

Before We Say Goodbye



KALYAN DASARI

Before We Say Goodbye

A Story of Love, Friendship, and the Days That Faded

By Kalyan

(A nostalgic tale of school corridors, unspoken feelings, and the goodbyes that never happened.)

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DEDICATION

**To the ones whose stories were never loud,
whose feelings lived quietly in their hearts,
and whose goodbyes were never spoken out loud.**

To all the Karans out there —
the innocent ones in every class,
the middle benchers who blended in everywhere
yet carried the deepest emotions inside.

To those who loved softly,
lost silently,
and learned to move forward with grace.

This book is for everyone
who had a Shravani in their life —
a moment, a memory, a person
who changed everything
before the goodbye ever came.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My heartfelt thanks to the people who unknowingly became part of this story – my friends, my teachers, my classmates, and those moments that shaped these pages.

To my family, for giving me strength.

To my friends, for giving me memories.

To my readers, for giving this story a purpose.

This book is drawn from real experiences, real emotions, and real goodbyes. Thank you for allowing me to share a small piece of my life with you.

FOREWORD

There are stories we forget with time...
and then, there are stories that follow us everywhere —
in memories, in conversations, in sudden flashes of emotion
when we pass an old classroom or hear a familiar laugh.

Before We Say Goodbye is one such story.
It does not begin with grand adventures or dramatic moments,
but with simple school corridors, morning prayers,
classroom benches, stolen glances,
and the quiet emotions we carried
when we were too young to understand them fully.

This book is not about perfect love or perfect friendships.
It is about the real moments —
the spark that starts unexpectedly,
the distance that grows silently,
the heartbreak that arrives without warning,
and the goodbye we never get to say properly.

As you read, I hope these chapters remind you
of someone from your own past —
someone who made you smile,
someone who made you feel seen,
or someone you had to let go
even when you didn't want to.

Welcome to a story of innocence, warmth, and quiet heartbreak.
Welcome to the journey...
before we say goodbye.

PREFACE

Life has a strange way of teaching us —
sometimes through happiness,
sometimes through heartbreak,
and sometimes through people
who enter and leave at the exact moments we never expect.

Before We Say Goodbye is not a fictional adventure.
It is a reflection of my own journey —
of the mornings that shaped me,
the friendships that strengthened me,
and the one connection that changed me
before fading into silence.

Every chapter in this book carries a real memory:
the prayers, the elections, the mischief,
the first spark, the confusion, the festivals,
the late realizations, and the quiet pain of losing someone
not because you did something wrong,
but because life simply decided to move differently.

I believe everything happens for a reason —
the good, the bad, the unexpected.

Everyone enters our life with a purpose:
some teach us,
some hurt us,
some stay for a while,
and some leave without explanation.
But from each one, we learn.

This book is the result of those lessons.
If these pages remind you of your own school days,
your own silent heartbreaks,
or your own unspoken goodbyes,
then this story has found its home.

Thank you for holding this book,
and for walking with me
through memories I once lived
and now relive again
before we say goodbye.

INTRODUCTION

Every story begins somewhere —
mine begins in the middle bench of a classroom,
between morning prayers and lunch breaks,
in friendships that felt like family,
and in a connection I never saw coming.

Before We Say Goodbye takes you through
the small but powerful moments of school life:
the laughter during games,
the teasing of friends,
the nervousness of standing on stage,
the innocence of first feelings,
and the ache that follows when things change.

This book is not about a perfect love story.
It is about the reality of growing up —
about caring for someone quietly,
falling for someone unexpectedly,
losing someone silently,
and still choosing to move forward.

As you turn the pages,
you will walk with me through the days
that defined my teenage years —
the spark, the drift, the heartbreak,
and the lessons hidden behind every moment.

Every one of us has someone
we wish we had held onto a little longer...
someone whose memory still speaks to us
even after the goodbye.

This is that story.
This is *Before We Say Goodbye*.

MEET KARAN

I stand at 169 centimeters — not too tall, not too short, and somewhere in that comfortable middle. I'm not fat, not thin, just the kind of body type that never draws attention. People often said I looked innocent, and maybe they were right.

I was never the one to start conversations. New people made me nervous, words hesitated on my tongue, and silence felt safer than speaking. I wasn't talkative, I wasn't loud, and I wasn't the person who instantly became everyone's favourite.

But once I blended in with a group, I had a quiet way of fitting everywhere. Not a first bencher who answers every question, not a backbencher who makes all the noise. I lived in the middle space — unnoticed sometimes, but never out of place.

That's who I was.

Simple. Soft-spoken. A boy who observed more than he spoke.

And maybe... a little more emotional than I liked to admit.

CHAPTER 1: MY ROUTINE ALARMS

That morning began the way most of my mornings did.

My phone alarm rang, loud and annoying, only to be silenced by my thumb pressing snooze again and again. I was half-buried in my pillow when my sister barged in, smacked me on the back, and yelled,

“Rey... aa alarm endhuku ra iga!”

With half-sleep still weighing on my voice, I mumbled,

“Nuv off cheyye...”

She gave me a look and shot back, “Levanappudu endhuku ra petkovadam?”

I turned my face away from the sunlight creeping in through the window and muttered,

“Sare le, ee okkasari mellaga lestha...”

Her laugh had that teasing edge,

“Cha... roju fast ga lechinattu!”

And of course, instead of listening, I let my eyes close again.

The next time the alarm buzzed, it was 6:30. I ignored it. When I finally woke up with a start, the screen showed 7:18 AM. My heart skipped — I was late. I rushed to the bathroom, splashed water on my face, brushed, bathed, and somehow managed to be ready by 7:50. Bag on my shoulders, dragging my weight and my books together, I stepped out of the house and walked down the street to the main road.

There, like every day, I waited for my auto — my school van. Except it wasn't one of those cozy city autos meant for 3–4 people. No. This was a carrier auto, the kind where the driver squeezed in 15–20 students at once. No buses came to our school, not even the government ones. The only public option was the Pallevelugu bus, which ran late more often than it ran on time. So most of us depended on these cramped, noisy, seatless autos that rattled through the lanes carrying a whole classroom inside.

By the time we reached school, it was already around 8:45.

I hurried to my classroom — 10th A, tucked near the steps. The room looked empty when I entered. I pulled out a scrap of waste paper from my bag, rubbed the dust off my desk, and sat down in the middle row.

The middle benches were perfect.

First benchers were the “clevers,” always under the teachers’ gaze.

Last benchers had the reputation of being useless troublemakers.

But the middle? That’s where you could be anyone, talk to anyone, mix with everyone.

And that was me — the boy who blended in. I could chat with toppers on one side, laugh with the last benchers on the other, and somehow still hold the title of Class Leader.

The clock in our classroom always felt louder in the mornings, ticking like it was mocking the silence. Sitting there before anyone arrived, I could even hear footsteps echoing near the staircase, each one sharper than the last. Our class was close to the steps, so every sound carried.

Sometimes, instead of sitting, I would stand near the window. The cool morning air slipped through the iron bars, brushing my hair, grazing my cheeks — a soft reminder that even if no one was around yet, the world was still here, alive and waiting.

That was our routine. If I came too early, I never wasted time. I would step onto the ground, drag my foot across the dirt, and mark the boundary lines of the kabaddi court. By the time my friends came, the court would be ready. No delays — just straight into the game.

A few of my friends always arrived on cycles, parking them carefully under the mango orchard near the gate. That spot was our “parking lot,” the trees shielding our cycles with their lazy shadows. Kotesh and Bobby usually came early by cycle, while Sai jumped down from the bus, tossing his bag onto the growing pile near the court before joining us.

I raised my voice, “Shall we play?” and added in a lower tone, almost to myself, “Remaining will join in the middle...”

Sai from another section and Bobby stepped forward. I dragged them to the center and announced, “Captains!” As usual, teams formed section-wise — a familiar rivalry. Some kids stood on the sidelines, others sat cross-legged, their eyes glued to the game. To anyone passing by, it looked like a mini-tournament, only missing the crowd of a real one. Students coming from buses often paused to watch us before heading to class.

The game began. Voices rose, nerves buzzed in our chests, and every raid carried tension.

I was more of a raider than a defender, though I could manage both if needed. My first raid gave us a point, and we cheered. Then they scored. Back and forth it went, dust flying from the court with every dive.

And then it happened.

“Reyy...” a loud voice cut through the chaos. We turned, squinting to see.

“Nannu kuda theeskondra!”

It was Abhi from B section. The muscled boy. He jogged in with a grin, tossed his bag to his friend, and stepped onto the court like a warrior entering battle. Abhi was notorious — the kind of player whose very presence made everyone tense.

I went in for a raid. He tackled me head-on. The whole crowd shouted as I went down, and Abhi joined their team officially. Almost immediately, he went in for a raid himself. He touched the mid-line, kissed his hand dramatically, and charged — his signature style that sent a chill through every defender. Within seconds, he had taken down more than one of us.

But we had Kotesh. Our own dubki king, like Pardeep Narwal in PKL. With one clever dive, he revived me. The match wasn't over.

Abhi raided again. This time, I was waiting at one corner and Kotesh at the other. He ran the full length of the court, and I saw my chance. I dashed behind, wrapping my arms around his upper body before he could notice. Kotesh dove at his legs. Together, we brought him down. The court exploded with cheers.

The game grew fiercer, and I went on multiple raids, dragging points back to our side. Victory felt close.

And then the bell rang.

That sharp, metallic sound cut through the air, silencing the ground in an instant. Everyone scattered, rushing to grab their bags, sliding into their footwear, sprinting toward the assembly ground for morning prayer. The kabaddi court dissolved into a blur of laughter, dust, and racing footsteps — as if the match had never happened.

CHAPTER 2: THE MORNING PRAYER

As soon as the bell rang, the kabaddi court scattered like a flock of birds. We rushed into the building, straight to the washroom on the ground floor. Dust clung to our shirts and legs, so we splashed water quickly, rubbing our arms, patting our hair, making sure no trace of the game remained. PET Sir's hawk eyes never missed a speck of dirt — and if he caught us after prayer, the stick in his hand would do the talking.

By 9:15 AM, we were clean enough to pass, vaulting over the basement wall and walking into the assembly ground with our best innocent faces. We pretended we had done nothing before, strolling slowly, as though we had been disciplined all along. In truth, our hearts still thumped from the last raid.

We slipped into the lines, adjusting ourselves carefully in the height order, just before our class teacher's sharp eyes caught us. The assembly was already set. Three girls stood on the stage, holding a book in front of the mic. Today was our class's turn to lead the prayer — something everyone had to do, one day or another.

Beside the stage, a thin boy held a long stick and stood next to a big drum, ready to assist. The drumbeat wasn't just rhythm for the prayer; after assembly, it became the marching signal that sent us back to class in neat lines.

Varsha stepped forward and announced clearly, "Let's go with Vande Mataram."

Her voice carried through the speakers, and soon the whole ground rose in song.

After the anthem, she returned to the mic, moving us through the morning sequence — a thought for the day, followed by a GK question. The GK was our favorite part. Not because we wanted to answer honestly — but because we always knew the answer in advance. Our classmates who went on stage were our secret agents. They told us the day's question beforehand, so when it was asked, one of us would shout the answer instantly.

The effect was glorious. For a brief second, all eyes turned on us, impressed. Teachers nodded, students clapped. That tiny recognition felt like winning an award, when in

reality we had just... cheated the system with insider info. But the thrill of it — the claps echoing in the ground — was addictive.

Finally, the deep “dhummm” of the drum signaled the end. The lines began to move, but that’s when the real tension started.

There he was.

PET Sir.

A tall man with a square jaw, dark sunglasses that hid his eyes, and a stick always dangling from his hand. He didn’t need to shout. Just his presence was enough to send shivers down our spines. As each student passed, his gaze scanned us like an x-ray. Shoes not polished? Collar not buttoned? Hair too long? He dragged the unlucky ones out of line, making them stand aside with trembling knees.

At the end of the assembly, those caught were herded to the center of the ground. PET Sir interrogated them one by one before stamping a red line across their palms with the thin stick dipped in ink. It was his mark of shame. Sometimes, the punishment continued with an extra duty — picking up litter from the ground, a “lesson” disguised as social responsibility.

The rest of us waited in the washroom for the victims, and once they were freed, we all entered class together, laughing off the fear.

That morning, we rushed toward the classroom, but our run slowed when we spotted someone on the staircase. Suji ma’am.

She was struggling to hold a tower of books in her arms, walking carefully up the steps. Our class in-charge — but unlike any strict teacher. Her presence was gentle, almost motherly. Her voice was soft, like silk, her smile the kind that made you straighten your

collar without realizing. The way she treated us was not with punishment, but with warmth — the way a guardian would guide, not command.

I sprinted up to her, and before I could even offer, she looked at me with a small smile that said, come slowly, I'll wait. Without a word, she placed the books in my arms. That was the understanding between us — effortless.

Carrying the books, I reached our classroom and placed them gently near her chair. By then, everyone had settled in their benches, waiting. And then she entered.

“Gooooood mooorningggg maaaam,” the class sang in a single stretched chorus.

Her reply was soft, almost musical, “Ok children... thank you.”

Her lessons never felt like lectures. Her voice — thin, melodic — made Telugu poems sound like songs. Every line, every word, slipped into our ears and stayed there. She was, to me, like Sita from Sita Ramam — grace in her tone, patience in her presence, and strength behind gentleness.

The bell rang eventually, breaking the calm. A tall man appeared near the door — our Hindi sir. Dressed like a pandit, with a tilak on his forehead and an endless reservoir of words, he didn't just teach Hindi. He spoke about society, politics, life — anything that crossed his mind. His classes were less about language and more about philosophy, sprinkled with humor, sometimes dragging longer than we wanted.

And that was how our days went on — mornings that began with prayer, discipline, and a little fear... followed by teachers who filled our hours with stories, poems, and lessons that still echo in memory.

CHAPTER 3: ONE FINE DAY

The day had come.

It was our class's turn to represent the school in the morning prayer. None of us knew until that very morning. No teacher had warned us, no senior had reminded us. We found out just minutes before the assembly bell.

Panic. Pure panic.

Within seconds, I split the duties: Ishaan, Ajith, and one more to handle the prayer; another classmate for the GK question and thought of the day; and me? I took anchoring.

I ran, grabbed the script from the previous anchors, and tried to prepare. But time was slipping through my fingers. PET sir's whistle blew sharp and piercing, signaling students to assemble. Already 70–80% of the students were lined up on the ground, the rest rushing down the stairs.

I tucked in my shirt as I ran upstairs — the usual hideout where we sat to skip classes — adjusted myself quickly, and then bolted onto the stage. My heart thumped louder than the drum on the side.

From the stage, the wh+ole school stretched out before me. Rows upon rows of students in white uniforms, shoes glinting in the morning sun, all facing the Dias. Teachers stood at the sides, arms crossed, eyes sharp.

It was the first time I truly felt that weight — the spotlight of a thousand eyes. The air felt heavier, my throat drier, and a strange fear gripped me. A thought kept buzzing in my head: Don't look at my class line. Because if I did, my so-called friends would definitely make faces to crack me up, and I'd burst out laughing on stage.

"Dhummm." The drum sounded. The signal to start.

I stepped forward, clutched the mic, and spoke as steadily as I could:
“Good morning, everyone. Let’s begin today’s assembly with Vande Mataram.”

To my surprise, my voice didn’t crack. It came out clear, firm — almost confident. Ajith and Ishaan carried the song, and when it ended, I returned to give the next announcements. One by one, the routine went smoothly. No blunders. No laughs. Just... relief.

By the time it ended, I whispered in my head, Thank God.

But I had to remain on stage until every class filed out. The seniors passed first — second years, then first years. As the line of students moved past, someone brushed against me gently. I looked down. A faint streak of color was on my hand. I didn’t know who had left it there or why — just that it felt unusual, a mystery tucked into an ordinary day.

Classes began. Walking back from the assembly, I crossed the senior wings — BiPC first, then MPC first year. Ishaan paused there, casually chatting with his girlfriend, Mahisha, one of our seniors.

It was funny, almost irritating sometimes. Our batch seemed cursed. Everyone around me had girlfriends from the senior classes. Vijay, our backbencher legend, somehow ended up with Manaswi, the MPC topper — a match no one could ever explain. Ajith? He was too close with senior Satwika, spending more time in her section than ours.

And me? I was the odd one out. The single. The one who blended with everyone, joked with everyone, but when the gang paired off with their seniors, I was left tagging along, laughing just for fun.

Break time came, the true freedom of school.

We walked out together, the whole batch moving like heroes in a movie. Heads high, bags swinging, pretending the corridor was our red carpet. And then — right on cue — Mahisha and her friends appeared, walking from the opposite direction.

She stopped briefly to talk with Ishaan, and in that pause, I heard it.

A soft voice. Gentle, careful, almost uncertain.

“Hi.”

At first, I didn’t even realize it was meant for me. I looked around. No one. Then I noticed — a girl, dusky in complexion, with innocent eyes that carried both shyness and familiarity. A face I had seen around, but never really noticed.

It was Shravani.

I replied, a bit awkwardly, “Hello.”

That was how it started.

I didn't know her well then. But as days passed, it became routine. A small chat during breaks. A smile in the corridor. Words exchanged like secrets no one else noticed.

And as usual — my weakness showed. I cracked jokes, and she laughed more than anyone else. Laughter was her language, and I was quick to learn it.

After three or four days of this rhythm, I finally asked,

“How do you even know me?”

Shravani lowered her eyes, her voice soft with both shyness and something deeper.

“The moment I saw you, I felt like... something missing had come back to me. When you held the mic on stage, I saw more than a boy — I saw a speaker. A presence. I felt a special pull. After that, I couldn’t ignore it. I asked around about you — your past, your behavior, what kind of person you are. And everyone said the same: you’re different. A masterpiece... someone who slipped away from where he belonged. Finally, I asked Manaswi, since she knows you. She hesitated, but I pushed her to introduce me. She was too shy, so I came forward myself. I just had to.”

Her words struck me like thunder. All this, from just one day on stage?

I must have shown my shock, because she smiled slightly and added,

“You never know who’s watching you. But someone always is. And for me, it was you.”

That day, something shifted.

Shravani wasn’t just another face in the crowd anymore.

She had seen me — and somehow, in seeing me, she made me see myself differently too.

CHAPTER 4: THE INITIAL IGNITE

Life was flowing gently — like clouds drifting fast in the wind, like a winter breeze brushing against the beach. Nothing too dramatic, but something new, something exciting was quietly weaving into my days.

And that something was Shravani.

Her presence was like a little light I didn't notice at first, but one that began to glow brighter each day. Our conversations — short, playful, sometimes silly — were like a kid discovering new toys, piece by piece building a place of joy.

Whenever our eyes met, she smiled. And I? I was the joker, the one who cracked lines and pulled laughter out of everyone. But with her, the jokes had a different weight. They weren't just about making noise — they became signals, ways of talking without talking.

Most of the time, we spoke through our eyes. At the ends of our square-shaped corridors, our classrooms stood nearly opposite. From one corner to the other, we could see each other, sneak quick glances, or exchange a silent smile before ducking back into class. It was our secret language, unspoken but understood.

The Lunch Break

Lunch breaks were always chaos. The whole campus buzzed like a festival ground. Steel tiffin boxes clicked open, the smell of pulihora, chapati rolls, and sambhar rice filled the air. Some sat in groups under the staircase, some on the corridor floors, others huddled around one friend who always brought the tastiest curry.

Our group? We scattered — a few under the mango tree, a few in the shade near the parking. I stayed on the stairs near the BiPC wing, watching the crowd.

That was when I noticed her.

Shravani stepped out of her classroom, scanning the corridor with searching eyes, as if looking for someone. Her glance paused when she found me at the stairs. A small smile tugged her lips, and then she raised her hand in a soft wave.

Not just a wave — it was a question in the air, her fingers moving slightly like she was asking, “Can I come there?”

I didn’t need to reply. She already began walking over.

“Had lunch?” she asked softly.

“No,” I replied. “And you?”

“I have to,” she said, hesitating. Then added quickly, “But I saw you standing here, so I came to talk.”

I chuckled, “You eat first, then we’ll continue.”

She looked down, her voice dropping lower. “Ya... but I wanna ask you something.”

Her head tilted down, her fingers twisting slightly, like she was fighting her own shyness.

“What’s the matter? Why looking down?” I asked.

She hesitated for a beat, then whispered, “Do you... use a mobile phone?”

“Yes,” I said, curious.

She bit her lip, then asked directly, “Why don’t you give me your number?”

I looked at her knowingly, teasing, “Why?”

Her reply was almost childlike, honest. “I won’t call you... but at least I can wish you on your birthday. I don’t even have a phone, I stay in the hostel. But... still.”

I smiled mischievously. “If you don’t have a phone, then why do you need my number? We’ll catch up like this.”

Her face fell. The light in her eyes dimmed. She pressed her lips together, nodded faintly, and murmured, “Okay... fine.” Her voice carried disappointment — low, small, fragile. She turned away slowly and walked back into her class.

For a moment, I wondered if I had been too harsh.

The Next Day

Break again.

And there she was, walking towards me with a different energy. Her eyes sparkled, a shy grin spread on her face like she was hiding something exciting.

She came close, hands folded into fists. “Choose one,” she said, holding both hands out to me.

I tapped her left hand. She opened it — empty. She laughed, her face lighting up, eyes dancing with mischief, as if I had lost a game I didn’t even know I was playing.

“Check the other one,” she teased.

Slowly, dramatically, she opened her right hand. Inside was a small folded piece of paper.

I caught a glimpse of digits scribbled on it. My eyebrows rose.

“What’s this?” I asked, pretending clueless.

“Guess,” she whispered.

“I have no idea,” I said, though my heartbeat knew.

She brought the paper close to her face, eyes gleaming, lips moving like she was reading a secret spell. “Seven... seven... nine... nine...”

I froze.

It was my number.

Shock ran through me. My mind raced back — I had refused her yesterday. How could she have found it today?

She giggled at my stunned expression. “Magical powers,” she said with a wink. “Don’t worry... I won’t call you. I don’t even have a mobile. But still...”

Then, with a little “oops” smile, she slipped the paper back into her hand and walked off, leaving me rooted to the stairs, half shocked, half smiling.

Afternoon Classes

The post-lunch bell dragged us back into the classrooms. Social studies — the eternal punishment.

First, Ramu Sir, the man of pocket dynamites. He cracked jokes casually, never smiling himself, but leaving the class in stitches. Just when laughter filled the room, he would shout “Shhh... low, low...” like he was controlling a comedy show. His lesson on the World Wars felt like a story, full of side comments that made even history sound entertaining.

But then came the twist of fate.

At the door appeared Aanir Sir — tall, stylish, his voice slow, deep, almost philosophical. Ramu Sir surrendered the class reluctantly.

And just like that, our energy dropped. Faces that were bright with laughter now drooped like sunflowers left in the heat.

Aanir Sir started, his voice flowing like poetry, but heavy — like waves that drowned instead of lifted. He spoke of history, geography, society, philosophy — everything at once. And with every passing minute, it felt less like a class and more like a two-hour sermon.

For those two hours, time stopped. It was torture — two years compressed into two hours. His long fingers tapped the desk when someone looked away, and we all feared the legendary “Aanir grip,” the way he could crush your wrist if he caught you not listening.

By the time the bell finally rang, the entire class exhaled together — relief flooding out like air from a balloon. But instead of freedom, he handed us a pile of assignments, as if punishing us for surviving.

The day ended with tired faces and heavy bags, but in my mind, only one moment replayed — Shravani’s mischievous smile and the way she whispered my number like a secret spell.

And that was how the initial spark had begun — small, innocent, yet powerful enough to change everything.

CHAPTER 5: THE TRIP MEMORIES

The day began like any other, with Suji ma'am taking her usual class. The backbenchers, however, were up to their routine mischief, sneaking snacks under the desks. Suji ma'am caught sight of the culprit, pointed at him, and made him stand up. Just then, a junior walked in and called her to the principal's office for a staff meeting. Before leaving, she looked at me.

“Karan, monitor the class. Keep everyone quiet. I'll be back soon.”

The moment she stepped out, the room erupted in chatter. Everyone whispered and laughed, trying to guess the reason for the sudden meeting. For half an hour, the entire school—from Class 6 to 10—was without a teacher. Every mind spun its own theory: exams postponed, sports event, inspection... nobody knew.

I leaned against the corridor railing, eyes fixed on the principal's cabin, waiting for the meeting to end. Each tick of the clock grew heavier, stretching the suspense. After a long ten minutes, the door opened. Teachers emerged one by one, and strangely, every face seemed to glow with excitement. Yet when Suji ma'am's eyes met mine, she masked her expression with a serious look, pointing sternly at me to get back inside the class.

A few minutes later, she returned, silenced the class with a sharp “Shhh!”, and for a moment kept that same serious expression. Then, suddenly, she smiled.

“Students... we have permission for a three-day trip. To Vizag!”

The classroom exploded into cheers. “Yaaaaah!” Desks rattled, hands flew in the air, and voices echoed down the corridor. For years, we had begged for at least one trip—sometimes even settling for an industrial visit—and finally, the miracle had happened.

During the break, Ishaan and Ajith immediately rushed to the MPC wing to discuss trip plans with their crushes. I leaned casually against a pillar, watching the BiPC side. As usual, Shravani stepped out, her searching eyes finding me.

“Why didn’t you come here like your friends went to MPC?” she teased.

I grinned. “I was about to, but you reached me first. Nice escape, right?”

“Hmm.” She smiled faintly. “So... are you coming on the trip?”

“More than excited! But you... are you coming?”

She lowered her eyes. “Maybe not. Hostel rules, parents... they might not allow me. These three days I’ll probably just be stuck inside.”

Her voice was soft, tinged with disappointment. I forced a light smile. “No problem. Try to come—we’ll enjoy more if you do.”

She nodded slowly, almost whispering, “Okay,” before walking back into her class. That small word carried the weight of an answer she already knew.

The much-awaited day finally arrived. The school gate was crowded with parents, handing over extra bags of snacks to their children as though we were leaving for a week-long adventure. Teachers repeated the instructions: no electronics, no mobiles. But, like every student, we ignored the warnings. My phone, though nearly out of storage, came along, along with a small OTG pendrive to save photos and videos.

Three buses were arranged—two for juniors and one for seniors. Students scrambled, discussing where to sit and with whom. I, Ishaan, and Ajith tried to claim spots together.

Then I heard it—“Karaannn!” A familiar, cheerful voice. I turned and froze. Priya.

She had returned to school after months away, smiling as if no time had passed. Priya was more than just a friend; she was like a sister, a guardian, someone who cared for me in

ways others didn't notice. She called me over and introduced me to her family. I spoke with her parents awkwardly, unsure what to say, but then they added warmly, "We know you well. We're sending her with full trust—you'll be with her."

I stood there stunned, a lump forming in my throat. That kind of trust—it felt overwhelming, almost enough to bring tears.

Boarding began. Priya was assigned to Bus 1, I to Bus 2, and Bus 3 went to the seniors. We waved to each other, promising to meet at the destinations.

Soon after, a message buzzed on my phone from an unknown number: "Hey... not coming. Waiting for the next working day. Miss you." It was from Shravani. My heart sank for a moment.

Back at the bus, Suji ma'am called out names for attendance. Seats filled quickly: I sat with Vinni and Krishna, while Raghu took the row beside us. Ishaan and Ajith claimed the last row, already celebrating their kingdom. When the engines roared to life, the entire bus erupted. Shouts, claps, chants—voices filled the night air. Even Ramu Sir, usually so reserved, was dragged into the fun. Students clapped as he was pulled into the aisle, dancing awkwardly to the beats. For once, he laughed openly, and the bus shook with cheers.

The night rolled by in song, laughter, and noisy chatter until, one by one, we dozed off on each other's shoulders.

Morning greeted us in Vizag. We freshened up, visited a temple, and roamed around the first day. But the highlight awaited us on Day Two—the RK Beach.

That evening, as we lined up in pairs, my phone buzzed again. A message from Priya: “Are you coming to the beach or staying in the bus?”

“Yes, I’m coming,” I replied.

“I’m hungry. I want an ice-cream.”

I looked at the strict line our teachers forced us to maintain. Breaking it was risky, but I couldn’t ignore her. Without thinking, I darted to a vendor, bought two ice-creams, and hurried back. Carefully, I reached Priya and handed her one.

But just as the cone touched her hand—

“KARAN!”

Pinky ma’am’s voice tore through the air. She stormed toward me, her eyes blazing.

“What is this? Approaching girls? Giving them things? Do you think I don’t see?”

“It’s just... ice-cream, ma’am,” I stammered.

“Don’t act smart! This kind of behavior will not be tolerated.” She looked at Priya too, her voice sharp enough to cut.

Heat rushed to my face. Inside, I screamed silently—Flowers I understand, love letters maybe. But ice-cream? That’s my crime? I apologized quickly. “Sorry, ma’am. It won’t happen again.”

The mood shifted once we reached the beach. Waves crashed like applause, the salty wind slapping our faces. Horses trotted along the sand, and I dared myself to ride one, gripping the reins with both thrill and fear. Friends scribbled their names in the sand, drawing hearts around them, only for the waves to wash everything away.

I bent down with a stick, wrote my name, and started to add another—beginning with the letter N. But out of nowhere, I noticed Pinky ma’am’s sharp gaze again. She was

everywhere, watching me like the “Watcher” from the MCU What If... series. I quickly stopped, pretending it was nothing, as the waves erased the letters.

We took group photos, laughter mixing with the sound of the sea, and carried those memories back with grains of sand in our shoes.

The following day passed with temple visits. Honestly, I barely remembered the names of the places. Each time my parents asked where I was, I fumbled, asking friends for the names to tell them.

The return journey turned into the trip’s grand finale. This time, Priya boarded my bus, and the night came alive. Antakshari became the soul of the ride, with students and teachers competing passionately. Suji ma’am’s voice was the sweetest of all—soft, melodic, almost professional. Even the boys who usually made noise fell silent to listen.

I sang until my throat ached, danced in the aisle with friends, and laughed until my stomach hurt. Teachers joined in, shedding their strictness for a night of pure joy. For those hours, we weren’t students and teachers—we were just one big family on wheels.

By the time we reached school, it was past 1 a.m. Parents stood waiting, some with sleepy eyes, some with relieved smiles. My father arrived on his bike, ready to take me home. Some of my friends stayed overnight at school, sleeping on classroom benches before leaving in the morning.

And just like that, the three days ended. Fun, laughter, music, beaches, and temples—it all felt like a dream. Only one thing left incomplete: Shravani wasn’t there.

CHAPTER 6: THE ELECTIONS

The Monday after the trip, the school corridors buzzed with stories of Vizag—temples, beaches, antakshari, and the late-night laughter in buses. Photos were passed around, inside jokes were born, and memories were replayed again and again.

But in the middle of all that noise, Shravani was quiet. She hadn't been on the trip, and her absence was like an unspoken pause in my story. When I saw her near the corridor, she gave me a small smile and said,

"So... trip chala baagundha?"

I nodded. "It was fun. But not the same without you."

She tilted her head down, her voice soft. "Missed it... missed being there. Everyone's talking about it like some festival happened."

I smiled faintly. "We'll make other memories. Don't worry."

Her eyes lit up briefly, but the moment passed. Something bigger was already brewing in college—the student elections.

The atmosphere shifted completely. Posters began appearing, names circulated in whispers, and groups started forming. The talk of beaches and temples was slowly replaced by, "Who will be the president? Who will lead the college?"

I was nominated. Ishaan too.

I didn't expect it, but somewhere it felt right. I was known among juniors as "Karan bhayya," someone approachable and friendly. Teachers often saw me as responsible, and many of my classmates respected me for balancing fun and studies. My name floated naturally, like it belonged there.

Ishaan, on the other hand, had strong support from the seniors, especially the MPC wing where his crush studied. It was as if our paths were destined to cross—not as friends, but as competitors.

When the announcement came, our circle of friends split silently into two teams. Some campaigned with me, others with Ishaan. And from the outside, people assumed we had personal clashes. "Why else would best friends stand against each other?" they whispered. But we both knew—it was just fate.

The campaigning began.

Moving from classroom to classroom, shaking hands, smiling at juniors, answering questions—it felt like politics in miniature. Everywhere I went, voices rose in encouragement:

"Karan, we're with you!"

"You have our vote!"

"You'll win for sure!"

Each word boosted me, and yet, deep down, I knew promises didn't always equal votes.

Teachers were a different challenge. When we approached them, many asked, “Why do you want this responsibility instead of focusing on your studies?” I thought they were just testing us. I gave the safest answers—about leadership, responsibility, making student voices heard. But I didn’t realize those questions carried a weight I wasn’t prepared for.

Election Day arrived.

By 11 a.m., voting started. Students lined up, teachers supervised, and ballot boxes slowly filled with folded slips. The campus was charged with energy—like a festival, yet tense, with eyes darting, alliances forming, whispers spreading.

By lunch, voting closed. Now came the longest wait: the counting round in the afternoon.

We gathered near the old banana tree in the courtyard. Some sat cross-legged on the ground, others leaned against the walls. Priya ran around like a reporter, updating me with every rumor and leak she heard.

The first round of counting began. Numbers were read aloud. My name stayed on top—leading by twenty to thirty votes. Cheers erupted from my side. I smiled, my chest swelling with hope.

Second round—still in the lead, this time by forty votes.

Third round—fifty.

Excitement bubbled inside me. My friends started whispering, “You’re winning, Karan! This is yours!”

Then Priya came closer, leaned toward my ear, and whispered words that froze me.

“It’s not you.”

I turned sharply. “What? But how do you know?”

She laughed softly. “Internal leaks... exit polls. Teachers already decided. You’ll lose in the end.”

Shock tightened my throat. “But... why?”

She looked at me, almost apologetically. “They think you’re too good in studies, Karan. If you take up this role, you’ll lose focus. Some teachers want you to stay away from distractions.”

I sat there, still hearing the cheers from my supporters, but feeling hollow inside. My heart battled itself—should I feel honored that people cared for my future, or should I break at the thought of losing something I fought for?

The final round came.

Ramu Sir, with his usual serious face, stood near the desk with ballot sheets. His voice carried over the restless crowd. Numbers fell, one by one, each tightening the knot in my stomach.

The lead slipped.

Twenty votes.

Thirty.

Fifty.

By the end, I was trailing.

And when the final count was read, Ishaan had won by nearly seventy votes.

For a moment, the courtyard blurred. Cheers erupted, but they weren't for me. I stood still, the reality settling like dust after a storm.

I walked over to Ishaan, forced a smile, and shook his hand. "Congratulations, Captain."

He grinned, pulling me into a quick hug. There was no bitterness between us—only the unspoken bond of two friends who had stood against each other because destiny demanded it.

But my heart wasn't in that moment. I was still stuck on the thought that people saw me as someone too valuable to risk. It was both a compliment and a wound.

Shravani found me later near the corridor. She walked slowly, her voice careful.

"Hey... you were so close. Everyone thought you'd win."

I smiled faintly. "Maybe it wasn't meant to be. Maybe they were right."

Her eyes softened. "Still... you tried. That matters."

Others came too, patting my back, saying, “You lost by just a few votes. Next time, you’ll win.” I nodded, but inside, I knew the truth. Sometimes losing isn’t about numbers—it’s about what people decide you should or shouldn’t become.

And under that banana tree, as the noise of celebration continued, I silently promised myself: maybe I don’t need a title to prove who I am.

CHAPTER 7: BETWEEN THE LINES

The day itself was strange right from the morning. A festival weekend had collided with Ganesh Nimmajanam, and though the college administration had first declared a holiday, the notice was later withdrawn with a sudden announcement: “Working day.” The confusion did its work—half the students bunked, some had already gone to their villages, and others simply ignored the correction.

The morning prayer felt hollow. Instead of the usual packed lines stretching across the ground, there were patches of emptiness, gaps between students that looked like missing teeth in a comb. The drum sounded thinner, the chorus of Vande Mataram softer, carried by fewer voices. The corridors echoed strangely—footsteps louder, whispers sharper—like the whole school was breathing in half-volume.

When Suji ma’am entered our class, her eyes immediately scanned the room. Out of forty-five, maybe fifteen of us were there. Her eyebrows lifted, lips pressed into a straight line, but she didn’t scold. Instead, she leaned on the desk, sighed, and picked up a chalk.

“Okay... let’s continue,” she said gently.

But before she could even write the first line on the board, we all burst out in chorus:

“Nooooo maaaam!”

The echo bounced around the nearly empty room, our combined voice sounding mischievous rather than rebellious.

Ma’am tilted her head, feigning surprise. “Then what should I do? I can’t sit calm either.”

“Digital class, ma’am!” someone shouted.

“Some video, ma’am!” another added.

She tapped the chalk on her palm, pretending to think, then turned to me. “Karan, go to Hindi sir and ask for the projector. If we can’t have a full class, at least let’s make it useful.”

The projector was a small, portable one—our college’s “low-budget digital classroom.” I carried it back with care, pretending like I was holding a treasure. Suji ma’am smiled, promised just “a few poems first,” then we would watch something engaging. The period ended lighter than usual, no one bored, everyone relaxed.

When she was about to leave with the projector, I quickly stopped her.

“Ma’am, you can leave it here. Hindi sir will need it next... he told me to keep it ready.”

She trusted me enough not to ask twice. “Okay, keep it safe,” she said and left.

Of course, Hindi sir hadn’t said anything. Within minutes Ajith plugged in his pendrive, the blue light blinked, and suddenly Saaho blared across the wall.

We shut the door, bolted it from inside. To anyone passing by, it looked like a serious digital class. Inside, we were whistling like cinema halls.

Some sprawled on the benches, some lay their heads on desks, others dug into snacks. The back row laughed too loudly until someone hissed at them to shut up. It was a scene of chaos disguised as discipline.

But in the middle of it, Rishi kept poking me, teasing unnecessarily, until it sparked into a small fight. Annoyance simmered in me, souring my mood. I sat sulking at one end of the bench, Rishi at the other, while the rest drowned in Prabhas’s action scenes.

Then—knock knock.

Everyone froze. For a second the room was dead silent. If it was a teacher, we were finished.

Vinod crept to the door, cracked it open. A soft, hesitant voice floated in:

“Is Karan inside?”

I knew that voice instantly. Familiar. Sweet. Nervous. Shravani.

She stood there, head slightly bent, eyes searching the floor instead of faces. She didn’t even look at Vinod.

Vinod turned his head dramatically and shouted into the room, “Karannnn! Someone’s here for you!”

The whole class erupted in suppressed giggles. My heart thumped. I walked out, trying to look casual.

“Why did you come here?” I asked, trying to sound firm.

“Why shouldn’t I?” she shot back softly, still not looking up.

Behind me, Vinod leaned against the wall, arms crossed, smirking like a spy waiting for the scandal to unfold. His eyes darted between us as though he had caught two thieves.

“Go inside,” I barked at him. “I’ll come in five minutes.”

But he lingered nearby, pretending to tie his shoelaces, ears clearly pointed towards us.

Shravani glanced at me once, quickly, then away again. Her hand twitched slightly, as if holding back words. Finally, she gave a little signal with her chin toward the stairs. I sighed and followed, irritation from my fight with Rishi still bubbling in me.

On the steps, away from the others, I asked sharply, “What?”

She lowered her head even further. “I... I wanted to tell you something.”

“Then say it,” I snapped, more harshly than I intended.

She fumbled, her voice so low it almost merged with the hum of the corridor. “I... just... actually...”

She twisted her fingers, swallowed, her words breaking into murmurs. I grew impatient, my mind half in anger, half in curiosity.

Just then, Ramu Sir strolled into the corridor. His sandal steps echoed like thunder in that tense moment. Both of us stiffened instantly, stepping apart as if magnets suddenly repelled. He didn’t even glance at us, just walked by toward the washroom.

Vinod’s laughter carried faintly from the other side. My ears burned.

As soon as sir disappeared, Shravani turned back, determination trembling in her eyes now. She tried again, voice trembling but audible:

“I... I... I love you.”

Her words were like a stone thrown into still water, ripples spreading through me. She bent her head immediately, both hands covering her face in sudden shyness.

And then, destiny's cruel timing—Ramu Sir walked out again.

This time, it was absurdly cinematic. Shravani, whispering again: “I love you.”

Me, frozen.

Ramu Sir, right between us.

He didn't stop, didn't scold, didn't even raise an eyebrow. Just walked past, expression unreadable, sandals slapping the floor. But I knew, he had heard.

My stomach dropped. My mind spun with dread. Tomorrow morning, I imagined myself dragged onto the stage, the entire school laughing as my name was announced with hers. “Affair between a tenth boy and a BiPC girl.” Finished.

Shravani's eyes were wide with worry too. She bit her lip, whispering, “What will happen now?”

I couldn't answer. My throat was dry. I just nodded vaguely and walked back to class.

Inside, the movie still played, everyone laughing at a fight sequence, completely unaware of the storm that had just unfolded outside.

I sat down quietly, staring at the wall, my heartbeat loud in my ears. My mind repeated the same cycle: Did he really hear? What if he tells? What if tomorrow...

The day ended like that. A confession, a witness, and a silence heavier than words.

CHAPTER 8: THE DRIZZLING DISTANCE

The next morning, I entered the college gate with a mind full of storm and silence. Each step echoed with fear — fear of being called to the staffroom, fear of what might have spread after yesterday's incident. My heartbeat was so loud that I could almost hear it over the morning chatter.

Even during the prayer, it felt like every faculty member's eyes were fixed on me.

Their glances seemed to whisper, "You're done, Karan. Today's your day to be on the stage."

Every movement, every look, every murmur felt like a signal. My palms were cold, my throat dry, and I tried to hide in the middle of the line, pretending everything was normal.

When the prayer finally ended, I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding. No one called my name. No one scolded. The stage remained empty, and for a moment, I felt like I had escaped a storm that never arrived.

Back in the class, I sat under the fan with Rishi, trying to look normal. I explained everything that had happened the previous day — every word, every glance, every heartbeat.

That idiot laughed loudly, patting my shoulder, "Don't worry, brother! Whatever it takes, we'll face it!"

His laughter was infectious, but my mind still spun with questions. Did Ramu Sir hear her? Did he tell in the staffroom? Or are they all just pretending not to know?

Suji ma'am came, took her class with her usual soft grace, and left. Hindi Sir entered and exited too, cracking small jokes like nothing happened. Everything around me was normal — painfully normal — while my mind refused to believe it.

Days passed. Neither I nor Shravani spoke again. No glances, no gestures. Just distance wrapped in silence.

Soon, the talk in the corridors shifted from exams and homework to something bigger — our college was hosting the State Meet. It was a big deal. Students from various colleges were about to arrive, the ground was buzzing with decorations — flags, banners, and posters waving in the late-October wind. The campus looked alive, brighter than ever, but somewhere inside, I felt distant, dull, and disconnected.

Most of the students bunked classes that day, busy preparing for the events or sneaking around the ground to cheer for teams. I was one of the few who stayed back in the classroom, half-heartedly copying notes from one book to another, pretending to be busy while my thoughts wandered.

That's when I heard a familiar voice echo down the corridor —

“My dear Karannnn! Look who’s here!”

It was Priya, walking towards me with her usual teasing smile.

I turned my head lazily and said, “You came again?!”

She just grinned wider, “Of course! Now come out. Let’s see the games — maybe we can find someone for you!”

I shook my head, pretending to focus on my notebook.

“Hey, just now I finally got time to sit and relax. You go, enjoy yourself,” I said flatly.

Her smile faded a little, and she turned away. I didn’t realize then — sometimes we push away the people who care just because we’re too tired to face our own thoughts.

About an hour later, I heard her voice again — louder, happier.

“Look, my dear Karan! I brought them here for you!”

I looked up, and there she was — surrounded by a group of girls from another college, laughing and waving. For a moment, I was frozen.

She introduced me proudly, telling them, “This is Karan — he touches the sky!”

Everyone laughed, and I felt a bit shy, scratching my head, not knowing what to say.

Among them was a cheerful junior girl named Akky, who suddenly called out, “Annayya, you’re such a nice guy!”

That one line melted something in me — it was unexpected, sweet, and pure. From that day, she became like a little sister from another college. We exchanged a few words before they left for their games again, smiling and waving goodbye.

Priya knew me well — better than I admitted. She knew how to pull me out of loneliness, even when I resisted it. That’s what made her special.

But every happy thing has a shadow waiting nearby.

During the state meet, several small stories started surfacing. Ishaan’s secret crush got exposed, and with that, a few other stories spread like wildfire among the staff. Even Ishaan was called to the staffroom, interrogated like he was hiding some criminal plan. He laughed it off later, but I could see the worry in his eyes.

Slowly, the gap between me and Shravani widened — not because of anger or misunderstanding, but because of silence. The kind of silence that grows roots.

Weeks passed. Exams approached. Conversations faded.

And one day, I saw her again — standing near her class window, talking to another guy.

They were smiling, laughing, sharing the same space where once we exchanged silent signals and smiles. My heart didn't break loudly that day — it just cracked quietly, like an old glass left out in the rain.

Even Manaswi whispered to me later, "Karan, she's talking to someone these days."

I smiled faintly and said nothing. Because what was there to say? I had already seen it myself.

That evening, I stood alone at the corridor, watching the sunset cast long shadows on the ground. The breeze carried the faint laughter from her class.

And in that silence, I realized something.

> If someone truly values you, no storm can drift them away.

But she left with just the drizzling rain.

The day ended quietly.

No tears. No confrontation. Just a slow acceptance that some people walk into your life to change your chapters, not to stay till the end.

And so, another chapter of my life — and hers — gently closed.

CHAPTER 9: WHEN FLOWERS BLOOMED AGAIN

Life slipped back into its usual rhythm.

Classes resumed, the corridors filled with noise again, and the same chaos returned — homework, chalk dust, laughter, gossip. After the state meet, everything seemed normal on the outside, but inside me, there was still a quiet weight. I had accepted things as they were. Or at least, I thought I had.

Then, one afternoon during break, Shravani appeared at the door of my classroom.

Her expression was unreadable — neither angry nor smiling, just searching.

She walked straight up to me and said softly,

“Why are you not talking to me these days?”

I looked at her for a moment, then turned slightly away, my voice low.

“What’s there to talk about? Even if I stop talking, who cares? Some people seem busy with others these days.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly, surprised at the bitterness in my tone. “Are you... doubting me?”

“I saw you,” I replied quietly. “And not just me — others said the same too.”

Her face tightened, hurt. “Oh. So you’ll believe what others tell you... even if it’s wrong about me?”

Before I could reply, her voice broke, and tears began to well in her eyes. She tried to speak but the words came out uneven, trembling. Watching her cry like that — so raw, so genuine — something inside me twisted painfully.

I took a slow step forward, guilt washing over me. “Hey... I’m sorry, yaar. It’s just bad timing. Maybe everything went wrong at once.”

She wiped her tears with the back of her hand, still looking away. But that small apology was enough to break the invisible wall between us. For the first time in weeks, she smiled faintly.

That was how the closeness began again — slowly, quietly, like the first drizzle after a dry summer.

We didn’t talk much about what had happened. We didn’t have to.

Sometimes, a few simple words — “sorry” and “it’s okay” — are enough to restart something that should never have stopped.

Soon, the festive air of Bathukamma filled the college.

Suji ma’am announced in class, “Everyone bring flowers tomorrow. We’re going to make the biggest Bathukamma in the school this year.”

By the next morning, the entire classroom smelled like a garden. Jasmine, marigold, chrysanthemum, and rose petals were spread across desks. Girls sat in circles, hands busy arranging layers, their laughter mixing with the rustle of flowers.

Suji ma’am and the girls — Priya leading them as usual — were in full spirit.

The boys, including me, mostly stood around pretending to help but actually just watching and passing comments. Every few minutes, Suji ma'am would turn and scold lightly, "You boys only know how to watch, not help!"

I had brought a small bag of flowers myself — just enough to say I contributed. And, tucked secretly inside, two roses meant for someone who had once brought color into my days again — Shravani.

I ended up as the photographer for our class Bathukamma team.

With the projector camera borrowed from Hindi Sir's room, I crouched around taking pictures of everyone — Suji ma'am adjusting the flowers carefully, Priya laughing as she dropped petals on Raghu's head, and the girls singing folk lines while arranging the layers.

By the time the bell rang, the Bathukamma looked beautiful — round, colorful, and fragrant.

Evening came, and the celebrations began on the ground. The campus looked magical. Every class stood in circles with their Bathukammas placed in the center. The air was filled with the beats of drums and traditional songs echoing from all sides.

Priya walked up to me, smiling. "Karan! What are you waiting for? Everyone's already gathered!"

But she didn't know that my eyes weren't looking at the Bathukammas or the crowd — they were searching for someone else.

“Yeah, I’m coming... you go ahead,” I said. “I’ll join in a while.”

She rolled her eyes and ran off to her group.

I stood near the edge of the ground, pretending to check my camera, when a soft tap fell on my shoulder.

I turned around — and there she was.

Shravani.

For a moment, everything else blurred — the music, the laughter, even the bright lights.

She was standing there in a traditional half-saree, a deep pink with golden embroidery that shimmered under the evening lights. The pleats flowed gracefully, the border brushing against the ground. Her long hair was braided neatly, decorated with jasmine strands that matched the white bangles on her wrists. She looked radiant — elegant, pure, and effortlessly beautiful.

“So?” she asked, tilting her head slightly. “How do I look?”

I tried to act casual, my heart racing. “Yeah... nice.”

She frowned. “Just nice?”

I shrugged, pretending indifference.

She crossed her arms, clearly annoyed. “You know what? I wore this for you! And you can’t even say a proper word? I expected at least something, Karan.”

Her voice carried both frustration and hurt. “I wore this half-saree for the one who cares for me. I thought he’d see me and feel happy. But...”

Before she could finish, I smiled softly and interrupted, “Cool down. You’re not just nice. You’re... absolutely gorgeous. You’re the center of attention here. Everyone’s watching you.”

Her expression melted into a shy smile.

Then, with a small grin, I lifted my little finger and gently rubbed it against the corner of her eye, smudging her eyeliner slightly.

“What are you doing?” she asked, confused.

“Putting a dishti chukka,” I said with a wink. “So no evil eyes will fall on you.”

She laughed softly. I bent down, playfully trying to touch her foot with the same finger, but she quickly pulled back, blushing. “No, no... don’t do that!”

Her laughter mixed with the drum beats, and for a moment, everything felt right again.

Days went on like that. Small chats, messages, occasional calls during holidays — nothing dramatic, just the sweetness of connection finding its rhythm again.

We didn't have personal phones, so we used whatever small chances we got. A borrowed phone from a friend, a saved number on a scrap of paper, a call during vacations. Sometimes she'd say,

"Wait, your attha is calling me,"

when she really meant her mom was asking her to help at home.

Sometimes she'd tease, "So what's my attha doing?" — meaning my mom. It became our secret code, a playful little thing to make boring days feel warmer.

Those simple moments — the flowers, the laughter, the phone calls — felt like the calm after a long storm.

I didn't know it then, but those small things were becoming the memories I'd hold onto forever.

CHAPTER 10: THE DAY SILENCE SPOKE

Days passed quietly.

Our messages, those small calls, and even the little jokes between us had slowed down. My phone had stopped working completely — a blank screen that suddenly felt like a wall between me and her. Without it, I couldn't reach Shravani. We met only during short breaks at college, exchanging a few lines before the bell rang again. Those few minutes were all we had, and even they started slipping away.

Weeks went by like that — empty, ordinary, and quieter than they should have been.

Then, one fine day, I was walking through the BiPC corridor looking for Ramu Sir. The afternoon sun streamed in through the windows, turning the marble floor golden. The corridor was mostly empty, except for a few voices echoing from the far end.

That's when I noticed them — a boy and a girl standing close, laughing softly near the corner.

I couldn't see their faces properly. They looked like any couple, lost in their small world of smiles and secrets. I didn't want to intrude, so I looked away and continued walking.

But as I turned to leave, I caught sight of the girl playfully slapping the boy's shoulder — not in anger, but with the shy affection that says more than words ever could. She waved her hand lightly over his head, giggling, while he stood there smiling like the world revolved around her.

Something about that laughter, that movement, pulled at me. My steps slowed.

I took a few more, almost unwilling, and when I reached the end of the corridor, the couple turned slightly toward me.

And my world just... stopped.

It was her.

Shravani.

The person I had trusted the most. The one who asked me, “Are you doubting me?” and cried when I said yes.

The one who promised me that I was wrong to think she’d ever talk to someone else.

The one who looked for me every time I was missing.

And now... she was right there — with someone else.

The smile on her face was the same one I had once lived for. But it wasn’t mine anymore.

For a few seconds, I just stood there, staring, every heartbeat louder than the last.

It wasn’t anger. It wasn’t disbelief. It was something heavier — that silent ache when the truth is so clear you can’t even deny it.

I felt my chest tighten, but I forced a small smile anyway. A smile to hide the storm inside.

I walked past them slowly, pretending not to care, but every step felt heavier.

That walk — from the corridor to the class — was the longest I had ever taken.

Back in the class, I sat at the back bench, facing the window.

Outside, the world was perfectly normal — birds hopping on the railing, a gentle breeze moving the leaves, the sound of distant chatter.

Inside me, everything had gone still.

That day, I finally understood how Telugu movie heroes feel when they lose the one they love.

Not angry, not crying — just broken in silence.

I stared at the trees outside, watching their branches sway as if mocking me. My thoughts ran wild:

We had just a week's gap, that's all. And in that gap, she found someone else.

When I doubted her, she cried.

And now... she's making me cry.

I whispered to myself, "Maybe I shouldn't cry for someone who already stopped thinking about me."

I thought about all the small things — the phone calls, the festival, the smiles.

Everything seemed to shrink into one painful question: Was it ever real?

Ishaan once told me something I couldn't forget — that his girlfriend had mentioned Shravani kept an old picture from our Vizag trip, cut my part out of it, and kept it safe because she liked me that much. That girl, the one who once couldn't stand being away from me for a day, now stood laughing with someone else.

I tried to understand it. Maybe it wasn't her fault. Maybe she just changed. But my heart didn't want logic — it just wanted her.

The day dragged painfully.

Priya, sitting a few benches away, kept glancing at me every few minutes. She knew something was off. She always did.

By the last period, the teacher didn't come. The class turned noisy, but I stayed silent, staring at the window again.

Priya walked over and sat beside me.

"What's wrong with you, my boy?" she asked gently. "You've been staring outside since morning. What did you see out there, huh?"

I looked at her, expressionless, hiding the tears behind tired eyes.

She waved her hand in front of me. "Hello? Earth to Karan? Found something?"

I forced a small smile but said nothing.

"Okay, okay... relax," she said softly. "You don't have to tell me now. But don't lock it in. I know you — you never share, but I can see when something breaks inside you."

She patted my back lightly and added, "Whatever it is, you'll be fine. Just don't lose yourself in it."

She didn't know what had happened — but she didn't need to.

Her presence was enough.

Priya and Rishi — those two were my lifelines.

They didn't fix my problems, but they made sure I never drowned in them.

Two or three days passed like that. I spoke little, laughed less, and pretended I was fine.

But inside, I kept replaying the same corridor scene again and again — her smile, that slap, the way she looked at him.

One weekend, I had to go to a nearby village, close to where Rishi lived.

We went together on my bike, stopping at a small shop to collect an online parcel.

We were waiting at the counter when a bus pulled up nearby.

And then, like fate's cruel sense of humor — she stepped off.

Shravani.

She didn't see me, but I saw everything.

She got down, her dupatta fluttering in the breeze, her hair falling loosely around her face. And behind her, the same boy stepped off.

They smiled at each other, waved goodbye like they'd done it a hundred times before.

Then she walked away, still smiling — walking straight into her street, unaware that I stood just a few feet away.

Rishi looked at me quietly. His eyes said it all — let it go.

He didn't say a word. Just reached for my bike keys. "Come, machaa," he said softly. "Let me drive."

I handed him the keys without a word.

As the bike rolled forward, I turned once more — she had already disappeared into her lane.

Maybe she was gone long before that day.

That ride back was quiet. The wind hit my face, drying the tears I hadn't even realized were there.

Somewhere between the turns of the road, I let go — not because I wanted to, but because I had no choice.

And for the first time, I didn't feel anger, or betrayal, or regret.

I just felt... empty.

Maybe this was what it meant to grow up — realizing that people change, hearts shift, and sometimes, love just fades without a reason.

But deep inside, I whispered a single line to myself —

> "If someone truly loves you, no storm can move them away.

But she left with just a drizzle."

And with that, I let the road, the wind, and time carry the rest of her away.

CHAPTER 11: THE CALM BEFORE GOODBYE

The final months of school had begun — the countdown to our board exams.

The corridors that once echoed with laughter now hummed with murmurs of revision. Teachers rushed through lessons as if chasing time itself. Charts of formulas, grammar rules, and definitions filled the blackboards.

Life had suddenly turned serious.

I had stopped thinking about Shravani. Maybe not completely, but enough to not hurt anymore. My focus had shifted to my books, my friends — Priya and Rishi — and the quiet dream of making my teachers proud.

Almost every teacher in the school had placed their hopes on me.

One afternoon, the Maths ma'am from Section B called me into her class while I was walking past.

“Karan,” she said, adjusting her spectacles with a faint smile, “how’s your preparation going? Are you focused?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I replied with a polite smile.

She nodded. “Good. You know, last year we expected a few students to get a 10 out of 10, but not one did — not even the top girl. This time, the staff have fewer expectations... but one strong hope. And everyone’s saying the same name — Karan. Make sure you don’t disappoint us, my boy. Make our school proud.”

I smiled, a little embarrassed. “I’ll do my best, ma’am.”

Even though she wasn’t my teacher, she always treated me like one of her own.

Almost every teacher in the school did. I wasn't the topper, but somehow, I had become that one student everyone trusted — the good guy, the one who wouldn't mess up.

Like they say — “Ramudu manchi baludu.”

I still remember a moment from weeks before — I was sitting on the staircase near the corridor, revising a few notes, when Haasin ma'am walked past. She smiled slightly and patted my head.

Turning to Suji ma'am, who was standing nearby, she joked, “If he doesn't perform well in boards, beat him, okay?”

Both of them laughed.

Suji ma'am replied warmly, “No ma'am, he's a good boy. He'll perform well in everything.”

Haasin ma'am looked at me teasingly. “So tell me, Karan, are you really a good boy?”

I grinned, pretending to think. “Don't know, ma'am.”

She burst out laughing. “See, Suji! How smart he is!”

Then she waved her hand on my head and left with a smile.

That was Haasin ma'am — the feared Botany teacher for the BiPC students. Shravani's class teacher. Her very name could silence a corridor.

If Haasin ma'am caught anyone doing something wrong — that was it, end credits. Career over.

Strict, serious, and always alert. But strangely, with me, she was softer — maybe she saw something genuine, maybe she just liked my honesty.

But soon, the air in school changed again.

Like a new police officer arriving in a movie, the “investigation days” began.

Teachers started discovering couples — one by one — from both A and B sections.

Rumors spread like wildfire, and names flew around faster than facts.

And when Haasin ma'am found out, everything got serious.

Even Ishaan's matter came to light — his connection with the senior girl.

If Haasin ma'am knew, it was already over.

Everyone knew what that meant.

Suji ma'am, being the kindest among all, didn't scold or humiliate him. She just spoke gently, like a mother.

“Ishaan,” she said, “this isn't the time for all that. You've got your whole life to enjoy. Don't waste this chance. You were a topper once — don't let one distraction change who you are.”

But Ishaan had changed. Once the sharpest student, now he was barely listening. He laughed everything off, living like it didn't matter.

Suji ma'am's eyes often softened when she spoke about him — she wasn't angry, she was just heartbroken.

She cared too much for her students.

One day, I went to the juniors' class to call someone, and Suji ma'am was there. She smiled when she saw me.

"Come here, Karan," she said.

We talked for a while, and then her tone shifted, gentle but serious.

"Tell your friend to focus on the board exams. After that, he can enjoy as much as he wants. And by the way..." she added, "don't be in Botany ma'am's eyes. You understand?"

I nodded. "Yes, ma'am. But you've seen how he's changed. Even we tried telling him, but he doesn't listen."

She sighed deeply. Her eyes shimmered a little — and I realized she was fighting tears.

"You know what hurts me the most?" she said quietly. "Now, all the teachers are talking about my class. They're saying, 'Suji ma'am's students are the ones doing all this.' Even Haasin ma'am asked me, 'What's happening with your students, Suji? Junior boys and senior girls? What are you all teaching them?'"

Her voice broke slightly. I had never seen her cry before — not once in three years.

That day, she did.

She ended softly, “Please, Karan. Just make sure you don’t give anyone a reason to doubt you. Focus on your exams. Make me proud.”

I nodded silently, feeling an ache in my chest. I had never felt so protective of a teacher before.

The next day, during Botany class, Haasin ma’am told me to collect all the notebooks and bring them to her cabin.

I gathered them neatly and went. Her cabin smelled faintly of chalk and phenyl. She was writing something on a paper when I entered.

I placed the books on the table.

“Ma’am, here are the notebooks,” I said.

“Hmm. Wait, Karan,” she said suddenly. “Stop. I got to know something about you.”

My heart froze.

This was it. My end card.

I turned slowly. “What, ma’am?”

She folded her arms. “I know you’re doing something in your class. There’s a girl involved. And I know who she is.”

For a second, my heart dropped straight to my stomach. My palms went cold. But something in her tone — the misplaced confidence — gave me a small hint of relief.

“Ma’am, there’s nothing like that,” I said, steadyng my voice. “We’re just friends.”

She narrowed her eyes slightly. “We? Who and who?”

I smiled faintly. “You already know, ma’am. You must have heard it. But really — there’s nothing. Just friendship.”

She looked at me for a moment longer, then smiled in that half-serious way of hers. “Okay then. If there’s nothing, fine. But if I find out otherwise... you know what I’ll do.”

I nodded quickly and stepped back, hiding the small sigh of relief escaping my chest.

But as I turned to leave, I caught a faintly puzzled look on her face — a flicker of uncertainty. It was clear that Haasin ma’am’s suspicion wasn’t even about Shravani at all. She had somehow linked my name with Priya — probably because she’d often seen us walking together, laughing, and sharing notes.

She was convinced there was something between me and Priya.

That small misunderstanding, ironically, became my unexpected escape.

As I turned to leave, something in me couldn't stay quiet. I stopped at the door and looked back.

"Ma'am, everyone's blaming our class. But honestly, it's not just us. Even in your class, a few students are doing the same things. Maybe... you should look into that too."

I said it respectfully, but firmly. Not to insult her — just to protect the teacher who cared for me the most.

She looked at me quietly, her expression unreadable. Then she nodded once. "Okay, Karan. I'll check."

I walked out, feeling strangely lighter.

Evenings in those final months had a different peace to them.

We had study hours after school — boys on one side, girls on the other, a small gap between us with the teachers walking in between. The ground was soft with green grass, surrounded by square-shaped corridors glowing in the orange light of sunset.

Suji ma'am sat near the corridor, checking our notes while the cool evening wind moved her dupatta lightly.

Some students studied seriously; others joked quietly, pretending to read.

Halfway through, snacks were served — bonda, pakoda, or sometimes just biscuits with chai. The laughter would return briefly, then fade as books reopened.

By six in the evening, the sun dipped behind the building, and the whole campus glowed with a calm golden hue.

No chaos. No shouting. Just the rustling of pages, the smell of chalk dust, and the quiet murmur of dreams being built.

Those evenings — peaceful, grounded, and full of unspoken goodbyes — were the moments that would stay with me long after school ended.

CHAPTER 12: THE DAYS THAT FADED

Only a month remained for our board exams, and the weight of expectation started pressing heavier with each passing day. The teachers had begun to rush through the syllabus, the corridors echoed with hurried revisions, and even laughter felt smaller, buried under the fear of the coming tests.

Everyone expected something from me — teachers, friends, even the juniors.

Whenever I crossed the corridor, juniors would whisper,
“This time, Karan anna will do it. He’ll get 10 out of 10.”

That admiration slowly turned into pressure. I started questioning myself — Can I really do it? What if I fail everyone’s hopes?

Evening study hours were supposed to be quiet and serious, but they always turned into light chaos. Still, I began using that time wisely. I studied hard, not for the praise — but to keep the faith of those who believed in me.

One evening, during those study hours, Vijay was suddenly called by one of the helpers.
“Principal ma’am is calling you,” they said.

We turned to look — at the gate near the office, a couple of elders were waiting, faces tight with concern.

Someone whispered, “They’re Manaswi’s relatives.”

Everyone exchanged looks.

We didn't need a full story — we understood.

Vijay's matter had also been exposed.

Within minutes, no one was studying. Every eye was fixed toward the principal's cabin. The murmurs started spreading like ripples through the quiet campus.

Books were open, but no one read a line. Heads were half-turned, pretending to study while waiting for the result of the interrogation.

After nearly an hour, Vijay finally came back.

He walked like a celebrity facing the press — and the class turned into reporters, surrounding him in silence.

“What happened?” someone whispered.

“What did ma’am say?” another asked, eyes wide.

We all leaned closer, but not too obviously — Suji ma’am’s eyes were still around.

Vijay sighed dramatically, lowering his bag.

“Her aunty came to school,” he said. “She saw me near their house the other day and went straight to the principal. Asked everything — ‘Why was Vijay there? Is there something between him and Manaswi?’ All that.”

We sat still, pretending to take notes but listening to every word.

“I told them,” Vijay continued, “I just went to celebrate my friend’s birthday. Nothing else.”

We exchanged knowing looks — because we knew whose birthday it was.

Manaswi's.

When we looked at him accusingly, he smiled sheepishly.

"Okay, okay," he said. "It was her birthday, but that's not the point. I managed it."

He explained how the principal warned him gently,

"Exams are near. Stay away from distractions, whatever it is."

That day, we laughed it off. But deep down, we all realized — our time there was ending.

Our stories, our small mischiefs, our secrets — everything was about to become memories.

Then came the exam season.

The first day, I stood outside the gate holding my hall ticket, my palms sweating, heart racing.

It was the Telugu Paper-1.

The air smelled of new answer sheets, chalk dust, and nervousness. Some were revising notes, some were pretending to pray, others just staring into the sky.

I wrote well — though my Telugu handwriting worried me. Paper 2 went smoother. Then came Hindi — the one that scared everyone.

When the question paper was distributed, a wave of murmurs ran across the hall.

It was tough. Really tough.

I stared at the paper, my mind blank for a second, then began writing — slow, steady, trying to fill every line, pushing through the panic.

Halfway through, a sir entered the hall and made an announcement that silenced everything:

“Due to the increasing number of corona cases in the state, the remaining exams are postponed until further notice. Everyone must wear masks and return home safely.”

The class froze.

Postponed?

Some students cheered quietly. Others looked shocked.

I just sat there, pen in hand, unsure what to feel.

When I walked out, the Hindi Pandit saw me.

“So, Karan! How was it?” he asked.

“Sir... tried my best. Maybe good enough to be in the 10 out of 10 list.”

He laughed softly. “Even the topper from B section said the same. Let’s see.”

But deep down, I already knew this wouldn’t be a normal ending.

That evening, I, Priya, and Suji ma'am spoke over a call — all of us equally confused and worried.

"Ma'am," Priya said, "what if the exams get canceled?"

Suji ma'am sighed. "Don't overthink. They'll conduct them later. Just stay in exam mode."

But the next morning, my phone rang again. It was her voice — softer, sadder.

"Karan," she said, "the news is spreading. The exams might be canceled completely. Let's wait for the official notice."

The words echoed in my ears all day.

And then, the announcement came —

"SSC Exams canceled. Marks to be awarded on internal assessment."

The world outside had changed.

Within days, lockdown began.

No school. No shops. No streets filled with uniforms. Just silence.

Everyone stayed home. No haircuts, no gatherings, no games, no friends.

Life shrank into four walls.

The television became the morning prayer, the phone became the classroom, and boredom became the new subject.

Even groceries felt like missions — masks on, sanitize everything, stay distant.

The fear was everywhere — in the air, on doorknobs, in every cough that echoed outside.

I didn't even get a haircut for months. One day I pulled a strand of hair and measured it with a small scale — fifteen centimeters. I laughed alone. It had been 123 days since I'd stepped out.

Every small thing became big — a new message, a phone vibration, a sound from the gate. Life had slowed down so much that even stillness felt like noise.

Months later, results were declared online.

Everyone got high marks — 10 out of 10, 9.8, 9.6. So many toppers that it felt meaningless.

People began calling us “The Corona Batch.”

At first, it sounded funny. Later, it felt like a label stuck forever — a reminder of the year that never really happened.

We had become the batch that didn't write exams, the batch that didn't say goodbye.

And Shravani?

We never spoke again. No messages. No calls. No last meeting.

Just distance — silent, real, permanent.

The girl who once searched for me in crowds now lived somewhere beyond reach, beyond conversation.

From “the one I couldn’t stop thinking about” to “the one I never heard from again.”

It’s strange how time changes people —
how the most talked to becomes the most avoided,
how the most awaited message becomes just a deleted chat.

Some nights, I’d scroll through old photos — the group pictures, the classroom smiles, the blurred selfies — and realize how fast everything changed.

From corridors filled with laughter to empty rooms filled with silence.

From “See you tomorrow” to “Hope you’re doing fine somewhere.”

Life moved on.

The world slowly opened again.

Haircuts returned, buses ran, shops reopened.

But something inside me stayed the same — that quiet part that still belonged to those school days.

And when people now ask,
“What was your school life like?”

I smile and say,
“It had everything — laughter, fear, friendship, love, heartbreak... and one unforgettable story.”

Because some stories don't need perfect endings.
They just need to be felt.

❀ ***The End*** ❀

“Some memories don't fade — they just live quietly in the corners of who we become.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kalyan Dasari is a young storyteller who believes the strongest stories are not imagined but lived. *Before We Say Goodbye* is his **debut book**, drawn directly from the moments, friendships, and emotions that shaped his school years.

He writes with simplicity and heart — capturing the small feelings, the silent heartbreaks, the forgotten memories, and the lessons that stay with us long after childhood ends. Kalyan's stories reflect the innocence of youth, the honesty of experience, and the belief that every person enters our life for a reason.

Through this book, he hopes readers will reconnect with their own school days, their first spark, their own Shravani, their own silent goodbye — and the version of themselves they left behind.

This is just the beginning of his writing journey, with many more stories waiting to be told.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Every story in this book began as a real moment — simple, ordinary, and unforgettable. I didn't write this book to recreate a fantasy.

I wrote it to honor the memories that shaped me, the lessons I learned too late, and the people who unknowingly left footprints on my life.

Before We Say Goodbye is not perfect — because real life isn't. It is honest. It is emotional. It is mine.

If you ever felt something for someone and couldn't express it...

If you ever lost a connection without understanding why...

If you ever carried a goodbye in silence...

Then a part of this book belongs to you too.

Thank you for reading my first ever work.

Thank you for letting my memories become a part of your heart, even for a moment.

— Kalyan

THANK YOU

Thank you for choosing to read *Before We Say Goodbye*.

Being my **first book**, every page holds a piece of my life and every chapter carries a memory I once lived.

To everyone who walked with me through these words —
thank you for your time, your trust, and your heart.

If this book made you smile, reminded you of someone, brought back a school memory,
or touched you in a quiet way... then you've given this story its true purpose.

Thank you to my friends who became my characters,
to my teachers who inspired my journey,
and to my family who believed in me long before I believed in myself.

This book is not just mine —
it belongs to everyone who ever experienced a silent love,
a quiet heartbreak,
or a goodbye left unsaid.

Thank you for being part of my beginning.
More stories are waiting... and I hope you'll stay for them.

With gratitude,
— **Kalyan Dasari**

BEFORE WE SAY GOODBYE

Karan is shy, quiet, and never quite the center of attention—until the day he meets Shravani. In the corridors and classrooms of their school, a simple spark of connection soon grows into something deeper. But before he can find a way to express his feelings, distance begins to grow and the chance he never took lingers in the air, waiting for a moment that may no longer arrive.

Before We Say Goodbye is a nostalgic journey through first love and school days—the morning prayers, the subtle moments, the misunderstandings, and the silences that spoke volumes. It is a story of childhood, innocence, and emotions left unspoken.

An evocative school-time glimpse into the truths we only learn when it is time to let go...