



The Priceless

GIFT

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Chapter - 1

The Venkateswara Quality Inn was, as usual, bustling with activity; people were coming in and going out continuously. Vijay, the owner of the hotel, sat silently, watching the goings on. Suddenly, his eyes fell on the young lad, who was just entering and at once his entire system revved up. The boy, probably in his early twenties, was new to this area and had come here regularly every night for over a week. Vijay was rather perplexed as to why his heart went out to him whenever he happened to see him. He could also not understand why he was engulfed with strong feelings of love and affection toward this boy; it seemed Vijay had known him all his life! Today, he was inclined to find out, more than ever. For the first time in two years, Vijay felt an urge to talk to someone! Slowly, he got up from his chair and started walking toward the table where the boy was sitting.

Being a motherless child, Vijay was brought up by his father who had spoiled him with too much love and pampered him so much that he always got his way. Even in his mid-forties, he lacked dignity and good manners. He was puffed up with self-conceit and pride and thought that he had everything in life that one could ask for. Vijay had never known what it was to be in need of something until the day when the tragedy struck .

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It happened on the day of Ramya's thirteenth birthday. Vijay had taken his daughter to the Marina Beach to watch the sunrise. Swathi, his wife, sat on the shore and kept watch over her. Vijay was walking around with his cell phone, talking to

one of his close friends. Ramya was enjoying the tickle of sand and water under her feet when she saw a few catamarans far off. Within a few minutes, the catamarans reached the shore, and the fishermen embarked from them with their huge catches. Curious to see the fishes, Ramya followed them. Immediately the men squatted on the sand and divided the fishes into various categories. Several wholesalers surrounded the fishermen and started their bidding. In a few moments, the fishermen sold all their catch and left the place after tying up the catamarans on the sand. Ramya quickly jumped into the catamaran and began playing. She called out to her mother to join her, and as she walked toward her daughter, Swathi pointed to the rising sun. "Wow! Look at that Daddy. It looks as if the sun is coming out of the sea!" Ramya shrieked in excitement on seeing her father return. Vijay joined in her excitement and after a few minutes told her that it was time to return home. But Ramya pleaded with him that she wished to play in the water a little longer, and he relented.

Ramya ran and dipped her feet in the cool water once again and shortly she was joined by both parents. Swathi noticed that the waves were suddenly getting violent, and she warned father and daughter not to go into the sea. Just as she said this, she saw huge waves rising high in the middle of the sea and forming giant walls. Slowly, the water came closer and closer to them. All around, people started running helter-skelter-and screaming in fear.

Filled with panic, Vijay lifted Ramya and ran toward the catamarans, holding Swathi's hand. He held the catamaran in a strong grip while his wife and daughter held on to him for support. As they stood huddled together, frozen in fear, the

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violent waves overtook them. The catamarans were ripped apart by the strong force of the water. Vijay saw his wife and daughter cart-wheeling away from him and abruptly being drawn into the deep sea. He ran behind them for a short distance, screaming aloud, and was very soon dragged into the ferocious sea in a similar manner. But as luck would have it, Vijay was swept back to the shore by another violent wave, and he lay there unconscious for a long time. When at last he regained consciousness, he slowly attempted to get up. Confused over the clamor and din around him, he stood paralyzed in shock at what he saw.

Dead bodies were everywhere, and people were wailing for their dear ones. Vijay frantically searched for his wife and daughter. There was no sign of them. Having lost all hope, he sat down on the sand and let out an ear-shattering scream, "Oh God! How can you be so cruel and heartless? Why did you take away my loving daughter and wife, leaving me all alone? Why did you spare me? I should have gone with them! Why am I still alive?"

The tragedy transformed Vijay's life into doldrums. He was constantly in a state of distress for he had no soul whom he could call his own. His mother died when he was just five years old. His father passed away soon after Vijay married. And now his whole family was gone. Very often he wondered why God had saved him.

The incident, however, transformed Vijay from being a very dominating person to a subdued one. His workmen, who dreaded facing him, now felt sorry for his loss and were filled with empathy toward him.

Though the wheel of time had taken a quick turn and it was almost two years now, Vijay continued to be in a melancholy mood. He was still having nightmares and woke up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat with his heart thumping. He kept hearing the waves crashing around him and the heart-rending cries of his wife and daughter as they were swept away from him.

Withdrawing himself into a shell, he often remained aloof, hardly speaking to anyone. But of late, he was surprised that his heart was melting at the sight of this boy, and he was determined to find out the cause today.

Chapter - 2

“Are you new to this place?” Vijay asked as he approached his table.

“Yes,” the boy nodded.

“Where do you hail from?”

“Mumbai”

“You are a Mumbaite, and you understand Tamil?”

“We belong to Chennai only. We had to go to Mumbai to eke out our living. Now that I have a job here, we are back home.”

“I see! What’s your name you said?” Vijay asked rather absent-mindedly.

“I never told you my name yet,” he said, flashing a grin as he stood up. And before taking leave, he added, “My name is Vikram.”

The next day, too, as soon as Vikram turned up, Vijay smiled at him. He was anxious to continue their chat. He got up swiftly and following him, he said, “You seem to have come late today.”

“You are indeed right,” Vikram said as he sat down. “I was sleeping, and my mother did not bother to wake me up. When I shouted at her, she calmly told me that she did not wish to disturb me,” Vikram further explained.

“Sleeping? At this odd hour?” Vijay was getting curious.

“Of course. My biological clock is tuned like that now. I am working in an IT company, and I have to slog all night and sleep during the day.”

“Don’t you like your mother’s cooking? I see you here almost every day,” Vijay inquired.

“Actually, she cooks hot meals in the morning. At night, she takes the leftovers and has to prepare tiffin just for me. I told her not to strain herself and hence I come here for dinner every night. After all, my mother has undergone a lot of hardships in order to educate me and now it is my turn to keep her happy.”

“A responsible son indeed!” Vijay patted him on the back as he turned to leave.

They bonded easily and were in sync with each other. Vikram did not mind his nosiness and patiently answered all his questions. Whenever Vikram walked into the hotel, Vijay made it a point to exchange a few words with him. Their friendship blossomed day after day so much so that Vijay looked forward to this time of day when he could have a chat with Vikram.

Chapter - 3

One evening, the clouds started gathering and it suddenly began to rain heavily. Vijay was standing at the entrance of his hotel, basking in the unusual summer rain after a rather hot day. The downpour soon created puddles of water on the roads. As he stood there blankly looking into the dark night, he saw Vikram maneuvering his way in the puddles of water. Despite carrying an umbrella, he was wet and Vijay directed him to sit under the fan so that his clothes would dry quickly. He also took a handkerchief from his pants pocket and offered it to him. Vikram thanked him for his kindness and started rubbing his hands with it. Then, as he wiped his face, Vijay was surprised to see a golden watch glittering on his wrist.

“Is that a new watch you are wearing?” he asked, continuing to admire the watch.

“Not really! In fact, this watch is as old as me. Actually, my mother doesn’t want to give this to anyone. She often told me that it is a priceless gift that my father gave her before his death. Hence, she treasures it in her bureau and never lets me lay my hands on it. Today, being my birthday, she asked me to wear it to the temple.”

“Can I have a look at it?” Vijay extended his hand.

“Oh, sure!” Vikram said as he unfastened his watch and handed it to him.

Vijay examined the golden watch closely turning it from side to side. When he saw the name “G.Venketeswaran” embossed

on the back of the watch, he became stupefied. That was his father's name; this hotel was named for him: "The Venketeswara Quality Inn." He was baffled as to how it could be on this boy's hand. Vijay stood there rooted to the ground, lost in thought. Slowly things unfolded before him. He remembered the day when his father had painfully given his costly golden watch to Parvathy, who had worked here as a cook for over fifteen years. It was his ancestral property, which was so dear to him, and which he had all along considered a symbol of luck.

Vijay was dumbfounded. He stared at Vikram in utter disbelief. The memories of Priya, who had worked for him for just a month, came flooding to his mind. Suddenly, Vijay was unable to think coherently. Returning the watch to Vikram, he said, "It's a nice watch. Keep it safely." He then abruptly turned to leave, cutting short their usual chat.

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