

Burning Between Two Loves

A Journey of Passion, Choices, and Redemption

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Prologue – Burning Between Two Loves

Love is never simple. Sometimes, it's intoxicating, pulling you in like a tide you can't resist. Other times, it's a fire—burning, consuming, and leaving behind nothing but ashes of what once was.

Sanjeev never imagined he'd find himself at the center of a storm that had no easy way out. It all started with Janki—the woman who once awakened a passion in him so deep, it blurred the lines between right and wrong. Their forbidden moments, their shared secrets, and the undeniable chemistry between them made it impossible for him to let go. But life has a cruel way of forcing choices, and just when he thought he had moved on, fate brought her back into his life.

Then came Anvika—a woman so different, yet so captivating. Unlike Janki, she was untouched by his past. She was fresh, untainted, and completely available. Her warmth and charm started pulling him toward a future that felt less complicated, less sinful. But how could he walk away from a love that once meant everything?

As Sanjeev stands at the crossroads of two burning desires, he knows one thing for certain—no matter which path he chooses, someone will get hurt. And deep down, he wonders... will that someone be himself?

A Story of Passion, Choices, and the Fire That Burns Within...

Burning Between Two Loves is the gripping third installment in *The Forbidden Desire* series—a tale of romance, longing, and the torment of choosing between the past and the future.

Would love let him go? Or would it consume him whole?

Chapter 1 – A Body on Fire

The morning sun streamed through the curtains, casting a dull glow across Sanjeev's bedroom. It was the morning of the next day, but instead of feeling refreshed, his entire body ached as if he had been beaten in his sleep. His limbs felt heavy, his throat was painfully dry, and his skin burned with fever.

He let out a low groan as he tried to move, only to realize how utterly drained he was. Over the past few days, he had been ignoring his health—pushing himself through hectic work sessions, intense workouts, and even partying while running a fever. And yesterday had been the final blow. The exhaustion of running around the hospital, ensuring Subhash's transfer to the ICU, and returning home late had completely drained whatever energy he had left.

Now, his body was demanding repayment.

With great difficulty, Sanjeev forced himself up, rubbing his aching forehead. He had to take some medicine before this fever got any worse. Dragging himself toward the medicine cabinet, he rummaged through the packs of tablets, searching for paracetamol. His fingers finally found a strip, but the moment he turned it over, frustration surged through him.

Expired.

“Just perfect,” he muttered under his breath.

He sat down on the edge of the bed, trying to think. The local chemist, Rakesh, must have opened his shop by now. Being an old friend, he wouldn't mind delivering the medicines home. Sanjeev reached for his phone, ready to call Rakesh, but before he could dial the number, his phone buzzed with an incoming call.

Mr. Gupta.

Sanjeev sighed, already guessing the reason for the call.

“Hello, Mr. Gupta,” he answered, his voice hoarse.

“Sanjeev, good morning! Listen, I was thinking of going to the hospital to check on Subhash. Would you like to come along?”

Sanjeev leaned back against the headboard, shutting his eyes for a moment. “Mr. Gupta, I’d love to, but I’m down with a high fever. I ignored it for too long, and now it’s hitting me hard. I was just about to call the chemist for some medicine.”

“Oh no,” Mr. Gupta said, his tone laced with concern. “You’ve been running around too much these past few days. No wonder you’re unwell.”

“I know,” Sanjeev admitted. “But I’ll take some meds, rest for a while, and then I’ll head to the hospital in the afternoon once the fever settles.”

“That’s fine,” Mr. Gupta said. “Subhash’s condition was already so bad last night. I just hope the ICU team is able to stabilize him. I’ll get an update and let you know.”

“Yes, please do. I’ll come as soon as I can.”

“By the way,” Sanjeev added, “your car’s battery is dead. You can take my car, I’m not driving these days as I want my arm to heal quickly.”

“Oh no, no need,” Mr. Gupta chuckled. “The battery was replaced early this morning. Yusuf, the local mechanic, handled it. He’s a good guy, always helps us out at odd hours.”

“Yusuf is a lifesaver,” Sanjeev agreed. “He once came to my rescue in the middle of the night when my car broke down near the market.”

“Yeah, he’s a hardworking fellow,” Mr. Gupta said. “Anyway, you get some rest. I’ll update you about Subhash once I reach the hospital.”

“Thanks, Mr. Gupta. Take care.”

As the call ended, Sanjeev let out a deep breath and placed the phone back on the nightstand. He still needed to call Rakesh for the medicines, but first, he needed a moment to gather enough energy just to lift the phone again.

It was just the beginning of the day, and he already felt completely exhausted.

Sanjeev let out a deep breath and turned onto his side, reaching for his phone once again. His fingers felt sluggish as he scrolled through his contacts until he found **Rakesh Chemist** and pressed the call button.

The phone rang twice before a familiar, cheerful voice answered.

“Arre, Sanjeev bhai! Good morning! What happened? You sound terrible.”

Sanjeev sighed, his throat scratchy. **“Not a good morning for me, Rakesh. Fever’s knocked me out. I checked my medicine cabinet, and the paracetamol I had was expired. Can you send me a strip?”**

“Of course, bhai! I’ll have someone deliver it in ten minutes.”

Sanjeev closed his eyes, relieved. **“Thanks, man. I owe you.”**

“Owe me? Please, Sanjeev bhai. You’re my friend, not a customer. Just rest, and don’t worry about anything.”

Sanjeev managed a weak chuckle. **“I’ll try.”**

After ending the call, he let the phone slip from his hand onto the pillow beside him. His body felt drained, every muscle heavy with exhaustion. But despite the fever, despite the fatigue, one craving gnawed at him—**coffee.**

His mind wandered to the thought of a steaming hot cup of black coffee, the rich aroma filling the room, the first bitter sip waking up his senses. That was all he needed right now. But as much as he longed for it, the reality was cruel—**he simply didn’t have the energy to get up and make it.**

The thought frustrated him. He had never been the kind of man who let illness slow him down. Even when sick, he had always powered through—whether it was work, workouts, or even a late-night party. But today, his body had given up on him.

He shut his eyes, hoping that maybe if he rested a little longer, he’d gather the strength to get up and make his coffee.

Ding-dong!

The sudden chime of the doorbell startled him. His brows furrowed. **That was fast.** Had Rakesh’s helper really arrived in just a few minutes?

Summoning what little energy he had, Sanjeev forced himself to sit up and slowly made his way to the door. When he opened it, he was **shocked** to see **Rakesh himself** standing there, holding a small paper bag of medicines.

“Rakesh? You?” Sanjeev blinked in surprise.

His friend smiled. **“Haan bhai, my helper didn’t show up today. And when I heard your voice on the phone, I could tell you were really sick. So, I thought, why not bring the medicine myself?”**

Sanjeev was touched by the gesture. **“That’s really thoughtful of you. Come in, at least sit for a bit.”**

But Rakesh shook his head. **“I’d love to, but I can’t. The shop is open, and there’s no one else to handle it.”**

Sanjeev nodded in understanding. **“Still, thanks, yaar. This means a lot.”**

Rakesh grinned. **“You can thank me by getting better soon.”**

He handed over the medicines, patted Sanjeev’s shoulder lightly, and turned to leave. Sanjeev watched as his friend walked away, feeling a small warmth in his heart despite the fever burning through him.

Sanjeev took the medicine strip in his hand and tore it open with his fingers. His throat was already parched, and the thought of swallowing the tablet without water made him wince. **Coffee.** If he was going to take the medicine, he might as well have something warm to go with it.

Slowly, he dragged himself, his body protesting with every step. **Just get to the kitchen. Make the coffee. Take the medicine. Then you can sleep.** He kept repeating this to himself like a mantra.

As he reached the kitchen, he leaned against the counter for support, his head spinning. His eyes fell on the coffee jar, sitting untouched beside the electric kettle. **Just a few more steps,** he told himself.

He opened the kettle's lid, his fingers trembling slightly as he filled it with water. But before he could even press the button to switch it on, his vision blurred for a moment. A wave of dizziness hit him, making him grip the counter for support. His **legs felt like lead**, and his body screamed at him to stop.

I can't.

Sighing in frustration, he reached for a glass, filled it with tap water, and tossed the pill into his mouth. With one quick gulp, he swallowed it down, his throat burning slightly as the tablet went down. He took another sip of water, trying to shake off the exhaustion, but his body wasn't cooperating.

Screw the coffee. I need to lie down.

Dragging himself back to the bedroom, he practically **collapsed** onto the bed. His head sank into the pillow, and he could already feel his body surrendering to fatigue. But before closing his eyes, he knew there was **one last thing to do**.

He grabbed his phone, opened the office chat, and quickly typed:

“Not coming in today. Down with fever.”

He hit send, not bothering to check for typos. Within seconds, his phone buzzed with a reply. He glanced at the notification but didn't even bother to open it. Whatever it was, it could wait.

Right now, nothing mattered except sleep. As he shut his eyes, the fever burning through his body made everything feel distant, almost dreamlike. His mind drifted between exhaustion and vague thoughts—**Subhash in the ICU, Janki's worried face, Anvika's soft voice in their last chat**.

And then, just like that, sleep pulled him under.

Chapter 2 – Fever, Promises, and Unspoken Emotions

Sanjeev was in a deep, fever-induced sleep. The paracetamol had given him some relief, but exhaustion had pulled him under harder than he had expected. In his mind, he had thought he would wake up in a few hours, feel better, and make it to the hospital at **2 PM**—the time he had promised Anvika for his dressing.

But sleep had **claimed him completely**. His body, drained from days of overexertion, had surrendered without resistance.

Then, **his phone rang**.

A shrill vibration against the wooden bedside table jolted him out of his heavy slumber. His eyes fluttered open, but his limbs felt like they were made of stone. The screen of his phone glowed brightly, flashing **Anvika's name**.

His **heart skipped a beat**.

Shit!

It was **already 2 PM**.

He fumbled, nearly dropping the phone in his haste, and finally pressed the answer button.

The Call with Anvika

“Hello?” His voice was hoarse, still thick with sleep.

“Sanjeev?” Anvika’s voice came from the other end, calm but laced with expectation. **“I just got off my shift. I’m waiting for you. You remember, right?”**

He squeezed his eyes shut and ran a hand over his face. **Of course, she’s waiting.**

“Uh... yeah, Anvika, I—” He coughed, struggling to find words. **“I overslept. Not feeling great. But I’ll be there in 15-20 minutes.”**

There was a pause. Then, her tone turned playful but slightly scolding. **“Not good, Mr. Sanjeev. You make a friend wait? That too when I just finished a long shift?”**

He forced a small chuckle. **“I promise I’ll make it up to you. Just give me a few minutes.”**

“Hmm... Fine. But hurry up. I don’t like waiting,” she nagged lightly.

Sanjeev pushed himself up, rubbing his face to shake off the drowsiness.

“I’ll be there soon, I swear,” he said hurriedly.

“You better,” she said with a slight laugh before hanging up.

Rushing to Get Ready

Sanjeev **threw his phone on the bed** and quickly got to his feet, his legs feeling weak beneath him. His body **still burned with fever**, but there was no time to dwell on it.

In a swift motion, he grabbed a **towel**, ran to the sink, and splashed **cold water** onto his face. It sent a brief shock through his system, waking him up more.

“**Damn it,**” he muttered, wiping his face with the towel.

His hair was a mess. He ran his fingers through it, then **wet his hands** and quickly flattened it into place. It was a trick he had mastered **after many hangovers**—making himself look somewhat presentable in **under a minute**.

No time for coffee. No time for breakfast.

He needed to get to the hospital.

Calling for a Tax

Instead of booking a cab through an app, Sanjeev dialed the number for the **local taxi stand**.

The phone rang twice before it was answered by a **booming voice**.

“**Haanji, kaun bol raha hai?**” came the thick Punjabi accent of **Sardarji**, the taxi stand owner.

“**Uncleji, it’s Sanjeev,**” he said quickly. “**I need a taxi to the hospital right away.**”

There was a pause. Then came the **scolding**.

“**Oye, Sanjeev! Tu sirf tab yaad karta hai jab emergency hoti hai! Hamesha app waali gaadiyaan book karta hai, haina?**”

Sanjeev groaned internally. He didn't have time for this.

“Uncleji, bas aaj emergency hai. Please bhej do na ek taxi!” he pleaded.

Sardarji let out a loud, exaggerated sigh. **“Haan, theek hai. 2 minute ruk. Driver bhej raha hoon.”**

Sanjeev **muttered a quick thank you** and hung up.

Reaching the Hospital

The **taxi screeched to a halt** outside the hospital entrance. Sanjeev **paid the driver** and rushed inside.

As soon as he entered, his eyes **immediately fell on Anvika**.

She had **already changed out of her uniform**, now wearing a simple yet **elegant light blue kurti with white leggings**. The soft fabric flowed around her as she stood near the dressing counter, waiting for him.

She looked **stunning**—more beautiful than he had imagined her outside of work.

But Sanjeev **wasn't the only one looking**.

The **staff nurses sitting behind the counter** had their eyes locked onto them, exchanging **curious glances**. They knew Sanjeev could have gotten his dressing done by any of them. **So why was Anvika waiting for him?**

Ignoring their stares, Sanjeev walked up to her.

“You’re late,” she said, raising an eyebrow.

“I know, I know,” he sighed. **“I overslept. Sorry.”**

She crossed her arms. **“Hmm... fine. Sit down.”**

Anvika Realizes He Has a Fever

As Anvika began **removing his old dressing**, her fingers brushed against his skin. **She froze.**

Her eyes **snapped up to his face.**

“Sanjeev... you’re burning with fever.”

He scoffed. **“It’s nothing. Just mild fever.”**

She **ignored him**, stood up, and walked over to the locker room. Within seconds, she returned with **a tablet and a glass of water.**

“Take this.”

He frowned and nagged her. **“No paracetamol. I read on Google that it’s harmful to the liver.”**

Anvika **rolled her eyes dramatically**. “**Oh, really? And the whiskey you drink? That’s good for your liver?**”

He smirked. “**Whiskey is medicine. You wouldn’t understand.**”

She **shook her head**, annoyed but amused. “**Just take the damn medicine, Sanjeev.**”

After a little more playful **nagging**, he finally **popped the tablet into his mouth** and drank the water.

She then carefully **re-dressed his wound**, her fingers moving with gentle precision.

Once she was done, she stood up and looked at him seriously.

“**You need rest. My apartment is just nearby. You’re not going home in this condition.**”

Sanjeev started to protest. “**Anvika, I can manage—**”

She cut him off. “**No arguments. Come with me.**”

With a **firm expression**, she led the way out of the hospital.

As they walked toward her apartment, **the hospital staff exchanged curious glances**. The **nurses at the dressing counter watched them leave together**, and some of Anvika’s neighbors looked at her questioningly as she led Sanjeev inside.

But she **ignored them all**. Right now, Sanjeev’s health was more important.

Anvika's Apartment

She **unlocked the door**, revealing a **small yet beautifully maintained space**.

The **walls were painted in soft cream**, adorned with a few paintings and fairy lights. The **room smelled of lavender**, and everything was neatly arranged—the perfect contrast to Sanjeev's own messy apartment.

“Lie down,” she ordered.

Sanjeev **removed his shoes** and lay down.

As he settled in, he **removed his old wristwatch**—a **vintage NATO-strap watch**, the kind few modern men wore anymore.

Then, from his pocket, he pulled out **a pack of cigarettes and a lighter**, placing them beside the bed.

Anvika **raised an eyebrow**. **“You're burning with fever, but you still carry cigarettes?”**

Sanjeev smirked. **“It's my oxygen.”**

She **shook her head**, exasperated. **“You're impossible.”**

Chapter 3: A Sip of Care, A Touch of Warmth

Sanjeev lay sprawled on Anvika's bed, his body still aching from the fever. His head felt heavy, and though the paracetamol had dulled the burning sensation, he still felt weak. His mind was foggy, but one thing was clear—he **needed coffee**.

As if reading his thoughts, Anvika entered the room with a steaming cup in her hand. But instead of the rich aroma of coffee, **a sharp, spicy scent filled his nostrils**.

Sanjeev frowned. "What is this?" He lifted his head slightly, already suspicious.

"**Ginger tea**," Anvika announced, setting the cup down on the bedside table.

Sanjeev groaned. "No. No way. I want coffee, not some kadha."

Anvika placed a hand on her hip and arched an eyebrow. "Coffee won't help your fever, Mr. Stubborn. Ginger tea will."

"But I don't like it." He scrunched his nose like a petulant child.

"Too bad," she said, sitting beside him on the bed. "You have two options—either drink this tea quietly or I'll make you drink it myself."

Sanjeev smirked despite his fatigue. "That doesn't sound too bad. Maybe I should pretend I can't hold the cup so you have to—"

Anvika rolled her eyes. "Oh, shut up and drink it." She shoved the cup into his hands.

With a resigned sigh, Sanjeev took a cautious sip, only to **grimace instantly**. “Ugh! This is so strong! Did you boil ginger for an hour or what?”

“That’s the point,” Anvika said, unfazed. “It will clear your throat and make you feel better.”

Sanjeev took another sip and winced. “Yeah, by burning a hole in my stomach.”

Anvika chuckled. “Oh, stop being dramatic. Just finish it.”

With a grumpy look, Sanjeev forced himself to gulp it down, coughing slightly at the spice. Anvika watched with amusement, her eyes twinkling. She enjoyed nagging him—it felt natural, as if she had always done it.

Once he placed the empty cup back on the table, she took it away and returned, sitting beside him again. Her expression softened as she **studied his face**, noticing the fatigue in his eyes.

“How are you feeling now?” she asked, her voice gentler.

Sanjeev sighed. “Better, I guess. But I swear, if I die from drinking that poison you call tea, my ghost will haunt you.”

Anvika laughed, shaking her head. “If you have enough energy to joke, then I guess you’ll live.”

Sanjeev smiled faintly. His eyelids felt heavy now. The warmth of the tea, the fever medicine, and Anvika’s presence made him feel **drowsy, yet strangely comforted**.

As sleep started to take over, he barely felt it when Anvika pulled a **soft blanket** over him. It smelled like **lavender and something uniquely her**.

“Rest,” she murmured, adjusting the blanket gently. “You need it.”

She was about to leave when suddenly, **his fingers closed around her wrist.**

Anvika **froze.**

Sanjeev, half-asleep, barely realized what he was doing. His grip wasn’t tight—just warm and lingering, as if **he didn’t want her to leave.**

Anvika swallowed, feeling **a strange warmth in her chest.** She glanced at his face—his eyes were closed, his breathing steady, but his hold on her was firm enough to make her hesitate.

For a moment, she just stood there, caught in a strange feeling she couldn’t quite name.

Then, with a soft sigh, she gently pried his fingers away, letting them **rest lightly on the bed.**

She took a step back, looking at him for a few seconds longer. A small smile tugged at her lips.

“Idiot,” she whispered, before quietly leaving the room.

As Anvika stepped out of the room, she let out a soft sigh, brushing her fingers through her hair. The apartment was quiet except for the occasional creak of furniture settling. She stretched her arms and walked toward the window to let in some fresh air.

But the moment she **pushed aside the curtain,** her breath hitched.

A figure stood outside her house, near a parked **motorcycle**. His posture was casual, yet something about him **felt off**—as if he wasn't just passing by, but watching.

Her heart pounded as she narrowed her eyes, trying to make out his face. The sunlight filtered through the sparse trees lining the street, casting shifting shadows over him, making his expression **hard to read**. But one thing was clear—he was **the same man** she had noticed in the hospital before, **staring at her and Sanjeev**.

A sudden **chill** crawled up her spine despite the warm afternoon air.

Who was he? And why was he here?

For a moment, she stood frozen, her fingers clutching the curtain tightly. The man didn't move, didn't even pretend to be looking elsewhere. He just stood there, **his gaze fixed in her direction**, as if **waiting for something**.

Anvika swallowed hard. She wasn't the kind of person to be easily frightened, but this was unsettling. Her mind raced through possibilities. **A coincidence? A patient's relative? Someone from Sanjeev's past?**

No. This didn't feel random.

Determined to find out, she made up her mind. She **turned away from the window** and hurried toward the door. But just as she reached for the handle—

The sharp sound of an engine roaring to life cut through the quiet street.

She **rushed outside**, but the man had already swung his leg over the bike. **With a powerful kick-start, he sped off, his tires kicking up a small cloud of dust from the dry road.**

By the time Anvika stepped onto the porch, all she could see was **the faint blur of his disappearing figure, weaving through the narrow street.**

She stood there for a moment, feeling her **pulse hammering against her ribs.** The road, which had just felt so charged with tension, now seemed **too empty, too normal—as if nothing had happened.** But something **had** happened.

And now, she had more questions than answers.

Anvika took a deep breath, trying to calm the strange unease curling in her stomach. **She had met Sanjeev only a few times**—so why did it feel like she was being watched because of him?

She instinctively thought of asking Sanjeev, but when she peeked into the bedroom, he was still resting. His face, though slightly flushed from fever, was peaceful. **He had already been through a lot**—there was no point in worrying him when she herself had no idea what was going on.

With a sigh, she walked back to the drawing room and **picked up the novel she had been trying to read** earlier. But no matter how much she tried to focus on the words, her thoughts **kept drifting back** to the man.

Who was he? And what did he want?

Hours Later...

Anvika finally gave up on the novel and decided to check on Sanjeev. She walked quietly into the room, expecting to find him still deep in sleep.

Instead, she found him **lying on his back, staring at his phone screen.**

Her eyebrows furrowed. “Seriously?” she said, stepping closer. “Instead of resting, you’re chatting on the phone?”

Sanjeev barely glanced at her, **his fingers moving swiftly over the screen**. “This is an important chat from the office,” he muttered.

Anvika crossed her arms, watching him with **a mixture of concern and irritation**. His fever hadn’t even fully settled, and here he was, working again. Typical.

But right now, **her mind was occupied with something else**—something that had nothing to do with his fever.

Because the shadow of **the mysterious man outside her house** still lingered in her thoughts.

Sanjeev’s Chat – The Big Meeting

Sanjeev’s fingers moved swiftly over the phone screen, **his fever momentarily forgotten** as he scrolled through the office group chat. The conversation was buzzing with excitement.

[Corporate Strategy Team – Office Group Chat]

Amit Sharma: *Guys, just got word from Mrs. Khanna. Big meeting tomorrow at 11 AM. She wants to discuss an important new project!*

Priya Mehta: *Oh wow! Any hints on what it’s about?*

Rohit Khanna: *I heard it’s something major. Expansion, maybe?*

Meenal Joshi: *So... basically another ‘we need new ideas’ meeting where we end up doing all the work?*

Amit Sharma: *Nope. This time, she's calling in senior board members too. We need to be on our A-game.*

Rohit Khanna: *Wait, is Sanjeev even coming? I heard he's down with fever.*

Priya Mehta: *Oh yeah, Sanjeev, are you alive? Or should we send a rescue team?*

Meenal Joshi: *We can tell Mrs. Khanna that Sanjeev won't be attending. I'm sure she'll understand.*

Sanjeev, who had been silently reading the messages, suddenly typed in quickly, refusing to be left out.

Sanjeev Khurana: *I have fever, not cancer. I'll be there 100%.*

A flood of laughing emojis and reactions popped up in the chat.

Amit Sharma: *And that's why you're the boss's favorite.*

Priya Mehta: *But seriously, don't show up looking like a zombie. We don't need Mrs. Khanna thinking we overwork our employees.*

Rohit Khanna: *Agreed! Just don't bring your germs along.*

Meenal Joshi: *If you feel too unwell, don't push yourself, okay? No one wants you fainting in the conference room.*

Sanjeev Khurana: *Relax, people. I'll pop a pill, wear a suit, and be there looking as sharp as ever.*

Amit Sharma: *That's the Sanjeev we know! Alright, see you all tomorrow at 11. Let's get ready for whatever Mrs. Khanna has in store.*

As the chat settled down, Sanjeev **leaned back against the pillow, rubbing his forehead.** His body was still aching, but he felt a rush of energy at the thought of the meeting.

It wasn't just about work—it was about **proving to himself that he was still in control, still the same Sanjeev who could handle anything.**

Anvika's Concern and Sanjeev's Stubbornness

As Sanjeev put his phone aside, still smirking at the chat, he noticed Anvika standing near the bed, arms crossed, looking at him intently. There was something in her eyes—concern mixed with hesitation.

"What?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

Anvika hesitated for a moment, then took a deep breath. **"There's something I need to tell you."**

Sanjeev sat up slightly, resting his back against the pillow. **"Go on."**

She walked closer and sat at the edge of the bed. **"That man..."** she began. **"The one standing outside my house. I've seen him before."**

Sanjeev narrowed his eyes. **"Where?"**

“At the hospital. The last time we met there, he was watching us.” She paused. **“I thought maybe I was overthinking it, but now he was here, near my house. And the moment I stepped outside, he disappeared.”**

Sanjeev leaned his head back and let out a small laugh. **“Oh, come on, Anvika. That must be one of the detectives my company hires.”**

Anvika blinked. **“Detectives?”**

Sanjeev smirked. **“Yeah. Our company keeps an eye on its young employees, especially the promising ones like me.”** He winked. **“They don’t want us falling into a honey trap, you see.”**

Anvika narrowed her eyes and threw a cushion at him. **“Honey trap my foot! So, what are you trying to say? That I am a ‘honey trap’?”**

Sanjeev caught the cushion with a grin. **“I never said that. But if you are, you’re the sweetest trap I’ve ever fallen into.”**

Anvika rolled her eyes but couldn’t stop the small smile from creeping onto her face. **“You’re impossible.”**

Sanjeev chuckled. **“But seriously, don’t worry. That guy could be anyone—maybe just a random onlooker.”**

She didn’t look convinced, but she let out a sigh. **“Fine. But if I see him again, I’m going to find out who he is.”**

Sanjeev smirked. **“And what will you do? Interrogate him?”**

Anvika crossed her arms. **“If I have to.”**

Sanjeev chuckled again, but then suddenly his expression changed. His eyes widened as if he had just realized something important.

“Damn.” He sat up straighter. **“I haven’t even asked about Subhash’s health.”**

Anvika’s eyes softened. **“Sanjeev…”**

“I need to go to the ICU and check on him.” He pushed the blanket off and swung his legs down, trying to get up.

Anvika immediately placed a firm hand on his shoulder. **“No, you’re not.”**

Sanjeev looked at her, surprised. **“Anvika, I can’t just sit here. I need to see how he’s doing.”**

She shook her head. **“You can simply ask on a phone call. You’re in no condition to go anywhere.”**

Sanjeev sighed, rubbing his forehead. **“I just want to see him for myself.”**

“You can’t even walk straight. You have such high fever, and you’re thinking of running to the hospital?” She crossed her arms. **“You should rest. In fact, you should miss office for the next few days.”**

Sanjeev looked at her as if she had said something absurd. **“Miss office? No way. I have an important meeting tomorrow at 11 AM.”**

Anvika threw her hands in the air. **“You are absolutely impossible! You’re burning with fever, and instead of resting, you’re planning to go to work?”**

Sanjeev sighed again, as if trying to explain to a stubborn child. **“It’s an important meeting, Anvika. I can’t just skip it.”**

Anvika clenched her jaw. **“Fine. But you’re not going anywhere today. No hospital visit, no rushing back home. You’re staying here and resting.”**

Sanjeev opened his mouth to argue, but before he could say anything, **Anvika suddenly stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him.**

Sanjeev stiffened for a moment, caught off guard. He could feel the warmth of her body against his, the steady rise and fall of her breath. Her embrace was firm, yet filled with care. It wasn’t romantic—it was something deeper. A silent plea for him to take care of himself.

“Please,” she murmured softly. **“Just rest.”**

For the first time in a long while, Sanjeev felt... safe. Like someone genuinely cared beyond casual concern. His usual instinct was to make a joke, to lighten the moment, but this time, he didn’t.

Slowly, his hand came up and rested on her back. **“Alright,”** he muttered, his voice quieter than before. **“I’ll stay.”**

Anvika pulled back slightly and looked at him, her eyes searching his. **“Good.”**

Sanjeev sighed, leaning back into the pillow as she tucked the blanket around him again.

For the first time that day, **he allowed himself to truly rest.**

Chat Between Sanjeev and His Boss, Mrs. Khanna

Mrs. Khanna [7:45 PM]:

Sanjeev, I heard from the team that you're running a high fever. There's no need for you to attend tomorrow's meeting. It's just a preliminary discussion for the new project. Take rest.

Sanjeev [7:46 PM]:

Appreciate your concern, ma'am. But I'm not dying. It's just a fever. I'll be there at 11 AM sharp.

Mrs. Khanna [7:48 PM]:

Sanjeev, don't be stubborn. You need to recover properly. This project discussion isn't urgent for you. The others will take notes, and I'll brief you later.

Sanjeev [7:49 PM]:

Ma'am, with all due respect, if the project is important enough for you to hold a meeting, it's important enough for me to be there. I'm not the kind to sit at home and sip soup while others make decisions.

Mrs. Khanna [7:50 PM]:

Your dedication is commendable, but don't overdo it. I don't want you fainting in the boardroom.

Sanjeev [7:51 PM]:

Ma'am, I've survived working 16-hour shifts, unreasonable deadlines, and the Mumbai local trains during peak hours. I think I can handle a 60-minute meeting with a little fever.

Mrs. Khanna [7:52 PM]:

Unbelievable. Fine, if you're so determined, come. But if you feel worse, you're going straight back home. No arguments.

Sanjeev [7:53 PM]:

Agreed. And thank you for the concern. But before I rest, I have to ask—who hires these detectives of yours? They're so bad at their job that even a staff nurse figured out I was being followed. Maybe it's time for a new agency?

Mrs. Khanna [7:55 PM]:

Oh, is that so? I'll be sure to pass on your *expert* feedback to the agency. But listen carefully, Sanjeev—**your job is to work on company projects, not to assess the competency of corporate intelligence. So focus on your work and let the professionals handle theirs. Understood?**

Sanjeev [7:56 PM]:

Oof. Understood, boss.

Mrs. Khanna [7:57 PM]:

Good. Now get some rest. See you tomorrow.

Sanjeev [7:58 PM]:

Roger that, ma'am. Signing off.

A Warm Moment Over Soup

As Sanjeev was about to put his phone aside after his chat with Mrs. Khanna, Anvika walked into the room carrying a steaming bowl of soup. The rich aroma of ginger, garlic, and black pepper filled the air. She placed it on the side table and crossed her arms, looking at him with narrowed eyes.

“I knew it,” she said, shaking her head. **“You were chatting instead of resting, weren’t you?”**

Sanjeev smirked, stretching lazily on the bed. **“Correction—I was handling important office business.”**

Anvika rolled her eyes. **“Oh really? And did this important office business include you typing sarcastic replies to your boss?”**

Sanjeev chuckled. **“You know me well.”** Then, noticing the soup, he frowned. **“But what’s this? I never asked for soup.”**

Anvika sighed, picking up the bowl and thrusting it toward him. **“It’s not about what you asked for. It’s about what you need. Now, drink up.”**

Sanjeev made a face. **“Can’t I have coffee instead?”**

Anvika placed her hands on her hips. **“Oh yes, of course! And while we’re at it, let’s get you a cigarette and some whiskey too! Because who needs recovery, right?”**

Sanjeev sighed in defeat. **“Okay, okay. No need for sarcasm.”**

He took the bowl from her hands but hesitated, stirring the soup lazily with the spoon. **“You didn’t put too much ginger, did you? I hate when it tastes like a medicine shop.”**

Anvika smirked, sitting beside him on the bed. **“It’s my secret recipe. It will make you feel better instantly.”**

Sanjeev took a reluctant sip, his face twisting at the strong taste. **“Ugh. This tastes like boiled herbs!”**

Anvika laughed. **“Oh, stop being dramatic! It’s good for you.”**

Sanjeev sighed again, this time with a small smile. **“You won’t stop nagging me unless I finish this, will you?”**

“Nope,” she said, popping the ‘p’ playfully.

With no other choice, Sanjeev continued sipping the soup while Anvika watched him with satisfaction.

The room fell into a comfortable silence, the only sound being the occasional clinking of the spoon against the bowl. Sanjeev glanced at Anvika, who was sitting cross-legged beside him, her face relaxed, her long hair cascading over her shoulder. The light from the bedside lamp gave her a soft glow, making her look almost ethereal.

Sanjeev felt an odd warmth spreading through him, and for the first time in days, it wasn’t because of his fever.

“You know,” he said, setting the bowl down after finishing the last sip, **“I don’t usually like soup, but this one wasn’t bad.”**

Anvika raised an eyebrow. **“Oh? Is that your way of saying thank you?”**

Sanjeev smirked. **“It’s my way of saying... don’t get used to this. Next time, I’m having coffee.”**

Anvika playfully nudged his shoulder. **“Next time? So you’re already planning to fall sick again?”**

Sanjeev chuckled. **“Only if it means getting this kind of attention.”**

Anvika shook her head, but a small, fond smile played on her lips.

For a long moment, they just sat there—shoulder to shoulder, lost in the quiet comfort of each other’s presence. Neither of them spoke, but the air between them was filled with an unspoken understanding, a growing closeness that neither could deny.

And for the first time in a long while, Sanjeev didn’t mind being sick.

Chapter 4: A Night of Care and Companionship

As they sat together in comfortable silence, the sudden shrill whistle of the pressure cooker pierced through the quiet of the night. Anvika instinctively got up, brushing her hair back, and walked toward the kitchen.

Sanjeev, leaning against the headboard, called after her, “What’s cooking, chef?”

Anvika turned her head slightly and smiled. “Khichdi.”

Sanjeev’s expression immediately changed, his eyebrows shooting up in horror. “Wait... what?” He sat up straighter, as if he had just heard a life-threatening announcement.

She glanced back at him, rolling her eyes. “Yes, khichdi. You have fever, and you need something light and easy to digest.”

Sanjeev shook his head dramatically, already grabbing his phone. “No, no, no. That’s prisoner food. I am not eating that! I’m ordering a masala dosa right now.”

Anvika narrowed her eyes at him as she stood at the kitchen door, her arms crossed. “Oh really? You think you’re some kind of food critic now?”

“Not a critic, just a guy with good taste.” He grinned, already scrolling through a food delivery app. “Here, see this. Crispy masala dosa, loaded with butter, coconut chutney, and sambar...” he said, waving the phone at her temptingly.

Anvika scoffed. “You have a fever, and you think greasy restaurant food is the cure?”

“Of course! Oil kills bacteria. Haven’t you heard that before?” he smirked.

She let out an exaggerated sigh, stepping toward him. “And here I thought you were an intelligent man.”

He smirked playfully. “Intelligent men don’t eat khichdi.”

Anvika gave him a light smack on his shoulder, making him chuckle. “You are impossible, Sanjeev!”

He laughed, looking back at his phone. “Okay, I’ll make a deal with you. I’ll eat a little bit of your sad, bland khichdi—”

“It’s not bland,” she interjected, hands on her hips.

“Fine, *supposedly* not bland khichdi,” he corrected with a smirk. “But only if I get to eat masala dosa after that.”

Anvika raised an eyebrow. “You’ll actually eat the khichdi without making faces?”

Sanjeev put a hand on his chest, acting innocent. “I never make faces.”

Anvika chuckled. “Liar.”

After a bit more playful bickering, they finally reached a consensus—Sanjeev would first eat a small bowl of khichdi, and then he could have his beloved masala dosa.

A few minutes later, Anvika walked into the room with a steaming bowl of khichdi, a faint hint of ghee floating in the air. She sat beside Sanjeev, handing him the bowl with an expectant look.

He took it reluctantly, eyeing it with suspicion. “This better not taste like baby food.”

Anvika smirked. “Just eat.”

Sanjeev took a cautious spoonful and chewed slowly, his expression unreadable.

“Well?” she asked, watching him closely.

He swallowed, looked at her, and deadpanned, “Still tastes like prisoner food.”

Anvika gasped and smacked his arm. “Sanjeev!”

He laughed, taking another bite. “Okay, fine. It’s *slightly* better than I expected.”

She smiled, watching him eat. “See? I told you. And it’s good for your fever.”

He nodded begrudgingly, finishing the small bowl just as the doorbell rang.

“The dosa is here!” Sanjeev announced excitedly, getting up.

Anvika rolled her eyes. “You look more excited for this dosa than you’ve ever looked for me.”

Sanjeev smirked as he walked to the door. “That’s because dosa never yells at me.”

She shook her head, smiling.

Sanjeev opened the door, took the package from the delivery boy, and slipped him a generous tip. The boy's eyes widened in gratitude. "Sir, thank you so much!"

Sanjeev waved him off. "Good food deserves good tipping, my friend."

As he walked back inside, Anvika shook her head. "You tip the delivery boy like he's your long-lost brother but argue with me over a bowl of khichdi?"

Sanjeev grinned. "Priorities, Anvi. Priorities."

They sat together on the bed, opening the warm, fragrant package. The crisp dosa was golden brown, the chutneys placed neatly in small containers.

As Sanjeev took the first bite, he closed his eyes dramatically. "Mmm... this is heaven."

Anvika watched him, shaking her head with amusement. "You're ridiculous."

He grinned and held up a bite-sized piece toward her. "Here, taste some."

She hesitated. "I already ate."

Sanjeev pouted. "Come on. It's called sharing."

Rolling her eyes, she leaned in and took the bite, her lips brushing against his fingers ever so slightly. Their eyes met for a moment, a quiet understanding passing between them.

She quickly looked away. “It’s good,” she mumbled.

Sanjeev smirked. “Told you.”

They continued eating, occasionally exchanging playful remarks, their conversation filled with warmth and laughter. It wasn’t just about the dosa or the khichdi—it was about the ease they felt around each other, the comfort of being together, and the growing realization that their connection was becoming something deeper.

As the night grew quieter, Anvika glanced at him and said softly, “You should sleep now. You need rest.”

Sanjeev nodded, stretching. “Yeah, yeah. Doctor’s orders, I suppose?”

She smiled. “Exactly.”

He lay back against the pillows, watching her as she cleared the plates. He didn’t say it, but deep down, he felt something unfamiliar—something warm, something safe.

As she turned off the main light and left only the bedside lamp glowing, he closed his eyes, feeling a strange sense of peace.

For the first time in a long time, he didn’t mind being taken care of.

As the night deepened, the warmth of their shared meal lingered in the air. Sanjeev stretched lazily, leaning back against the pillows, his fever making him feel drowsy but not entirely ready to sleep yet. Anvika, on the other hand, busied herself with tidying up the dishes, her eyes occasionally flickering toward him to ensure he wasn’t secretly plotting to sneak out of bed again.

She walked back to the room with a glass of water and a small strip of medicines in her hand. “Alright, time for your night dose,” she announced, standing beside the bed.

Sanjeev groaned dramatically. “Again? You already tortured me with khichdi. Isn’t that enough for one night?”

Anvika narrowed her eyes at him. “You want to wake up tomorrow feeling worse?”

He sighed, taking the pills from her hand and popping them into his mouth with a sip of water. He made a face. “Ugh, they taste horrible.”

She chuckled. “It’s medicine, not candy.”

Sanjeev set the glass aside and lay down, resting his head against the soft pillow. He turned to look at her, one eyebrow raised. “So... you’re staying here tonight?”

Anvika hesitated for a second, then nodded. “Of course. I need to make sure you don’t do anything reckless in the middle of the night.”

He smirked. “Like what? Go out and run a marathon?”

She rolled her eyes and pulled the blanket over him. “With your level of stubbornness, I wouldn’t be surprised.”

Sanjeev watched as she turned off the bedside lamp, leaving only a dim glow from the streetlights outside filtering through the curtains. She lay down beside him, a comfortable space between them, her head resting on the pillow as she let out a quiet sigh.

For a while, there was silence, just the soft hum of the ceiling fan and the occasional sound of distant traffic.

Sanjeev closed his eyes, but a few moments later, he felt a gentle touch on his forehead. He peeked through one eye and saw Anvika leaning toward him, checking his temperature with the back of her hand.

“You’re still warm,” she murmured.

“Well, I *am* hot,” he said with a smirk, his voice low and teasing.

Anvika sighed, shaking her head, but a smile tugged at her lips. “Even with a fever, you can’t stop being annoying.”

He chuckled softly, shifting slightly to get more comfortable. “It’s a special talent.”

She checked his forehead again after a while, her touch feather-light, as if afraid of disturbing him. Even in the dim light, Sanjeev could see the concern etched on her face.

“You should sleep,” he mumbled.

“I will,” she said, but she didn’t move just yet. She brushed a few strands of hair away from his forehead, her fingers cool against his heated skin.

Sanjeev felt something tighten in his chest—an unfamiliar warmth, a sense of being cared for in a way he hadn’t experienced in a long time. He didn’t say anything, just let the moment settle between them.

Slowly, exhaustion took over, and his eyelids grew heavier. Just before drifting off, he felt her check his temperature one last time, her touch comforting, reassuring.

And for the first time in years, as the fever ebbed and the night wrapped around them, Sanjeev slept peacefully, knowing that when he woke up, she would still be there.

Chapter 5: Fever, Fatigue and Unspoken Emotions

The soft chime of Sanjeev's mobile alarm broke the quiet of the early morning. He groaned, reaching out with one hand to silence the irritating sound. His head still felt slightly heavy, but the fever had subsided considerably. Blinking against the morning light that filtered through the curtains, he sat up slowly, stretching his sore limbs.

As he swung his legs over the bed, ready to leave, Anvika stirred beside him. "Where do you think you're going?" she asked, her voice still laced with sleep.

Sanjeev ran a hand through his messy hair. "Home. I need to change and get ready for my meeting. I can't walk into the office looking like a homeless man."

Anvika narrowed her eyes at him. "Excuse me? You *were* homeless last night, and I took care of you."

He smirked. "That's why I need to go home. Can't show up to the office looking like I've been kidnapped and nurtured back to health."

Anvika scoffed. "Your clothes just need a little ironing. I'll do it."

Sanjeev raised an eyebrow. "You? Ironing *my* clothes?"

She rolled her eyes. "What's so surprising? I iron my own clothes too, you know."

He chuckled. "Fine, fine. I'll take your offer. But only because you insist."

She shot him a look before getting up and grabbing his shirt and trousers. "Sit here, take your medicine first," she ordered, already heading toward the corner of the room where she had set up an ironing board.

Sanjeev sighed, watching her disappear into the other room before reluctantly swallowing the morning dose of medicine she had left on the nightstand. A few minutes later, Anvika returned with a steaming cup of ginger tea in one hand and his neatly pressed clothes draped over her arm.

“Here, your tea,” she said, handing him the cup.

Sanjeev took a sip, making a face. “You know, for someone who claims to be a doctor, you’re forcing me to drink a lot of stuff I don’t like.”

Anvika crossed her arms. “It’s *good* for you. Do you want to be well for your meeting or not?”

He exhaled. “Fine. But my day doesn’t start properly without black coffee.”

She rolled her eyes but smiled. “Okay, fine. I’ll make you coffee too, but finish your tea first.”

Sanjeev grinned. “Now you’re talking.”

As she walked back to the kitchen, Sanjeev watched her with quiet amusement. There was something oddly comforting about this—about her fussing over him, making sure he was well. He couldn’t remember the last time someone had done that for him.

A few minutes later, Anvika returned with a cup of freshly brewed black coffee. “There you go, your highness. Now stop complaining.”

Sanjeev took a sip and sighed in satisfaction. “Ahh, this is the real deal. Now I feel alive.”

She shook her head. “You’re impossible.”

By the time the clock neared 10 AM, Sanjeev straightened his freshly ironed shirt, buttoned his cuffs, and ran a comb through his hair in front of the mirror. He looked decent—almost as if he hadn’t spent the night in a nurse’s apartment recovering from a fever.

“See? Told you I’d make you look presentable,” Anvika said, standing beside him.

Sanjeev turned to her with a smirk. “Not bad. I might actually let you take care of me more often.”

She scoffed. “Don’t get used to it.”

Just then, his phone buzzed. The cab had arrived.

“Alright, time for me to go,” he said, moving out of the house.

Anvika’s playful expression softened slightly. “Take care. And don’t overexert yourself.”

Sanjeev gave her a small smile before heading to the door. As he stepped out, he turned back for a moment. “By the way... thanks.”

Anvika just smiled. “Go. Before I change my mind and lock you inside again.”

He chuckled and made his way down the stairs, heading toward the waiting cab, feeling a strange warmth in his chest that had nothing to do with the fever.

Sanjeev pulled open the cab door and slid into the seat, exhaling deeply. “Let’s go to the office,” he instructed the driver, his voice carrying a trace of weariness.

As the cab rolled forward, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a cigarette. Before lighting it, he turned to the driver. "Mind if I smoke?"

The driver, a man in his late forties with a salt-and-pepper beard, glanced at Sanjeev through the rearview mirror and grinned. "Why would I? I smoke too."

Sanjeev raised an eyebrow. "Oh, really? Then why don't we pull over and have one together?"

The driver chuckled. "You read my mind, sir." He smoothly steered the cab to the side of the road, near a small tea stall where a few other drivers were gathered.

Both men stepped out, leaning casually against the car. Sanjeev offered the driver a cigarette, and the man took it gratefully, lighting his first before handing the lighter back.

Taking the first drag, Sanjeev let the nicotine settle in his lungs before blowing the smoke out in a slow, measured exhale. The driver followed suit, sighing in contentment.

"Stress relief," the driver commented, stretching his arms. "You look like you need it, sir."

Sanjeev smirked. "You have no idea."

The driver chuckled. "Office tensions?"

Sanjeev shook his head. "Something like that."

They stood there for a moment, both lost in their own thoughts, enjoying the silent companionship that only smokers understood.

After a few puffs, the driver spoke again. "You know, sir, I've been driving in this city for fifteen years. Seen all sorts of people. You can always tell when a man's thinking about a woman." He looked at Sanjeev with a knowing grin.

Sanjeev chuckled but said nothing, taking another long drag.

"Or in your case," the driver added, "maybe two women?"

Sanjeev turned to him sharply, eyebrows raised.

The driver shrugged. "I'm just guessing. But that kind of look doesn't come from work problems."

Sanjeev smirked, shaking his head. "You should be a detective, not a cab driver."

The driver laughed. "Driving a cab is the best way to learn about people. Everyone talks in a cab. Some cry, some laugh, some just sit in silence. And some, like you, have too many thoughts but don't want to talk about them."

Sanjeev exhaled, watching the smoke curl into the morning air. "You're not wrong."

The two finished their cigarettes in silence before flicking the stubs onto the pavement. Sanjeev crushed his underfoot, while the driver did the same.

"Alright, sir," the driver said, stretching. "Shall we go?"

Sanjeev nodded and got back into the cab. The car started rolling forward, but his thoughts stayed behind.

As the city passed by in a blur, his mind wandered.

Janki.

He had seen her, but she hadn't spoken a word to him. She had looked at him, but only for a second—like a fleeting whisper of something that once was. He could still feel the distance, the unspoken words between them, pressing against his chest like a weight.

He wanted to talk to her, but Janki's silence was a message of its own.

And then there was Anvika.

Anvika, who had held his hand when he was feverish. Anvika, who had argued with him over khichdi and masala dosa. Anvika, who had stayed up all night checking his temperature.

One woman was slipping away from him.

The other was drawing closer.

He leaned back against the seat, running a hand through his hair.

What the hell was happening to him?

The cab moved forward, but his heart was stuck somewhere in between.

As the cab pulled into the parking lot of Sanjeev's office, he stepped out, patting his pockets instinctively. He wanted to tip the driver, but his fingers met nothing but the fabric lining—no wallet, no cash. He had left home hurriedly.

Sanjeev asks the cab driver to open his phone scanner so that he could transfer his tip online.

The cab driver nodded, pulling out his phone and opening the scanner. Sanjeev swiftly scanned and transferred the tip. The driver smiled. “Thank you, sir.”

Sanjeev gave a tired nod, about to turn when his phone vibrated in his hand. He glanced at the screen. A message from Janki.

“I saw you in the hospital. I want to talk.”

His heart skipped a beat.

Without thinking, he quickly typed back.

“Okay, call me now.”

He hesitated for a second before hitting send. As he slipped his phone back into his pocket, he walked toward his office building, his mind racing.

Janki wanted to talk. What did she want to say?

But seconds passed. Then minutes. The phone remained silent.

Sanjeev checked his screen again, hoping for the typing indicator. Nothing.

His fingers itched to call her, but he stopped himself. **What if her brother-in-law was around? What if her brother was nearby?** It wouldn't take much for them to connect the dots. If anyone in her family grew suspicious, it would only make things worse for both of them.

He swallowed hard, resisting the urge. His mind kept replaying the brief glimpse he had caught of her in the hospital. Was she okay? Was she angry? Nervous?

Another vibration snapped him out of his thoughts. His eyes flickered to the screen—his heart leaped for a second, expecting Janki.

But it wasn't Janki.

It was Anvika.

“I kept your medicines in your pocket. Take them on time. Also, you forgot your watch on my bed. I'll keep it safe.”

Sanjeev smiled despite himself. He slipped a hand into his pocket, finding two tablets wrapped in foil.

A warmth spread through his chest. She was caring for him in ways he hadn't even realized.

But before he could reply, the meeting room door opened, and he had to switch gears.

The conference room was buzzing with energy.

Sanjeev took his seat as the discussion about their ambitious new project unfolded. Mrs. Khanna, his boss, stood at the head of the table, detailing the scope of the project—a massive, multi-phase endeavour that could elevate their company to new heights.

Everyone was charged up. Ideas bounced around the room. People were pitching, debating, refining strategies.

Sanjeev joined in, contributing his insights, his mind racing through the challenges and potential solutions. He thrived in such high-stakes discussions.

But even as he spoke, his focus wavered.

Janki.

Anvika.

One had sent a cryptic message and then disappeared. The other was slipping medicines into his pocket and reminding him to take care of himself.

His phone lay on the table, silent. No reply from Janki. No missed call.

His chest tightened.

Was she hesitating? Was she in trouble?

And then there was Anvika. What was he supposed to do with the way she made him feel?

The room around him buzzed with voices, but inside Sanjeev's head, there was only chaos.

The meeting was in full swing. The energy in the room was electrifying as everyone brainstormed ideas for the new project. Sanjeev contributed his thoughts, nodding as his colleagues presented their inputs. But no matter how hard he tried to immerse himself in the discussion, his mind kept drifting.

His phone, placed discreetly beside his notepad, vibrated. A quick glance told him it was from Janki. His heartbeat picked up.

Janki: *"I can't talk right now. Will call you later."*

Sanjeev's grip on his pen tightened. *Why couldn't she talk?* Was she being watched? Was her brother-in-law nearby? Or was it something else?

He wanted to reply instantly, but before he could type a word, he heard his boss's voice.

"Sanjeev, are you with us?" Mrs. Khanna's sharp gaze was fixed on him.

Sanjeev immediately straightened. "Yes, absolutely."

Mrs. Khanna didn't look convinced but continued with the discussion.

Just then, his phone vibrated again. Another message. But this time, it was from **Anvika**.

Anvika: *"Do you want me to keep your watch safe or should I courier it?"*

Sanjeev smirked, shaking his head. Anvika always had a way of making things light. He quickly typed back:

Sanjeev: *"Keep it safe. I'll come back to steal it from you soon."*

A response came almost instantly.

Anvika: *“Steal? If you try, I’ll report you for theft!”*

Sanjeev chuckled softly, drawing a few curious glances from his colleagues. He tucked his phone back into his pocket, trying to refocus on the meeting.

A Sudden Decision

By the time the meeting concluded, it was already 1 PM. His colleagues dispersed, but Sanjeev remained seated for a moment, staring at his phone. Janki still hadn’t called back.

A sudden thought struck him—he had left for the office in such a rush that he hadn’t even checked on **Subhash**. He knew the hospital was nearby, and there was still plenty of time before his next engagement.

Without hesitating, he grabbed his phone and typed:

Sanjeev: *“I’m coming to see Subhash. Will you be there?”*

There was no reply.

Sanjeev didn’t wait. He walked out of the office, called a cab, and headed straight for the hospital.

At the Hospital ICU

The familiar smell of disinfectants hit him as he entered the hospital. He walked briskly through the corridor, his mind torn between concern for Subhash and anticipation of seeing Janki.

As he reached the ICU, he saw **Janki standing outside.**

She wasn't alone.

Her brother was there too, speaking to the doctor. Sanjeev slowed down, realizing he had to be careful. He couldn't just walk up to her and start talking.

Janki's brother noticed him first and walked up with a grateful expression.

"Thank you once again for all your help, Sanjeev," he said sincerely.

Sanjeev nodded politely. "How is he doing?"

Janki's brother sighed. "No improvement yet. The doctors are trying their best."

Sanjeev stole a glance at **Janki**. Their eyes met for the briefest moment, but she quickly looked away, pretending to check her phone.

He wanted to talk to her. Ask her why she had texted him. What was so urgent? But her brother's presence made it impossible.

Janki remained quiet, standing a little distance away. Was she avoiding him? Or was she afraid of being seen talking to him?

After a few minutes, Sanjeev finally said, "I have an important meeting to get back to. Take care of him." He nodded at Janki's brother, then, with one last glance at Janki, turned and walked away.

As he stepped out of the hospital, his phone buzzed again.

Janki: *“Meet me later. I need to talk to you.”*

Sanjeev’s pulse quickened. *What was it that she wanted to say?*

He got into the cab, closed his eyes for a moment, and sighed.

It was going to be a long day.

Exhaustion Takes Over

As the cab came to a halt outside his apartment, Sanjeev barely had the energy to open the door. His body felt like lead—every step he took felt like he was dragging himself through wet cement. The fever, the restless thoughts, the constant back-and-forth between emotions and responsibilities—it had all drained him.

He somehow managed to pull his keys from his pocket, but his fingers felt weak, trembling slightly as he tried to fit them into the lock. After fumbling for a few seconds, he finally twisted the key, pushed the door open, and stepped inside.

The silence of his apartment wrapped around him instantly. No chirping notifications, no ringing phone calls, no demanding voices—just stillness.

Before crashing onto the bed, his tired eyes caught the dim glow of his phone screen. He unlocked it with slow, heavy fingers and typed out a short message to Janki:

“I’m down with fever. Going home to rest.”

He hesitated for a second before hitting send. A part of him wanted her to call, to ask if he needed anything—but another part of him just wanted to shut his eyes and disappear into sleep.

A moment later, his phone vibrated.

Janki: *“Take care, Sanjeev.”*

A weak smile played on his lips. Short, simple words—but they held warmth. Even in his feverish haze, it felt... nice.

He kicked off his shoes without caring where they landed and dragged himself to his bedroom. His body was screaming for rest, but before collapsing, he reached into his pocket.

His fingers brushed against something small and round—**the tablet Anvika had slipped into his pocket.** He pulled it out, glanced at it under the dim light, and sighed.

She really does take care of me.

Too exhausted to get water, he popped the tablet into his mouth and swallowed it dry. The bitter taste lingered for a moment, but he didn't care. He barely had the strength to stand anymore.

With a heavy exhale, he let himself **fall onto the bed.**

The soft mattress welcomed his aching body, and his head sank into the pillow. His mind was too foggy to think about Janki, Anvika, the office, or anything else. Right now, there was just **sleep**—deep, much-needed, unavoidable sleep.

And within seconds, he was **gone.**

Chapter 6: An Unexpected Visitor

Sanjeev stirred awake at the sound of his phone vibrating against the bedside table. His body felt heavy, his limbs unwilling to move, and his throat was parched. Squinting at the screen, he saw Anvika's name flashing on the display. With a tired sigh, he swiped to answer.

"Hello..." His voice was hoarse, barely above a whisper.

"Sanjeev?" Anvika's voice was filled with concern. "What's wrong with you? You sound awful!"

"I'm fine..." Sanjeev muttered, rubbing his forehead. "Just feeling a little feverish. I took the medicine you gave me and also something from my chemist friend. I'll be alright."

"Little feverish?" Anvika scoffed. "Sanjeev, you sound like you can barely talk! Have you even eaten anything?"

Sanjeev sighed, trying to muster some strength in his voice. "I'm okay, Anvika. I'll just rest."

"No. That's it. I'm coming over."

Sanjeev sat up slightly, blinking in disbelief. "What? No, Anvika, there's no need—"

"I said I'm coming." Her voice left no room for argument. "Send me your address on WhatsApp."

Sanjeev knew better than to argue when Anvika had made up her mind. With a small smile tugging at his lips, he tapped out his address and sent it to her. The moment he hit send, exhaustion took over, and he collapsed back onto his bed, drifting into a hazy half-sleep.

The sharp chime of the doorbell jolted him awake. Blinking drowsily, he stumbled toward the door, his body feeling heavier with each step. He unlocked it, and as the door creaked open, his breath caught in his throat.

Anvika stood there, illuminated by the warm glow of the hallway lights. She looked ethereal.

Her long, wavy hair cascaded over her shoulders, strands gently framing her face. A delicate bindi adorned her forehead, accentuating her deep, expressive eyes that shimmered with both concern and quiet warmth. Her lips, slightly parted, carried a natural rosininess, and her skin glowed with a softness that made her look almost unreal.

She was wearing a simple yet elegant salwar suit—peach in color, which contrasted beautifully against her radiant complexion. The fabric clung gracefully to her curves, moving fluidly as she shifted slightly on her feet. The faint scent of jasmine clung to her, wrapping around Sanjeev like an embrace, making his tired mind feel momentarily lighter.

Her gaze traveled over him, taking in his disheveled appearance—his slightly messy hair, the feverish flush on his face, and the exhaustion in his eyes. A frown formed on her lips as she placed a gentle hand on his arm.

“You look terrible,” she murmured.

Sanjeev smirked weakly. “And you look like a dream.”

Anvika rolled her eyes but couldn’t hide the hint of a smile that played at the corners of her lips.

“Are you going to let me in, or do you want to collapse in the doorway?” she teased.

Sanjeev chuckled softly, stepping aside. “Come in, Doctor Anvika.”

She shook her head, stepping inside with a determination that made it clear—Sanjeev was in for a night of care, whether he liked it or not.

Chapter 6: Healing Touch, Burning Desire

As soon as Anvika stepped inside, she turned to lock the door behind her, then placed her warm hands on Sanjeev's shoulders, gently guiding him toward his bedroom.

"Sanjeev, you can barely walk straight. Stop being so stubborn and just lie down," she murmured, her voice filled with both affection and frustration.

"I'm not—" Sanjeev started to argue, but before he could finish, she tightened her grip and pulled him forward, making him stumble slightly.

With surprising strength, she led him toward the bed. The moment his knees hit the edge, he let out a sigh and collapsed onto the mattress, the exhaustion gripping his body like a heavy chain. He closed his eyes for a brief moment, relishing the coolness of the sheets against his feverish skin.

Anvika sat beside him, her eyes scanning his face. She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, her fingers brushing against his forehead to check for fever. A soft frown formed on her lips as she pulled her hand back.

"Did you eat anything today?" she asked, her voice firm yet caring.

Sanjeev opened his eyes slightly, staring at the ceiling. "Yeah, there were some snacks and coffee in the meeting," he replied casually.

Anvika narrowed her eyes. "That's it?"

"Yeah. That's it."

Her expression darkened. “No proper lunch?”

Sanjeev chuckled weakly. “Lunch is overrated, Anvika. When I’m working, I don’t really think about food. I get too caught up in things.”

Anvika exhaled sharply, shaking her head. “And when you’re done with work?”

“Then I just order something from outside. Anything that pairs well with whiskey.” he said with a lazy smile.

Anvika shot him a look of pure disapproval. “Oh, wonderful. What a nutritious lifestyle you have. Coffee and snacks during the day, restaurant food at night. That explains why your immune system is throwing a tantrum.”

Sanjeev smirked. “My immune system is just dramatic. Like you.”

Anvika let out an exasperated sigh but didn’t argue further. Instead, she stood up and walked out of the bedroom.

Sanjeev lazily turned his head to watch her leave, curiosity sparking in his feverish mind. Moments later, she returned, holding a small tiffin in her hands.

“What’s that?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“My magic potion,” she teased.

She unlatched the tiffin and pulled out a steel container filled with home-cooked food. The aroma of warm spices and fresh ingredients filled the air instantly, making Sanjeev realize just how hungry he actually was.

She carried the container to the kitchen, reheated the food, and then returned with a plate in her hands.

Sanjeev glanced at the food—steaming hot dal with perfectly cooked rice, a side of lightly spiced vegetables, soft rotis that looked handmade with care, and a small bowl of thick curd. It was the kind of meal that instantly evoked warmth and comfort.

Anvika sat beside him again and scooped up a spoonful of dal-rice. “Come on,” she urged. “Eat.”

Sanjeev opened his mouth slightly to argue, but before he could, she brought the spoon to his lips. The heat of the food, mixed with the lingering scent of home, made him hesitate. Then, without another word, he took a bite.

The warmth of the food spread through him, comforting and soothing in ways he hadn't realized he needed. Anvika watched him with a small, satisfied smile.

“See?” she said smugly. “This is what real food tastes like. Not your restaurant junk.”

Sanjeev chewed slowly, his eyes meeting hers. “You're enjoying this, aren't you?”

Anvika grinned. “Of course. Now shut up and eat.”

With a playful sigh, Sanjeev gave in. He let her feed him, bite after bite, her hands moving with gentle precision. Occasionally, she wiped a stray grain of rice from the corner of his lips, her touch lingering just a second too long.

For the first time in a long while, Sanjeev felt truly cared for.

As Sanjeev finished the last bite of food that Anvika had lovingly fed him, he leaned back against the pillows, feeling a warmth that had nothing to do with the fever that had subsided. His eyes remained fixed on her—on the gentle curves of her face, the way her hair fell loosely over her shoulder, and the soft glow of care in her eyes.

Anvika, unaware of his intense gaze, picked up the tiffin, ready to leave for the kitchen, but before she could rise from the bed, Sanjeev reached out and caught her wrist. His grip was firm yet gentle, sending a shiver through her. She turned to him, startled, only to meet his deep, longing eyes.

“You really didn’t have to come all the way here,” he murmured, his voice husky, laced with something unspoken.

“If I hadn’t, you would still be lying here, sick and starving,” she countered, trying to sound stern, but her voice wavered slightly under the intensity of his gaze.

Sanjeev didn’t reply immediately. Instead, he gently tugged at her wrist, pulling her closer. Anvika resisted for a second, but then, as if drawn by an invisible force, she let herself be pulled into his arms. She found herself sitting on the bed beside him, her hands pressed against his chest. His heartbeat was strong beneath her palms, steady yet quickened.

“You take care of me as if I belong to you,” Sanjeev whispered, his fingers trailing lightly up her arm, leaving a tingling sensation in their wake.

Anvika lowered her gaze, a soft blush creeping onto her cheeks. “Someone has to,” she murmured.

Sanjeev smiled, a slow, knowing smile, and then, with deliberate slowness, he raised his hand and tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. His fingers lingered against her skin, tracing the line of her jaw.

“You’re beautiful,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

Anvika's heart pounded wildly, her breath caught between her lips. She wanted to say something, but words failed her. She could only look at him, trapped in the depth of his gaze.

Sanjeev leaned in, his face inches from hers. "Tell me to stop," he murmured, his breath warm against her skin.

Anvika's lips parted, but no words came. She wasn't sure if she wanted him to stop.

And then, slowly, hesitantly, he closed the distance. His lips brushed against hers, light as a whisper, a question rather than a demand. Anvika shivered at the gentle touch, her fingers curling into the fabric of his shirt.

He pulled away slightly, just enough to see her expression, searching her eyes for hesitation. But all he found was warmth, longing, and something deeper—something that mirrored his own emotions.

Encouraged, he kissed her again, this time more firmly, his hand cupping her face, his thumb stroking her cheek. Anvika melted into him, her own hands sliding up to his shoulders, holding onto him as if afraid to let go.

For a long moment, the world outside ceased to exist. It was just the two of them, wrapped in the quiet intensity of the moment—no past, no future, just the present, just this overwhelming, undeniable connection.

When they finally broke apart, Anvika exhaled softly, her forehead resting against his. "You're impossible," she whispered breathlessly, a faint smile playing on her lips.

Sanjeev chuckled, his fingers gently caressing the back of her hand. "And you're irresistible," he countered.

She playfully nudged his shoulder, but the warmth in her eyes betrayed her affection.

For the rest of the night, they sat close, lost in whispered conversations, soft laughter, and the quiet understanding that something between them had changed—deepened.

Neither of them knew what the future held, but in that moment, nothing else mattered.

Chapter 7: Between Love and Dilemmas

A soft golden glow seeped through the curtains, casting a warm hue over the room. Sanjeev stirred slightly, feeling the gentle weight of an arm draped over his chest. His eyes slowly opened, and a small smile tugged at his lips as he realized Anvika was still beside him, her face nestled close to his shoulder, her rhythmic breathing tickling his skin.

For a moment, he just lay there, watching her. There was something peaceful about seeing her like this—without the usual sarcasm, without the playful nagging—just serene, vulnerable, and breathtakingly beautiful. A few strands of her hair had fallen over her face, and he had the sudden urge to brush them away.

Carefully, he reached out and tucked the stray strands behind her ear. Anvika stirred at the touch, her lashes fluttering slightly before her sleepy eyes finally opened. A soft smile played on her lips as she met his gaze.

“Caught you staring,” she murmured, her voice husky from sleep.

Sanjeev chuckled. *“And you looked so peaceful, almost innocent. Hard to believe you’re the same person who bullies me all the time.”*

Anvika stretched like a lazy cat, her arm still resting on him. *“Well, I wouldn’t have to bully you if you took care of yourself,”* she shot back, her voice teasing.

Sanjeev smirked. *“You mean if I let you boss me around?”* He suddenly pulled her closer, making her gasp. *“You’re way too comfortable here, aren’t you?”*

She laughed softly, resting her head on his chest. *“Maybe. Your bed is warm, and you’re not such a bad pillow.”*

Sanjeev ran his fingers through her hair lazily, enjoying the moment. But then, Anvika lifted her head, looking at him with a mock-serious expression.

“Now that you’re awake, Mr. Fever Boy, you need to freshen up properly. Go take a bath,” she ordered.

Sanjeev groaned dramatically. *“Ugh, why? I’m perfectly fine like this.”*

Anvika wrinkled her nose. *“Fine? You smell like sleep, medicine, and me. Go shower.”*

Sanjeev grinned mischievously. *“Exactly why I don’t want to. I like having your scent on me.”*

Anvika blushed slightly before shoving him playfully. *“Sanjeev!”*

He laughed and grabbed her wrist, pulling her back onto the bed. *“You’re cute when you get all bossy, you know that?”*

“And you’re impossible!” she huffed, but there was a softness in her eyes as she looked at him.

They lay there for a few more moments, wrapped in a silence that felt far more intimate than words. It was a feeling neither of them had acknowledged yet—a quiet realization that maybe, just maybe, this was something more than just playful teasing and casual care.

Anvika finally sighed. *“Fine, be a lazy bum. But don’t complain when I start calling you ‘Stinky Sanjeev.’”*

Sanjeev groaned again, rolling onto his side. *“You’re ruthless, woman.”*

She giggled. *“And you love it.”*

He didn't deny it. Instead, he pulled her closer once again, resting his forehead against hers. *"Maybe I do."*

For a moment, their eyes met, unspoken emotions hanging between them. Neither of them said it, but they both felt it—the shift, the change, the depth of whatever was growing between them.

And neither of them was ready to break the moment just yet.

Sanjeev tightened his hold on Anvika, feeling the warmth of her body pressed against his. Her scent was intoxicating, a soft mix of jasmine and something uniquely her. His fingers gently traced slow patterns on her back, sending a shiver down her spine.

"You're not letting me go, are you?" Anvika whispered, her lips brushing against his cheek as she spoke.

"Not a chance," Sanjeev murmured, his voice husky. *"You barged into my life, took care of me, made me feel things... now you'll have to deal with the consequences."*

Anvika smiled, her hands moving up to cup his face. *"Oh? And what consequences are those?"*

"This," he whispered before capturing her lips in a slow, deep kiss.

Anvika melted into him, her fingers tangling into his hair, pulling him closer as their lips moved in perfect sync. The kiss was unhurried yet filled with longing, as if they were both savoring every second of it.

Sanjeev pulled back just a fraction, his lips barely brushing against hers as he whispered, *"You taste like last night's ginger tea."*

Anvika laughed softly, her breath warm against his lips. *“And you taste like trouble.”*

“The best kind,” he smirked before kissing her again, this time with a little more urgency.

Anvika sighed into the kiss, her body molding against his as his arms wrapped around her, holding her as if she were the most precious thing in the world. Her fingers traced his jaw, down to his chest, feeling his heartbeat beneath her touch.

“You’re still warm,” she murmured between kisses, her voice laced with concern.

“Then cool me down,” Sanjeev teased, pressing a trail of kisses from her lips to her jawline, making her shiver.

Anvika playfully pushed him back onto the bed, her eyes twinkling. *“You’re impossible, you know that?”*

“And yet, you’re still here.” He smirked, pulling her back into his embrace.

She sighed, resting her forehead against his. *“Because someone has to take care of you.”*

“And I’m really enjoying it,” Sanjeev admitted, his fingers gently tracing the curve of her back. *“You being here, waking up next to you... it feels...”*

“What?” she whispered, looking into his eyes.

“It feels right,” he admitted, brushing a strand of hair from her face.

Anvika's breath hitched, and for a moment, she just stared at him, her heart pounding. Then she leaned in, pressing the softest kiss to his forehead. *"Rest, idiot. You're still recovering."*

Sanjeev sighed dramatically. *"Fine, but only if you stay here."*

"I'm not going anywhere," she promised, snuggling closer to him.

And just like that, the world outside didn't matter anymore.

Anvika finished buttoning up her kurta and ran a quick hand through her hair as she glanced at Sanjeev, who was still sprawled on the bed, watching her with lazy admiration.

"Going for duty?" Sanjeev asked, his voice still thick with sleep.

Anvika rolled her eyes and crossed her arms. *"No, Mr. Workaholic, it's my off day today."*

Sanjeev smirked. *"Then you should stay here. We can order food, laze around, maybe watch a movie..."* He reached out, grabbing her wrist and pulling her back towards the bed.

"Nice try," she said, tapping his nose with her finger. *"Your kitchen pantry is a disaster. You live like a bachelor who survives only on food delivery. I'm going out to buy fruits, vegetables, and some pantry essentials."*

Sanjeev sighed dramatically. *"I'll order everything online. Just tell me what you need, and we can spend time together instead."*

Anvika gave him a pointed look. *"I want fresh fruits and vegetables, not something that's been sitting in storage for weeks. I'll be back soon, I promise."*

Sanjeev sighed, releasing her wrist but not before pressing a quick kiss to her palm. *“Fine, but don’t take too long.”*

Anvika smiled, ruffling his hair. *“Behave while I’m gone.”* With that, she grabbed her bag and walked out of the door.

Sanjeev lay back on the bed, stretching lazily. Just as he was about to close his eyes again, his phone rang. He glanced at the screen—Janki.

He quickly picked up the call, his voice soft. *“Hello, Janki.”*

“Sanjeev, how are you feeling? You looked very unwell yesterday,” Janki’s voice was filled with concern.

Before answering about himself, Sanjeev instinctively asked, *“How’s Subhash?”*

There was a pause before Janki sighed. *“No improvement yet.”*

Sanjeev ran a hand through his hair. *“I was hoping to hear some good news.”*

“Me too,” she murmured.

A silence hung between them for a moment, filled with things neither of them could say.

“Anyway, I have to take care of some things at the hospital,” Janki finally said. *“I’ll call you later. Please take your medicines on time and get proper rest.”*

Sanjeev nodded, though she couldn’t see him. *“I will. Take care, Janki.”*

“You too,” she said softly before the call disconnected.

Sanjeev stared at his phone for a moment before tossing it onto the bed. His thoughts were a tangled mess—Janki’s concern, Anvika’s presence, and his own conflicted emotions. He let out a deep sigh and lay back, waiting for Anvika to return.

Sanjeev lay on his bed, staring at his phone, his fingers tapping restlessly against the screen. He was waiting—eagerly—for Anvika to return. The quietness of the house felt unsettling now that she had left. To distract himself, he opened his office group chat and typed a message:

Sanjeev: *“Not feeling great today. Taking a full day’s rest. Won’t be coming to the office.”*

He hit send and placed the phone on his chest, closing his eyes. Within seconds, replies started popping up.

Ramesh (Senior Manager): *“Take care, Sanjeev. Yesterday’s discussion wouldn’t have been the same without your insights. Rest well.”*

Pooja (HR): *“That was real dedication yesterday, Sanjeev. Despite being sick, you attended the meeting and contributed so much. Hope you feel better soon!”*

Anil (Team Lead): *“Kudos to your commitment, man. But now, focus on getting better. Office can wait.”*

Shweta (Colleague): *“We missed your usual energy today! Take your meds and rest properly.”*

Sanjeev smiled faintly as he read through the messages. It felt nice to be appreciated, but right now, all he really wanted was for Anvika to come back. His eyes drifted back to the phone screen, half-expecting a message from her saying she was on her way.

Just then, the doorbell rang.

His heart leaped with excitement. *Finally, Anvika's back!*

He swiftly got out of bed, running a quick hand through his messy hair before flipping open the door with a grin. But instead of Anvika, there stood Chotu—the young errand boy from the local shop—balancing two large grocery bags in his arms.

“*Arey, Chotu?*” Sanjeev frowned, his excitement fading slightly.

Chotu, struggling under the weight of the bags, gave him a puzzled look. “*Sir, you only buy cigarettes. Since when did you start buying groceries?*”

Sanjeev chuckled, stepping aside to let Chotu bring the bags inside.

“*Madam ordered these things,*” Chotu said, placing the bags on the kitchen counter. His eyes darted around, as if expecting to see this mysterious ‘Madam’. Then he smirked. “*So, you're not going to cook this yourself, are you?*”

Sanjeev laughed. “*No chance. But maybe my kitchen will finally see some use.*”

Chotu pulled out the bill from his pocket and handed it to him. Sanjeev scanned it briefly, then paid the amount, adding a generous tip.

Chotu's eyes lit up. “*Thank you, Sir!*” He grinned widely, stuffing the money into his pocket.

Sanjeev waved him off. “*Alright, go before you start giving me more lectures about my cooking skills.*”

Still grinning, Chotu turned and walked out, shutting the door behind him.

Sanjeev sighed, glancing at the packed grocery bags on his counter. *This girl...* He shook his head, smiling.

Sanjeev lay sprawled on the sofa, his legs resting on the cushioned stool. His body still felt weak, but the laziness that came with illness was slowly wearing off. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out his cigarette pack, tapping it lightly against his palm before sliding a single stick out. Holding it between his lips, he flicked his lighter open, the small flame dancing for a second before he lit the cigarette.

He inhaled deeply, the first drag filling his lungs with a familiar warmth. Exhaling a slow cloud of smoke, he leaned back, letting his head rest against the sofa. The silence of the room felt oddly comforting. He picked up the remote, switched on the television, and scrolled through Netflix, searching for his current favorite show.

Just as he settled in, the doorbell rang.

With the cigarette still between his fingers, he got up lazily, exhaling another puff as he swung the door open.

Anvika stood there, bags in hand, her hair slightly tousled from the morning breeze. The moment she saw the cigarette in his hand, her lips pressed into a thin line. She stepped inside, placed the bags on the counter, and crossed her arms.

"I don't like it when you smoke, Sanjeev," she said, her tone firm yet laced with concern.

As Anvika's disapproving glance lingered on the cigarette between his fingers, Sanjeev couldn't help but recall how Janki's eyes used to light up every time he exhaled a cloud of smoke — one woman saw fire in it, the other saw ashes. And in that moment, he wondered if love was about being admired for who you are, or becoming better for someone who truly cares.

Sanjeev took one last pull, then lazily flicked the ash into the tray. *“Oh, come on, Anvika. It’s just one cigarette,”* he said, watching her as she began unpacking the groceries.

She paused, looked up, and gave him a knowing stare. *“Just one? How many times have I heard that before?”*

He smirked. *“Alright, you caught me. But what’s a little smoke in this big world?”*

Anvika sighed and pulled out some fresh apples from the bag. *“Sanjeev, do you know how many patients I’ve seen struggling to quit? You say it so casually, but it’s not that easy.”*

Sanjeev watched her slice an apple with practiced ease, her hands delicate but sure. Then, as if making a grand declaration, he suddenly stubbed out the cigarette, grabbed the pack, the lighter, and the ashtray, and walked to the dustbin.

With a dramatic flick of his wrist, he tossed them all in.

Anvika’s eyes widened. *“Wait... what are you doing?”*

He turned to her, arms crossed, a playful smile on his lips. *“Quitting. From this very moment.”*

She raised an eyebrow. *“Just like that?”*

He shrugged. *“Just like that.”*

She shook her head, slicing another piece of apple. *“Sanjeev, it’s not that simple. You might feel strong now, but when the craving hits—”*

He cut her off by taking a step closer and tilting her chin up with his finger. *“I’m not like other people, Anvika. If I say I’ve quit, I’ve quit.”*

For a moment, she held his gaze, searching his eyes for any trace of hesitation. There was none. A slow, proud smile spread across her face.

“Alright then, Mr. Determined. Let’s see if you can keep that promise.”

She popped a slice of apple into his mouth, laughing when he pretended to sulk.

“Mmm,” he hummed, chewing. *“Not bad. Maybe I can replace cigarettes with apples.”*

Anvika rolled her eyes and turned off the television. *“No distractions now. You’re going to sit on the bed and eat fruits like a good boy while I make breakfast.”*

Sanjeev chuckled as she pulled him towards the bed, making him sit. She placed a bowl of freshly cut fruits in his lap and ruffled his hair affectionately.

“Eat this while I cook something decent for you,” she ordered.

Sanjeev picked up a slice of mango, took a bite, and grinned. *“As long as you’re feeding me, I don’t mind quitting anything.”*

Just as she turned to leave, Sanjeev grabbed her wrist, gently pulling her back toward him.

“Wait,” he murmured. *“I’m not letting you go just yet.”*

She gave him a questioning look, but before she could protest, he wrapped his arms around her, holding her close. Her warmth, her scent, the way she fit so perfectly against him—it all made his heart race.

“Just a hug?” she teased, tilting her head up to look into his eyes.

“For now,” he whispered, brushing a kiss against her forehead.

Anvika smiled, her arms wrapping around him as she rested her head on his chest. The steady rhythm of his heartbeat was oddly soothing.

“You’re warm,” she murmured, nuzzling closer.

“And you’re beautiful,” he replied, lifting her chin and placing a soft, lingering kiss on her lips.

She sighed into the kiss, savoring the way he held her, how gentle yet possessive his touch was. But just as things started to get a little more intense, she pulled away, placing a playful finger on his lips.

“No more distractions, mister. Eat your fruits.”

Sanjeev groaned. *“You’re impossible.”*

“And you’re stubborn. Now be good and eat,” she scolded, ruffling his hair before finally stepping away.

As she headed to the kitchen, Sanjeev sat on the bed with a goofy smile, biting into an apple slice.

“I think I’m already addicted,” he muttered to himself, watching her disappear into the kitchen.

Anvika moved gracefully to the kitchen, her soft anklets making a faint sound as she walked. As she stepped inside, a warm smile played on her lips. She tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear and began organizing the grocery bags, setting the fresh vegetables in the basket, arranging the pantry items neatly in the cupboards, and placing the fruits in a bowl on the counter.

Her movements were elegant, every action reflecting a natural ease. She wore a simple yet beautiful floral kurti, and as she reached for a jar on the top shelf, the sunlight streaming in through the kitchen window highlighted the delicate curve of her waist. Her bangles jingled lightly as she worked, and the soft glow on her face made her look even more radiant.

Once everything was set in place, she took a deep breath and decided to make poha for Sanjeev. She washed the flattened rice, let it soak for a moment, and then began sautéing mustard seeds, green chilies, onions, and curry leaves in a pan. The kitchen soon filled with the irresistible aroma of spices blending with the softened poha. She added a handful of roasted peanuts, garnished it with fresh coriander and lemon juice, and took a moment to appreciate her own work.

Satisfied, she scooped the steaming poha onto two plates and carried them carefully to the bedroom.

Sanjeev, still sitting on the bed, looked up and smiled as she walked in. He couldn’t help but admire her—there was something undeniably mesmerizing about the way she carried herself, with a quiet confidence and a warmth that made everything around her feel like home.

“Look at you, bringing me food like a queen serving her king,” he teased.

Anvika smirked and handed him a plate. *“Well, if you’re the king, then you better appreciate the royal meal I just prepared.”*

He took a bite and closed his eyes. *"Mmm, this is divine."*

Anvika watched him with a proud smile. *"It's just poha, Sanjeev."*

"Not just poha. It's made by you. That makes all the difference," he said, taking another bite.

They sat together on the bed, eating and talking, enjoying the easy comfort that had settled between them.

"You know," Sanjeev mused, *"a few days ago, we didn't even know each other. And now, it feels like I can't imagine a day without you."*

Anvika paused for a moment, looking at him with a soft expression. *"Yeah... life is strange, isn't it? Sometimes, it brings people together in the most unexpected ways."*

He nodded, wiping his fingers on a napkin. *"By the way, my dressing?"*

She shook her head playfully. *"You don't need one today. You're healing well. We'll do it tomorrow."*

"And my leave? You asked me to inform my office," he reminded her.

She raised an eyebrow. *"Did you?"*

Sanjeev smirked. *"Yes, ma'am. I sent the message, and my colleagues even praised me for my commitment yesterday."*

Anvika rolled her eyes. *"You and your office ego. Always seeking validation."*

“Oh, come on,” he grinned. “A little appreciation never hurt anyone.”

She chuckled, shaking her head. *“Well, today, your only task is to rest and enjoy.”*

As they finished their meal, they continued talking, laughing, and sharing little details about their lives. Sanjeev talked about his work, the people he liked, and those who annoyed him. Anvika shared funny hospital stories, making him laugh with her dramatic reenactments of how some patients tried to escape injections.

They didn't realize how effortlessly time passed.

At one point, Anvika stretched her legs on the bed, resting her head against the headboard. *“I can't believe the whole day is almost gone.”*

Sanjeev, lying beside her, turned to face her. *“That's what happens when you're with someone you truly enjoy being with.”*

She smiled, looking at him with warmth. *“You're feeling better, aren't you?”*

He nodded. *“Much better. And I think I know the secret ingredient.”*

She raised an eyebrow. *“Oh? And what's that?”*

He reached out, tucking a loose strand of her hair behind her ear. *“You.”*

Anvika's cheeks flushed slightly, but she didn't look away. The day had passed in each other's company, in quiet moments of laughter, teasing, and warmth. And as the evening

approached, Sanjeev realized something—this wasn't just about companionship. This was something deeper. Something he never expected to feel so soon.

And as the evening air cooled, the warmth between them only grew stronger.

As the evening deepened, a gentle breeze filtered through the open window, carrying the distant hum of the city settling into the night. Anvika stretched her arms lazily and sat up from the bed, brushing back her long hair.

"I should leave now," she said softly, glancing at the time on her phone. *"I have an early morning shift at 8 a.m."*

Sanjeev, who had been reclining comfortably against the pillows, frowned. *"No, stay."*

Anvika shook her head with a small laugh. *"Sanjeev, I can't. I need to be at the hospital on time. And if I leave now, I'll get enough sleep before my shift."*

Sanjeev sat up, grabbing her wrist gently. *"You can leave in the morning. 7 a.m. sharp. I'll even set an alarm for you,"* he offered, his voice laced with persuasion.

She narrowed her eyes at him. *"You think I trust you to wake up early?"*

He grinned. *"I'll wake up if it means keeping you here for a few more hours."* He pulled her closer until she was sitting right beside him. *"Look, it's already late. It's not safe to travel at this time. Just stay, and I promise I'll personally drop you off in the morning."*

Anvika sighed, pretending to think. *"Hmm... tempting offer, but—"*

Sanjeev cut her off, leaning in. *"No buts. You're staying. I won't let you leave."*

“Oh, so now I need permission to go home?” she teased, folding her arms.

“Exactly!” he declared dramatically. “You’re my responsibility now. I can’t let you wander off into the night alone.”

She rolled her eyes. *“You’re impossible.”*

“And you love it,” he smirked, tracing a finger down her arm.

She huffed playfully, but the smile tugging at her lips gave her away. *“Fine,” she finally conceded. “But if I’m late tomorrow, you’re responsible for explaining to my senior doctor.”*

“Deal!” he grinned triumphantly.

Anvika shook her head, laughing. *“You really don’t take no for an answer, do you?”*

Sanjeev pulled her into a warm embrace, resting his chin against her shoulder. *“Not when it comes to you.”*

She sighed, melting into his arms. *“You’re lucky I like you,” she murmured.*

“I know,” he whispered, pressing a soft kiss to her forehead. “And I’m going to keep reminding you why.”

As Anvika rested in Sanjeev’s arms, a sudden thought crossed her mind. She gently pulled away from him and got up from the bed.

“Wait a second, I almost forgot something,” she said, walking out of the bedroom.

Sanjeev watched her curiously as she disappeared into the drawing room. Moments later, she returned, holding something in her hand. She came back to his bedside, placed a familiar object on the side table, and smiled.

“Here. I brought your wristwatch back.”

Sanjeev glanced at the watch and chuckled. *“Oh! I completely forgot about it.”*

Anvika picked up the watch and examined it closely. It was different from modern digital watches. The dial had a vintage charm, the mechanical hands moving smoothly, and the worn-out NATO strap carried the signs of years of use.

“You know,” she said, tilting her head, *“no one really wears watches like these anymore. This is so old-school!”*

Sanjeev smirked, taking the watch from her hand. *“That’s because it’s special.”*

Anvika raised an eyebrow. *“Oh? Special how?”*

He ran his fingers over the dial with a nostalgic smile. *“This was my father’s first watch. He bought it when he got his first job. He cherished it a lot.”* He paused, his eyes softening. *“I always loved this watch since I was a kid. I used to play with it, put it on my wrist, even though it was too big for me back then.”*

Anvika sat beside him, listening intently. *“So how did it end up with you?”*

Sanjeev grinned. *“I pestered him for years. Every time I saw him wearing it, I’d remind him that I wanted it. Finally, one day, after a lot of convincing, he gave it to me as a gift. I’ve worn it ever since.”*

Anvika smiled, shaking her head. *“I can totally imagine you as a stubborn kid, annoying your dad just to get this watch.”*

Sanjeev laughed. *“Annoying? No, no. I was a very persistent kid.”*

She rolled her eyes. *“Same thing.”*

He winked. *“Well, that persistence paid off. Now I have this watch and you.”*

Anvika blushed but quickly recovered. *“That doesn’t mean you get to boss me around like you did with your dad!”*

Sanjeev smirked, leaning in. *“Oh, we’ll see about that.”*

She playfully smacked his arm. *“You’re impossible!”*

“And you love it,” he teased.

They both laughed together, their laughter filling the room with warmth. The moment felt light-hearted yet deep, like a glimpse into the quiet intimacy growing between them.

As Sanjeev picked up the watch from the side table, he turned it over in his hands, running his fingers over its worn edges. The dim bedside lamp cast a warm glow on its aged dial. Anvika tilted her head, watching his expression shift from amusement to something deeper.

“You really love this watch, don’t you?” she asked softly.

Sanjeev nodded, a faint smile appearing on his lips. “It’s not just a watch, Anvika. It’s a piece of my childhood.”

She shifted closer, resting her chin on his shoulder. “Tell me,” she whispered.

Sanjeev took a deep breath. “I must have been around ten years old when I first saw this watch on my father’s wrist. I was fascinated by how the second hand moved smoothly instead of ticking like the other watches I had seen. I would watch him wind it every morning, the way he did it with so much care, like it was a ritual.”

Anvika listened intently, her eyes locked on him.

“One day, I asked him if I could wear it for a day. He laughed and said, ‘This watch is too big for your wrist, beta. You’ll lose it in five minutes.’ But I was stubborn. I begged and begged until he finally agreed—on one condition. I had to take care of it like he did. I promised.”

He chuckled, shaking his head. “Guess what happened next?”

“You lost it?” Anvika guessed, grinning.

Sanjeev sighed dramatically. “I wish! That would’ve been less embarrassing. No, I was showing it off to my friends, and one of them dared me to take it apart and see how it worked.”

Anvika gasped, covering her mouth. “You didn’t!”

“Oh, I did. I took out the back cover with a small screwdriver and immediately, a tiny spring jumped out and disappeared into the grass. I panicked, tried to put it back together, but it was never the same again. When my father found out, he didn’t scold me. He just sighed, took the watch, and said, ‘Now you’ve learned why you should never tamper with things you don’t understand.’”

Anvika smiled. “That’s actually a wise lesson.”

Sanjeev nodded. “Yeah. Years later, when I was older, he gave the watch to me, saying, ‘Now, you understand things a little better.’ Since then, I’ve taken care of it like it’s a part of him.”

Anvika placed her hand over his. “That’s beautiful, Sanjeev. Your father must have been a wonderful man.”

“He was,” Sanjeev said, his voice softer now. “Strict, but always fair.”

Anvika sighed, leaning back. “I wish I had memories like that with my father.”

Sanjeev turned to her, sensing a shift in her mood. “Why? What was your childhood like?”

She hesitated for a moment before speaking. “My father was always working. He was a good man, but his business took up all his time. I remember waiting for him at night, hoping he’d come home early just once. My mother used to say, ‘Papa is doing all this for us.’ But as a child, all I wanted was for him to sit with me, tell me stories, or just ask how my day was.”

Sanjeev squeezed her hand gently. “That must have been hard.”

She nodded. “I don’t blame him now. But back then, I did. I think that’s why I chose to become a nurse. I wanted to be around people, care for them, and never make anyone feel alone the way I did.”

Sanjeev looked at her with a newfound admiration. “You’re an incredible person, Anvika.”

She smiled, but there was a sadness in her eyes. “Sometimes, I wonder if I made the right choice. I give so much to others, but when I go home... it’s just me.”

Sanjeev cupped her face gently. “Not anymore.”

Anvika searched his eyes, and for a long moment, they just sat there, their fingers intertwined. It wasn’t just attraction anymore. It was something deeper, something neither of them had expected when they first met.

“You always know the right thing to say,” Anvika murmured, resting her forehead against his.

“And you always make me feel things I never thought I would,” Sanjeev admitted.

They sat in comfortable silence, holding onto the moment, realizing that, piece by piece, they were becoming something more than just two people who had met by chance.

As the evening stretched into the night, Anvika pulled herself away from Sanjeev’s embrace and stood up with a playful smile.

“Alright, Mr. No-Cooking, it’s time for me to show you what a real home-cooked meal tastes like,” she teased, stretching her arms.

Sanjeev smirked. “I’m already spoiled by your poha. Now you’re going to ruin takeout for me forever, aren’t you?”

“That’s the plan,” she said with a wink before heading to the kitchen.

Sanjeev watched as she moved around with ease, her presence filling the house with a warmth he hadn’t realized was missing. She tied her hair into a loose bun, allowing a few

strands to escape and frame her delicate face. The sound of chopping vegetables, the sizzle of spices hitting the pan, and the rhythmic clatter of utensils created a melody of domestic bliss.

She had decided on making a wholesome North Indian meal—a comforting dal, a simple yet flavourful jeera rice, crispy aloo bhindi, and hot, fluffy rotis fresh from the tawa. The kitchen was soon filled with an irresistible aroma, a mixture of earthy spices, fragrant ghee, and the subtle sweetness of caramelized onions.

Sanjeev, unable to resist, walked to the kitchen doorway and leaned against it, watching her intently.

“Smells heavenly,” he murmured.

Anvika turned and playfully waved the spatula at him. “Back to bed, you! I don’t want you hovering around like a food inspector.”

Chuckling, Sanjeev returned to the bed, waiting for her. A few moments later, she emerged with a tray holding two steaming plates of food.

“You should really get a dining table,” she teased as she placed the tray on the bed.

“Why? When the best meals can be eaten right here, with you?” Sanjeev winked, making her roll her eyes with a smile.

They sat cross-legged on the bed, side by side, as Anvika served him. Sanjeev took a bite, his eyes widening in appreciation.

“This is... ridiculously good,” he said between mouthfuls. “I swear, Anvika, you can quit nursing and open a restaurant.”

She laughed. “Flattery will get you nowhere. Eat properly.”

They ate slowly, savoring not just the flavors but the unspoken intimacy between them. Between bites, they talked about little things—her childhood recipes, his failed attempts at cooking, and the time he burned Maggi because he forgot about it on the stove.

Anvika shook her head. “How have you survived all these years?”

Sanjeev grinned. “By charming women like you into feeding me.”

She playfully hit his shoulder. “Shameless!”

As the meal came to an end, Anvika leaned back with a satisfied sigh. “Now tell me, wasn’t this better than ordering from some restaurant?”

Sanjeev nodded, reaching for her hand. “Much better. Not just the food. The whole evening.”

She smiled softly, fingers lacing with his. “Me too.”

They cleaned up together before slipping under the covers, the warmth of the evening settling between them. Anvika snuggled closer to him, resting her head on his chest, her breath slowing as she drifted into sleep.

Sanjeev held her close, his fingers absentmindedly stroking her hair, but his thoughts were far from sleep.

Janki.

He hadn't thought much about her all day, but now, as he lay in the quiet night with Anvika sleeping in his arms, the weight of reality crept in.

Janki was struggling, handling Subhash's declining health, balancing work, and still taking the time to check on him. She had called earlier, her voice filled with concern, yet she was the one going through a storm.

A part of him felt guilty. Here he was, wrapped in comfort, in love, while she was possibly sitting beside Subhash, waiting for a miracle.

What was he supposed to feel? What was he supposed to do?

Sanjeev closed his eyes, but sleep didn't come.

He had no answers. Only questions.

And as the night stretched on, he found himself caught in the tangle of emotions—between the warmth of the present and the shadows of the past.

Chapter 8: Between Love and Secrets

Sanjeev woke up to the sound of his mobile ringing. Still drowsy, he reached for his phone but, before answering, he noticed that the other side of the bed was empty. He turned his head and saw Anvika standing near the dressing mirror, adjusting her earrings. She had already freshened up and was almost ready to leave for work.

Rubbing his eyes, Sanjeev sat up and stretched lazily. “You’re already leaving?” he asked, his voice still groggy.

Anvika turned around and smiled. “I have a morning shift at 8. I have to leave early.”

“But your hospital is just a 20-25 minute drive from here,” Sanjeev reasoned, still unwilling to let her go. “You can stay till 7:30.”

Anvika shook her head. “I don’t want to take any chances. I need to be there on time.”

Sanjeev sighed and leaned back against the headboard, watching her gather her things. Just as she picked up her handbag, he got out of bed and walked toward her. “At least say a proper goodbye,” he said, pulling her gently into his arms.

Anvika giggled. “You’re impossible, Sanjeev.”

He lowered his lips to hers, and they shared a lingering kiss. Anvika tried to pull away, but Sanjeev tightened his grip around her waist, not letting her go just yet. “Just a little longer,” he whispered.

She playfully hit his chest. “If you keep delaying me like this, I’ll actually be late.”

He kissed her again, softer this time, his fingers brushing through her hair. “It’s so strange, Anvika. A few days back, we were strangers, and now... I don’t even feel like letting you go.”

Anvika caressed his face, her expression turning tender. “Me too, Sanjeev. I don’t know how it happened, but I feel like I’ve known you forever.”

They stood there for a few more moments, lost in each other. Finally, Anvika sighed and turned towards the door. “I really have to go now.”

Sanjeev leaned against the doorframe, watching her with a smirk. “I don’t think so,” he said, pulling her back once again.

Anvika laughed but gave in, resting her forehead against his. “You’re going to make me late, Sanjeev.”

“One more kiss,” he demanded like a child.

She gave him a soft peck on the lips before finally opening the door. “Promise me you’ll take full rest today. No running around.”

Sanjeev sighed. “Fine. But I wanted to come with you to see Subhash.”

Anvika gave him a stern look. “You need rest. Just call and ask about his well-being.”

Seeing that he wasn’t about to argue further, she finally stepped outside. Sanjeev watched her leave, his heart feeling unusually heavy. As the door clicked shut, the house suddenly felt eerily silent.

He walked back inside, sat on the sofa, and turned on the television, flipping through Netflix. But within seconds, he switched it off. The emptiness inside him deepened. He had even quit smoking, which used to be his distraction. Now, there was nothing to pass his time.

His thoughts began to wander—back to Janki.

He had spent an entire week with her in Goa, day and night. The moments they had shared were intense and unforgettable. And now... things had changed. How was he supposed to tell Janki about Anvika? How would she react?

As he sat there, his phone vibrated. A message from Janki.

Janki: *How are you feeling now? Are you taking proper rest?*

Sanjeev hesitated for a moment before replying.

Sanjeev: *I've improved a lot. I'm taking a full day's rest today.*

A pause. And then, almost impulsively, he typed another message.

Sanjeev: *Janki, I want to talk to you.*

The message was sent. He stared at the screen, watching as the blue double ticks appeared. Janki had read his message. But there was no reply.

Minutes passed. The silence in the room felt heavier. Sanjeev's fingers hovered over the phone, but he didn't type anything else. Maybe she was busy. Or maybe... she was avoiding the conversation.

Just then, another notification popped up. His heart skipped a beat. But when he checked, it wasn't from Janki.

It was from Anvika.

Anvika: *I made breakfast for you. It's on the kitchen counter. Eat it before it gets cold.*

A small smile formed on Sanjeev's lips. He quickly typed a reply.

Sanjeev: *Come over in the evening.*

But Anvika's next message came almost instantly.

Anvika: *I'm on duty now. I'll call you in the afternoon.*

Sanjeev chuckled, shaking his head. He put his phone aside, still feeling a strange restlessness. He had Anvika in his life now, but a part of him couldn't ignore the unresolved chapter with Janki.

As he walked towards the kitchen to check the breakfast Anvika had left for him, his mind was already clouded with thoughts of what was coming next.

Here's your engaging and romantic chapter with all the elements you wanted—sweet talk, romance, and playful teasing between Sanjeev and Anvika.

In the afternoon, as Sanjeev lay on the bed, scrolling through his phone, his mobile rang. He smiled when he saw Anvika's name flashing on the screen.

"Hey, beautiful," he answered in a lazy yet affectionate tone.

"Hey yourself," Anvika replied, a soft chuckle in her voice. "What are you doing?"

“Waiting for my favorite doctor to come back and check on me,” he teased.

Anvika sighed. “Sanjeev, I was actually calling to tell you that I’m going to my parents’ house for a few hours. It’s been a while since I visited them.”

Sanjeev immediately sat up. “No, no, no. You can’t do that.”

“And why not?” she asked playfully.

“Because I need you here. I took the whole day to rest so that I could feel better, just for you,” he said dramatically. “And now you’re planning to leave me alone?”

Anvika laughed. “Sanjeev, don’t act like a baby. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” He gasped as if she had said something outrageous. “That’s too far away! How will I survive until then?”

“You’re impossible,” she said, shaking her head on the other end of the call.

“But you love this impossible man,” he countered smoothly.

Anvika sighed, trying to resist his charm, but she knew she was already giving in. “Fine, I’ll come over for a while. But only for some time.”

Sanjeev grinned in victory. “That’s all I need. Just some time with you.”

A little while later, when the doorbell finally rang, Sanjeev opened the door eagerly, and the sight in front of him made his heart skip a beat.

Anvika stood there in a simple yet elegant pink and white salwar suit, her long hair cascading over one shoulder, slightly damp from her shower. Her cheeks had a natural glow, and her lips were a soft shade of pink. A few strands of hair danced around her face as the afternoon breeze kissed her skin. She looked breathtaking.

For a moment, Sanjeev just stood there, admiring her.

“Are you going to invite me in, or should I just leave?” Anvika teased, raising an eyebrow.

Sanjeev snapped out of his trance and quickly stepped aside. “Come in, my gorgeous doctor.”

As soon as she entered, he pulled her into a tight embrace. “You really made me wait today.”

Anvika laughed. “You’re such a drama king.”

“But you love me anyway,” he murmured against her hair, placing a soft kiss on her forehead.

She smiled, wrapping her arms around him. “Yes, I do.”

Sanjeev lifted her slightly, making her gasp. “Okay, okay! Put me down!”

“Only if you promise to never make me wait this long again,” he said, holding her close.

Anvika rolled her eyes. “No promises.”

Sanjeev pouted. "So unfair."

She pulled his face towards hers and kissed him softly. "Happy now?"

Sanjeev smirked. "Almost." He kissed her back, this time deeper, making her grip his shirt tightly.

Just as things were getting more intense, the doorbell rang.

Sanjeev groaned, resting his forehead against Anvika's. "Who on earth is interrupting us now?"

Anvika giggled. "You should check. It could be important."

Reluctantly, Sanjeev pulled away and went to open the door. A young pizza delivery boy stood there, holding a large pizza box and a bottle of Coke.

"Sir, your order," the boy said cheerfully.

Sanjeev smiled, taking out his wallet. He paid the bill and handed the boy a generous tip.

The delivery boy's eyes widened. "Thank you, sir!"

Sanjeev nodded. "Enjoy your day."

As he closed the door and turned around, he found Anvika standing with her arms crossed, giving him a pointed look.

“You ordered pizza?” she asked, her tone half amused, half annoyed.

Sanjeev grinned. “Yes. For us.”

“You haven’t even fully recovered, and you’re already back to eating junk food?” she scolded.

Sanjeev walked towards her, holding up the pizza box like a trophy. “But it’s not just any pizza. It’s our Sunday special pizza. And look—Coke! Perfect combination!”

Anvika shook her head. “You’re hopeless.”

“But I have a solution.” He pulled her by the waist and whispered, “We eat it together.”

She sighed in defeat. “Fine. But just a few slices.”

“Deal!” he said excitedly, leading her to the bed.

They sat cross-legged, the warm pizza between them. Sanjeev took the first bite and moaned dramatically. “Mmm... this is heaven!”

Anvika laughed as she took a bite. “Okay, I have to admit, it’s good.”

Sanjeev leaned closer. “Told you.”

They ate, shared playful moments, and laughed about small things. Sanjeev fed Anvika a bite, and she did the same for him.

As she wiped her fingers, she looked at him warmly. “You know, a few days ago, I never imagined I would be sitting here, eating pizza with you like this.”

Sanjeev smiled, taking her hand in his. “Neither did I. But now, I can’t imagine my life without you.”

She squeezed his hand. “You’re getting too romantic now.”

“Too late, sweetheart. I’m already in love,” he said with a wink.

Anvika blushed but didn’t deny it.

And just like that, their evening melted away into love, laughter, and the warmth of each other’s presence.

After finishing their pizza, Anvika got up and stretched. “Alright, now it’s time for some real food,” she announced.

Sanjeev raised an eyebrow. “Pizza isn’t real food?”

She rolled her eyes. “It’s junk. You need something nutritious.”

“Fine,” he sighed, watching her walk toward the kitchen. “What are you making?”

“You’ll see,” she said with a mischievous smile.

Curious, Sanjeev got up and followed her into the kitchen. He leaned against the doorframe, watching her tie her hair up in a loose bun. A few strands fell over her face as she pulled out ingredients from the grocery bags.

She turned and caught him staring. “What are you doing here?”

“Admiring my personal chef,” he teased.

She picked up a rolling pin and pointed it at him. “Back to bed, mister. You need rest.”

“But—”

“No buts,” she interrupted, stepping closer to him. She ran her fingers through his hair and whispered, “Be a good boy and go rest.”

Sanjeev pouted. “You always win.”

She kissed him lightly on the lips. “Because I love you.”

He sighed dramatically. “Fine, I’m going.”

“Good.” She gave him a gentle push.

As he made his way back to bed, Anvika turned back to her cooking. She decided to make **dal tadka** with **jeera rice** and **aloo fry**—simple yet comforting food.

She heated ghee in a pan and added cumin seeds, letting them crackle. Then she sautéed onions, tomatoes, and garlic until they turned golden brown, filling the kitchen with a delicious aroma. She mashed the boiled lentils and mixed them with the tempering, adding a handful of fresh coriander leaves. Meanwhile, she cooked rice with a touch of ghee, making it light and fluffy.

For the side dish, she sliced potatoes thinly and tossed them into a pan with mustard seeds and curry leaves, crisping them up to perfection.

Finally, she placed everything neatly on two plates, garnishing the dal with a drizzle of ghee and some chopped coriander.

Carrying the plates, she walked into the bedroom. “Dinner is served,” she announced.

Sanjeev sat up, smiling. “Smells amazing!”

She placed the plates on the side table and sat beside him. “You’re going to love it.”

Sanjeev took a spoonful of dal and rice, closing his eyes as he savored it. “God, this is heavenly.”

Anvika chuckled. “Told you.”

He picked up a piece of crispy potato and fed it to her. “You should taste your own magic.”

She took a bite and nodded. “Not bad, huh?”

“It’s perfect.”

They ate slowly, exchanging soft smiles and teasing words.

Once they finished, Sanjeev leaned back against the pillows. “Let’s watch a movie on Netflix.”

Anvika shook her head. “Nope. You need sleep.”

“But—”

“No buts.” She turned off the lights and slipped into bed beside him.

Sanjeev sighed but didn’t argue. As soon as she wrapped her arms around him, his complaints melted away. He pulled her close, kissing her forehead.

She tilted her face up, meeting his lips. Their kisses deepened, turning slow and passionate. Their fingers traced each other’s skin, feeling the warmth and tenderness between them. Wrapped in each other’s arms, they made love, their bodies and hearts intertwining.

Afterward, Anvika rested her head on his chest, her breathing soft and even as she fell asleep.

But Sanjeev lay awake. His mind drifted to Janki.

How was he going to tell her about this?

He knew he had to. Keeping it a secret wasn’t fair—to Janki or Anvika.

Would Janki understand? Would she be hurt?

He exhaled deeply, running a hand through his hair. He had to find the right words, the right time.

With these thoughts swirling in his head, he finally closed his eyes, holding Anvika close.

Tomorrow, he would have to face the truth.

Chapter 9: Unspoken Truths and Lingering Doubts

Sanjeev stirred awake as the first rays of the morning sun filtered through the curtains, casting a golden glow over the room. He blinked a few times, adjusting to the light, and then turned his head slightly to see Anvika curled up beside him, her soft breath fanning against his chest. Her arm was draped over him, her fingers lightly touching his skin as if she had fallen asleep holding onto him.

A deep warmth spread through Sanjeev's heart as he watched her. She looked so peaceful, so content in his embrace. He gently tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear, careful not to wake her. Her lips, slightly parted in sleep, carried a softness that made him want to lean in and kiss her right away. But as he lay there, admiring her, another feeling crept in—guilt.

His mind wandered to Janki. He had spent so much time with her, built something deep, something meaningful. And yet, here he was, tangled in the sheets with Anvika, a woman who had stormed into his life like a fresh breeze, making him feel things he hadn't expected. He had to tell her, he thought. She deserved to know the truth. But what if it hurt her? What if she walked away from him after hearing it?

Sanjeev sighed, running a hand over his face. Maybe today wasn't the right time. Maybe he needed to wait a little longer, find the right moment, the right words. But was there ever a right moment to confess something like this?

Just then, Anvika stirred in his arms, letting out a soft sigh before slowly opening her eyes. As her gaze met his, she smiled—warm, sleepy, and full of love.

“Good morning,” she murmured, her voice husky from sleep.

Sanjeev forced a smile, pushing away his thoughts for now. “Good morning, beautiful.”

Anvika stretched lazily, her fingers tracing small circles on his chest. “Were you watching me sleep?” she teased.

He chuckled. “Maybe.”

She playfully swatted his arm. “Creepy,” she joked, but her eyes twinkled with affection.

Sanjeev held her closer, pressing a soft kiss to her forehead. In this moment, with her warmth against him and her scent filling his senses, he wished he could freeze time. Because soon, reality would come knocking. And he wasn't sure if he was ready to face it.

As the soft glow of the early morning sun seeped through the curtains, Sanjeev stirred awake, feeling the warmth of Anvika still wrapped in his arms. Her face was nestled against his chest, her breath slow and rhythmic. For a moment, he simply watched her—her delicate features, the way her eyelashes fluttered slightly as she slept, the peaceful expression on her face.

A deep sense of love washed over him, but along with it came something else—guilt. He knew he needed to tell her about Janki. But was this the right time? Would there ever be a right time?

Before he could dwell on it further, Anvika shifted in his arms and let out a soft sigh.

“Mmm... I don't want to go to work,” she mumbled, snuggling deeper into his embrace.

Sanjeev chuckled. “That's a first. I thought you were married to your job.”

She lifted her face slightly, pouting. “Maybe I should just call in sick and stay in bed with you.”

Sanjeev grinned, running his fingers through her hair. “Tempting offer. But I know you. You'd feel guilty the whole day for skipping work.”

Anvika sighed dramatically. “Ugh. Why do you know me so well?”

“Because I’m falling for you more and more every day,” he whispered, brushing a soft kiss on her forehead.

They lay there for a while, talking in hushed tones, their legs tangled together, stealing kisses and teasing each other. It was a moment of pure bliss, one that Sanjeev wished could last forever.

Eventually, Anvika stretched and sat up. “Alright, I need to get up before I actually convince myself to stay back.”

She threw on one of Sanjeev’s oversized shirts and padded toward the kitchen.

“I’ll make breakfast,” she announced.

Sanjeev propped himself up on his elbow. “Oh? I thought I’d get breakfast in bed.”

Anvika rolled her eyes playfully. “You’re well enough to get out of bed now, mister.”

Sanjeev smirked and followed her into the kitchen, leaning against the counter as he watched her move around effortlessly. She cracked eggs into a bowl, whisking them with a little masala before pouring them into the sizzling pan. The aroma of butter and spices filled the kitchen as she flipped the omelette with ease, then toasted some bread to go along with it.

“You know,” he mused, “watching you cook is quite attractive.”

Anvika shot him a glance over her shoulder. “You’re just saying that because you’re hungry.”

“Partly. But mostly because I just love looking at you.”

She chuckled, shaking her head as she plated the food. They settled at the table, eating the warm, flavourful meal while chatting about random things—her shift schedule, his plans for work, how they should go on a short trip together soon.

But somewhere in between the laughter and light-hearted talk, Anvika noticed something.

“You’re awfully quiet today,” she said, looking at him closely. “Is something bothering you?”

Sanjeev’s Internal Struggle

Sanjeev hesitated, pushing a piece of toast around on his plate. “Nothing, just thinking about work.”

It was a lie, and he knew she could sense it. But he wasn’t ready to shatter this perfect morning with the truth.

Anvika didn’t press. Instead, she reached across the table, taking his hand in hers. “Whatever it is, you know you can talk to me, right?”

Sanjeev forced a smile and squeezed her hand. “I know. Thank you.”

For now, he kept the truth buried. But it wouldn’t stay hidden for long.

A Call from Janki – The Unavoidable Moment

Just as he was beginning to relax, his phone buzzed. He glanced at the screen, and his heart skipped a beat.

Janki.

His grip on the phone tightened. Should he pick up? Should he ignore it?

Before he could decide, Anvika noticed. “Who’s Janki?” she asked casually.

Sanjeev’s stomach twisted. He forced a neutral expression. “She’s my neighbour. You remember the man I told you about—the one I took to the ICU that night for alcohol withdrawal? That’s her husband.”

Anvika nodded, seeming to accept the explanation. But then, when Sanjeev got up and stepped out of the room to take the call, her eyes followed him, suspicion flickering in her mind.

Something about the way he reacted didn’t feel right.

And she intended to find out why.

The Unexpected Conversation

Sanjeev stepped out onto the balcony, heart pounding as he swiped to answer the call.

“Hello?” he said, keeping his voice low.

There was a brief silence before Janki’s voice came through, soft yet laced with something unspoken. “Sanjeev... how are you feeling now?”

“I’m better,” he replied, glancing back toward the kitchen where Anvika was clearing the plates. “Much better, actually.”

“That’s good,” Janki said. Then, after a pause, she added, “I wanted to call earlier, but... I wasn’t sure if I should.”

Sanjeev leaned against the railing, exhaling. “Janki, we need to talk.”

“I know,” she murmured. “I’ve been thinking about us a lot.”

Sanjeev closed his eyes. The weight of his choices was pressing down on him. “Listen... there’s something I have to tell you.”

But before he could continue, he heard footsteps behind him. He turned, and there stood Anvika in the doorway, arms crossed, eyes filled with quiet curiosity.

“Everything okay?” she asked, tilting her head slightly.

Sanjeev hesitated, then nodded. “Yeah. It’s just...” He glanced at his phone. “Janki.”

Anvika’s expression remained unreadable. “Are you coming inside?”

Sanjeev nodded. “Yeah. Just a minute.”

Anvika didn’t question further. She gave him a small smile before disappearing back inside. But her instincts told her—there was more to this call than Sanjeev was letting on.

Once she was gone, Janki spoke again. “That was her, wasn’t it?”

Sanjeev sighed. “Yes.”

Janki was silent for a moment. Then, with a soft, almost sad chuckle, she said, “I guess things really have changed, haven’t they?”

Sanjeev ran a hand through his hair. “Janki, I—”

“I hope she makes you happy,” Janki interrupted. Her voice was gentle, but there was a hint of pain beneath it. “That’s all I wanted to say.”

Sanjeev swallowed hard. “Janki...”

“Take care, Sanjeev,” she said, and before he could stop her, the line went dead.

Anvika’s Doubts Begin

Sanjeev stood there for a moment, staring at his phone. He had wanted to explain things to Janki properly, but now... he wasn’t sure if he would get the chance.

With a heavy heart, he walked back inside. Anvika was sitting on the couch, scrolling through her phone. She looked up as he entered.

“Everything sorted?” she asked casually.

Sanjeev forced a smile. “Yeah. Just checking in on her husband.”

Anvika nodded, but something in her eyes said she wasn't entirely convinced.

She didn't push further, though. Instead, she patted the seat beside her. "Come here."

Sanjeev sat down, and she immediately leaned into him, resting her head on his shoulder. "Can we just spend the rest of the evening together?" she murmured. "No work, no stress. Just us."

Sanjeev wrapped an arm around her. "Of course."

But even as they sat there in comfortable silence, his mind was racing. He knew the past wouldn't stay buried forever.

And sooner or later, Anvika would start asking the questions he wasn't ready to answer.

The Morning Goodbye

As Sanjeev pulled open his wardrobe, Anvika leaned against the doorframe, watching him with an amused smile.

"You're really wearing *that* to work?" she teased, crossing her arms.

Sanjeev glanced down at his choice—dark blue trousers and a white checkered shirt. "What's wrong with this?"

Anvika smirked. "It's too formal. You look like a bank manager, not a doctor."

Sanjeev raised an eyebrow. "And what do you suggest, fashion expert?"

She stepped forward, rummaged through his wardrobe, and pulled out a navy blue polo T-shirt. “This. You’ll look more handsome and approachable.”

Sanjeev chuckled. “So, the goal is to look *approachable*?”

Sanjeev took the shirt and changed into it, adjusting the collar as he glanced at Anvika for approval.

She smiled. “Much better.”

As he slipped on his watch and reached for his shoes, Anvika’s expression turned serious. “Listen, Sanjeev... don’t overexert yourself today. You’re still not fully fit.”

Sanjeev sighed. “I’ll be fine, Anvika. I can’t keep sitting at home forever.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Fine, but *no* gym for a week. You need to let your body heal properly.”

Sanjeev grinned, stepping closer and placing his hands on her waist. “You love nagging me, don’t you?”

Anvika gave him a playful push. “It’s not nagging, it’s *caring*.”

He pulled her back into a gentle hug. “And I love how much you care.”

Anvika blushed slightly but maintained her firm tone. “I’m serious, Sanjeev.”

Sanjeev nodded, pressing a soft kiss to her forehead. “Okay, doctor. No gym, no overexertion. Anything else?”

She tapped her chin. “Hmm... yes. Come home early. We’ll go to the hospital for your dressing.”

Sanjeev chuckled. “Yes, ma’am.”

A Change of Plans

As he picked up his car keys, Anvika’s eyes widened. “Wait. *Where* do you think you’re going with those?”

Sanjeev looked at her, confused. “To work?”

She marched over and snatched the keys from his hand. “You’re *not* driving. Your arm is still recovering.”

Sanjeev sighed. “Anvika, I can drive with one hand.”

“No arguments,” she said firmly, placing his phone in his hand instead. “Book a cab.”

Sanjeev exhaled in defeat and opened the app. “Fine, I’ll book a cab.”

Anvika smiled victoriously. “Good boy.”

As he confirmed the ride, he turned to her. “What about you? What’s your plan for the day?”

Anvika leaned against the table. “I have three days off, so I *was* planning to go to my parents’ house.”

Sanjeev looked at her curiously. “And now?”

She smirked. “Now, I’m staying here to fix up your house. It’s a total mess.”

Sanjeev laughed. “You’re staying here *just* to clean?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Well, *someone* has to do it.”

He shook his head. “I don’t deserve you.”

Anvika placed a hand on his cheek. “No, you don’t,” she teased, then added with a soft smile, “but I’m here anyway.”

A Goodbye Kiss

The cab honked outside. Sanjeev grabbed his bag and turned to Anvika. “I should go.”

Anvika stepped forward, adjusting the collar of his shirt. “Remember, no overexertion.”

Sanjeev rolled his eyes. “You’re sending me to work, not a battlefield.”

Anvika ignored his sarcasm and tiptoed to press a lingering kiss on his lips. “Take care,” she whispered.

Sanjeev smiled, brushing a strand of hair from her face. “I will.”

With that, he walked out the door, but his mind wasn't just on work.

As he got into the cab, his destination wasn't just the hospital.

He needed to see Janki.

Sanjeev stepped out of the cab and turned to the driver. “Wait for me here. I'll be back in a while,” he said, slipping a hundred-rupee note into the man's hand as a tip. The driver nodded, adjusting his seat to get comfortable while waiting.

Taking a deep breath, Sanjeev walked toward the hospital entrance, his heart pounding slightly. He had come here with a purpose, but now that he was just steps away from seeing Janki, an unease settled over him. He hadn't prepared himself for this conversation.

As he entered the waiting area, he spotted Janki sitting alone on a bench, her fingers absentmindedly playing with the corner of her dupatta. She looked lost in thought, her gaze unfocused. But when he approached, she seemed to sense his presence and looked up.

Their eyes met, and for a moment, time stood still. There was no smile, no instant greeting—just a quiet exchange of emotions neither of them voiced. Sanjeev hesitated before sitting down beside her.

A Silent Tension

A tense silence stretched between them, heavy and unspoken. It was Janki who finally broke it.

“How have you been?” she asked softly.

Her voice was gentle, but there was something behind her words—something that told Sanjeev she already knew things had changed.

He swallowed, unsure of how to respond. The weight of everything—Goa, their moments together, and now Anvika—pressed against his chest. He knew he couldn't hide the truth from her for long.

Before he could say anything, Janki spoke again.

Janki's Confession

"I've been thinking about Goa a lot," she said, her voice laced with nostalgia. "How perfect it felt. How real it seemed. I miss it, Sanjeev. I miss you."

Sanjeev looked away for a moment, gathering his thoughts. He had expected this, but it didn't make it any easier.

"Do you?" she asked, tilting her head slightly. *"Do you miss it too?"*

Sanjeev took a deep breath. He had to be honest. This was the moment.

"Janki..." he started, but before he could finish, she raised her hand, stopping him.

"Don't say it," she whispered. *"Not if it's going to hurt me."*

His chest tightened. He had never seen her so vulnerable.

Janki's Husband is Recovering – But She's Unhappy

Janki let out a small sigh and looked down at her hands. *“My husband is getting better,”* she said flatly. *“The doctors say he's responding well to treatment.”*

Sanjeev studied her face. There was no happiness, no relief in her tone.

“That's good news, isn't it?” he asked gently.

She let out a dry chuckle. *“Maybe I wanted him to stay sick... so I'd have a reason to keep meeting you.”*

Sanjeev froze. He hadn't expected that.

She looked up at him then, eyes filled with emotions she couldn't put into words. *“I don't know what's wrong with me, Sanjeev. I should be happy that my husband is getting better. But all I feel is... lost.”*

Sanjeev exhaled slowly. He had always known Janki was emotionally fragile, but this was something else. He suddenly began to wonder—had what they shared in Goa been love? Or just an escape?

Anvika's Name Comes Up

Just as he was searching for the right words, Janki tilted her head slightly, studying him.

“Who is Anvika?” she asked suddenly.

Sanjeev's heart skipped a beat. *"What?"*

"Anvika," she repeated. *"I heard some of the hospital staff talking about her. And when they said her name, I saw the way your expression changed."*

Sanjeev felt his throat go dry.

Janki gave him a sad smile. *"She's the reason you don't look at me the same way anymore, isn't she?"*

Sanjeev felt trapped. No matter what he said next, someone would get hurt.

Before Sanjeev could respond to Janki's question, he noticed someone approaching them. Turning his head, he saw Subhash's brother walking toward them with a concerned yet relieved expression.

Janki immediately straightened up, wiping away the vulnerable look she had just moments ago. Sanjeev composed himself as well, knowing that this conversation would have to wait.

A Brief Interruption

"Sanjeev," Subhash's brother greeted him with folded hands. *"I wanted to thank you once again. My brother is getting better because of you."*

Sanjeev nodded with a polite smile. *"I'm really glad to hear that. It's a good sign that he's responding well to treatment. Make sure he follows all the instructions given by the doctors."*

"Yes, of course," Subhash's brother assured him. *"We are doing everything we can."*

There was a brief silence before he turned to Janki. *“Bhabhi, the doctor wants to discuss something about Subhash’s next course of treatment. Shall we go?”*

Janki hesitated for just a moment, then gave Sanjeev a final look—one that carried a thousand unspoken words—before nodding and walking away with Subhash’s brother.

Sanjeev watched her leave, feeling a strange mixture of relief and unease. He knew this conversation was far from over, but for now, it had been postponed.

Taking a deep breath, he turned around and walked out of the hospital. The cab driver was still waiting, just as he had instructed. Sanjeev slid into the back seat and exhaled.

“Office,” he told the driver.

As the cab pulled away, Sanjeev leaned back against the seat, closing his eyes for a moment. The morning had been far more emotionally exhausting than he had expected. And he knew that the real storm was yet to come.

An Unexpected Evening at the Hospital

Sanjeev leaned back in his office chair, staring at his phone. He had completely forgotten about the hospital visit Anvika had insisted on. He really didn’t want to go. The idea of stepping into that place again, with the possibility of running into Janki, made his stomach tighten.

He sighed and picked up his phone, dialing Anvika’s number. She picked up after just one ring.

“Yes, Sanjeev? You’re leaving the office?” she asked cheerfully.

“Anvika, listen... Can’t we just do the dressing at home? It’s just stitches. You can easily remove them, right?” he tried to reason with her.

There was silence for a moment, then came Anvika's firm response.

“No way, Mr. Overconfident! It's not just about removing stitches. The doctor needs to check if the wound has healed properly before we take them out. This can only be done at the hospital.”

Sanjeev groaned. **“Come on, Anvika. I really don't—”**

“No arguments! I'll take an auto and meet you at the hospital. You come straight from your office.”

With that, she hung up before he could protest any further. Sanjeev ran a hand through his hair. There was no way out. He had to go.

As he booked a cab, uneasy thoughts started swirling in his mind.

“What if Janki is still at the hospital? What if she sees Anvika? What if Anvika sees her? What if—”

He shook his head, trying to push away the thoughts. There was no point overthinking. He had no choice but to go.

At the Hospital – The Sutures are Removed

Sanjeev reached the hospital and found Anvika already waiting for him near the entrance, her arms crossed. She immediately grabbed his hand and pulled him towards the dressing room.

“You really tried to skip this, didn't you?” she scolded him playfully.

“Guilty as charged,” he smirked.

Inside the dressing room, a few nurses were standing around, chatting. As soon as they saw Anvika, they started teasing her.

“Look at you, Anvika! Coming to the hospital even on your off day. Looks like someone is madly in love.” one of them grinned.

“We always knew you’d end up with a handsome young guy, but we didn’t expect you to be this committed!” another nurse added, winking at Sanjeev.

Anvika rolled her eyes. **“Oh, stop it, you guys! I’m just here to make sure he gets proper treatment. That’s all.”**

_“Yeah, yeah. ‘Proper treatment.’ We understand.” One of them giggled.

Sanjeev smirked. **“At least someone here cares about me.”**

Anvika shot him a look but couldn’t hide her smile.

She carefully removed his sutures, making sure he wasn’t in pain. Despite her professional attitude, there was a softness in her touch that Sanjeev couldn’t ignore. Once she was done, she applied fresh dressing and stood back.

“There, all done! Now, you need to rest properly.”

Sanjeev stretched his arm slightly, testing it.

“Great! Now, let’s go out for dinner.”

Anvika frowned. **“Dinner? No, you need to go home and rest.”**

Sanjeev pouted. **“Come on, Anvika. I’ve been stuck in the office all day, then here at the hospital. Let’s go somewhere nice, have good food, and relax.”**

She sighed. **“Sanjeev, you just got your stitches removed! I swear, you never listen to me.”**

Sanjeev gave her a boyish grin. **“That’s because I know exactly how to convince you.”**

Anvika shook her head, defeated. **“I don’t know how you do it, but you always make me say yes to things I don’t want to do.”**

He chuckled and held her hand. **“That’s the magic of Sanjeev.”**

Rolling her eyes but unable to suppress a smile, Anvika finally agreed.

“Fine! But we’re not staying out too late. You need rest.”

“Whatever you say, Doctor Anvika,” he teased, making her playfully hit his arm as they walked out of the hospital together.

An Evening of Elegance and Unspoken Emotions

As Sanjeev and Anvika stepped out of the hospital, the golden hues of the setting sun bathed the city in a warm glow. The air was crisp, carrying with it the distant hum of traffic and the

occasional laughter of passersby. A soft breeze lifted a few strands of Anvika's hair, making them dance around her face.

Sanjeev stole a glance at her, and for a moment, he was captivated. The evening light accentuated her beauty—her deep brown eyes reflecting the fading sunlight, her lips curved into a slight, content smile. She was wearing a simple yet elegant outfit, a deep maroon kurti that complemented her radiant complexion. She looked effortlessly beautiful, the kind of beauty that didn't need any embellishment.

Sanjeev, too, looked dashing in his crisp white shirt, sleeves rolled up just enough to give him a casual yet sophisticated look. His well-built frame, sharp jawline, and slightly ruffled hair made him stand out. Anvika noticed how effortlessly charming he looked, and for a brief moment, she felt a surge of pride that he was hers.

But amidst this beauty, there was an underlying tension within Sanjeev. His eyes darted around, scanning the hospital compound. He was afraid of running into Janki. *If she sees us together... if she says something in front of Anvika... how will I handle it?* But luck was on his side. Janki was nowhere in sight. A quiet sigh of relief escaped his lips as they reached the parking area, where a cab was already waiting for them.

A Ride Through the Glowing City

As they settled into the cab, Sanjeev gave the driver an address—his favorite restaurant, a place where he had spent many evenings unwinding with a glass of wine.

The city outside was alive with the charm of the evening. Streetlights flickered on, casting a golden glow on the roads. The gentle hum of moving vehicles, the laughter of couples walking hand in hand, and the faint aroma of street food filled the air. The cab moved past beautifully lit buildings, and the reflection of neon signs shimmered on the car windows.

Inside the cab, a comfortable silence settled between them. Sanjeev's fingers brushed lightly against Anvika's hand, almost unintentionally. But instead of pulling away, she intertwined her fingers with his, squeezing them gently. Their eyes met—a silent conversation passed between them. There was warmth, understanding, and something deeper, something unspoken.

Anvika smiled softly. **“What?”** she asked, tilting her head.

Sanjeev smirked. **“Nothing. Just wondering how I got so lucky.”**

Anvika rolled her eyes playfully but couldn't hide the blush that crept onto her cheeks.

The cab finally pulled up in front of the restaurant. Sanjeev stepped out first and then held the door open for Anvika. She took his hand as she stepped out, her fingers still resting in his for a brief second before she let go.

The waiter at the entrance greeted them with a polite smile. **“Welcome, Sir! Your usual table?”**

Sanjeev nodded. The waiter led them to a cozy corner table, tucked away from the crowd—a place Sanjeev had always preferred. The dim, golden lighting of the restaurant cast a soft glow over everything, making it feel even more intimate.

As they settled in, Anvika picked up the menu, glancing through it.

They took some time in deciding the order.

They finally decided on their orders—

- **For Sanjeev:** Grilled salmon with garlic butter sauce, a side of mashed potatoes, and a fresh garden salad.
- **For Anvika:** Spaghetti Alfredo with mushrooms and a side of garlic bread.

As the waiter took their order and walked away, another one approached with a wine menu.

“Sir, would you like to order the usual bottle of Château Margaux?”

Sanjeev shook his head. **“No wine today. Just plain water.”**

Anvika raised an eyebrow. **“No whiskey, no wine? This is surprising.”**

Sanjeev smiled. **“Yeah... I guess I just don’t feel like drinking anymore.”**

Anvika leaned forward slightly, her eyes studying him. **“And smoking? You’ve completely stopped that too?”**

Sanjeev nodded. **“Yeah, I don’t even feel the urge anymore.”**

Anvika was genuinely amazed. **“That’s rare, you know? Most people give up quitting in just a few days. I’ve seen so many struggle with it.”**

Sanjeev shrugged, a playful smirk on his lips. **“Maybe I found something—or someone—more addictive than smoking.”**

Anvika laughed, shaking her head. **“You and your cheesy lines!”**

The waiter returned once more, just to double-check. **“Sir, are you sure you don’t want any wine? It’s your favorite.”**

Sanjeev remained firm. **“Just water, please.”**

The waiter nodded and left, leaving Anvika to look at him with admiration. **“You’ve really changed, haven’t you?”** she murmured.

Sanjeev held her gaze, his voice soft yet firm. **“Maybe I just found a better reason to be a better man.”**

Their food finally arrived, filling the air with delicious aromas. As they ate, the dim candlelight flickered, casting a soft glow on Anvika’s face. Sanjeev couldn’t help but admire her. The way the warm lighting danced on her skin, the way her eyes sparkled every time she laughed—it was mesmerizing.

“Why are you staring at me?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

Sanjeev smiled. **“Just appreciating the view.”**

Anvika rolled her eyes but blushed again.

They ate slowly, savouring the food and each other’s company. There were occasional bursts of laughter, soft murmurs, and playful teasing. It was a perfect evening—simple, intimate, and filled with a quiet kind of happiness.

Little did they know, outside the restaurant, a pair of familiar eyes had just spotted them.

A Deep Conversation (Sanjeev Opens Up More to Anvika)

As the waiter clears their plates, replacing them with a small bowl of kulfi drizzled with rose syrup—Anvika’s favorite—she leans forward slightly, resting her chin on her hand. The dim golden lighting of the restaurant reflects in her eyes, making them shine with curiosity.

“Sanjeev,” she says playfully, scooping a bite of the kulfi. “You know so much about me now, but I feel like I hardly know anything about your past. Before we met, what was your life like?”

Sanjeev picks up his spoon, stirring the dessert absentmindedly, buying himself time. “It was... different,” he says finally, giving her a small smile. “Busy. Routine. I never really thought about slowing down or enjoying small moments like this.”

Anvika tilts her head. “No serious relationships?”

Sanjeev hesitates for a fraction of a second before shaking his head lightly. “Nothing that lasted,” he says carefully. “I had my share of... connections, but I never really let anyone in too deep. Maybe I was too focused on work, or maybe I was just waiting for the right person.”

Anvika watches him closely, sensing that there’s more he’s not saying. She doesn’t press, but a flicker of doubt crosses her mind. There was something in his voice—like he was holding back a part of himself.

“So, I’m the one who finally broke through that wall of yours?” she teases, trying to keep the conversation light.

Sanjeev chuckles, nodding. “Yeah, you could say that.” He reaches for her hand across the table, squeezing it gently. “You came in and changed everything, Anvika.”

She smiles, squeezing his hand back. But deep inside, a small voice whispers—*What is he not telling me?*

After finishing their dinner, Sanjeev pulls out his wallet, settling the bill and leaving a generous tip for the waiter. The waiter, familiar with Sanjeev’s usual preferences, thanks him and smiles knowingly.

“Sir, no wine today?” he asks.

Sanjeev shakes his head with a small smirk. “Not today. I have viral fever. I haven’t quit drinking—next time, I’ll definitely have my favorite wine.”

The waiter nods, stepping back as Sanjeev and Anvika leave the restaurant. The cool night air greets them as they step into the waiting cab. Anvika snuggles close to Sanjeev in the backseat, resting her head on his shoulder.

The ride home is peaceful until, just as they step out of the cab, Anvika notices the fading wound on Sanjeev’s forearm. “I never asked you... how did you get this?” she inquires, running her fingers lightly over the scar.

Sanjeev exhales and replies casually, “Fell from a motorcycle.”

Anvika’s eyes widen in excitement. “Motorcycles? Wow! I love motorcycles!” She grins at him. “Where is yours?”

Sanjeev chuckles. “I don’t own one. I just rent whenever I feel like riding.”

As they step into the elevator, Anvika is still buzzing with excitement. “Tell me about the accident!”

Sanjeev leans against the wall, giving her a smirk. “It was in Goa. I had taken an extra dose of pheny and revved the engine a little too hard. A car suddenly cut in front of me, and bam—I crashed.”

He pauses for a second before adding, “Janki was on the rear seat.”

The name slips out so effortlessly that even he doesn’t realize it at first. But as soon as he does, something tightens in his chest. *Why did I say that?*

Anvika doesn't react. Maybe she didn't catch it. Maybe she thought she misheard. But deep inside, a faint flicker of doubt stirs within her.

When they reach his apartment, Sanjeev unlocks the door and steps inside—only to pause in surprise. The place looks immaculate. His once-messy living room is now perfectly arranged. The floor is spotless, the furniture dust-free, and even his bookshelf, which he never cared about, looks organized.

“You did all this in one day?” he asks, looking at Anvika with admiration.

She smirks. “I had to. Your house looked like a war zone.”

Sanjeev sighs, rubbing the back of his neck. “You know, I just wanted to watch Netflix and relax for a bit.”

Anvika crosses her arms. “No way. You're still recovering. You need to rest.” She grabs his wrist and pulls him toward the bedroom.

Sanjeev groans. “I'm tired of being treated like a patient! First, my elbow injury, now this fever. I don't even feel like myself anymore. I miss my old life—working like hell, hitting the gym, sipping whiskey, and stuffing myself with junk food at night.”

Anvika rolls her eyes. “Wow, what a healthy lifestyle. And you wonder why you're always getting sick?”

Sanjeev chuckles but doesn't argue. As they settle into bed, Anvika snuggles close to him, her warmth soothing his frustration. Their faces are inches apart, their breaths mingling in the dim glow of the bedside lamp.

She traces gentle fingers down his jawline, looking into his eyes. “Sanjeev, you're impossible, you know that?”

“That’s why you love me,” he murmurs, pulling her closer.

Their lips meet, slow and tender at first, then deepening into something more passionate. Sanjeev wraps his arms around her, feeling the softness of her body against his. For a few moments, nothing else matters—just them, lost in the warmth of each other’s embrace.

But exhaustion soon catches up with him. His body, still recovering, gives in to the comfort of her arms, and he drifts into sleep.

Anvika, however, stays awake. Her fingers lightly trace over his chest as she watches him breathe. There’s a peacefulness in his face, but something gnaws at her mind.

Janki.

That name. The way he said it. It was so natural, too natural. She hadn’t reacted at the time, but now, lying beside him, it echoes in her mind.

Sanjeev was hiding something. She could feel it.

She didn’t know what it was, but a small part of her was afraid—afraid that whatever it was, it might change everything.

With a quiet sigh, she rests her head against his shoulder, closing her eyes. For now, she wouldn’t push. But sooner or later, she would have to find out.

Chapter 10: Restless in Silence

Sanjeev woke up feeling surprisingly fresh. For the first time in days, there was no heaviness in his head, no dull ache in his body. The fever was gone, and his energy had returned. Stretching his arms, he glanced at Anvika, still curled up under the sheets, her hair cascading across the pillow in soft waves. A smile tugged at his lips as he carefully got out of bed, not wanting to wake her.

He walked to the kitchen, the familiar aroma of coffee filling the air as he prepared his usual black coffee. Just as he lifted the steaming mug to his lips, he felt a pair of warm arms wrap around his waist from behind. A soft kiss landed on the side of his neck.

“Good morning, handsome,” Anvika whispered, her voice still heavy with sleep.

Sanjeev chuckled. “Good morning, doctor. Seems like your treatment worked—I feel completely fit today.”

Anvika rested her chin on his shoulder, her breath warm against his skin. “Of course, my treatment works. Now, let me get my coffee too.” She stepped away, pulling her hair into a messy bun as she moved towards the coffee maker.

Once her cup was ready, both of them walked to the balcony and settled into their chairs. The morning air was crisp and carried the faint scent of wet earth, as if it had rained lightly during the night. The city stretched out before them, bathed in the golden hues of the rising sun. Birds chirped from nearby trees, their melodies blending harmoniously with the distant sounds of early morning traffic. The gentle breeze rustled the leaves of the potted plants Anvika had arranged neatly in one corner of the balcony.

Sanjeev took a sip of his coffee, exhaling deeply. “Mornings like these make life feel perfect,” he murmured.

Anvika smiled, tucking her legs beneath her on the chair. “Yeah, but they don’t last forever. Today, I have to go visit my parents.”

Sanjeev’s relaxed expression shifted. “What? You’re leaving me alone so soon?”

Anvika laughed. “I haven’t seen them in a long time, and I only have two days before my night shifts start. After that, I won’t get a chance to visit them for the next ten days.”

Sanjeev sighed dramatically. “Still, do you have to go today? Can’t you stay just a little longer?”

Anvika playfully nudged him. “Nope. But I promise, I won’t be gone for too long.”

Sanjeev leaned back, pretending to think. “Fine. But on one condition.”

Anvika raised an eyebrow. “What condition?”

“A good kiss before you leave.”

Anvika rolled her eyes but leaned forward, brushing her lips against his. “There, happy now?”

“Very.”

A little while later, she got ready to leave. Standing at the door, she looked effortlessly beautiful—dressed in a simple white top and faded blue jeans, her hair falling in soft waves over her shoulders. Her natural beauty needed no effort; it was in the way she carried herself, in her warm smile, in the way her eyes sparkled when she looked at him.

Just as she was about to step out, Sanjeev pulled her into one last hug, pressing a lingering kiss on her forehead. “Take care. Call me when you reach.”

“I will,” she promised, smiling as she walked out the door.

As soon as she was gone, the apartment felt strangely quiet. Sanjeev sat on the sofa, his fingers tracing the rim of his coffee mug absentmindedly. His thoughts wandered back to everything that had happened in the last few weeks.

Janki. Anvika. Two different women. Two different kinds of love.

When his affair with Janki began, he had felt an electrifying thrill, an escape from the ordinary. But then, things took an unexpected turn, and before he knew it, Anvika had entered his life. With her, things felt different—softer, steadier. Yet, deep down, he knew there was a storm waiting to break.

At least Janki now knew the truth about Anvika. That part was over.

But Anvika... she still had no idea.

Sanjeev leaned back into the plush sofa, staring at the ceiling fan as it spun lazily above him. The apartment was quiet—too quiet. The absence of Anvika’s soft laughter and her gentle presence made him feel strangely restless. He took a deep breath and let his mind drift back to Goa, to those intoxicating days with Janki.

He could still feel the warmth of the sun on his skin, the salty breeze from the sea tangling in Janki’s hair as they rode the motorcycle down winding coastal roads. He remembered the way she clung to him, pressing her face against his back, laughing carelessly as if they had all the time in the world. The stolen kisses, the nights spent tangled in each other’s arms, the way she looked at him as if he was the only man that existed—all of it felt so real back then. But was it love? Or was it just an escape, a momentary illusion fueled by the thrill of secrecy and the rush of something forbidden?

And then, there was Anvika.

Anvika, who had walked into his life when he wasn't looking for anything, yet somehow, she had settled in as if she belonged there all along. With her, everything felt different. There was no urgency, no reckless passion, no fear of losing something before even having it. Instead, there was warmth, comfort, and a deep connection that he hadn't expected. It wasn't just attraction—it was something more. A sense of peace he hadn't felt in a long time.

But the truth lingered like a storm cloud above him.

Janki knew. Anvika didn't. And the longer he hid the truth, the harder it would be when it eventually came out.

Sanjeev sighed and ran a hand through his hair, feeling the weight of his choices pressing down on him. He knew he couldn't keep running from it.

But what was he supposed to do?

Sanjeev's gaze drifted toward his laptop, resting on the coffee table. He suddenly remembered that he had asked his junior to prepare some data for him. Stretching his arm, he grabbed the laptop, flipped it open, and placed it on his lap. As the screen lit up, he navigated to his inbox and found the email he had been waiting for.

Clicking it open, he scanned through the detailed reports and figures. Soon, all thoughts of Janki and Anvika faded into the background as his analytical mind took over. His fingers moved swiftly across the keyboard as he replied to a few emails, making notes and corrections where necessary. He then compiled a brief summary and forwarded it to his senior before closing the laptop with a satisfied sigh.

Just as he was about to get ready, his phone buzzed on the table. A smile unconsciously formed on his lips when he saw Anvika's name on the screen.

"Hey, you reached?" he answered, his voice soft.

“Yes! I just got here a while ago.” Anvika’s cheerful voice came through. “And I’m already missing you.”

Sanjeev chuckled. “It’s just a day, Anvika. You’ll survive.”

“I don’t know... It already feels weird being away,” she sighed dramatically. “I was just telling my mom about you.”

“Oh? And what did you tell her?”

“That you’re a very bad patient who doesn’t listen,” she teased. “She laughed and said I’m already acting like a wife.”

Sanjeev smirked, enjoying the teasing tone in her voice. “Maybe because you are. You take more care of me than I do myself.”

“Exactly! Which is why I’m reminding you again—don’t overwork yourself today. You’re still recovering.”

“I’m feeling completely fine now,” he assured her. “Thanks to your excellent nursing skills.”

“Good! But still, take it easy, okay? No skipping meals, no overexertion.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said playfully.

Anvika giggled. “Okay, I’ll let you go now. Call me if you need anything.”

“I will. You enjoy your time with your family.”

They exchanged a few more words before hanging up. Sanjeev stared at his phone for a moment, thinking about how much both Anvika and Janki cared for him. Despite the complications, he was lucky to have two women who genuinely loved him. But love, he knew, wasn't just about receiving—it was about choosing. And soon, he would have to make a choice.

Shaking the thoughts away, he got up and got dressed in his usual work attire. He ran his fingers through his hair, checked his watch, and grabbed his car keys from the key holder.

As he stepped out of his apartment building, the crisp morning air greeted him. The sun was now fully up, casting golden hues across the sky. The fresh scent of morning flowers mixed with the distant aroma of chai from a roadside stall. Birds chirped in the distance, and the city was slowly coming to life.

Near the gate, the security guard spotted him and gave him a broad smile.

“Good morning, sir,” the guard greeted.

“Morning,” Sanjeev replied with a nod.

“How is Subhash now? Is he doing better?” the guard asked, genuine concern in his voice.

“Yes, he's improving,” Sanjeev said. “Still under observation, but the doctors are optimistic.”

The guard let out a relieved sigh. “That's good to hear. We were all worried about him. He's a good man.”

Sanjeev nodded. “Yes, he is. Hopefully, he'll be back home soon.”

The guard smiled warmly. “That’s great, sir. Have a good day at work.”

“You too,” Sanjeev said before heading to the parking complex.

He pulled out his car keys, unlocked the door, and slid into the driver’s seat. The engine roared to life with a smooth purr. He adjusted the rearview mirror, took a deep breath, and steered out of the parking lot.

As he drove through the streets, the beauty of the morning sun captivated him. The golden light spilled over the high-rise buildings, casting long shadows on the roads. The trees lining the streets swayed gently, their leaves glistening with dewdrops. The city was a mixture of calm and energy—shopkeepers opening their stores, joggers taking their morning runs, and children waiting for their school buses.

Soon, he reached his office. Parking his car in his usual spot, he stepped out and walked briskly toward the entrance. As soon as he entered his cabin, he dived into work. A new project had started, and he was completely engrossed in it. Meetings, reports, discussions—the hours flew by in a blur.

By the time he glanced at his watch again, it was already evening.

Sanjeev walked out of the office, loosening his tie slightly as he stepped into the evening air. The sky had begun its transition to dusk, painted in soft hues of orange and pink. As he reached his car, he instinctively thought of visiting Janki at the hospital.

But then, logic intervened. If he kept showing up too often, her relatives might start wondering about his presence. He had already visited her multiple times, and though no one had questioned him yet, he didn’t want to draw unnecessary attention. With a sigh, he decided against it and got into his car, steering it toward his apartment.

The streets were bustling as usual, but inside his car, there was an odd sense of emptiness. No calls from Anvika, no urgent messages from work—just the steady hum of the engine and the faint sound of music playing on the radio. He turned into his apartment complex and parked his car in his usual spot.

Stepping out, he stretched his arms slightly, feeling the fatigue from the long day at work. The building's entrance was quiet except for the distant murmur of neighbours chatting on their balconies. He swiped his keycard, entered the elevator, and pressed the button for his floor. As the elevator doors slid open, he walked down the familiar hallway, pulled out his keys, and unlocked the door.

The apartment was silent. Too silent.

Sanjeev switched on the lights and placed his keys on the holder. He walked over to the sofa and sank into it, rubbing his temples. His gaze wandered around the room—everything was perfectly arranged, thanks to Anvika. The cushions were neatly placed, the floor spotless, and even his books and papers were stacked more orderly than he would have ever kept them.

A strange emptiness settled over him.

Janki was in the hospital. Anvika was at her parents' home. And for the first time in weeks, he was alone. Completely alone.

He leaned back against the sofa, exhaling deeply. He had been so caught up in the whirlwind of emotions, love, and complications that he had forgotten what solitude felt like. Now that he had it, he wasn't sure he liked it.

A Moment of Restlessness

As Sanjeev sat on the sofa, his fingers drummed lightly on the armrest. The silence, which initially felt unfamiliar, now started to feel unsettling. He picked up his phone, stared at the blank screen for a moment, and considered calling Anvika—but she was with her parents. Calling Janki was out of the question.

He sighed, got up, and walked to the balcony. The city lights flickered in the distance, the cool breeze brushing against his face. A part of him felt relief—no complicated conversations, no emotional confrontations. Yet, another part of him felt restless, as if something was missing.

His mind wandered back to the past few weeks, how drastically his life had changed. From the passionate affair with Janki to the comforting presence of Anvika—both women had become deeply woven into his life. But for how long could he keep this up?

Sanjeev ran a hand through his hair and muttered under his breath, **“I need to clear my head.”**

With that thought, he turned back inside, grabbed his keys again, and decided to take a late-night drive. Maybe, just maybe, the empty roads would bring him some clarity.

His phone suddenly rang with the familiar name flashing on the screen made him smile—Anvika.

He picked up the call, and before he could even say hello, Anvika’s playful but concerned voice came through.

“Sanjeev, what are you doing?” she asked, her voice carrying the warmth he had grown so used to.

“Nothing much. Just sitting around, feeling a little restless,” Sanjeev replied.

“Restless? What do you mean?” she questioned.

Sanjeev hesitated for a second, then said, **“I was thinking of taking a lazy drive to that old Dhaba near the university. You know, the place where I and my friends used to hang out when we were freshers.”**

There was a brief silence on the other end. Then came Anvika’s scolding.

“Are you serious, Sanjeev? You just recovered from fever, and now you’re planning a long drive? Do you even know what rest means?”

Sanjeev chuckled. **“Come on, Anvika. It’s just a short drive, nothing serious. I’m feeling fine now.”**

“You always say that! But your body needs proper rest. I can’t believe you! If I were there, I would have made you lie down and covered you with a blanket,” she said, her tone firm but affectionate.

Sanjeev smirked. **“Oh really? That’s tempting. But in your absence, what do I do?”**

“Stay at home, eat properly, and get some rest. Please, Sanjeev. Don’t make me worry,” she pleaded softly.

Sanjeev sighed, shaking his head with a smile. **“Fine, fine. I surrender. I won’t go anywhere. I’ll just relax at home.”**

“Good boy,” Anvika teased. **“Now promise me you won’t do anything reckless.”**

“I promise,” he said, playing along.

“Alright. Now order something good for dinner, and no skipping meals!” she added.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said in mock obedience.

Anvika giggled. **“I miss you already.”**

Sanjeev's heart warmed at her words. **“Me too. But you enjoy your time with your parents. We'll meet soon.”**

After exchanging a few more words of affection, Anvika finally hung up.

Sanjeev put the phone down and stretched. As much as he had wanted to go out, he had to admit—Anvika was right. He needed to take it easy.

He picked up his phone again, scrolled through a food delivery app, and ordered himself a meal—some butter chicken, naan, and a small portion of dal tadka, his comfort food.

Then, without a second thought, he walked to the cabinet, poured himself a glass of whisky, and settled back on the sofa. The ice cubes clinked softly as he swirled the glass in his hand.

With a deep sigh, he picked up the remote and scrolled through Netflix, finally settling on an old action movie he had watched a dozen times before. The familiarity of it felt comforting.

As he sipped his drink, the weight of the past few weeks settled on him. Janki. Anvika. The emotional turmoil. The lies. The decisions he still had to make. But for tonight, he decided to put all those thoughts aside.

For tonight, it was just whisky, good food, and a movie.

And for the first time in weeks, Sanjeev allowed himself to simply exist.

Chapter 11: The Road to Redemption

The soft morning light filtered through the curtains, casting a warm glow over the room as Sanjeev slowly opened his eyes. Unlike the past few days, there was no lingering fatigue, no heaviness in his body. He felt fresh, energized, and ready to take on the day.

Stretching his arms above his head, he got out of bed and made his way to the kitchen. The familiar ritual of brewing his black coffee had become a source of comfort. As the rich aroma filled the air, he took his favorite mug, poured himself a steaming cup, and took the first satisfying sip.

With the coffee in hand, he walked over to the sofa and flipped open his laptop. The screen lit up, and within seconds, his inbox was flooded with emails. He quickly scanned through them, searching for updates regarding the 10 a.m. meeting. The project had been progressing well, and today's discussion was crucial. He had some fresh ideas to present, and for the first time in weeks, he felt genuinely excited about his work.

As he reviewed the presentation, a fleeting thought crossed his mind—**Janki**. He hadn't seen her since the last time at the hospital. The urge to check on her was strong, but he quickly dismissed it. He couldn't afford to be late today. His work came first.

Setting his laptop aside, Sanjeev got up and went to the wardrobe. He carefully picked out his outfit for the day—a crisp white shirt, well-fitted navy blue trousers, and a sleek black blazer. The combination was classic, making him look both authoritative and effortlessly stylish. He completed the look with polished brown leather shoes and his favorite watch—a gift from his father.

As he stood before the mirror, adjusting his collar, he felt a sense of confidence washing over him. **No distractions today. Just work.**

Grabbing his laptop bag, he stepped out of his apartment, locking the door behind him. The fresh morning air greeted him as he made his way to the parking lot. On his way, the security guard gave him a warm smile.

“Good morning, sir. How’s Subhash doing now?” the guard asked.

Sanjeev nodded, appreciating the man’s concern. **“He’s doing much better. The treatment is working well.”**

The guard beamed. **“That’s great to hear, sir. He’s lucky to have someone like you looking after him.”**

Sanjeev simply smiled, giving the man a polite nod before heading to his car. Sliding into the driver’s seat, he cranked the engine, feeling the gentle hum of the machine beneath his fingers.

The drive to the office was smooth, the roads bathed in the golden hues of the morning sun. A slight chill lingered in the air, making the weather perfect. He rolled down the window slightly, enjoying the crisp breeze against his face.

Upon reaching his office, he parked his car and made his way inside. The building was just starting to come alive with employees trickling in, but Sanjeev was among the first to arrive at the meeting room.

The long conference table was spotless, the large glass windows allowing ample sunlight to flood in. Sanjeev placed his laptop on the table, powered it on, and went through his presentation slides one last time. Everything was set. He was ready.

Leaning back in his chair, he adjusted his blazer and smirked slightly. **It was going to be a good day.**

The meeting had gone exceptionally well. Every team member contributed valuable insights, and Sanjeev’s inputs, in particular, had been well-received. His ideas sparked a meaningful discussion, and even the boss, Mrs. Khanna, nodded in approval multiple times.

As the meeting wrapped up, Mrs. Khanna, a woman known for her sharp intellect and authoritative presence, looked at Sanjeev with a small smile. **“Sanjeev, I need to see you in my cabin,”** she said, her voice firm yet polite.

A sudden hush fell over the room. All eyes turned toward Sanjeev. The unspoken tension was almost palpable. **Mrs. Khanna never called anyone of Sanjeev’s level to her cabin unless it was for something significant—like a promotion.**

Sanjeev could feel the weight of his colleagues’ stares. Some looked at him with admiration, some with envy, and others exchanged knowing glances, silently confirming what they all suspected—this was a big moment.

Trying to maintain his composure, Sanjeev nodded and stood up, buttoning his blazer. He walked out of the conference room with steady steps, but inside, his heart pounded with anticipation.

As Sanjeev stepped into Mrs. Khanna’s office, he couldn’t help but admire the grandeur of the space. **The room was a masterpiece of modern corporate elegance.**

A massive, polished mahogany desk stood in the centre, its surface gleaming under the soft glow of designer lamps. Behind it, a high-backed leather chair gave an air of authority. **Floor-to-ceiling glass windows lined the entire left side of the office, offering a breathtaking view of the city skyline.** The skyscrapers stretched endlessly, bathed in the golden morning light.

To the right, a luxurious seating area with plush white couches and a glass coffee table added a touch of warmth to the otherwise powerful setting. On the walls, framed awards and recognition adorned the space, a testament to Mrs. Khanna’s success.

She gestured for Sanjeev to take a seat in front of her desk. **“Make yourself comfortable,”** she said with a warm but professional smile.

No sooner had he sat down than Mrs. Khanna's personal assistant walked in, carrying a tray with a single cup of coffee. **Black coffee.** Sanjeev smiled inwardly. His boss knew him too well.

The PA placed the cup in front of him, and before he could even take a sip, Mrs. Khanna slid a white envelope across the desk toward him.

“Congratulations, Sanjeev,” she said, her voice carrying a rare softness.

Sanjeev looked at the envelope, his fingers hesitating for a moment before picking it up. As he pulled out the neatly folded document inside, his eyes scanned the words. His breath hitched.

It was a promotion order.

His hard work, his dedication, and all those long hours had finally paid off.

Mrs. Khanna leaned forward slightly, her eyes filled with something deeper than just professional encouragement. **“Sanjeev, you have always been an asset to this company. Your dedication speaks for itself. And just as you've solved challenges here with clarity and resilience, I believe you will do the same in your personal life.”**

Sanjeev looked up at her, surprised. There was a knowing glint in her eyes, as if she understood more than she was letting on.

“Things are taking a positive turn.” she added, a small, almost mysterious smile playing on her lips.

Before Sanjeev could respond, she glanced at her watch and stood up. **“I have another meeting to attend. Take your time, enjoy your coffee and take a day off for today. Enjoy your day”**

She gave him a final nod before walking out of the office, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

A Moment of Triumph and Reflection

Sanjeev sat there, holding the promotion order in one hand and his coffee cup in the other. He took a slow sip, letting the rich bitterness fill his senses.

This was a moment of victory. A moment that should have been purely joyful. Yet, amidst his happiness, a quiet thought lingered in the back of his mind—**his personal life was still a tangled web.**

Still, as he gazed out the grand glass window, watching the city move below, he couldn't deny that for the first time in a long while, **he felt hopeful.**

(Final Chapter - Continued)

Sanjeev placed the promotion order neatly on the table, letting his fingers trace over the bold letters of his new designation. A proud smile played on his lips. **This was the moment he had worked so hard for.**

He reached into his pocket, pulled out his mobile phone, and quickly unlocked it. Without wasting another second, he tapped on WhatsApp and opened the chat with his father. His fingers moved swiftly over the keyboard as he typed:

“Papa, I’ve been promoted! Just got the official letter from Mrs. Khanna. I’ll call you in a few minutes. Love you!”

He hit send, leaned back in the chair, and exhaled deeply. His father would be proud. He could already imagine his old man's voice, full of pride, telling his mother and probably half the neighborhood about his son's achievement.

After a moment of letting the happiness sink in, he stood up, adjusted his blazer, and picked up the promotion order before heading toward the door. As soon as he stepped out of Mrs. Khanna's grand office, he was met with a sudden **burst of excitement**.

Mrs. Khanna's **PA had already spread the news, and the entire office floor was buzzing**. As soon as Sanjeev stepped out, a loud, collective **"Congratulations!"** echoed in the hallway.

Rohit, his closest colleague, was the first to rush toward him. He clapped a hand on Sanjeev's shoulder and grinned. **"Man, I knew this day was coming! You deserved this! But, bro, now you gotta throw us a party."**

"Definitely, party to banti hai!" chimed in Nisha, the lively HR manager, winking playfully. **"But let's not make it one of your boring, sit-down-and-discuss-work kind of parties."**

Sanjeev chuckled. **"Oh come on, I'm not that boring."**

Amit, the finance guy, folded his arms with a smirk. **"Well, you kind of are. But now that you've got a fancy new title, we'll let that slide."**

Everyone burst into laughter.

As more colleagues came forward to congratulate him, Riya, the soft-spoken marketing executive, shook his hand with a warm smile. **"We all knew you'd get here, Sanjeev. You set such high standards for all of us."**

Deepak, the senior IT guy, nodded. **"Yeah, man, you're making the rest of us look bad. Now Mrs. Khanna will expect everyone to work as hard as you!"**

A round of laughter followed, and Sanjeev couldn't help but shake his head. **“Come on, guys. Hard work pays off. You all know that.”**

“Yeah, yeah, corporate speech alert!” Rohit joked, rolling his eyes. **“But seriously, well done, dude.”**

Even **Mr. Sharma, the senior-most manager**, who was usually reserved, gave Sanjeev a nod of approval. **“I've seen a lot of people come and go in this office, but you, Sanjeev, are different. You have a fire in you. Keep it burning.”**

Sanjeev felt a deep sense of gratitude. These were the people he had spent years working with—**his second family**.

After all the congratulatory handshakes and pats on the back, the inevitable demand resurfaced.

“So, what's the plan for the party?” Amit asked, rubbing his hands together.

“Yeah, and don't even think about escaping,” Nisha added. **“We're expecting something grand.”**

Sanjeev smirked. **“Fine, fine. Give me some time to plan it out. It'll be on me.”**

A loud **“YES!”** erupted from the team, followed by playful cheers and applause.

As the excitement settled, Sanjeev took a step back and let his gaze sweep over the people around him.

He had started as a simple, ambitious man trying to make a name for himself. And today, standing there, surrounded by colleagues who respected and admired him, he realized how far he had come.

But amidst all this joy, there was still **one last thing he had to take care of—his personal life.**

With that thought in mind, he pulled out his phone again. **It was time to make an important call.**

After the cheerful celebration with his colleagues, Sanjeev needed a moment of peace. **The office floor was still buzzing with energy, but he quietly slipped away, weaving through the corridors until he reached one of his favorite spots—the rooftop terrace.**

It wasn't a grand space, but it had a charm of its own. **A few potted plants lined the edges, their leaves swaying gently in the cool breeze.** The glass railing provided a breathtaking view of the cityscape—tall buildings standing like silent giants under the golden morning sun. **The soft hum of distant traffic mixed with the occasional chirping of birds, creating a rare moment of tranquility amidst the corporate chaos.**

Sanjeev leaned against the railing, inhaled deeply, and let out a slow breath. **This was the perfect place to call his father.**

He pulled out his phone, scrolled to his father's number, and pressed 'Call.' **After just two rings, his father picked up.**

Father: *(Excitedly)* "Arre, Sanju! I was just about to call you back. Tell me, what's this big news?"

Sanjeev: *(Grinning)* "Papa, I've been promoted! I just received the official letter from Mrs. Khanna herself."

Father: (*A deep pause, then a warm, proud chuckle*) “Beta, I knew this day would come! I always told your mother, ‘Our son is destined for great things.’”

Sanjeev: (*Smiling*) “Well, your faith in me paid off, Papa.”

Father: “So, what’s the new designation?”

Sanjeev: “Senior Vice President of Operations.”

Father: (*Whistles*) “Wah! That’s no small title, Sanju. You’ve worked hard for this. Your mother will be over the moon when she hears this.”

Sanjeev: (*Chuckles*) “I know, she’ll probably tell every neighbour before I even finish this call.”

Father: (*Laughs*) “That’s for sure! But tell me, how do you feel?”

Sanjeev: (*Pauses for a moment*) “Honestly? It feels surreal, Papa. I’ve always wanted this, but now that it’s here... I don’t know, it makes me reflect on everything—how far I’ve come.”

Father: (*Gently*) “That’s a good thing, beta. Success is not just about reaching the top—it’s about remembering the journey. And you’ve had quite a journey.”

Sanjeev: (*Softly*) “Yeah... I have.”

Father: “And I hope, along with your work, you’re thinking about your personal life too. You can’t just keep winning at the office and ignoring the matters of the heart.”

Sanjeev: *(Sighs, but smiles)* “I know, Papa. I’m working on it.”

Father: *(Laughs)* “Good, good. Alright, enough emotional talk. Now, when are you coming home? Your mother will want a full celebration.”

Sanjeev: *(Chuckling)* “Soon, Papa. Very soon.”

A Moment of Reflection

After ending the call, Sanjeev slid the phone back into his pocket and leaned against the railing once more.

The city stretched before him, just as it had all these years. But today, it felt different.

He let himself drift into thoughts about his journey—the struggles, the late-night work sessions, the times he doubted himself, and the moments of pure triumph. He had built himself into the man he was today, one step at a time.

But his father’s words lingered in his mind.

“You can’t just keep winning at the office and ignoring the matters of the heart.”

Sanjeev exhaled deeply. **It was time to stop running from the personal battles he had left unresolved.**

And with that thought, he straightened up, adjusted his blazer, and headed back inside.

A Day to Celebrate

As Sanjeev stepped back into the office, a newfound energy coursed through him. **The air felt lighter, his steps more confident.** He wasn't just another employee today—he was the man of the hour.

With a playful grin, he clapped his hands together and announced, **“Ladies and gentlemen, I have some breaking news! Mrs. Khanna has officially granted me a day off to ‘enjoy the moment.’”**

A moment of silence. Then—

“Whaaat? A day off?” shouted Priya, the HR manager, her eyes widening in disbelief.

“Boss’s special treatment, huh?” teased Rohit, one of the senior managers, nudging Sanjeev’s shoulder.

“That means only one thing—party time!” Vikram, his closest colleague, declared, raising his hands like a victorious gladiator.

The entire office erupted in cheers and laughter. **A chorus of ‘Party! Party!’ filled the room as Sanjeev shook his head, pretending to be overwhelmed.**

Sanjeev (laughing): “Guys, guys! I’m not running away to throw a party just yet! I need to process all this first.”

Priya (smirking): “Process what? That you’re now our boss? Come on, don’t be shy, Mr. Senior Vice President!”

Rohit: “Yeah, and as our new leader, it is your moral responsibility to take us out for drinks!”

Sanjeev (raising an eyebrow): “Moral responsibility, huh? You guys are impossible.”

Vikram (grinning): “Look, you have two options. Either you take us out today, or we’ll all crash at your place tonight. Your choice.”

Sanjeev (laughing): “Oh, God! Fine, fine! Drinks on me this weekend, happy?”

Everyone (cheering): “Yesssss!!”

Sanjeev shook his head, **his heart light and his spirits high**. He had spent so many days buried in work, carrying the weight of personal dilemmas, but today—today felt different.

With a final wave and a mock salute to his teammates, **Sanjeev grabbed his blazer from his chair, adjusted his tie, and made his way towards the exit**.

“**Enjoy your day, boss!**” Priya called out.

“**Don’t forget our party!**” Vikram added.

Sanjeev turned around with a smirk. “**Like you guys will let me forget.**”

As he pushed open the glass doors, **the sunlight greeted him warmly, as if the universe itself was celebrating his success**.

He took in a deep breath.

This was it.

A new chapter was beginning—not just in his career but in his life.

Now, it was time to deal with everything else.

With that thought, Sanjeev put on his sunglasses, stepped into his car, and revved the engine.

Where to next? **He had an idea.**

A Nostalgic Pause

Sanjeev pulled his car into the familiar dusty parking lot of **Sharma Ji Ka Dhaba**, a place that had been a second home during his college days. The scent of **freshly fried pakoras, strong masala chai, and the faint whiff of tobacco** lingered in the air, pulling him back to the carefree years of youth.

As he stepped out, **Chotu**, the ever-enthusiastic server, caught sight of him and ran inside, shouting, **“Arey Sharma ji! Dekho kaun aaya hai!”**

Within seconds, **Mr. Sharma himself emerged from behind the counter.** The old man, now slightly grayer but still just as lively, wiped his hands on his apron and squinted at Sanjeev.

“Oye Sanju? Tu din ke time yahaan? Aur akela?” Sharma Ji asked, his eyes twinkling with recognition and surprise.

Sanjeev smiled, feeling an odd comfort in hearing his old nickname again. **“Haan Sharma Ji, socha aaj nostalgia wali chai pee loon.”**

Before another word was exchanged, **Chotu rushed out with a chilled beer bottle, grinning. “Lo bhaiya, aapke liye!”**

Sanjeev chuckled, shaking his head. **“Chotu, tu abhi bhi nahi sudhra? Ab main drink and drive nahi karta.”** He patted the young man on the shoulder. **“Lekin kisi din cab leke zaroor aayunga.”**

Mr. Sharma let out a hearty laugh. **“Sahi keh raha hai beta, ye sudharna zaroori tha.”** He turned back towards the counter and added, **“Tere liye toh special chai main khud banaunga. Tu ja baith, main abhi laata hoon.”**

The Unique Charm of Sharma Ji’s Dhaba

Sanjeev strolled toward his favorite **rickety wooden bench** in the corner, running his fingers over the rough edges of the table that had seen countless debates, laughter, and late-night plans.

The **dhaba was just as he remembered**—walls adorned with old, yellowing film posters, a buzzing fly here and there, and the soft hum of a cricket commentary playing on the radio.

A few people sitting around stole quick glances at him, their eyes flickering between his **sharp suit, polished shoes, and the expensive car parked outside. He clearly looked out of place, yet at home.**

Sanjeev caught one of the customers staring at him. The man, dressed in a simple kurta, nodded in acknowledgment. Sanjeev nodded back, amused at how his presence was making people curious.

He leaned back, watching as **Sharma Ji carefully prepared his tea.** It was an unspoken rule here—**no one else was allowed to make tea at this dhaba.** It was part of the charm, part of what made this place special.

Sanjeev took a deep breath, allowing the memories to wash over him.

This place had once been his **sanctuary**, a world far removed from the complexities of adulthood, of promotions, of tangled relationships.

And for now, just for this moment, it still was.

A Lonely Triumph

Sanjeev wrapped his hands around the hot **kulhad** of chai that Sharma Ji had just placed before him. The steam rose in soft, lazy swirls, carrying with it the aroma of cardamom and ginger—a scent that once meant endless laughter, inside jokes, and carefree days.

He looked around the Dhaba, at the benches that once held **his entire gang**, all huddled together, cracking jokes, pulling each other's legs, and making grand plans for a future that had seemed so distant back then. **This place had been their escape, their playground, their home away from home.**

And now?

Sanjeev took a slow sip of his tea, letting the warmth spread through him. He had everything he once dreamed of—a **successful career, money, a reputation, and an apartment in a high-rise building**. But as he sat there, in this **old familiar spot**, he couldn't shake the feeling that something was missing.

Back in the day, he would have been surrounded by his friends—**Aman, the loudest among them; Vikram, the one who always found a way to argue about anything; Sneha, the only girl in the group who kept them all in check**. The conversations would flow from college crushes to career ambitions, to their grand dreams of making it big.

But today, he was alone.

The realization hit him hard. **Success had come, but at a cost.**

He had been so busy chasing goals, handling work pressure, and getting tangled in personal complications that somewhere along the way, he had lost touch with those who once mattered the most.

Yes, he had money. **Yes, he had power.** But **did he have the same kind of happiness he once did?**

He exhaled, placing the cup back on the table.

A part of him wanted to call someone, just to hear a familiar voice. Maybe even reach out to **Aman or Vikram**, see where life had taken them. But another part of him hesitated. **Had too much time passed? Were they even the same people anymore?**

Lost in thought, he stared at the fading paint on the dhaba's wall, **the same wall where they had once carved their names, laughing like idiots.**

Time had moved on. So had life.

But deep down, **Sanjeev wondered if he had truly moved with it.**

A Decision Made

Sanjeev ran his fingers along the rim of the **kulhad** before placing it down gently on the table. He had come here searching for something—**perhaps clarity, perhaps comfort.** But what he had found was a realization.

Mrs. Khanna's words echoed in his mind.

“Just as you’ve worked hard to earn this promotion, put the same effort into fixing your personal life. Things are already taking a positive turn. You just need to take action.”

For too long, he had let things remain unresolved—**his entanglement with Janki, his growing bond with Anvika, his reluctance to face the truth.**

No more.

He reached into his pocket, pulled out his wallet, and took out a crisp **five-hundred-rupee note**. He handed it to **Chotu**, whose eyes widened in surprise.

“Arey bhaiya, itna zyada?” Chotu hesitated, looking up at him.

“Rakh le, Chotu,” Sanjeev said with a small smile. *“Aaj mood achha hai.”*

Chotu beamed, stuffing the note into his pocket as if it were a hidden treasure.

Sanjeev then turned to **Sharma Ji**, who was wiping his hands on a towel after preparing another round of tea for some customers.

“Waise Sharma Ji, aapki chai ka taste bilkul nahi badla,” Sanjeev remarked, handing over the payment.

Sharma Ji chuckled, shaking his head. *“Aur tum bilkul badal gaye ho, Sanjeev beta. Bada aadmi ban gaya hai tu.”*

Sanjeev smiled, though there was a flicker of something else in his eyes—**nostalgia, maybe even a little sadness.**

“Bas, thoda zyada zimmedaariyon wala aadmi ban gaya hoon,” he admitted.

Sharma Ji patted his shoulder. *“Zimmedaariyon se bhaagna mat. Kayi baar insaan sirf kaam aur paise ke piche bhaagta rehta hai, aur jo zaroori hai use sambhalne ka waqt hi nahi nikalta.”*

Sanjeev nodded slowly. He knew Sharma Ji wasn't just talking about life in general. Somehow, **even this old man could see that something was weighing on him.**

He turned to leave, walking toward his car with a renewed sense of purpose.

Sitting inside, he cranked up the engine, his grip firm on the steering wheel.

“Enough running. It's time to fix things.”

And with that thought, **he drove toward the hospital, ready to face Janki, ready to bring an end to this chapter of his life.**

Sanjeev pulled into the **hospital parking lot**, switched off the engine, and exhaled deeply. His mind was clear—today, he had to settle things once and for all.

He reached for his phone and dialed **Janki's** number.

“Hello, Sanjeev,” Janki's voice came through, soft yet composed.

“Hey, Janki. I just reached the hospital. How's Subhash?”

*“Much better. The doctors have shifted him to **Ward 37, Bed 12.** He's recovering well.”*

“That’s good to hear. I’ll be there in a minute,” he said before hanging up.

The hospital corridors smelled of antiseptic, mixed with the faint aroma of fresh flowers placed at the reception. As Sanjeev walked past the **nurse’s station**, a young nurse gave him directions to Ward 37.

When he stepped inside, he saw **Subhash sitting upright on his bed**, propped up by pillows, looking significantly better. His face wasn’t as pale anymore, and his eyes carried the warmth of someone slowly regaining strength.

But what caught Sanjeev’s attention more was **Janki sitting beside him, holding his hand gently**. They were looking at each other with an unspoken understanding, a bond that was difficult to miss.

Sanjeev cleared his throat, making his presence known.

Janki quickly withdrew her hand, and Subhash looked up, smiling at Sanjeev.

“Sanjeev, I really don’t know how to thank you,” Subhash said, his voice still a bit weak but sincere. *“Janki told me everything. If it weren’t for you, I don’t know what would’ve happened.”*

Sanjeev shook his head. *“Don’t even mention it, Subhash. You would’ve done the same for me.”*

Subhash gestured for him to sit on the stool beside the bed.

Janki let out a deep breath. *“It was terrifying that night. He just collapsed, and I thought—”* she paused, shaking her head. *“I thought I was going to lose him.”*

“Well, you didn’t,” Sanjeev reassured her. “And now, Subhash, tell me—how are you feeling?”

“Weak, but alive,” Subhash chuckled weakly. “The doctors say I’ll make a full recovery, but I need to take it slow. No more stress, no skipping meals, and...” he threw Janki a knowing glance, “...strict medicine schedules.”

Janki gave him a pointed look. *“You better listen this time.”*

Sanjeev smirked. *“Good. And if you need anything, just let me know. You’re not alone in this.”*

Subhash smiled. *“I appreciate that, Sanjeev. Truly.”*

For a moment, none of them spoke. The air between them was calm—almost peaceful.

Then Janki broke the silence.

“Sanjeev, you must be tired. Why don’t we go to the canteen and grab a cup of tea?”

Before Sanjeev could reply, Subhash spoke up, *“Yes, Janki, go. You need a break from playing nurse.”*

Janki hesitated. *“But are you sure? You don’t need anything?”*

“I’m fine.” Subhash smiled reassuringly.

Sanjeev nodded. *“Alright, let’s go.”*

Janki gave Subhash one last look before stepping away from the bed and walking beside Sanjeev toward the **canteen**.

A Silent Goodbye

As **Sanjeev and Janki stepped out of the ward**, their footsteps echoed lightly in the hospital corridor. The air carried the sterile scent of antiseptics mixed with the faint aroma of fresh flowers from a nearby nurse’s desk. The dim lighting of the hallway cast long shadows as they walked side by side, neither speaking, yet both fully aware of the emotions simmering between them.

Janki’s arms were crossed loosely, her fingers tracing the fabric of her saree as if lost in thought. Sanjeev, his hands buried in his pockets, occasionally glanced at her but found no words to say. There was a weight in the silence—a quiet understanding that **something between them had already begun to change**.

As they neared the **hospital canteen**, the atmosphere shifted.

The **canteen was modest yet filled with life**—a mix of doctors on their short breaks, nurses chatting over cups of chai, and a few worried family members clutching disposable cups, hoping for good news from the other end of the hospital. The warm scent of freshly brewed tea filled the air, mingling with the light murmur of conversations.

Sanjeev led Janki to a **corner table near the window**, away from the bustling crowd. The table was simple—metallic with a few scratches from years of use, but it served its purpose. **A silence settled between them as they sat down**, both lost in their own thoughts.

Sanjeev motioned to the tea vendor, signalling for two cups of tea. The vendor nodded, quickly pouring **steaming masala chai into two cups**.

For a while, **neither spoke**.

Sanjeev drummed his fingers lightly on the table, while Janki absentmindedly traced circles on the surface with her fingertips. Their eyes met briefly, then shifted away again.

There was **pain**, but also **understanding**.

There was **affection**, but also **a quiet acceptance** of what had to be.

Finally, **Janki broke the silence**.

“It’s good that you’re going in the right direction now, Sanjeev,” she said, her voice steady but kind. *“Getting involved with a married woman... that was never right for you. You’re young, successful, and... a handsome bachelor. You deserve better.”*

Sanjeev exhaled, a sad smirk forming on his lips. *“I don’t regret loving you, Janki,”* he admitted, staring into his tea. *“But I do regret the pain it caused us both.”*

Janki gave a small nod, her eyes softening. *“I don’t regret it either. You gave me something I had lost... affection, attention. But Sanjeev, love should never come at the cost of someone else’s pain.”*

Sanjeev took a deep breath. *“And Subhash?”* he asked, lifting his gaze to meet hers.

Janki smiled faintly. *“In the last one day, he has been very loving towards me,”* she said, almost in disbelief. *“He has promised that he will never drink again. I want to give him a chance, Sanjeev. Maybe this was the wake-up call he needed.”*

Sanjeev nodded, a part of him feeling relieved. *“Then take care of him, Janki. And take care of yourself.”*

She smiled. *“You too.”*

Their tea had gone slightly cold, but neither of them noticed.

After a few more minutes of quiet, **they stood up together.**

Sanjeev paid for the tea, and as they walked out of the canteen, **they paused at the entrance.**

“Goodbye, Sanjeev,” Janki said, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Goodbye, Janki,” Sanjeev replied, his tone carrying a mix of finality and warmth.

As **Janki walked back towards the ward**, she felt a strange lightness in her chest. It was painful, yes—but also freeing. She had been living in a conflict for too long. Now, there was **clarity**. She had made mistakes, but so had Sanjeev. **They had loved, they had lost, and now, they had forgiven.**

As **Sanjeev walked towards the parking lot**, he felt an odd sense of peace settle over him. The **past could not be changed**, but the **future was his to shape**. He had loved Janki deeply, but now, he had to move forward—**towards Anvika, towards a new beginning.**

He reached his **car**, slid into the driver’s seat, and gripped the steering wheel for a moment. **Then, without hesitation, he cranked up the engine.**

As the car moved forward onto the open road, **he didn’t look back.**

There was **nothing left behind to hold on to.**

There was **only the road ahead.**

Chapter 12: Riding Into the Future

Sanjeev tightened his grip on the steering wheel as his car sped down the highway. The road ahead stretched endlessly, lined with tall eucalyptus trees swaying in the afternoon breeze. **His heart was pounding—not out of fear, but anticipation.**

This was it.

The last thing to settle.

His mind raced as fast as the car, replaying every moment, every choice that had brought him here. He had left the past behind at the hospital, but **one thing remained unfinished—Anvika.** He had to tell her everything about his involvement with Janki before he could start fresh. **She deserved the truth.**

“I can’t begin something new while hiding the past.”

He had been foolish before—caught in a storm of emotions, drowning in a sea of confusion. But now, he knew what he wanted. **A clean slate. A real chance with Anvika.**

His fingers tapped impatiently on the steering wheel as he pressed the Bluetooth button on the car’s console. **The call rang. Once... twice...**

No answer.

“Damn it,” he muttered, frustration creeping in. But he didn’t stop. **He kept driving.**

An Unexpected Call

A few minutes later, his phone buzzed. **Anvika.**

He quickly answered through the Bluetooth.

“Hello, Sanjeev!” Her voice was light, cheerful. **“I just saw your missed call. I was riding a motorcycle, so I couldn’t answer.”**

Sanjeev’s eyebrows shot up. **“Wait... what? You were riding a motorcycle?”**

He heard a small chuckle on the other end. **“Yeah! Why do you sound so shocked?”**

And then, suddenly, **it all clicked.**

The way her eyes had sparkled when he had told her about the motorcycle ride in Goa.

She had wanted to experience that thrill.

A slow smile spread across Sanjeev’s face. *Damn... I should have figured this out earlier.*

But right now, there was something more important.

“Listen, Anvika... I have great news. I got promoted!”

Her excited gasp filled the car. **“WHAT? Oh my God, Sanjeev! That’s amazing! I’m so proud of you!”**

Sanjeev grinned, his heart swelling at her enthusiasm. **“Thanks, Anvika. And there’s more... My boss, Mrs. Khanna, gave me the day off. So I want to meet you. Today itself.”**

There was a brief pause, and then she spoke. **“Today?”**

“Yes.”

“Are you serious?”

“One hundred percent. I’m already on the way.”

She laughed. **“Wait... are you just guessing your way to my home?”**

Sanjeev chuckled. **“Pretty much. I just have a rough idea of the location.”**

“Oh my God, you’re insane.”

“Maybe. But send me your location anyway. Let’s make this easy for both of us.”

Anvika was still laughing when she said, **“Alright, alright. Sending it now.”**

Within seconds, Sanjeev’s phone pinged. **A WhatsApp location link.**

Sanjeev clicked it, and a map opened on the car’s screen.

He was on the right road. But now, he had a clear destination.

His heart raced—not with uncertainty, but with **determination**.

Sanjeev’s brows furrowed as he glanced at the GPS while he stopped at a red light. The location Anvika had sent wasn’t a house. **It was a Dhaba.**

“Did she send the wrong location?”

His fingers tapped the Bluetooth button on the steering wheel, calling her back.

“Hey, Anvika... I think you sent me the wrong location. This isn’t your home—it’s a Dhaba.”

Anvika laughed on the other end. **“Nope, it’s the right one. That Dhaba is near my home. They serve the best parathas!”**

Sanjeev shook his head, a smirk forming on his lips. **“Parathas, huh? So, am I meeting you for breakfast or what?”**

She chuckled. **“Something like that. Listen, I don’t want you coming to my home just yet. My parents are a little orthodox, and though I have told them about you, I’ll invite you some other day. For now, let’s meet here.”**

Sanjeev exhaled, nodding to himself. He appreciated her honesty. **“Alright, then. I’m on my way.”**

The Journey to the Unknown

The location was **a good 100 kilometres away from the city**, and Sanjeev was in for a long drive.

The road stretched ahead, winding through **golden fields of wheat and mustard** that danced in the wind. Now and then, he passed small villages—**houses made of bricks and mud, with children playing in open courtyards, their laughter mixing with the occasional bleat of goats and the honking of motorcycles.**

The further he drove, the quieter everything became. The chaos of the city faded behind him, replaced by **the soothing rhythm of nature.**

Yet, beneath all the beauty, his mind was restless.

How would he tell her?

How do you tell someone you love that you were entangled in something messy? That you were caught in a web of emotions with another woman but now, you want to start fresh?

“Will she understand?”

He gripped the wheel tighter. **This was the last thing standing between him and a future with Anvika.**

As the kilometres melted away, so did his hesitation. **He knew what he had to do.**

As Sanjeev continued driving, the sun began its slow descent, casting a golden hue over the landscape. The cool breeze rushing through his half-open window carried the scent of earth and fresh crops.

The road ahead was uncertain, much like his own journey. But one thing was clear—this was his chance to **close an old chapter and start a new one, free of guilt, free of doubt.**

With each mile, the burden on his heart grew lighter. He didn't know how Anvika would react, but he knew one thing for sure—**he was ready to face the truth.**

The sun hung low in the sky as Sanjeev pulled up to the Dhaba, its rustic charm blending into the quiet countryside. The scent of freshly made parathas and steaming chai filled the air. He glanced around but didn't see Anvika. His fingers tapped against the steering wheel as he picked up his phone and called her.

She answered immediately.

“I'm almost there, just give me ten minutes,” she said, a hint of excitement in her voice.

Sanjeev smiled and leaned back into his seat. He turned off the ignition but stayed inside the car, his heart pounding. His mind raced with how he would bring up his past with Janki. The weight of his own truth pressed on him, but at the same time, there was something about today—the long drive, the open sky, the feeling of taking charge of his own life—that made him feel lighter than he had in a long time.

Then, in the distance, he heard it. The unmistakable deep thump of a **Royal Enfield's engine.** He turned his head towards the road, and there she was.

Anvika rode into view like a scene from a movie—**the sun reflecting off the chrome of her bike, her long hair flowing behind her in the evening breeze.** She wore a sleek leather jacket over a white top and fitted jeans, her half-face helmet revealing her radiant face. There was a confidence in the way she handled the heavy motorcycle, her posture straight, her grip firm, her movements effortless.

As she slowed down near the dhaba, the bike purred beneath her like a loyal beast tamed by its queen. She flicked the side stand down with a practiced motion and swung her leg off in one fluid move. Removing her helmet, she shook her hair loose, revealing **deep, expressive eyes that carried both warmth and mischief.** The last rays of the sun painted her face in golden hues, making her look even more breathtaking.

Sanjeev stepped out of the car, his eyes fixed on her.

“You made me wait, madam,” he teased, leaning against the car with a smirk.

She laughed, a soft, melodic sound. **“Well, good things take time, don’t they?”**

They stood there for a moment, just looking at each other, both knowing that this meeting was different from the ones before. It wasn’t just another casual outing. It wasn’t just a stolen moment of togetherness.

This was the beginning of something real.

As Anvika and Sanjeev stood near the Dhaba, exchanging playful smiles, a voice called out from inside.

“Arey, Anvika bitiya?!”

A stout, mustached man with a warm smile and a towel draped over his shoulder stepped out from behind the counter. His face lit up with recognition. It was **Bhola Kaka**, the owner of the dhaba, a man who had been running this place for as long as Anvika could remember.

“Kaisi ho, bitiya? Kitne dino baad yahan dikh rahi ho!” Bhola Kaka beamed.

Anvika grinned and folded her hands in a respectful greeting. **“Namaste, Bhola Kaka! Bas, kaam me busy thi. Aaj mann kiya ki aapke dhabe ki parathe kha loon!”**

Bhola Kaka chuckled. **“Wahi swad milega jo pehle milta tha. Par yeh batao, maa-bauji kaise hain?”**

“Sab theek hain, kaka. Aapko yaad karte hain. Kabhi ghar aayiye na!” she said warmly.

Bhola Kaka patted his belly. **“Haan, aana padega. Teri maa ke haath ki kheer toh ab yaadon mein hi reh gayi!”**

Sanjeev watched this exchange with interest, admiring how naturally Anvika fit into this place. She wasn't just a visitor—she belonged here.

Turning to Bhola Kaka, Anvika said, **“Kaka, do aloo parathe bana do apne haath se. Aur haan, do masala chai bhi!”**

“Bas do?” Bhola Kaka teased. **“Ladka jawan hai, do se kya hoga?”** He gave Sanjeev a playful look.

Anvika laughed. **“Pehle do laaiye, fir dekhte hain!”**

Bhola Kaka nodded and signaled to one of his boys to prepare the order.

Anvika then turned to Sanjeev, her eyes scanning the dhaba before settling on a corner table, a little away from the crowd. She pointed towards it.

“Let's sit there, away from all the noise,” she suggested.

Sanjeev nodded and followed her, weaving through the rustic wooden tables occupied by truck drivers, locals, and a few travellers. The smell of fresh rotis on the tandoor mixed with the aroma of ginger-laced chai filled the air.

The far-end table was set near an old brick and a dim, yellow bulb hung overhead, casting a soft glow. It was quieter here, perfect for a conversation that didn't need interruptions.

Anvika pulled out a chair and sat down, resting her helmet on the empty chair beside her. Sanjeev took the seat opposite, leaning slightly forward, observing her with curiosity.

There was something different about today.

Something meaningful.

As they sat in the dim glow of the dhaba's rustic lights, a moment of silence stretched between them. The familiar clinking of metal plates and muffled chatter of truck drivers filled the air, but at their table, the quiet was heavier, almost expectant.

Sanjeev leaned back slightly, drumming his fingers on the wooden table before breaking the silence.

“You know, Anvika... you took me to the hospital that day, telling me that the doctor had to check my wound before removing the sutures.” He narrowed his eyes at her. **“But I have a feeling that wasn't the real reason.”**

Anvika smirked, tilting her head. **“Oh, so you finally figured it out?”**

Sanjeev folded his arms. **“I should have known. You're always up to something. What was the real reason?”**

Anvika let out a soft chuckle. **“Some of my friends found out about... us. And a few of them were curious to see you. They had heard about you but never got a chance to meet you. So, I took you there, you know... to put their curiosity to rest.”**

Sanjeev rolled his eyes. **“So I was on display? Like some sort of exhibit?”**

Anvika laughed. **“Not exactly! But I won't lie... they were all keeping an eye on you.”**

Sanjeev sighed, shaking his head with a smile. **“That explains the curious looks and the whispered comments whenever I got my wound dressed.”**

Anvika leaned in slightly, mischief dancing in her eyes. **“Oh yes. I remember Pooja asking me, ‘Iska haath theek ho raha hai ya tumhari mohabbat ka asar zyada hai?’”**

Sanjeev groaned, running a hand through his hair. **“Great. So I was the subject of hospital gossip.”**

Anvika giggled. **“Oh, absolutely! The nurses had a betting pool on how long it would take before you and I officially became a thing.”**

Sanjeev laughed, shaking his head. But then, as he looked at her, the humor faded from his eyes. His expression turned serious, and his fingers instinctively curled into a fist on the table.

Anvika immediately noticed the shift. She straightened slightly. **“What happened?”**

Sanjeev exhaled, rubbing his hands together as if trying to find the right words. **“Anvika, there’s something I need to tell you. Something serious.”**

She nodded, her expression unreadable. **“Go ahead.”**

Sanjeev hesitated for a moment before speaking, his voice softer. **“I know you probably have an idea, but I need to say it out loud. There was someone else in my life before you.”**

Anvika remained quiet, watching him intently.

“Janki,” he continued. **“It wasn’t just a passing thing. It was... complicated. And I don’t want to start anything with you while keeping secrets.”**

Anvika sighed, her eyes filled with understanding. **“I already knew.”**

Sanjeev blinked. **“You did?”**

She nodded. **“I’m not blind, Sanjeev. I could tell there was something... someone... lingering in your past. The late-night calls, the way your face sometimes changed when you thought no one was watching. I knew you were talking to another woman.”** She paused before adding, **“But I also knew.”**

Sanjeev frowned. **“Knew what?”**

Anvika smiled faintly. **“That it was over.”**

Sanjeev stared at her, taken aback by her confidence. **“How were you so sure?”**

Anvika shrugged. **“Call it intuition. Or maybe, I just trust you more than you trust yourself.”**

Sanjeev swallowed hard, feeling something tighten in his chest. He looked down at the table, gathering his thoughts.

“It wasn’t easy, Anvika. There were moments when I was stuck between what was right and what felt right. I even went on a trip to Goa with her, trying to figure it out.” He looked up. **“But I know now. I know where my heart belongs. And I just didn’t want you to hear about it from someone else or feel like I was hiding anything from you.”**

Anvika reached across the table and placed her hand gently over his. **“Sanjeev, I’m not someone who judges a person by their past. What matters to me is the person you are today and the person you want to be.”**

Sanjeev felt the warmth of her hand, steady and reassuring.

“Are you sure?” he asked softly.

Anvika squeezed his hand. **“I like you, Sanjeev. Not the idea of you. Not a version of you without a past. But you, as you are. And no matter what happened before, it won’t change how I feel.”**

A slow, relieved smile spread across Sanjeev’s face.

Before he could say anything more, they heard the sound of footsteps approaching.

“Bhaiya, paratha aur chai!”

It was **Chotu**, Bholu Kaka’s young helper, placing the hot, buttered parathas and two steaming cups of masala chai on the table. The aroma of the fresh parathas filled the air, momentarily breaking the emotional intensity of their conversation.

Anvika let out a small chuckle. **“Looks like destiny wants us to stop talking and start eating.”**

Sanjeev laughed. **“Yeah, I think I need this paratha after all that emotional unloading.”**

As Chotu left, Anvika picked up her cup of chai and raised it slightly. **“To new beginnings?”**

Sanjeev picked up his own cup, meeting her eyes. **“To new beginnings.”**

As they finished the last bites of their parathas and sipped the final drops of chai, Sanjeev reached into his pocket to settle the bill. But before he could get up, Anvika’s voice came from behind him.

“Kaka won’t take money from a guest, Sanjeev.”

Sanjeev turned to find her already pulling out her wallet. She smiled knowingly as she handed the cash to Bhola Kaka. **“You know how it is. Around here, the guest is a part of the family.”**

Bhola Kaka chuckled, shaking his head. **“Bitiya is right. If I let him pay, your mother will come scolding me.”**

Sanjeev let out a small sigh but smiled. **“Looks like I’ll never win against you.”**

“Nope. So don’t even try,” Anvika teased, tucking her wallet back into her sling bag.

They walked out of the dhaba, their steps unhurried as they made their way to the parking area. Sanjeev’s car gleamed under the golden hues of the setting sun, but his eyes were fixed elsewhere. His gaze landed on the **Royal Enfield**, standing tall and sturdy like a silent beast. He turned to Anvika, an idea flashing in his mind.

“Let me ride your motorcycle,” he said with boyish excitement.

Anvika raised an eyebrow. **“It’s not mine. It’s my father’s.”**

Sanjeev smirked. **“Then let me ride your father’s motorcycle.”**

Anvika crossed her arms, pretending to think. **“Hmm... That depends. You’ll be allowed to ride it only if I join you.”**

Sanjeev chuckled. **“That sounds like a fair deal.”**

Without another word, Anvika handed him the keys, and Sanjeev swung his leg over the bike, gripping the handles. The Enfield roared to life with a deep, satisfying rumble. Anvika got on behind him, her hands resting lightly on his shoulders before she hesitated and finally wrapped them around his waist.

As he twisted the throttle, the bike surged forward, carrying them into the open road.

The sun was beginning its slow descent, casting a golden glow over the fields stretching on either side of the road. The air was crisp and carried the earthy scent of distant farms. A few birds flew in V-formations overhead, heading home as the evening settled in.

Sanjeev felt the warmth of Anvika against his back, her presence steady and reassuring. The worries that had weighed on his heart for so long—the confusion, the guilt, the unresolved emotions regarding Janki—seemed to dissolve into the evening air. Just like the sun that was setting behind the hills, those worries were setting too, making way for something new.

Anvika tightened her grip slightly, resting her chin on his shoulder as she spoke over the wind. **“You’re smiling.”**

Sanjeev glanced at her reflection in the side mirror and saw the soft amusement in her eyes. **“Because I’m happy,”** he admitted.

The road stretched ahead, curving gently through the countryside. With every turn, Sanjeev felt as if he was riding toward something lighter, something brighter.

The past was behind him. The present was here. And the future? Well, he was riding toward it with the woman who had become an irreplaceable part of his journey.

As they finally came to a stop by the side of the road, overlooking a small lake that shimmered under the twilight, Anvika exhaled, taking in the view. Sanjeev turned off the engine, and silence wrapped around them like a warm blanket.

“This feels like the perfect ending, doesn’t it?” Anvika mused, looking at him.

Sanjeev nodded. **“Or maybe the perfect beginning.”**

She smiled, leaning her head against his shoulder as they sat there, watching the last rays of the sun disappear beyond the horizon.

And just like that, the story that had been filled with twists, dilemmas, and choices found its quiet closure.

Sanjeev had made peace with his past. And now, he was ready for everything the future had to offer.

This marks the end of Sanjeev’s journey, and with it, the end of The Forbidden Desire series. Some stories are meant to continue, while others find their perfect conclusion. And this was one of them.

A Heartfelt Request to My Readers

Dear Reader,

Thank you for being a part of this journey. Writing *Burning Between Two Loves*

has been an incredible experience, and I truly hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I loved writing it.

If this book and The Forbidden Desires Series made you feel something—whether it was excitement, curiosity, or the thrill of forbidden emotions—I'd be deeply grateful if you could take a moment to leave a 5-star rating and a short review.

Your support not only encourages me to keep writing but also helps other readers discover this story. Every review, every rating—it all makes a difference.