks."

"Exactly."

The interrogation continued.

Favourite food.

Favourite flower.

Favourite movie.

Favourite season.

Poor Aarav was getting eliminated from every round.

At this point even he started questioning whether he knew his own girlfriend.

Finally he got frustrated.

Aarav: "Okay. My turn."

Maani: "Fine."

Aarav: "What's my favourite Colour?"

Maani: "Yellow."

Aarav: "Correct."

Aarav: "Favourite instant food?"

Maani: "Maggi."

Aarav: "Correct."

Aarav: "Favourite girl?"

Maani: "Me."

Aarav: "Correct."

Maani: "That question doesn't count."

Both started laughing.

The fight was slowly losing strength.

As usual.

Then Aarav finally asked:

"Why are you actually angry?"

Silence.

A small one.

The honest kind.

Then Maani spoke softly.

"Because I uploaded that story hoping you'd say something."

Aarav's expression changed instantly.

There it was.

The real reason.

Not the favourite colours.

Not the chocolates.

Not the investigation.

Just expectation.

Aarav: "You know what I thought when I saw the story?"

Maani stayed quiet.

Aarav: "I thought my girlfriend looks beautiful."

Maani: "Then why didn't you say it?"

Aarav: "Because I thought you already knew."

Maani rolled her eyes.

Maani: "We're girls, Aarav."

"We need to hear it."

Aarav laughed.

Then finally sent the message he should have sent from the beginning.

Aarav: "You looked beautiful, Shawty."

Maani: "Only beautiful?"

"Maani."

"Hmm?"

"You're exhausting."

"And?"

"And you're still beautiful."

Fight over.

Peace restored.

The favourite colour remained unknown.

The favourite chocolate remained disputed.

But one thing became clear.

Aarav hadn't changed.

He was just a sailor trying to survive both the ocean...
and his girlfriend's investigations.

Chapter 14:

If the Distance Didn't Exist

Some nights are remembered not because something extraordinary happened, but because of a simple conversation that stays with you forever.

It was one of those quiet nights. Aarav had just finished a long day onboard. The ship moved steadily through the darkness while most of the crew had already retired to their cabins.

The ocean outside was calm, reflecting the moonlight like a giant silver sheet stretching endlessly into the horizon. Hundreds of kilometers away, Maani was lying on her hostel bed, surrounded by books she was supposed to be studying from. As usual, studying had lost the battle against talking to Aarav.

The call had been going on for nearly an hour. They had discussed everything from college gossip to ship stories, from food cravings to random Instagram reels.

Neither of them seemed interested in ending the conversation. There was comfort in simply hearing each other's voice, even when they had nothing important to say.

After a brief silence, Maani suddenly asked a question.

"Aarav, what if distance didn't exist?"

For a few seconds, Aarav didn't answer. He looked out of the porthole beside him and smiled. It was such a Maani

question—unexpected, innocent, and powerful enough to make him think.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean... what if we lived in the same city? No ship. No hostel. No waiting for calls. No network issues. Just... normal."

The idea sounded beautiful.

For so long, distance had become such a normal part of their relationship that imagining life without it almost felt unreal.

Maani was the first one to start dreaming.

She said that if distance didn't exist, she would force Aarav to meet her almost every day. She would make him accompany her to cafés, college events, bookstores, and random places she discovered online.

She would make him wait outside her classes, carry her shopping bags, click hundreds of photographs until she found the perfect one, and listen to stories that honestly could have been summarized in two minutes but somehow always took twenty.

Aarav laughed.

He knew she was serious.

And somehow, he loved that about her.

In return, Aarav imagined a life where he could simply meet Maani whenever he missed her.

No planning weeks in advance.

No railway stations.

No countdowns.

No staring at a phone screen hoping for better network.

If he had a difficult day, he could simply go see her. If she was upset, he could sit beside her instead of searching for the perfect comforting text.

If she achieved something important, he could celebrate it in person rather than through a delayed video call.

For a moment, both of them became lost in the version of life they wished they had.

A life where love was easy.

A life where time together wasn't limited by circumstances.

A life where goodbye wasn't a daily routine.

The more they talked, the more detailed their imaginary world became.

They spoke about watching sunsets together instead of sending photographs of them.

About celebrating birthdays without screens.

About festivals without oceans separating them.

About going on evening walks.

About arguing face to face instead of through text messages.

About sitting silently beside each other and doing absolutely nothing.

The funny thing was that neither of them imagined grand romantic moments.

They imagined ordinary moments.

Because when you're in a long-distance relationship, ordinary moments become luxury.

Maani admitted that sometimes she envied couples who could simply meet whenever they wanted. She envied seeing people walking together, sharing meals together, spending time

together without having to fight schedules, duties, studies, and distance.

Aarav understood exactly what she meant.

There were countless times he had watched couples at railway stations, airports, ports, and cafés and wondered what it would feel like to have such simplicity.

Not because their love was stronger.

But because their circumstances were easier.

For a while, neither spoke.

The silence wasn't uncomfortable.

It was thoughtful.

Both knew that their relationship had never been easy.

Every conversation required effort.

Every meeting required planning.

Every memory had been earned through patience.

Then Aarav softly said something that made Maani quiet.

"You know, if distance didn't exist, maybe we'd appreciate each other less."

Maani immediately protested.

"Never."

But Aarav explained.

Distance had taught them how valuable time really was.

A ten-minute call could brighten an entire day.

A simple message could change a mood completely.

A photograph could become a memory.

A voice note could become comfort.

People who met every day often took those things for granted.

Aarav and Maani couldn't.

Because they knew what it felt like to miss them.

The realization settled between them.

Maybe distance had stolen many things from their relationship.

But it had also given them something rare.

Gratitude.

The ability to cherish small moments.

The understanding that love isn't measured only by presence.

Sometimes it's measured by waiting.

By patience.

By staying.

By choosing someone even when life makes it difficult.

Eventually, the call started approaching its inevitable ending.

Another goodnight.

Another goodbye.

Another promise to talk tomorrow.

Before disconnecting, Maani asked one final question.

"Do you ever wish distance never existed?"

Aarav smiled.

Of course he did.

Every single day.

But after a moment, he answered honestly.

"Yes. But if distance didn't exist, we wouldn't have this story."

Maani didn't reply immediately.

Because deep down, she knew he was right.

Their relationship wasn't beautiful because it was easy.

It was beautiful because despite everything working against them, they still chose each other.

The call ended.

The ship continued sailing.

The hostel lights slowly turned off.

The distance remained exactly the same.

Yet somehow, both of them fell asleep feeling a little closer than before.

Because sometimes love doesn't need shorter distances.

Sometimes it simply needs two people willing to cross them together.

That night, the sky above them was the same.

The stars didn't care that one of them stood on the deck of a ship while the other stared out from a hostel window.

They simply shone—quietly, patiently, connecting two hearts separated by miles.

Aarav closed his eyes and imagined Maani beside him. He could almost hear her laugh carried by the sea breeze. Almost feel her hand slipping into his.

At the very same moment, Maani hugged the pillow. She whispered his name into the silence, hoping the wind would carry it across the ocean.

"If distance had a heart," she thought, "I'd ask it to be kind."

And somewhere in the darkness, Aarav smiled without knowing why.

Maybe love worked that way.

Maybe when two souls missed each other with all their hearts, the universe found tiny ways to let them know they were being missed too.

They couldn't watch the same sunset. They couldn't walk the same streets. They couldn't steal quick hugs after difficult days.

But every sunrise brought them one day closer.

Every goodbye was one goodbye less before the next hello.

So they stopped counting the miles.

Instead, they counted dreams... the places they would visit, the conversations they would have without worrying about time, the mornings they would wake up beside each other, and the life they were patiently building, one promise at a time.

Because distance was never their enemy.

It was only the road they had to cross before finally reaching each other.

And they knew...

No matter how many oceans lay between them today, one day, there would be no countdowns, no weak network, no tearful goodbyes.

Just Aarav. Just Maani.

Almost Together.

Chapter 15:

When the Sailor Finally Met His Home

Some meetings take place long before two people actually stand in front of each other. Aarav and Maani had already met a thousand times emotionally.

In late-night calls. In sleepy good mornings. In overthinking. In waiting. In silent comfort. Still—Nothing prepares the heart for the first real meeting.

Especially when two people have already fallen deeply for each other before even touching hands once.

After months of calls, sailings, arguments, emotional patch-ups, and surviving distance together, one thought had started staying inside Aarav's mind constantly—I need to see her once.

Not through a screen.

Not through blurry video calls.

Properly.

The real her.

The girl whose voice had become part of his routine. The girl who waited through oceans and unstable networks. The girl who somehow knew his moods before he explained them himself. Aarav missed her differently now. More deeply. As if his heart had finally become tired of loving someone only through pixels.

One night during a call, after another unnecessary fight over time and attention, Aarav suddenly asked softly — “Can I to come meet you?”

Silence.

Complete silence.

For a few seconds, even Maani stopped breathing properly. Because suddenly, after all these months—Their love no longer felt virtual.

Her voice became smaller.

“Seriously?”

“Hmm.”

Another silence.

Then slowly — “You’ll actually come all the way?”

Aarav smiled faintly. “Permission milegi?”

Maani laughed softly through nervousness. But beneath that laughter, her heart was racing uncontrollably. Because she had imagined this moment so many times secretly. And now it was real.

Weeks later, during his next holidays, Aarav finally boarded a train towards Jammu. The entire journey felt unreal to him. He kept staring outside train windows for hours while overthinking everything.

What if the meeting feels awkward? What if he cannot speak properly after seeing her? And honestly—That last fear turned out completely true.

By the time Aarav finally reached Jammu Tawi railway station, his heart was beating harder than it ever had during naval inspections.

The station was crowded. Noise everywhere. People rushing. Announcements echoing repeatedly. Aarav stepped down carrying his bag while immediately trying to call Maani.

No network.

Again.

He frowned instantly before checking his phone repeatedly. Then realization hit him — Outside SIM cards barely worked there.

Perfect. After travelling across the country to meet the girl he loved for the first time, the universe decided to remove network again.

Aarav stood near a pillar looking visibly frustrated now. Sweat. Travel exhaustion. Crowd pushing around him. And absolutely no idea where Maani was.

For the next few minutes he kept walking through the station trying to find her face among hundreds of strangers. Every girl in black clothes made his heart react for half a second.

But none of them were her. Then finally, one stranger helped him contact her briefly. And somehow—Maani found him first.

Aarav was still standing there frustrated near the crowd when suddenly the noise around him started fading emotionally.

Because from a distance — He saw her. Walking toward him slowly through the crowd. Black kurta. Loose hair moving softly. Golden skin glowing under the sun light. Those familiar eyes he had only seen through screens until now.

And somehow...She looked even softer in real life. More real. More beautiful. More dangerous for his heart. For one full second—Aarav genuinely thought about turning around and running away. Not because he didn't want to meet her. But because suddenly everything became too real.

The girl he loved through calls, screenshots, voice notes, overthinking, sleepless nights, and oceans—Was actually walking toward him now.

His throat went dry instantly. How is she this beautiful?

How am I supposed to act normal now? His heartbeat became uncontrollable. For months, Aarav had imagined this meeting confidently in his head.

But reality destroyed every prepared sentence immediately. He forgot how to stand properly. Forgot what expression to make. Forgot literally everything except her.

And the worst part? Maani noticed all of it.

She could clearly see the panic on his face from a distance itself. The sailor who handled naval pressure calmly looked completely terrified now.

As she came closer, Aarav looked away for two seconds just to breathe properly again. A part of him genuinely wanted to disappear into the crowd out of nervousness.

Because loving someone from far away is one thing. Standing in front of them and realizing they can actually affect your heartbeat physically—That is terrifying.

Maani finally stopped in front of him. Close enough now that Aarav could notice every small detail. The kajal in her eyes. Her earrings. The nervous smile she was trying to hide.

The way her fingers kept adjusting her sleeves unconsciously. For a few seconds—Neither spoke. Then Maani looked at him carefully before smiling softly.

“You were about to run away, right?” Aarav instantly started laughing nervously while looking down. Caught immediately. “Little bit.” Maani laughed softly hearing that.

And somehow, the sound of her laughter in real life felt even prettier than phone calls. Then finally — After months of distance, oceans, missed calls, overthinking, emotional fights, and waiting — The sailor and the girl he loved stood face to face for the very first time.

And honestly? Aarav knew one thing immediately. No screen had ever done justice to her presence.

For the first few minutes after meeting, both Aarav and Maani walked beside each other quietly outside Jammu Tawi railway station.

Not because they had nothing to say. But because sometimes reality takes time to settle inside the heart. After months of calls, oceans, overthinking, screenshots, letters, and waiting — They were finally together in the same moment.

And somehow, both of them looked calmer on calls than in real life. Maani kept stealing small glances at Aarav while walking. The same sailor who spoke confidently during arguments now looked strangely shy beside her.

Meanwhile Aarav was trying his best not to stare at her too obviously. Failing completely. Everything about her felt unreal to him. The black kurta. The softness in her voice.

The way she smiled while pretending not to be nervous. And honestly, the biggest realization hitting Aarav repeatedly was—She actually came. Not as a voice. Not as a notification. Not as a blurry video call. Real. Walking beside him.

After a while, both finally sat quietly on a bench outside the station. Cold wind moved softly around them while traffic sounds faded into the background. And suddenly, both remembered something at the exact same time. The gifts. Maani smiled immediately. “Wait... I brought something.” At the same moment Aarav opened his bag nervously.

Both stopped and looked at each other before laughing softly. Because somehow, both had spent days secretly preparing for this meeting.

Aarav carefully pulled out the customized passport cover first. The same one he bought from Thailand during sailing. The beige leather looked even softer under daylight.

Maani. Her name written neatly across the front. The small anchor sticker. The airplane. The stethoscope. Pieces of both their worlds placed together carefully.

The moment Maani saw it in real life, her expression changed completely. Her fingers touched her name slowly as if trying to process the fact that he had really made this for her.

For a few seconds, she said nothing. Then quietly — “You actually carried this all the way?”

Aarav smiled softly. “Obviously.” But he wasn’t done yet. From inside his bag, Aarav slowly took out the folded handwritten letter too.

The same letter written during lonely harbour nights. The same pages where he had poured every emotion he never explained properly through calls.

Maani’s eyes softened instantly seeing it. Because suddenly this meeting no longer felt ordinary.

It felt personal.

Deeply personal.

Then finally, Aarav awkwardly handed her a chocolate too. “And this... because apparently girls get angry without chocolates.” Maani laughed immediately. That same soft laugh Aarav had heard hundreds of times through phone speakers. Except now it existed right beside him. Real. Then suddenly Maani looked down shyly before opening her own bag

carefully. “My turn.” First, she handed him a bouquet. Simple. Beautiful. Fresh.

Aarav stared at it for a moment longer than necessary because honestly—No one had ever brought him flowers before. Especially not after travelling emotionally through oceans with him for months.

Then came chocolates. “For your mood swings.” Aarav looked offended instantly. “MY mood swings?” Maani smiled proudly. “Yes.” Then finally—She carefully pulled out one last thing.

A small glass bottle. Inside it — A tiny ship rested quietly. Aarav froze the moment he saw it. Because unlike ordinary gifts, this one understood him. Not the sailor uniform.

Not the naval life people see from outside. But the lonely oceans. The distance. The waiting. The part of him constantly travelling between duty and love.

Maani held it softly before saying — “So that even when you sail... a part of your ship stays with me.” That sentence hit Aarav harder than he expected.

Because suddenly, in one tiny bottle, she had managed to summarize their entire relationship. Distance trapped inside love.

For a few seconds, Aarav genuinely could not speak. He simply kept staring at the ship inside the bottle while smiling helplessly.

And maybe that’s what love truly is—Remembering small details about someone so carefully that even gifts begin carrying emotions instead of objects.

That day outside the station, no expensive thing existed between them. Only: a passport cover, a handwritten letter, flowers, chocolates, and a tiny ship inside a bottle. Yet

somehow — Those small gifts carried more love than words ever could.

For a few moments, neither of them spoke.

Not because there was nothing left to say.

But because every sentence they had imagined during countless late-night calls suddenly felt too small for this moment.

The station around them remained busy. Announcements echoed through the speakers. People rushed past with luggage, families greeted each other loudly, children laughed somewhere nearby.

Yet somehow, it all faded into the background.

For Aarav and Maani...

It felt like the entire world had paused.

Maani looked up at him and smiled nervously.

"So..."

"So..." Aarav repeated, scratching the back of his neck.

Both of them laughed.

It was the kind of awkward laugh that only happens when two people know everything about each other...

Except how to behave when they're finally standing face to face.

Without thinking, they started walking side by side.

Not toward any destination.

Just... together.

Their shoulders occasionally brushed against each other.

Every accidental touch sent tiny waves of excitement through both of them.

More than once, they looked at each other at exactly the same time.

And every single time...

Both of them looked away first.

"You know..." Maani said softly, "I imagined this meeting hundreds of times."

Aarav smiled.

"So did I."

"And?"

"It wasn't even close."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Worse?"

He shook his head.

"Much better."

Maani's cheeks turned pink.

They found a quiet corner away from the crowd and sat on a bench.

For the first time...

There was no countdown on a phone call.

No weak network.

No 'Can you hear me?'

No fear that the call would disconnect.

Only silence.

Comfortable silence.

The kind only love understands.

Maani slowly rested her head on Aarav's shoulder.

He froze for half a second.

Not because he didn't want it.

Because he had imagined this exact moment so many times that it almost didn't feel real.

After a moment, he gently leaned his head against hers.

Neither of them spoke.

They simply watched people passing by.

Somewhere between those quiet moments, Aarav quietly intertwined his fingers with hers.

Maani looked down at their hands.

Then smiled.

"So this is what your hand actually feels like."

Aarav chuckled.

"And?"

"It's warmer than I imagined."

He laughed softly.

"And yours fits perfectly."

Time passed faster than either of them wanted.

Soon, the announcement they had been dreading echoed through the station.

Aarav's train.

Neither of them moved.

As if staying seated for a few more seconds could somehow stop time itself.

Finally, Aarav stood.

"So..."

"So..." Maani repeated again, smiling sadly.

They both knew this goodbye would hurt.

Even after finally meeting.

Aarav stepped a little closer.

Close enough to see every tiny detail in her eyes.

Close enough to hear her breathing over the noise of the station.

Maani looked up at him.

Neither of them said anything.

She gave a tiny nod.

As if silently telling him...

It's okay.

Aarav slowly lifted a hand and gently tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

His fingers lingered for just a second.

Then, with quiet hesitation, he leaned forward.

Their foreheads touched first.

Both of them smiled instinctively.

He whispered,

"I've wanted to do this since the first day I fell in love with you."

Maani closed her eyes.

"So have I."

Aarav gently cupped her face.

And then...

He placed the softest kiss on her lips.

It lasted only a few seconds.

Gentle.

Unhurried.

Not driven by passion...

But by months of waiting, countless missed hugs, unfinished conversations, and every "I miss you" they had ever spoken over a phone call.

When they slowly pulled apart, neither of them opened their eyes immediately.

Both simply smiled.

Because for the first time...

Distance had finally lost.

Even if it was only for a little while.

And somehow, that single kiss felt like every mile between them had quietly disappeared.

The hardest part about long-distance love is not the waiting. It is the leaving. Because once you finally touch the person you spent months loving through calls and notifications — Going back to screens feels cruel.

After meeting Maani, Aarav finally understood why people say presence changes everything. Now her voice had a face. Her laughter had expressions. Her silence had eyes. Her comfort had warmth. And suddenly, phone calls no longer felt enough.

The remaining days of Aarav's holidays passed too quickly. Too softly. Too unfairly. Small walks.

Small conversations. Small moments both of them secretly memorized knowing distance would soon steal them again. Maani kept noticing little things about Aarav now.

The way he fixed his watch absentmindedly while thinking. The way he became quiet in crowded places. The way he smiled more with his eyes than words.

And Aarav kept realizing something dangerous too—He was getting more attached after meeting her in real life. Much more. Because before this, missing Maani meant missing a voice. Now? Now he missed her presence itself.

The black kurta. Her perfume. Her nervous smile. The warmth of standing beside her. And maybe that's why both of them avoided talking about departure until the very last minute. As if silence could stop time somehow. But time never listens to lovers.

The evening Aarav had to leave felt unusually quiet. No unnecessary teasing. No random arguments. No playful complaints. Just heaviness.

The kind both were trying not to acknowledge openly. At Jammu Tawi railway station again, the same place where their distance had once become real — Their separation now stood silently between them.

Crowds moved around them. Announcements echoed repeatedly. But both of them felt emotionally disconnected from everything else happening there.

Maani tried acting normal initially. She really tried. But the closer Aarav's train timing came, the quieter she became. Aarav noticed immediately. "Hey."

She nodded softly without looking properly at him. Then suddenly — Her eyes filled. Aarav's heart sank instantly. Because this was the same girl who handled overthinking, distance, hostel loneliness, and emotional breakdowns so strongly through months. And now she was crying simply because he had to leave again.

Maani looked away quickly, embarrassed. "I hate this part."

Her voice broke slightly. And honestly—Aarav hated it too. More than sailings. More than distance. More than unstable networks.

Because now he knew what it felt like to stand beside her. Going back to phone screens after that suddenly felt unbearable.

Aarav moved closer quietly before holding her hands softly. "Maani..." That single word broke her completely. Tears rolled down her face despite trying to stop them.

"Now again only calls and texts..." Aarav stayed silent. Because she was right. Again: No real Maani. No real Aarav. Only chats. Typing... Missed calls.

Good mornings through screens. Sleepy video calls. Waiting for replies. Saving pictures. Staring at last seen.

Love trapped inside phones again. And maybe that realization hurt both of them more than the actual goodbye.

Maani lowered her face while wiping tears angrily. "I got used to you being here." That sentence shattered something quietly inside Aarav.

Because he understood exactly what she meant. After meeting once, distance becomes heavier. Screens stop feeling enough. Aarav slowly pulled her closer before hugging her tightly for the first time. And suddenly—Everything became still emotionally.

The station noise disappeared. The crowd disappeared. Even time itself felt distant for a few seconds. Only two people remained. One trying not to cry.

The other trying to stay strong for both of them. Maani hugged him tightly as if memorizing the feeling before losing it again.

And Aarav, standing there silently with her in his arms, realized something painfully beautiful — Long-distance love survives through imagination.

People survive months by imagining touch. Presence. Warmth. But once imagination becomes real even once— Separation starts hurting differently.

Aarav gently rested his head against hers before whispering softly — “I’ll come again.” Maani nodded against his chest quietly.

But both of them knew the truth. The waiting would begin again now. The oceans. The duties. The hostel nights. The unstable networks. The overthinking. The missing.

Everything. And yet—Neither wanted to leave. The train announcement echoed again. This time louder. More real.

Aarav slowly pulled away from the hug while Maani immediately looked down again because her eyes had turned completely red now.

Even crying, she looked beautiful to him.

Dangerously beautiful.

Aarav smiled faintly before wiping one of her tears carefully. “Take care of yourself properly.” Maani tried speaking but her voice kept breaking.

So instead she simply nodded. Just like that. Because sometimes love becomes too heavy for words.

Then finally — Aarav boarded the train. And Maani stood outside watching silently. The same way she had watched him disappear emotionally during sailings. Except this time, the distance was visible.

As the train slowly started moving, Aarav kept looking at her through the window until her figure slowly blurred behind movement and station lights.

Still standing there. Still watching. And maybe that is what their love always was from the beginning—Two people constantly leaving and returning to each other emotionally.

That night, after hours of silence during the journey, Aarav finally received one message from her.

Maani: “Reached?”

Aarav stared at the screen for a few seconds before smiling weakly. Because somehow—After all the hugs, tears, gifts, and real moments — Their love had quietly returned to where it first began.

Chats.

Only chats again.

Final Chapter :

I don't want to write it but the reality always hit hard

Months passed quietly after that first meeting.

Not dramatically.

Not like movies where people suddenly stop loving each other after one painful incident.

Aarav and Maani still loved each other deeply.

Maybe too deeply.

But life slowly became heavier around them.

Responsibilities increased. Careers demanded more. Families started asking more questions. Calls became shorter. Replies became delayed. Overthinking became routine again.

And somewhere between all this—

Both of them slowly started growing into different versions of themselves.

Not worse.

Just different.

Aarav became calmer with time.

More mature. More emotionally silent.

The Navy slowly changed him.

Long sailings, loneliness, pressure, and responsibilities taught him how to hide emotions behind normal replies.

Meanwhile Maani kept fighting for her own future too.

SSB preparations. Exams. Family expectations. Her own fears about the relationship.

People often think relationships end because love disappears.

But sometimes—

Love stays.

Only courage leaves.

After years of calls, waiting, oceans, letters, fights, hugs, and distance, Aarav slowly started realizing something he never wanted to admit aloud.

He loved Maani deeply.

But love alone could not erase reality.

Their worlds were different.

Very different.

Different families. Different lifestyles. Different expectations. Different social positions.

And somewhere deep inside himself, Aarav had started feeling smaller every day.

Not because Maani ever made him feel less.

Never.

In fact, Maani loved him in the purest way possible.

But Aarav himself could not stop overthinking the future.

Would her family accept him? Would his life suit her future? Would she really stay happy inside his unpredictable naval life? Would he be enough for her years later?

These questions slowly became heavier than the distance itself.

And the worst part?

Maani still believed in them completely.

That hurt him even more.

One night during a quiet call, Maani kept talking about random future things innocently.

Her exams. Her SSB preparation. A café she wanted to visit with him someday. A city where both could finally stay together peacefully.

Meanwhile Aarav stayed unusually silent.

Because while she was dreaming fearlessly—

He was calculating realities.

Finally Maani stopped mid-conversation.

“Why are you so quiet nowadays?”

Aarav looked down.

No answer came immediately.

Then softly—

“Maani...”

Something in his tone scared her instantly.

Long silence.

Then finally Aarav spoke the sentence he had been carrying alone for months.

“I don’t think I’m suitable for you.”

Maani froze completely.

As if the world paused around her for one second.

Then she laughed nervously.

“What nonsense.”

But Aarav did not laugh back.

And suddenly—

The fear became real.

“Aarav stop talking like this.”

He closed his eyes painfully.

Because every word after this would hurt both of them.

Still—

He continued.

“Our families are different.”

“So?”

“Everything is different.”

“So what?”

Her voice started breaking slowly now.

But Aarav had already crossed the point where silence could save them.

“You deserve a more stable life.”

Maani instantly got angry.

Real angry.

The kind that comes from pain, not ego.

“Don’t decide what I deserve.”

Silence.

Then Aarav whispered quietly—

“I’m trying to think practically.”

That sentence destroyed her completely.

Because practical thinking is often the first step toward emotional endings.

Maani's eyes filled immediately.

"So all this time... you were loving me while planning to leave someday?"

Aarav looked away from the screen.

No answer.

And sometimes silence becomes confession.

For the first time in years, Maani looked at Aarav not with overthinking—

But heartbreak.

Because she realized something painful:

Aarav did not stop loving her.

He stopped believing in their future.

And those two things are very different.

That night both cried quietly on the same call while pretending to stay calm for each other.

No shouting. No blame. No betrayal.

Only helplessness.

The most painful kind of ending.

Before disconnecting, Maani asked one final question softly—

"If things were different... would you have stayed?"

Aarav smiled weakly through tears.

Then answered honestly—

"In every lifetime."

The call ended.

And somehow—

So did a version of both of them.

Days later Aarav sailed again.

This time he did not keep checking his phone every hour.

Maani stopped sending random pictures. Stopped asking for video calls. Stopped fighting for attention.

And that silence hurt more than arguments ever did.

Years later, Aarav would still remember her during lonely nights at sea.

Not as regret.

But as the purest love he was too afraid to fight for completely.

And Maani?

She eventually became stronger.

But somewhere inside her, a small wound always remained—

The wound of being loved deeply by someone who still chose to leave.

Maybe Aarav was right.

Maybe their worlds truly were too different.

Or maybe—

He simply lost courage before life even gave them a real chance.

Nobody knows.

But one thing remained true forever:

They did love each other.

Completely.

They just could not defeat the fear standing between their futures.

And perhaps that is why their story was called —

Almost Together.

A Public Letter to Maani

My Dear Shawty, Yes, I call her Shawty. Because for me, she is a real-life baddie. She sounds dangerous when she is angry, overthinks without warning, fights over the smallest things, and somehow still manages to become the softest part of my life at the same time. So where was I? Yes...My dear Shawty, If this book ever reaches your hands years later, I just want you to know that every page written here carries pieces of us hidden quietly between the lines. The late-night calls. The overthinking. The waiting. The distance. The small fights. The silent patch-ups. The “sleep now” texts that never ended on time. Everything.

People may read this as a love story. But for me, it was simply life after you entered it. You became part of my routine so naturally that I never even realized when your messages started affecting my mood, when your voice became my comfort, or when your absence started feeling louder than noise itself. And honestly, loving you were never difficult.

Distance was.

Timing was.

Life was.

But never you. You stayed with a sailor who disappeared into oceans, unstable networks, duties, and exhaustion — and somehow you still found reasons to wait for him every single time. That is something I will always admire about you. You loved me during my best days. But more importantly, you

handled me during my worst ones too. When I became emotionally unavailable. When work exhausted me. When I replied dryly. When I stayed silent because life felt heavier than words. Still... you stayed. And maybe you never realized this properly, but your presence changed me quietly.

You taught me how comforting love can feel when it is safe. You taught me that even ordinary moments become beautiful when shared with the right person. You taught me that attachment is not built through grand gestures. Sometimes it is built through waiting for someone's network to return. And Maani...I know I don't always express myself perfectly. I know I joke when things become emotional. I know I act calm even when my heart is full of things I cannot explain properly. But if there's one truth I want this final page to carry forever, it is this — A part of me will always belong to the girl who waited for a sailor through calls, oceans, and time zones.

And today, while writing this, there's one more thing I want to say publicly. I want to gift this book to you on your 22nd birthday. 26th August. Not because it is perfect. Not because I am some great writer. But because I wrote it with all my heart. Every chapter. Every emotion. Every late-night thought. This book carries pieces of my real life. And most of those beautiful pieces somehow begin with you. Honestly...I don't know what our future looks like. Life changes. People change. Situations become difficult. Maybe one day we will read these pages together and smile. Maybe life will test us in ways we cannot even imagine yet. But regardless of what happens tomorrow— Nobody can take away the fact that you stood beside me during the lowest phase of my life.

When my mind was tired. When life felt uncertain. When distance became emotionally exhausting. You stayed. And trust me, people underestimate how life-changing that kind of love can be. This book is not just a story. It is proof. Proof that two people still tried despite distance. Despite fear. Despite

overthinking. Despite people constantly judging what they never truly understood. This is our quiet win.

A win over those who judged us before knowing us.

Over those who thought long-distance love never survives.

Over those who waited for us to break apart.

Over those who never wanted Aarav and Maani together.

And maybe they will still judge us after this. But honestly? They were never present during the nights we fixed each other emotionally. They never saw the waiting. The effort. The patience. The silent reassurance. The tears hidden behind normal replies. The comfort we became for each other. Only we know how real this story truly was. And maybe that is enough. So if you are reading this someday, Maani — Please remember one thing forever. No matter where life takes us from here, you will always remain one of the most beautiful chapters of my life. Yes we are Together and we'll always be.

Touchwood!!!!

Yours, Aniket.

A Final Note to the Readers

If you reached this page — Thank you truly. Because somewhere between all these chapters, calls, oceans, overthinking, waiting, screenshots, letters, and late-night conversations...You guys quietly became part of Aarav and Maani's journey too.

Almost Together was never written to look perfect. It was written to feel real. Real love is not always cinematic. Sometimes it exists inside unstable networks.

Inside sleepy calls. Inside unread messages. Inside waiting. Inside emotional breakdowns nobody else sees. And maybe that is why this story matters so much to me personally. Because most of it was not imagined.

It was lived. Every emotion written in these pages came from moments that actually stayed with me long after they ended. The loneliness. The attachment. The fear of losing Maani because of distance.

The comfort of hearing one voice after exhausting days. The happiness hidden inside small things like: "Reached?" "Did you eat?" "Call me when free."

This book is for everyone who has ever loved someone from far away. For everyone who stayed awake waiting for replies. For everyone who stared at old chats during difficult nights. For everyone who found comfort in one specific notification. For everyone who learned that distance does not reduce love— It simply changes the way love survives.

And if even one chapter made you remember someone special...Then maybe this story did its job. Lastly—Thank you for giving your time to Aarav and Maani.

Thank you for understanding them beyond their flaws, arguments, overthinking, and imperfect situations. And thank you for staying till the end of a story that was never about perfect love — Only real love.

The final chapter was totally fictional, we with the characters of Aarav and Maani are still together and we'll always be. The book ended but our story didn't, it's not almost it's always together. Yes we will always together.

With gratitude,

Aniket Gupta & Mathli Sharma

Your Aarav & Maani :)

Almost Together

Always Together

JAI HIND