

# HOLIDAY HOMEWORK

*By Anand S Bose*



BlueRoseONE<sup>®</sup>  
Stories Matter  
New Delhi • London

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India | U.K.

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ISBN: 978-93-7139-027-9

First Edition: June 2025

## Author's Note

India, to me, is not merely a nation—it is a living, breathing story in itself. A land so vast in diversity and rich in cultural tapestry, where languages change every few miles, where celebrations echo in every corner, and where both hardship and hope walk hand in hand. From the stillness of the Himalayas to the relentless waves of the Indian Ocean, this country has taught me that the essence of life lies in its contrasts. It is in the warmth of a shared meal, the resilience of a daily wage earner, the laughter of children in narrow alleyways, and the silent prayers of the elderly that I find my deepest connection to the idea of humanity.

As an author, I am not drawn to fantasy or grandeur, but to the raw, unfiltered strength of ordinary people. I write because I am moved by the quiet dignity of lives that rarely make headlines but carry the true weight of a nation's story. Over a billion people call India home—each with a dream, each with a struggle, and each with a story worth telling. These everyday narratives, often overlooked, are the soul of my work.

It is in their endurance, their sacrifices, and their moments of grace that I see the spirit of India—and it compels me to write. I believe literature can offer both reflection and refuge, and through my stories, I hope to inspire others to look

closely at the lives around them. For in the face of adversity, humanity's greatest gift is its capacity to love, to endure, and to rise again.

As a storyteller and a believer in the quiet strength of peace, I've always felt that the true fabric of life is woven not with grand gestures or dramatic twists, but with simple, everyday acts of humanity—love, care, and understanding. *Holiday Homework* is my humble attempt to bring these values to young readers through a narrative that feels close to home, yet rich in meaning.

In a world that often celebrates noise over nuance, I wanted to craft a story that gently redefines what it means to build relationships—from teacher to student, friend to friend, and heart to heart. Through the characters of Manav and Sandhya, and the innocent voices of the children at Wisdom Foundation School, I've tried to capture the essence of emotional courage, quiet perseverance, and compassion.

This story is not just about homework done over a holiday—it is about the homework we owe to each other as humans. It's about the emotional labour we must be willing to do to heal wounds, to bridge distances, and to truly connect. It's about learning to listen not just with ears, but with hearts.

*Holiday Homework* reflects a changing India, where young people are discovering that strength does not lie in power alone, but in kindness; that victories are not always won in rings or arenas, but in the silent, meaningful moments of love and trust.

I hope this story stays with the reader like a soft afterglow—reminding us that no act of love, however small, ever goes unnoticed. That every bond formed through truth and tenderness is worth holding on to.

Because in the end, that's what truly matters.

— *Regards*

“It isn't the mountains ahead to climb that wear you out, it's the pebble in your shoe.”

~ Muhammad Ali

# 1

The spacious gym echoes with the clatter of weights, the rhythmic thud of sneakers against polished floors, and the occasional sharp whistle of a coach. Students push through intense drills, their focused faces glistening with sweat, while others strain under the weight of iron, each rep a testament to their grit.

The background hum of energetic chatter, clanging metal, and pounding feet fills the air, capturing the relentless drive of the athletes within.

Sandhya, eyes sharp behind the protective headgear, narrowly avoids a powerful straight jab aimed at her face, her instincts kicking in just in time. She weaves to the side, feeling the rush of air as the gloved fist cuts through the space she just occupied. She takes a few quick, cautious steps backward, resetting her stance as the faint thud of gloves against the ring floor echoes around her.

Her opponent, equally determined, presses forward, launching a series of rapid, less forceful punches. Sandhya raises her guarded fists, deflecting the incoming blows with precise blocks, her muscles tensed and focused.

Another sharp strike snaps toward her chin, but she leans back just enough to let it whistle past, her reflexes honed from countless hours of training. The crowd murmurs with every near miss, the rhythmic bounce of her opponent's feet adding to the symphony of the ongoing match.

The atmosphere crackles with anticipation as the bout reaches a fever pitch. A small but growing group of spectators, clustered just outside the ropes, begins to rally behind Sandhya, the underdog in this fierce contest. Their voices cut through the echo of gloves striking flesh, a wave of support rising to meet the intensity inside the ring.

“Come on, Sandy!” one of her friends standing outside the ring shouts.

Fists clenched in encouragement. Another slaps the side of the ring, trying to channel their energy into her flagging momentum. The crowd’s cheers swell, a rumble of hope and defiance, as Sandhya’s every block and counterpunch now feels like a small victory against the odds.

“Come on, Sandy!” the cheering continues.

Sandhya and her opponent circle each other with the fierce intensity of seasoned fighters, their eyes locked in a silent, unspoken challenge. They trade blows like gladiators, each punch and counterstrike echoing through the gym, their breaths coming in sharp, controlled bursts.

Despite their close bond outside the ring, there's no hint of friendship here – just the raw, unfiltered hunger for victory. Their gloves crash together in a rapid exchange, neither pulling their punches, each testing the other’s resolve.

At this moment, Sandhya finds herself cornered, her guard absorbing a relentless barrage of powerful strikes. She grits her teeth, refusing to back down, even as the ropes press against her back and the sting of each blow sharpens her focus.

Sandhya forces herself to steady her breath, her chest heaving beneath the protective padding. She narrows her focus, time seeming to slow as she catches a glimpse of her opponent's right arm winding back, the muscles tensing like a coiled spring.

She takes a deep breath, her mind sharpening, instincts kicking in. As the jab hurtles toward her, she pivots on her lead foot, bending sharply to her right, the rush of the incoming fist brushing past her cheek.

With the opening now clear, Sandhya seizes the moment – her right arm snaps upward in a perfectly timed uppercut, her muscles coiled like a tightly wound spring, unleashing all the power she has stored.

The force of the blow lands flush against her opponent's jaw, snapping their head back and sending a shockwave down their spine. For a brief, suspended moment, the opponent's body sways before collapsing to the canvas, the dull thud of their fall echoing through the arena as the crowd gasps in awe.

A roar of excitement erupts from the two friends standing just beyond the ropes, their eyes wide with disbelief and admiration. They exchange a quick, triumphant high-five, their fists still clenched in solidarity as they shout their support over the chaotic cheers of the crowd.

“Like a champ!” one of them yells, clapping his friend on the back, the adrenaline of the moment surging through them.

Sandhya stands tall in the ring, her opponent still sprawled on the canvas. The defeated contender sitting motionless, her

chest heaving beneath the weight of exhaustion and disbelief. She stares at Sandhya, who now sits slumped on the ring floor, sweat streaking her face, strands of hair clinging to her flushed cheeks.

For a brief, breathless moment, their eyes meet – Sandhya’s steely, unbroken gaze meeting the stunned, wide-eyed expression of her friend.

She had been so sure this time, certain she had finally overpowered Sandhya. Every strike, every feint, every carefully timed jab had felt precise and relentless. Yet, the reality before her tells a different story – Sandhya, still very much in the fight, still defiant, and still unbroken.

Sandhya, still catching her breath, reaches up and peels off her headgear. She shakes her head slightly, strands of hair falling free as she turns to her friend – the defeated contender still standing a few steps away, fists slowly unclenching, shoulders rising and falling with the deep breaths of disappointment.

Sandhya’s lips curl into a warm, reassuring smile, a silent acknowledgment of the intense battle they just waged. For a brief moment, her eyes convey the unspoken bond they share – a connection forged through countless rounds of sparring, sweat, and mutual respect.

Her friend the lost contender, struggles to return the smile, her jaw tightening as the sting of defeat settles in. She drops her gaze, the bitter realization of falling short cutting deeper than any physical blow.

## 2

All four girls crowd into the brightly lit, slightly cramped dressing room, the faint hum of fluorescent lights overhead blending with the soft rustle of fabric as they peel off their sweat-soaked gear. Lockers clang open and shut, the metallic sound echoing off the tiled walls as they toss their headgear and gloves into their gym bags.

Laughter and light-hearted chatter fill the space, their voices reflecting the bond forged through shared victories and bruised egos. One of them pulls off her protective wraps, flexing her fingers with a relieved sigh, while another friend combs back her damp hair, catching her reflection in the streaked mirror.

Between the clinking of metal zippers and the muffled thud of gym bags hitting the floor, they share small talk, teasing each other about missed punches and surprising comebacks, the tension of the ring quickly melting into the warmth of friendship.

One of the girls, still adjusting her tracksuit zipper, glances at the wall clock and throws a playful, hurried look at her friends.

“Come on, guys, hurry up! The coach is about to break down the tournament lineup, and you know he hates it when we’re late!”

The others quickly pick up the pace, tossing towels into their bags and tightening their laces, a ripple of anticipation sparking through the group as they scramble to get ready.

Amid the hustle of changing and packing up, one of the girls couldn't help but grin, her eyes lighting up with excitement.

"Seriously! Lucky, I showed up for training today,"

Another friend said, pulling her hoodie over her head. "Just hearing about the tournament is enough to make my day – it means a shot at the prize money!"

The others chuckled, sharing her enthusiasm, their spirits lifted by the thought of competing – and possibly earning prize money.

One of the girls, tightening the laces on her shoes, smirked and shot back, "Pay is always better when you can win!"

The room filled with playful scoffs and knowing nods, the competitive spark in their eyes reflecting the unspoken understanding that the real reward wasn't just the cash, but the thrill of victory itself.

Another girl rolled her eyes with a playful grin as she tossed her gym towel into her bag.

"Whatever! Getting paid feels good anyways!"

The others laughed, nodding in agreement, the energy in the dressing room buzzing with a mix of confidence and friendly banter.

The girls linger near the edge of the ring, stretching sore muscles and exchanging quiet, excited whispers as they wait for the coach. The thud of punching bags and the rhythmic squeak of sneakers on polished floors provide a steady

backdrop, the gym buzzing with the energy of fighters honing their craft.

Finally, the coach steps onto the mat, his whistle bouncing against his chest as he approaches the group, his expression a mix of concern and reluctant resolve. The girls straighten up, their chatter falling to a hush as they turn to face him, anticipation hanging in the air.

The coach clears his throat, his gaze sweeping over his eager team.

Alright, listen up, girls. I've got an update about the Interstate Boxing Tournament. It's been postponed.

A murmur ripples through the group, a few shoulders sagging in disappointment.

The coach continued, "I know you've all been working hard for this, but the organizers have decided to push it back. It may not happen for another six months."

The girls exchanged disheartened glances, the excitement of the past few days suddenly deflating. Their fists slowly unclenched, the weight of the news settling over them like a cold, unexpected blow.

Sandy looked momentarily stalled, a hint of frustration flickering in her eyes as she turned to the coach, "why the delay, do you know?"

The coach sighed, scratching the back of his head as he replied, I'm not sure, but it may be due to the current pandemic situation.

One of the friends shook her head, her voice tinged with frustration, “This news is so disappointing.”

The coach addressed the group in an encouraging tone, “Listen, folks, it’s best to keep a positive attitude and not lose focus. If you have plans for work or recreation during this time, feel free to follow through. I’ll let you know as soon as the tournament is reorganized. Does that make sense?”

### 3

Somewhat disappointed but trying to stay optimistic, the girls walked out of the gym together, their footsteps echoing softly on the polished floor. As they headed toward the exit, their voices picked up in a casual chatter, discussing plans and possibilities now that they suddenly had more time to spare.

Some talked about catching up on rest, others considered extra training or even taking up new hobbies to fill the unexpected gap before the tournament. Despite the setback, their conversation carried a hopeful undertone, a shared determination to make the most of the wait.

Sandhya felt uncertain and clearly disheartened upon hearing that the Interstate Boxing Tournament, the very event she had been training so intensely for, had been postponed. The news hit her hard, casting a shadow over the countless hours of dedication and sacrifice she had poured into her preparation. For a moment, doubt flickered in her eyes as she struggled to come to terms with the delay, unsure of what this meant for her goals and momentum.

One friend, “Well, that gives me a lot of time to watch the new season of *Family Man 2* on Netflix!

Another friend said, “My boyfriend’s going to love this news. We were planning to spend some quality time together, and now we finally have it!”

The third friend said to Sandhya, “Well, it’s kind of sad for Sandy, she doesn’t have a boyfriend to share this extra time with!

The first friend continued joking, “I’ve told her many times—what’s worse is that she keeps rejecting all the offers from really talented and well-established boys.”

Sandhya’s contender inside the ring, now speaks in her support,  
“Okay... you guys, please stop worrying about her offers and let her plan her life on her own... please.”

Sandhya didn’t take her friends’ teasing too seriously, brushing off their playful mockery with a small, knowing smile. Still, beneath her calm exterior, a flicker of concern lingered. She wasn’t quite sure how she would fill this unexpected free time or make it truly worthwhile.

The coach had noticed the subtle disappointment clouding her expression after hearing about the tournament’s postponement. As the others gathered their things and prepared to leave, he called out to Sandhya, who was just about to step out of the gym.

From across the gym, the coach called out loudly, “Sandy!” His voice carried a note of concern as he fixed his gaze on her, hoping to catch her attention before she left.

Sandhya quickly walked up to her coach; her backpack slung over one shoulder. Her steps were measured, reflecting the mixed emotions she felt—determination mingled with uncertainty—as she prepared to hear what the coach had to say.

The coach looked at Sandhya thoughtfully and said, “I noticed you seemed disappointed earlier. It’s completely understandable—I know how hard you’ve been training and preparing for this tournament. You’ve put in a lot of effort, and it’s natural to feel this way.”

The coach gestured toward his office, and Sandhya followed quietly as they walked together through the gym. With a reassuring tone, he said, “I have something I want to give you—something that might help you make the best of this unexpected delay in the tournament.”

The coach steps behind his desk, pulling out a folder as Sandhya stands just inside the doorway, her backpack still slung over one shoulder.

The coach said, “Listen, Sandy, I don’t want you feeling down over this tournament delay. You’ve worked too hard to let this setback shake your focus.”

Sandhya gives a small nod, her curiosity piqued.

He continues, “Actually, I have an idea, how about taking up a temporary job as a Physical Training Instructor? There’s a school in Dehradun looking for someone like you.”

“This is a great opportunity, Sandy.” The coach advised Sandhya.

The coach spoke in a light-hearted tone, hoping to lift Sandhya’s spirits. “You’ll not only get to work and earn some money, but you’ll also have a chance to refresh your mind and body in the beautiful, hilly climate of Dehradun. Trust

me, a change of scenery can do wonders for your focus and motivation.”

Sandhya’s face lit up at the unexpected opportunity, a genuine smile breaking through the lingering disappointment. The idea of working as a Physical Training Instructor in Dehradun, with its fresh mountain air and scenic landscapes, instantly lifted her mood.

Sandhya replied with a whole lot of joy on her face, “Thank you, coach. This is exactly the kind of break I need. I’d love to take up the job. I really appreciate you thinking of me for this.”

The coach smiled back, clearly pleased to see the spark returning to Sandhya’s eyes. He decided to lighten the moment with a bit of encouragement.

Sandy, do you know who said, “Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee?”

Sandhya’s face brightened, her eyes lighting up with recognition as she nodded, her lips curving into a wide, appreciative smile.

The coach chuckled, giving her a reassuring pat on the shoulder before stepping toward the door, he said “all the best, buddy.”

With that, he left the office, the door clicking shut behind him.

As Sandhya glanced around the small room, her eyes landed on a motivational poster hanging on the wall. It read, “*It isn’t*

*the mountains ahead to climb that wear you out; it's the pebble in your shoe."*

Sandhya stared into the eyes of the greatest, drawing inspiration from the fierce, determined gaze on the poster of Muhammad Ali.

Sandhya took a deep breath, feeling a renewed sense of clarity and relief. The weight of uncertainty seemed to lift, and for the first time that day, she felt genuinely optimistic about the road ahead.

## 4

Sandhya walks out of the gym, her spirits lifted, a newfound sense of purpose in her stride. She slings her backpack over her shoulder, her steps light as she heads toward the nearest metro station.

The city around her is alive with its usual hustle and bustle – the chaotic symphony of honking horns, street vendors shouting out their wares, and the ever-present honking of public buses in the distance. She reaches the station, taps her metro card, and steps onto the platform just as a train pulls in, its metal doors sliding open with a familiar hum.

Her stop arrives, Sandhya steps off the train, weaving through the busy station and emerging onto the street, where she hails an Took-Took. The driver nods, and the small three-wheeler darts into traffic, weaving through Delhi's iconic landmarks – the grandeur of the Rashtrapati Bhavan, the timeless beauty of the Jantar Mantar, and the sprawling markets at Janpath.

As the Took-Took glides through the city, Delhi's vibrant life plays out in the background – the sprawling streets and walkways at Connaught Place, the iconic India Gate standing tall and concrete in the afternoon sun, and the bustling crowds at Kalkaji.

The wind whips through her hair as the auto-rickshaw zips past these familiar sights, her mind racing with plans for the new chapter ahead.

As the auto-rickshaw whizzes through the heart of Delhi, Sandhya takes in the vibrant pulse of the city around her. The narrow lanes brimming with street vendors, the sweet aroma of fresh jalebis wafting through the air, the chaotic yet comforting sound and distant echo of a street musician's soulful tune – all of it reminds her why they call this place the Capitol.

She feels a rush of warmth, her heart swelling with pride for the place she calls home. The lively, unbreakable spirit of Delhi seems to breathe new energy into her, lifting the last traces of her earlier disappointment.

The Took-took finally comes to a screeching halt in front of her modest but cozy Delhi neighbourhood home, nestled in a bustling heart of Kalkaji, where every face is familiar and every street corner holds a memory. She steps out, hands the driver his fare with a grateful nod, and takes a deep breath, feeling at peace as she steps through the narrow gate and heads inside.

Sandhya pushes open the creaking wooden door of her modest Delhi home, stepping into the cool, shaded interior. The familiar scent of incense and freshly brewed tea lingers in the air, mixing with the faint hum of the ceiling fan overhead.

She makes her way into the small but warmly decorated drawing room, the walls adorned with family photos and framed certificates from her past tournaments. With a sigh of relief, she bends down to untie her well-worn boxing shoes, letting them drop to the floor with a soft thud.

With a tired but content smile, she tosses her backpack onto the worn, cushioned couch, its weight sinking into the soft fabric, a testament to the long day she's had. She stretches her sore shoulders and takes a moment to breathe, feeling the comfort of being home.

Both her parents enter the drawing room, their faces lighting up at the sight of their daughter back home. Her mother with a gentle smile and warm eyes, wipes her hands on her apron as she steps in from the kitchen, while her father, a tall, broad-shouldered man with a neatly trimmed moustache, sets down his newspaper on the side table.

Sandhya's mother spoke gently, Ah, you're back, Sandy! How was your day? How's your training coming along?

Her father steps closer, resting a supportive hand on the back of the couch, his eyes full of pride and curiosity. "Beta, how's the training going? You've been working so hard lately."

Sandhya takes a deep breath, her expression a mix of disappointment as she looks at her parents. She replied, the Interstate Boxing Tournament has been postponed. It might not happen for another six months.

She pauses for a moment, then continues, her voice steady but tinged with frustration. "I'll have to wait all this time before it gets rearranged. It's tough after all the hard work I've put in."

Her parents exchange concerned glances, understanding the weight of the news but trying to offer her comfort.

Sandhya looks up, a small hopeful smile breaking through her earlier disappointment, “but there’s some good news too—I got a job offer to work as a Physical Training Instructor at a school in Dehradun.

Her parents’ faces instantly brighten, relief and pride washing over them.

Sandhya’s mother spoke with joy, “that’s wonderful, dear! It’s great to see you getting this opportunity.”

Her father added, “Dehradun is a beautiful place, and this job will give you the chance to keep training while earning. We’re really proud of you.”

Sandhya’s father looked at her thoughtfully, a gentle concern in his eyes, he asked “Teaching children isn’t an easy task, Sandhya. It requires a great deal of patience, and it will test your wits and resilience every day. Are you sure you’re ready for this challenge”?

He paused for a moment, wanting to make sure she truly understood what lay ahead. Sandhya met his gaze confidently, determined to prove herself capable.

Sandhya feels comforted by their support, her spirits lifting as she imagines the new path ahead.

“This is wonderful news, Sandhya. I’m confident you’ll make an excellent teacher,” her mother said with a warm smile.

“But for now,” Sandhya’s mother continued, “we have to prepare for the wedding celebration of our neighbour this evening. It’s going to be a joyful occasion, and I’m sure it

will be good for all of us to take a break and enjoy some festivities together.”

## 5

The bride and groom stand gracefully on the decorated stage, radiant in their wedding attire. Guests one by one approach the couple, offering blessings and heartfelt congratulations for their new life together.

Among them, Manav and her mother make their way up to the stage. Manav's mother steps forward first, placing her hands gently together in a traditional blessing, wishing the newlyweds a lifetime of happiness and prosperity. "Jeete raho beta, Tum Dono ko Shadi ki subhkamnaye, Sukhi Raho Hamesha"

Manav follows with a warm smile, extending her sincere congratulations to the couple, "Shadi Mobarak Tum Dono Ko"

The groom, Raghu, looks at Manav with a playful grin and says, "Ab Tumhari Bari," hinting at his eagerness to speak or perhaps a light-hearted challenge in the midst of the celebration.

The bride beams warmly, her eyes sparkling with joy, as she nods in heartfelt agreement to her husband's playful remark. Her smile conveys both affection and a shared excitement for the journey they are beginning together, sealing the moment with silent affirmation amid the festive cheers around them.

At another vibrant celebration not far away, Sandhya and her parents join their neighbours' wedding festivities. The air is filled with laughter, music, and the scent of delicious food as they mingle with friends and family. Sandhya's face lights

up with joy as she dances to the lively beats, sharing smiles and warm moments with her parents. The festive spirit wraps around them, making the evening a memorable occasion of togetherness and joy.

## 6

Manav and his mother sit in the car, driving home after attending the wedding. The city lights flicker by as they share a quiet moment.

Manav's mother speaks looking outside at the pedestrian crossing, "It was so lovely to see your best friend Raghu get married today. The couple looked truly happy."

Manav glances at his mother with a gentle smile.

She continued, "I wonder when I'll see you take that big step and stand there as a groom!"

Manav chuckles softly, his smile turning a bit teasing.

He replies, "Soon, Maa."

His mother leans closer, her eyes shining with hopeful curiosity. "Do you have someone special in your life? Anyone you like?"

Manav shrugs lightly, offering a carefree smile, "Not at the moment."

His mother persists, a teasing yet loving tone in her voice, "Would you like me to start looking for someone suitable for you?"

Manav sighs patiently, "Not right now, Maa. I want to focus on my work a bit longer."

His mother responds in awe, "But you've been saying that for over four years now!"

Manav smiles, nodding thoughtfully, “Okay, I promise I’ll find someone soon. If I don’t, then you can start searching for me.”

His mother smiles, relieved and happy, and gently takes his hand. She said, “Promise me you’ll look seriously, and start a family soon.”

Manav squeezes her hand reassuringly, “I promise, Maa.”

His mother feels relieved by his assurance and smiles.

Manav pauses for a moment, and speaks “By the way, I’ve applied for a job as a music teacher at a school in Dehradun. I want to work there for a while.

His mother beams with pride, “Dehradun, that’s sounds wonderful, promise me you’ll take good care of yourself.”

Manav’s family is originally from Dehradun. He tells his mother that he has applied for a job as a Music Teacher at a school there. Manav expresses his wish to return to Dehradun, where he spent much of his childhood and holds many treasured memories.

He hopes to stay there for some time, both to reconnect with his past and to embrace a change of environment. Fortunately, the family still owns a small house in Dehradun. If Manav’s job application is successful, he plans to live in the family home and take care of the property while pursuing his career.

They share a warm, quiet moment as the car continues its journey home.

The next morning, Manav sat at his desk, his fingers lightly tapping the keys of his laptop as he worked through his morning emails. Amidst the usual notifications and updates, one subject line caught his attention – “Job Confirmation – Music Teacher Position, Dehradun”.

With a mix of anticipation and nervous excitement, he clicked open the email. As he read through the message, his face slowly broke into a satisfied smile. The school had officially confirmed his appointment as a music teacher, welcoming him to join their faculty in Dehradun.

It felt like the first step toward a new chapter – a chance to reconnect with his roots, revisit old memories, and start afresh in the cool, misty hills of Dehradun.

As Manav sat down at the dining table, his mother brought over a steaming plate of freshly made parathas and a bowl of curd, setting them down with a familiar warmth.

She took her seat across from him, wiping her hands on her apron before serving him a generous helping. Manav picked up a piece of paratha, his mind still buzzing with the excitement of the morning.

“Mom, I just got the confirmation email for the teaching job I told you about last night – the one in Dehradun.”

His mother’s eyes lit up as she paused, her face breaking into a pleased, motherly smile.

Really? That's wonderful news, Manav! I knew something good was coming your way.

Manav's mother, though happy for her son, couldn't help but feel a pang of concern as she processed the news. She knew Dehradun well – its mist-covered hills and serene landscapes were beautiful, but it also meant Manav would be living alone, far from the comforts of home.

She placed another paratha on his plate, her brow furrowing slightly as she spoke.

“I know you're excited about this opportunity, but living alone can be challenging. Are you sure you'll be able to manage everything on your own – the house, your meals, and the new job?”

Manav looked up, meeting his mother's concerned eyes. He understood her worries, knowing how much she cared for his well-being.

Manav took a sip of his tea, leaning back in his chair as he tried to reassure his mother. He knew her concerns came from a place of love and care, but he also wanted her to trust that he could handle this new chapter of his life.

He said, “Maa, these days, getting food delivered is the least of my concerns. Thanks to all these instant delivery apps, you can get a hot meal even in the most remote places. I'll have plenty of options, and besides, I can cook a bit too, remember?”

He chuckled, trying to lighten the mood, knowing his mother always worried about his eating habits.

His mother's expression softened a bit, though the slight crease on her forehead lingered, showing that she still had a few more concerns on her mind.

Manav nodded, feeling a sense of accomplishment. They continued their breakfast. The small dining room filled with the comforting clatter of dishes and the warmth of a hopeful morning.

## 8

Early morning, Sandhya stood at the doorway of her modest Delhi home, her backpack slung over one shoulder. She exchanged warm hugs with her parents, their eyes reflecting a mix of pride and concern as they prepared to see their daughter off for her new journey.

Sandhya's Mother hugging her tightly said, "Take care of yourself, beta. Call us when you reach Dehradun, okay?"

Sandhya's Father patting her shoulder added "And don't forget to eat on time. Stay focused and take care of your health."

Sandhya smiled, her eyes glistening with the warmth of her parents' love and support.

Sandhya with a confident smile said before getting onboard the taxi, "Don't worry, I'll make you both proud."

With a final wave, Sandhya stepped into the waiting taxi, the morning air cool and crisp as the city slowly awakened around her. She settled into the back seat, the taxi pulling away from the curb, weaving through the bustling streets of Delhi.

As the taxi crossed the majestic India Gate, Sandhya took a deep breath, watching the wide, tree-lined Rajpath stretch out ahead, a symbol of power and resilience, much like the journey she was about to embark on. The morning sun bathed the sandstone and marble structures of the capital in a warm, golden glow, reflecting the promise of new beginnings.

She arrived at the bustling New Delhi Railway Station, her backpack slung over one shoulder and a small duffel bag in her hand. The air was thick with the sounds of clattering wheels, muffled announcements, and the calls of chai vendors moving swiftly through the crowd. She navigated her way through the maze of passengers, finally locating her coach and stepping inside.

She was the first to reach her designated seat, a window-side berth, and quickly began arranging her bags. She carefully slid her larger duffel bag under the lower berth, making sure it was secure, and placed her smaller backpack on the seat beside her.

As she took a seat and leaned back with a sigh, the coach door clattered open, and a tall, neatly dressed young man entered, his eyes scanning the seat numbers before settling on the one directly opposite her. He smiled briefly as their eyes met, a polite yet reserved acknowledgment, before he set his own luggage down and took his place.

Sandhya glanced at him for a moment, noting his calm, composed demeanour, before turning her attention to the view outside the window, the chaotic rhythm of the platform reflecting the start of her new journey.

As the train's horn echoed through the platform and the wheels began their slow, rhythmic clatter on the tracks, the final whistle signalled the departure. Just then, the sliding door of their coach creaked open, and an elderly couple stepped in, slightly out of breath from their hurried walk down the platform.

The man, with a full head of white hair and a neatly trimmed moustache, was carrying a small, vintage leather suitcase, while his wife, a petite, graceful woman in a pastel cotton saree, clutched a handbag tightly to her chest, her silver bangles jingling softly as she moved.

They paused for a moment, glancing at the seat numbers before exchanging a warm, relieved smile upon finding their seats opposite each other. The elderly gentleman carefully lifted their suitcase onto the luggage rack while his wife settled into her seat beside Manav, who politely shifted to give her more space.

Sandhya, seated by the window, watched with a gentle smile as the older woman adjusted her saree and leaned back with a contented sigh, clearly relieved to have made it just in time. Manav offered a courteous nod to the couple, and the old man returned the gesture, his eyes crinkling with the warmth of a seasoned traveller.

As the train picked up speed, the four of them found themselves sharing the small, yet cozy space of the coach – an unexpected yet potentially delightful company for the journey ahead to the hills of Dehradun.

## 9

The elderly couple, comfortably settled into their seats, began reminiscing about their earlier trips to Dehradun. The husband leaned in a little closer to his wife, his voice carrying the warmth of cherished memories.

With a nostalgic smile, the elderly man said to his wife, “Remember the first time we met at Dehradun? That spring when the valley was alive with the scent of deodar and the crisp mountain air whispered through the tall pines? The days felt longer, and the nights cooler, as if the mountains themselves were singing a welcome song.”

His wife chuckled softly, her eyes sparkling with the memories of their youth.

She replied, “Of course, I remember, where you nervously held my hand for the first time during that long walk to the old clock tower.”

The husband leaned back, a satisfied smile spreading across his face as he recalled the early days of their romance. “And a few years later, it’s where we got married... those small, quiet vows under the tall deodars.”

The wife’s face softened further as she added, “Yes, and then our honeymoon... those long walks by the waterfalls, the chilly morning hikes to the hilltop temples, and the countless cups of tea by the window, watching the clouds roll over the mountains.”

She paused, looking out the window as the train began to sway gently along the tracks. "We've made so many beautiful memories in that little house we bought there – the one with the creaky wooden floors and the garden you so proudly planted."

The husband chuckled, patting her hand. "Ah, our little nest in the hills. I can still remember the smell of fresh rain on the pine trees and the way the morning sun would break through the misty valley... Dehradun will always be special to us."

As they shared a tender smile, their words filled the compartment with a warmth that even the cool air of the air-conditioned coach couldn't suppress.

Manav, seated beside them, couldn't help but feel a gentle tug at his heart, momentarily lost in the purity of their connection.

Sandhya, listening quietly from across the aisle, found herself smiling, feeling a sense of warmth and optimism for the road ahead.

The elderly lady carefully looks around, double-checking the luggage piled beneath their seats and tucked into the overhead racks. Her brows furrowed as she mentally accounted for each bag.

"Mr. Dutta, all the luggage is here, except the bag with the Tiffin-box. You were the one carrying that, remember?"

The elderly man looked up from adjusting his seat, a hint of confusion crossing his face as he processed her words.

"That bag... it must be here somewhere. I remember holding it when we got into the taxi."

The lady's expression tightened, clearly not in the mood for a guessing game.

She responded in awe guessing rightly that Mr. Dutta had lost the bag with the tiffin-box, "It's not here. I've checked twice. That bag was definitely in your hand when we left the house."

The old man's face brightened for a moment, the flicker of memory sparking a sheepish smile. "Ahh yes, I was carrying that bag... oh, wait... I think I left it on the front seat of the taxi."

The lady's eyes widened, her lips pressing into a thin line as she leaned closer, her tone rising slightly.

"Oh no... again? You forgot the lunch bag again? Where is your mind these days, Mr. Dutta?"

The old man looked down, his face now a picture of mild embarrassment. "Ah... I'm so sorry. I completely forgot. I must have left the Tiffin bag in the taxi."

The elderly lady took a deep breath, clearly trying to rein in her frustration, before letting it out in a long, dramatic sigh.

"Very nice! Ab khana parega bahar ki biriyani. Jo aapko bahut pasand hai, isn't that so, Mr. Bhullakad? Ek number ka bhullakad insaan! Aur yeh bhoolne ki aadat toh aaj se nahi, zamane se hai aapko!"

The old man let out a small, apologetic chuckle, rubbing his hands together sheepishly as if trying to warm up to her good side, while the other passengers in the compartment exchanged amused glances, quietly enjoying the affectionate banter between the old couple.

Both Sandhya and Manav couldn't help but overhear the light-hearted exchange between the elderly couple. The playful bickering and the old man's sheepish attempts to defend his forgetfulness brought a hint of warmth to the otherwise quiet train compartment.

Manav stole a quick glance at Sandhya, curious if she found the situation as amusing as he did. For a brief moment, their eyes met – Manav quickly looked away, pretending to adjust his seat, a slight grin still tugging at the corners of his mouth.

Sandhya noticed his attempt to hide his laughter and felt a small wave of amusement herself. She turned her gaze back to the elderly couple, her lips curling into a quiet, understanding smile. The couple's banter reminded her of the simple, cherished moments that made life a little brighter, even on a long train journey.

As the train gently swayed along the tracks, the warm, familiar chatter of the elderly couple created a sense of shared humanity, bridging the distance between these strangers, each on their own journey to Dehradun.

The elderly man, catching the teasing tone of his wife, leaned back with a playful grin, his eyes twinkling as he responded, slipping naturally into a poetic verse,

“App khete ho hum bhulakkad inssan hai  
Aaj se nehi kayi zaamne se hai..  
Madam bhoolene ka ye Silsila  
Pyaar me Shuru hua tab se  
Wo ek zaamna tha zab hum pehlibaar  
Milne lage tha aapse...”

Both Sandhya and Manav couldn't help but smile at the playful yet heartfelt exchange between the elderly couple. The Elderly Man's clever, poetic response had caught them by surprise – a touching reminder of the timeless romance that can blossom even after decades together.

The Elderly Lady herself, despite her earlier scolding, felt her heart soften. She looked at her husband with a mixture of surprise and affection, her eyes gleaming with the warmth of shared memories. His poetic words had struck a chord, reminding her of the early days of their love, when the world felt new, and every glance held the thrill of first meetings.

For a moment, the small train compartment felt like a window into a long, shared journey – one that spoke of old promises, countless shared cups of tea, gentle arguments, and quiet reassurances. The scene left both Sandhya and Manav quietly admiring the depth of the bond that had only grown stronger with time.

As Sandhya and Manav listened, they found themselves admiring the beautiful words spoken by the elderly man to his wife, each line dripping with affection and the kind of love that only decades together can nurture. The poetic exchange of words had transformed the atmosphere of the small train compartment into something deeply

heartwarming, making them both appreciate the presence of such charming fellow travellers.

Caught up in the warmth of the moment, Sandhya and Manav glanced at each other, their eyes meeting briefly, and they shared a knowing smile – a silent acknowledgment of the rare beauty of witnessing such a pure, timeless bond.

Just then, the elderly lady, not one to let her husband have the last word, leaned in with a mischievous twinkle in her eye and said,

“Baatein aap achhee bana lete ho  
Apni har galti ka kassowar bhi mujhe tharaa ho..  
Mr. Dutta aapke bhoolne ka ye aada  
Shuru sehi karta raha hai mujhe fida”

Even Sandhya and Manav couldn't help but feel a wave of warmth and admiration for the elderly lady's heartfelt response to her husband's playful, poetic words. The gentle banter between the couple, rich with decades of shared memories and deep affection, had created a beautifully nostalgic atmosphere, bringing a smile to the faces of their younger fellow travellers.

As the elderly couple continued to share their loving exchange, Sandhya and Manav's eyes met for the first time, each recognizing the unspoken appreciation for the touching scene unfolding before them. Their shared glance held a quiet respect for the kind of enduring bond the elderly couple represented – a bond marked by understanding, forgiveness, and the joy of growing old together.

They both smiled, a subtle yet sincere gesture, acknowledging the beauty of the moment and perhaps,

without realizing it, planting the first seeds of their own unspoken connection.

## 10

The atmosphere in the carriage had lightened considerably, with all four passengers now sharing in the warmth and light-heartedness sparked by the elderly couple's playful banter. The air felt charged with a kind of positivity that only genuine affection and shared memories can create, making the long journey seem not just bearable, but truly enjoyable.

As laughter echoed softly through the carriage, the Coach Attendant entered, his uniform neatly pressed and a notepad in hand, ready to take the travellers' lunch orders. He cleared his throat politely, trying to suppress his own smile as he approached the lively group.

“Good morning, everyone! I hope you're all having a pleasant journey. Can I take your lunch orders? We have a variety of delicious options available.”

The elderly lady, still riding the wave of good humour from her husband's poetic lines, turned to the attendant with a mock serious face, raising one eyebrow as if making an important decision.

“Biriyani! I'll have biriyani, please. After all, thanks to my 'bhullakad' husband here, I missed my carefully packed home-cooked tiffin, so I deserve a feast.”

The elderly man chuckled, giving his wife an affectionate nudge. “Oh, so it's my fault you get to enjoy the spicy, fragrant goodness of train biriyani? I see how it is!”

The Coach Attendant, sensing the light mood, leaned in eagerly, trying to make the most of this potential sale.

“Ah! Excellent choice, Ma’am! We have Anda Biriyani, Chicken Biriyani, Mutton Biriyani, and even Mixed Biriyani, if you’re feeling adventurous. Just say the word, and I’ll make sure you have a royal feast!” The Coach Attendant continued with the list in the menu, a big smile on his face making the best sales pitch.

The elderly lady glanced at her husband, clearly enjoying the playful attention, and put on a thoughtful expression, tapping her chin as if making a crucial life decision.

“Hmmm... Mixed Biriyani sounds tempting, but maybe I should stick to Chicken Biriyani. I have to make sure my 'bhullakad' husband doesn’t steal too much from my plate.” The elderly lady smile at Sandhya.

The elderly man held up his hands in mock protest.

“Ah, now I am the one to be blamed for that too! But fine, you order what you like, and I’ll stick to my simple Egg Biriyani – after all, it’s safer that way.” The old man smiled back at the elderly lady.

Their playful exchange brought another round of chuckles from Sandhya and Manav, who couldn’t help but be swept up in the couple’s infectious energy.

The Coach Attendant, with his notepad now full of orders, took a step back, beaming with the satisfaction of a job well done.

The attendant said with a big smile on his face, “Excellent choices, Sir, Ma’am! I’ll have your biriyanis served fresh and hot soon. Enjoy your journey!”

With a final nod, the Attendant made his way to the next set of passengers, leaving the four travellers to continue their delightful conversation, the warm aroma of freshly cooked biriyani soon to fill their cozy compartment.

All four passengers in the carriage felt the warmth of shared happiness, their hearts lightened by the charming exchange between the elderly couple. It was as if the small, rocking space of the train had turned into a little world of its own – a cozy, moving picnic cabin, carrying not just bodies but hearts and memories.

When the food arrived, they shared smiles and light-hearted jokes, passing trays and unwrapping packed boxes as if they were family on a long road trip. The clatter of cutlery and the aroma of fresh biryani mixed with the rhythmic clanking of the train's wheels on the tracks, creating a symphony of life in motion.

As they ate together, stories flowed as easily as the countryside rolling by their windows, and for a while, the train felt less like a mere vehicle and more like a bridge between past memories and new beginnings.

As the train continued its steady journey, swaying gently on the tracks, the elderly lady, still glowing from the playful banter with her husband, turned her attention to Sandhya. She leaned forward slightly, adjusting her shawl, and smiled warmly, her eyes twinkling with curiosity.

“So, dear, what takes you to Dehradun? You look young and full of life – a traveller with a purpose, I suppose?” She asked.

Sandhya, who had been quietly observing the rolling hills through the window, turned to meet the elderly lady's gaze.

She felt a sense of comfort in the woman's gentle curiosity, which reminded her of her own mother.

"I'm actually an athlete. I'm going to Dehradun to take up a position as a Physical Training Instructor at a school," she replied.

The elderly lady's eyes widened, clearly impressed. She exchanged a quick, knowing glance with her husband, who gave a small nod of approval.

"An athlete! That's wonderful, dear. You must be very disciplined and strong-willed. It takes a lot of hard work to stay fit and focused. What sport do you play?" the old lady asked.

Sandhya's face lit up with pride as she responded. "I'm a boxer. I've been training for years, hoping to represent my state, and one day, my country. This job will help me stay fit and earn a living while I continue my training."

The elderly man, who had been listening quietly, now leaned in, his interest clearly piqued.

"A boxer! Now that's impressive. You're a real fighter in every sense. Dehradun is a perfect place for an athlete – the fresh mountain air, the peace... it will keep you strong and focused," the old man cheered.

The elderly lady beamed at Sandhya, a sense of pride sparkling in her eyes as if she were her own daughter.

She continued, "I can tell you're a determined young woman. That's a rare quality. The world needs more people like you

– strong and courageous, with the heart to follow their dreams.”

Manav, sitting across from Sandhya, listened in silence, his admiration for her growing as he realized he was traveling alongside someone with such passion and courage. He stole a quick glance at her, his respect deepening with every word she spoke.

The conversation created a warm, familial atmosphere in the carriage, the sense of shared lives and stories transforming the journey into something more meaningful. As the train chugged along, each passing mile felt less like a distance crossed and more like a connection formed.

Manav sat hunched over his sleek laptop, the soft glow of the screen reflecting in his focused eyes as his fingers tapped rhythmically on the keyboard. The train swayed gently, the soothing hum of the tracks below blending with the murmured conversations around him.

He was trying to concentrate, but his mind kept drifting to the young woman sitting across from him – Sandhya. Her confident, yet humble tone when speaking about her life as an athlete had caught his attention. He felt a flicker of admiration, mingled with a hint of curiosity.

Unable to resist, he risked a quick glance in her direction, his eyes lifting just over the edge of his laptop screen. Sandhya, still smiling from the elderly lady’s encouraging words, absentmindedly brushed a loose strand of hair behind her ear. She felt the faintest pull of a gaze and instinctively looked up, catching Manav’s eyes for a fleeting second.

Their eyes met – his, startled and wide, quickly darting back to his laptop screen, and hers, calm but knowingly amused. She could sense his interest, perhaps even his shyness, hidden behind the flicker of his long eyelashes.

Manav felt his ears grow warm, a slight, involuntary smile forming on his lips as he tried to refocus on his work. He knew he had been caught, and the small, almost playful embarrassment made his pulse quicken just a little.

Sandhya, still holding onto the warmth of the elderly couple's words, allowed herself a small, inward chuckle. She straightened in her seat, a hint of playful confidence sparking in her eyes as she glanced at Manav's nervously blinking laptop screen.

The brief, unspoken exchange created a subtle shift in the air between them – a silent acknowledgment of each other's presence, a tiny crack in the walls of polite distance. The gentle clatter of the train on the tracks seemed to echo this quiet, unexpected connection, carrying their thoughts forward along the winding rails.

The train clattered rhythmically along the tracks, the gentle sway creating a soft, hypnotic motion. The warmth of the afternoon sun filtered through the glass windows, casting dappled shadows on the seats, adding a nostalgic warmth to the air.

The Elderly lady, her face lined with the wisdom and warmth of years well lived, turned her attention to Manav, who was still pretending to be deeply engrossed in his laptop screen.

She adjusted her thick, round glasses, leaning slightly forward, her keen eyes sparkling with curiosity.

“And what about you, young man? You seem quite focused over there. What keeps you so busy on that little machine?” she smiled at Manav.

While he was caught off guard by the sudden shift in attention, quickly minimized the music arrangement software he had been working on, his fingers hesitating for a split second on the keys. Manav straightened up, gently closing his laptop as he turned to face her, his nervousness masked by a polite smile.

“Oh, me? I’m a music teacher... or at least, I’m hoping to be one soon. I just got a job at a school in Dehradun. I’ll be teaching children – trying to share a little bit of what I love about music,” he smiled at the old lady and then instantly shifting his focus on Sandhya, perhaps trying to discover her reaction to his response.

The elderly lady’s face lit up at this, her eyes crinkling at the corners in a genuinely pleased expression. She glanced at her husband, who nodded approvingly.

“Ah, a music teacher! How wonderful! Music is a gift to the soul, you know. My husband used to hum old Hindi songs to me when we first met – that’s how he wooed me,” she chuckled, nudging her husband gently, who gave a bashful smile, his cheeks turning a shade of rose.

“Yes, back in those days, I had quite the voice, didn’t I? Not that it would matter if I forgot the lyrics – she never let me forget my mistakes anyway!” The old man laughed jokingly.

The group shared a small, heartfelt laugh, the warmth of shared memories mingling with the steady clatter of the train.

Manav felt his initial nervousness melt away. He glanced at Sandhya, who was smiling, clearly enjoying the couple's playful banter. Her eyes met his again, this time holding the connection for a heartbeat longer, a silent acknowledgment of the light-hearted moment they were all sharing.

“Yes, music has always been my passion. I grew up around it, and it's been my constant companion. I just hope I can pass on that same love for music to my students.” Manav replied confidently.

The elderly lady clapped her hands together, her gold bangles jingling musically.

“Of course, you will! Dehradun is a wonderful place for that – the hills echo every note you play. I'm sure the children will love you.”

Manav smiled, his heart swelling with a mixture of anticipation and nervousness for the journey ahead. He took a deep breath, feeling a sense of quiet reassurance from the elderly couple's warmth.

As the train swayed gently, the mood in the carriage had shifted, each of them feeling a little more connected, the journey to Dehradun suddenly seeming a bit less solitary.

The train pulls into Dehradun station, its wheels screeching softly as it comes to a complete halt. The platform outside is a bustle of porters, vendors, and travellers, the air filled with the aroma of freshly brewed chai and the sharp, invigorating scent of the surrounding pine-covered hills.

The Elderly Couple, now fully awake and brimming with the excitement of their arrival, begins to gather their belongings. The Elderly Man, humming an old Kishore Kumar tune under his breath, struggles a bit with a bulky leather suitcase. His wife, ever the vigilant partner, straightens his collar before picking up her own modestly sized floral travel bag.

She turns to Sandhya, who is still adjusting the straps of her duffel bag, and places a gentle, affectionate hand on her shoulder.

“Beta, may your journey in Dehradun be as bright as the morning sun. May you find strength in every stride and joy in every moment,” she said and smiled at Sandhya.

Sandhya, taken aback for a moment, feels a warmth spread across her heart. She nods, her eyes reflecting a newfound determination.

“Thank you, Aunty. Your words mean a lot. I will remember them.” Sandhya responded with a smile.

The Elderly Man, now ready with his suitcase balanced precariously in one hand and his wife’s handbag in the other, gives Manav a firm, yet playful pat on the back.

“Remember, young man, keep singing, keep playing – you never know who might fall for those tunes of yours,” he smiled at Manav.

“I’ll keep that in mind, Sir. Thank you for the wonderful company.” Manav smiled back at the Elderly Man.

The Elderly Couple leaves, as they walk away, their figures gradually merging into the throng of travellers on the bustling platform, a small but powerful sense of gratitude settles in both Sandhya and Manav’s hearts.

Sandhya watches them disappear into the crowd, their loving banter still echoing in her ears, a reminder of the kind of connection she hopes to build in her own life someday.

Manav, now standing beside her with his laptop bag slung over one shoulder, turns to Sandhya, a gentle smile on his face.

“People like them... they remind you of what really matters.” He softly spoke looking at the fleeting crowd around them.

Sandhya, still holding onto the warmth of the farewell, meets his gaze, her eyes reflecting a quiet, hopeful understanding.

The station echoes with the call of chai vendors and the distant whistle of another train preparing for departure. The day in Dehradun has just begun, and with it, the promise of new adventures for both Sandhya and Manav.

Manav, still wearing a friendly smile, turns to Sandhya as he adjusts the strap of his laptop bag, “So, you’re a PT instructor?”

Sandhya, matching his energy, picks up her duffel bag, her eyes bright with anticipation for the journey ahead, “Yes, that’s right.”

Manav continues, “You know, I’m actually here to join the Wisdom Foundation School as a music teacher.”

Sandhya, caught mid-step, pauses, turning her head sharply towards Manav with a mixture of surprise and curiosity. “Wait... Wisdom Foundation School? That’s where I’m heading too! I’m joining as a PT instructor,” she laughed.

Both share a moment of genuine surprise, their eyes locking as the realization settles in. Manav lets out a small, disbelieving laugh, clearly thrilled by the coincidence.

“Well, isn’t that something! Looks like we’re going to be colleagues, then.” Manav laughed.

Sandhya, her smile growing wider, adjusts her duffel bag, feeling a strange but pleasant sense of connection. “Small world, isn’t it?” She smiled back at him.

They both share a light-hearted laugh, the ice between them truly broken now, their earlier awkwardness melting away as they continue walking through the crowded platform. The sound of porters calling out, the distant whistles of engines, and the steady hum of station life blend into the background as they move toward the exit, feeling a renewed sense of excitement about their new jobs and the unfolding possibilities in Dehradun.

## 13

The cool mountain breeze rustles through the station as Sandhya and Manav step out onto the platform, blending into the busy crowd. They pause for a moment, still processing the surprising coincidence.

“Well then, I guess that gives us a chance to talk a little more,” Manav said walking alongside her.

Sandhya responded, “True, and it’ll be nice to know at least one familiar face on campus.”

“Exactly. Besides, I could use some advice on staying fit. You know, all those hours sitting with a guitar aren’t exactly great for my posture,” Manav laughed.

“Oh, don’t worry. I’ll make sure you don’t end up with a hunchback by the end of the semester.” Both she and Manav have a good laugh.

“Alright then, colleague, let’s find a cab before the station gets too crowded. I’m sure our new lives in Dehradun are waiting for us.” Manav took out his phone and started searching for a taxi.

“Let’s do that.” Sandhya responds.

As they move toward the taxi stand, the mountain breeze catches their conversation, carrying it into the heart of the picturesque hill station that awaits them.

The taxi pulls away from the bustling platform of the Dehradun Railway Station, merging into the steady flow of

traffic heading into the heart of the city. The air is cool, carrying the fresh, crisp scent of pine and the distant echoes of mountain birds.

Sandhya settles into the back seat, her eyes glued to the window, absorbing every detail as the city unfolds before her. The roads, lined with tall deodar trees, weave like green arteries through the heart of the valley. She catches glimpses of old colonial bungalows with moss-covered roofs, their gardens bursting with wild marigolds and jasmine.

As the taxi approaches their destination, the road narrows, and the lush greenery becomes denser, the air cooler and filled with the sweet scent of wildflowers.

The taxi comes to a gentle stop in front of a quaint two-story building with ivy-covered walls and a garden overflowing with blooming hibiscus and marigolds.

They step out, both taking a moment to breathe in the cool, mountain air, the journey already beginning to feel like a new chapter in their lives.

The school stands nestled against the lush, rolling hills of Dehradun, its modest buildings painted in cheerful colours, framed by tall deodar trees and vibrant flowerbeds. The air is crisp, carrying the gentle hum of mountain breezes and the distant chirping of birds. The surrounding landscape stretches into the horizon, where the peaks of the lower Himalayas stand like silent sentinels.

As Sandhya and Manav enter through the rustic iron gates, they find themselves in a cozy courtyard with children's laughter echoing from a nearby playground. The main office building is part of the kindergarten section, a charming structure with large, welcoming windows and a small garden at the front, complete with tiny hand-painted benches and a chalkboard sign reading "Welcome to Wisdom Foundation School" in bright, playful letters.

The two make their way inside, where the air smells faintly of chalk, fresh paper, and floor polish. The receptionist, a kind-faced woman with glasses perched on her nose, informs them with a gentle smile that the principal is currently occupied in a meeting and asks them to take a seat.

They settle into the comfortable waiting area, where colourful drawings by young students cover the walls, telling tales of summer skies, mountain treks, and dreams of adventure. Sandhya, still taking in the atmosphere, glances over at Manav, who seems at ease in the surroundings, his eyes reflecting a quiet familiarity with the place.

Breaking the silence, Sandhya leans a little closer and asks, her tone curious and friendly, “So, Manav, is this your first teaching job?”

“Yes, my first job as a teacher. But I'm a musician by profession. Music has always been my first love – I've performed at a few small concerts, composed some original pieces, and even taught a few private students over the years. But teaching at a school like this, that's a new journey for me.” Manav responded.

As Manav finishes speaking, a staff member in a neat, formal uniform steps into the waiting area with a polite, welcoming smile.

“Excuse me, Mr. Manav and Ms. Sandhya, the Principal is now free and would like to meet with you both. If you could please follow me,” the staff confirmed.

Manav and Sandhya exchange a quick glance, a mix of anticipation and excitement evident in their eyes. They rise from their seats, gathering their bags, and follow the staff member down a hallway lined with motivational quotes and student artwork, each step taking them closer to the start of their new chapter at the Wisdom Foundation School.

Sandhya and Manav step into the principal's office, a warmly lit room with neatly stacked bookshelves, framed awards, and certificates that reflect the years of dedication and hard work poured into building the institution. A large window behind the principal's desk offers a breathtaking view of the rolling hillside, bathed in the golden glow of the morning sun.

The principal, Ms. Pratibha Sharma, a poised and confident middle-aged woman with salt-and-pepper hair neatly tied back in a bun, rises from her leather chair as they enter. Dressed in a crisp cotton saree with a subtle floral pattern, she exudes an aura of authority balanced with genuine warmth.

“Welcome to our School. You must be Sandhya and Manav. Please, have a seat.” The principal spoke with a welcoming smile at Sandhya and Manav.

Both exchange a quick, encouraging glance before taking their seats in the comfortable chairs placed across from the principal's desk. Ms. Sharma waits for them to settle, her eyes reflecting a keen interest as she observes their eager expressions.

“I’m delighted to finally meet you both. I’ve heard wonderful things about your talents. Sandhya, a national-level athlete, and Manav, a musician with a passion for teaching. It’s not every day we have such dynamic individuals joining our family. I look forward to seeing you both contribute to the growth and inspiration of our students.” The principal spoke with a welcoming voice.

The principal continued, “I am truly pleased to welcome you both to our teaching family here at Wisdom Foundation School. After meeting you in person, I have no doubt that you will bring the right kind of energy, passion, and positive influence that our young students need. A strong body and a creative mind can shape a child’s future in extraordinary ways, and I believe you both are perfectly suited to inspire our children.”

“We have made arrangements for your stay at the staff quarters, just a short walk from the school premises. It’s a cozy, peaceful place, surrounded by nature, perfect for unwinding after a day of guiding young minds. I hope you find it comfortable as you settle into your new roles here.” The principal pauses, her eyes reflecting a motherly concern.

“If you have any specific needs or face any challenges adjusting, please don’t hesitate to reach out. We’re a close-knit community here, and we take care of one another.” The principal smiled.

Both Sandhya and Manav nod with appreciative smiles, feeling a deep sense of welcome and support as their journey as teachers at the Wisdom Foundation School officially begins.

The morning air is filled with the fresh, earthy aroma of dew-soaked pine as Manav makes his way to the music classroom. The gentle hum of excited chatter spills out into the hallway, growing louder as he approaches the door. He takes a deep breath, steadying himself, and steps inside.

The classroom is alive with youthful energy – bright faces, curious eyes, and eager smiles. The walls are adorned with colourful music posters, staff notations, and portraits of famous musicians, reflecting the rhythmic soul of the room. A few students are already tapping their desks like makeshift drums, while others are strumming invisible guitars, their fingers dancing in the air.

As Manav walks in, the students quickly settle down, their eyes fixed on the tall, slightly nervous but friendly figure of their new music teacher. He sets his guitar down carefully, placing a small electronic keyboard on the wooden teacher's desk.

“Good morning, everyone! I’m Mr. Manav, your new music teacher. I hope you all love music as much as I do, because we’re going to have a lot of fun together.” He spoke smiling at the children.

The room echoes with a chorus of excited whispers and nods.

“Tell me, how many of you have tried singing in the shower?”

A wave of giggles sweeps through the room as nearly every hand shoots up, a few students even whispering to each other about their secret bathroom concerts.

“That’s great! You see, music is everywhere – in the wind, in the rustling of leaves, in the chirping of birds, even in the rhythm of your footsteps. And today, we’re going to learn how to capture that magic.”

Manav picks up his guitar, gently strumming a few chords, filling the room with a warm, inviting melody.

“Let’s start with the basics – notes. Just like the alphabets make up our words, musical notes make up our songs. So, let’s create some music together.” Manav asked the excited students.

The students lean in, their curiosity piqued, as Manav’s fingers continue to dance over the guitar strings, weaving a simple, catchy tune that instantly lights up their eager young faces.

The class carries on in the strumming of acoustic strings, and everyone joins in singing.

## 16

The midday sun casts long shadows through the gym's high windows, spilling light onto the polished wooden floor. A group of energetic children have gathered near the punching bag hanging in a corner, its heavy, worn surface swaying slightly as if sensing the mischief brewing around it.

A small, skinny boy stands at the centre of the group, his wide eyes darting nervously as the others circle around him like a pack of playful wolves.

"Hey, weakling, can you even hit that punching bag? I bet it'll send you flying instead!" one of the boys said to the skinny kid.

"Yeah, come on! Show us what you've got – if you have anything at all!" another one from the pack shouted.

The smaller boy hesitates, glancing at the thick, swaying bag. His shoulders stiffen as he takes a deep breath, his small fists clenching. He can feel the heat of their taunts pressing in on him, daring him to prove them wrong. With a burst of determination, he steps forward and swings his arm, but his inexperience shows – he strikes the bag awkwardly, his wrist bending at a painful angle.

He winces, pulling his hand back sharply, but forces a brave face as the others burst into laughter, slapping each other's backs as if they've won some unspoken contest.

"See? I told you he's too weak. Better stick to the chess club, pal." One from the pack laughed mockingly at the kid.

As the group disperses, the small boy clutches his throbbing wrist, his teeth gritted in silent pain. Just then, Sandhya walks into the gym, her sharp eyes catching the tail end of the scene.

She immediately senses the boy's discomfort, noting the way he cradles his wrist despite trying to hide his pain.

She steps up beside him, her presence instantly calming, and kneels down to his level, her voice firm yet reassuring.

"You're a brave one, aren't you? Trying to hide your pain like a warrior."

The boy looks up at her, surprised, his eyes still glistening from the sting of the taunts. Sandhya gently takes his wrist, her fingers expertly massaging the strained joint, easing the tension with practiced care. The boy's face gradually relaxes as the pain subsides, his breathing steadying under her gentle touch.

Sandhya advises the kid on being strong, "Let me teach you two important lessons about being strong. The first one you've already figured out – learning to hide your pain. That takes courage. But the second lesson is even more important – never let your anger control you in a fight. The moment you lose your temper; you've already lost half the battle." Do you understand?

The boy listens carefully, his small chest swelling slightly with pride at being spoken to like an equal. As she finishes massaging his wrist, Sandhya gives his shoulder a gentle, encouraging squeeze.

“Keep that spirit, and you’ll be stronger than you can imagine.” She smiled at the little kid.

The boy manages a small, grateful smile, his pain now replaced by a newfound determination, his small frame standing a little taller. As Sandhya rises and walks away, the boy watches her, inspired and silently promising himself to grow stronger – not just in muscle, but in spirit as well.

The boy jogs over to the main group of students gathering near the centre of the gym. Sandhya takes a deep breath, claps her hands together to grab everyone’s attention, and steps forward with the commanding presence of a true leader.

“Alright, everyone, line up! Let’s get our bodies moving and our spirits high! Remember, physical training isn’t just about building muscle, it’s about building character, endurance, and discipline. Today, we’ll push our limits and discover our strength.” Sandhya blowing the whistle moved around instructing upon the importance of physical training.

“One, two, three, four – stretch those arms, feel your muscles come alive! Five, six, seven, eight – let’s see that energy!”

The students follow her lead, some with the ease of natural athletes, others struggling but determined. Sandhya moves among them, correcting postures, offering encouragement.

As the session progresses, she introduces basic fitness drills – jumping jacks, squats, push-ups – gradually increasing the intensity, her eyes never missing a single movement. The sound of sneakers squeaking against the gym floor and the rhythmic thumping of dozens of feet echo through the

spacious hall, creating a vibrant, living soundtrack to their morning workout.

Sandhya's voice rises above the collective panting and shuffling feet, her tone firm but filled with enthusiasm.

"Push yourselves! Every drop of sweat, every moment of effort – it all counts! You're not just building muscles; you're building confidence and character."

As the session draws to a close, Sandhya gathers the students into a loose circle, their faces flushed with effort but glowing with the satisfaction of a good workout. She smiles, catching the eye of the young boy she had just helped, and gives him a small, proud nod.

"Great job, everyone! Remember, every strong person you see today started off just like you – with small steps, a little pain, and a lot of determination. See you all tomorrow, ready for the next challenge!" Sandhya dismissed the class with a whistle,

With that, the students break into cheerful chatter as they disperse, some high-fiving each other, others catching their breath on the gym floor.

Sandhya watches them with a sense of satisfaction, her heart swelling with the quiet pride of a mentor who has just planted the seeds of strength and resilience in young minds.

As the lunch bell rings, the once bustling corridors of the hillside school fall into a calm, echoing hush as students make their way to the canteen. In the cozy staff room, sunlight filters through the wide windows, casting warm, golden patches on the worn wooden floor. The air is filled with the faint, comforting aroma of freshly brewed tea and the soft rustle of lunch containers being unpacked.

Sandhya walks in, her cheeks still slightly flushed from the morning's intense PT session. She catches sight of Manav, who is already seated near the window, his laptop closed for a break, a mild smile playing on his lips as he stirs his cup of tea.

As she takes a seat across from him, a few of their new colleagues turn to greet them, their faces bright with welcoming smiles.

"Ah, our newest recruits! Welcome, welcome! How's the first day treating you both?" One of the senior teachers greeted the newly joined teachers.

"Hope the kids didn't tire you out already!" another teacher asked the new teachers.

Manav chuckles lightly, adjusting his glasses as he leans back in his chair. "Not at all, actually. The kids have been wonderful so far. I had a great first session with the music class. It's heartening to see so many young, enthusiastic minds eager to learn about the world of music."

Sandhya smiles, the spark of her morning energy still dancing in her eyes. “Same here. My first PT class was quite a rush. The kids have so much energy. It’s amazing to watch them push their limits, even at such a young age. It makes you feel like you’re a part of something bigger, you know?”

Manav’s eyes light up at her words, sensing the shared passion they both have for teaching.

He continues by saying, “You seem to really enjoy guiding them. Have you always wanted to be a PT instructor?”

Sandhya pauses for a moment, reflecting on her journey, before responding with a warm smile. “Well, yes. I’ve always loved sports and physical challenges. I believe physical strength builds mental strength too. It’s about creating a balance, both in body and mind.”

Manav nods, clearly impressed, his fingers gently tapping the side of his cup. “I like that. It’s like music, really – creating harmony, finding your rhythm, and pushing yourself to hit the right notes, both in life and art.”

Their conversation is briefly interrupted as another teacher places a small, fragrant bowl of freshly made samosas on the table, urging them to share the snacks. They both laugh, appreciating the warmth and camaraderie of their new colleagues.

As the lunch break continues, Sandhya and Manav exchange more stories about their first impressions of the school, their shared excitement for their new roles, and the quiet thrill of starting fresh in a place as beautiful as Dehradun.

By the time the bell signals the end of lunch, both feel a growing sense of camaraderie, grateful to have found a friendly face in each other on their first day at the Wisdom Foundation School.

The warm, mid-morning sunlight filters through the windows, casting soft shadows across the polished wooden desk where Ms. Sharma, the school principal, is seated. She straightens a stack of documents, then looks up with a welcoming smile as Manav enters, closing the door gently behind him.

“Manav, I wanted to have a quick word with you. As you know, the school will be closing soon for the upcoming vacation. It’s a wonderful time for both our students and teachers to unwind, but I have a little something in mind to make their return even more exciting.” The principal spoke with a smile.

Manav, his posture relaxed but attentive, nods with curiosity.

“When the school reopens after a month, I want to organize a grand school music fest. It’s been a while since we’ve had one, and I believe it’s the perfect way to reconnect our students, parents, and staff as a community. I want it to be a celebration of their talents and hard work.” The principal added.

She pauses, allowing her words to settle, as a gentle breeze rustles the curtains.

“I’d like you to take the lead on organizing the music fest portion of the event. It will be a significant part of the celebration, and I can’t think of anyone better suited for the task. You have a way of inspiring the children and bringing out their creative sides.” The principal requests Manav.

Manav lights up, clearly thrilled by the opportunity. He straightens a bit in his chair, already envisioning the lively music, eager young performers, and the sound of applause echoing through the school grounds.

Manav responds, “That sounds fantastic, ma’am. I would love to take on the responsibility. I’m sure the students will be excited to showcase their talents. Thank you for trusting me with this.”

“Wonderful. I have already informed the rest of the staff about the event, and we’ll soon be announcing it to the students. Those interested in participating will be directed to you for auditions. I’m confident you’ll guide them well.” Ms. Sharma felt relieved that Manav feels excited about the school music fest.

“Thank you, Ma’am. I promise to make this a memorable experience for the students. I’ll start planning right away.” Manav responds.

The principal gives him an encouraging nod, her eyes twinkling with confidence in her young, passionate music teacher. “I know you will, Manav. I’m counting on you to make this a truly special event for everyone.”

With that, Manav rises from his seat, his mind already racing with ideas for the fest – from choir performances to solo acts, and perhaps even a live band formed by the students themselves.

He leaves the principal’s office already humming a tune as he walks down the corridor, eager to bring the sound of music to life at the upcoming fest.

## 19

The warm afternoon sun casts long shadows over the freshly painted lines of the basketball court. The rhythmic sound of sneakers squeaking against the court and the steady thump of the basketball echo through the air. Sandhya, dressed in her athletic PT uniform, is in the midst of an intense game with a group of enthusiastic students. She guides them through a fast break, effortlessly dribbling past two defenders before passing the ball to a young girl, who takes a shot that swishes perfectly through the net.

The children cheer, and Sandhya claps her hands, encouraging them to keep up the energy. Just then, her phone, tucked into the pocket of her track pants, starts vibrating. She signals for a quick timeout, catching her breath as she steps away from the court, the kids still playfully jostling around.

Sandhya pulls out her phone, noticing the familiar name flashing on the screen – COACH– She quickly wipes the sweat from her brow and answers the call, her voice bright and full of anticipation.

“Hello, Coach! How are you?” Sandhya smiled.

“Sandy! I’m doing well, and I hope you are too. I have some good news for you. The Interstate Boxing Tournament is coming up soon. The dates haven’t been finalized yet, but I wanted to make sure you are mentally and physically prepared.”

Sandhya's eyes light up with excitement, her heart pounding not just from the game, but from the thrill of the news. She can feel the adrenaline rushing through her veins, just like it did every time she stepped into the ring.

"That's fantastic news, Coach! I've been training hard, and I'll make sure I'm ready when the time comes." She responds with excitement and joy.

"I know you will, Sandy. You've always been a fighter, both in and out of the ring. I'll keep you posted as soon as I get the confirmed dates. Until then, stay sharp and keep pushing yourself." The coach informs Sandhya.

"Thank you, Coach. I won't let you down." Sandhya confirms with determination.

The call ends, and Sandhya stands for a moment, her mind already racing with thoughts of intense training sessions, sweat-soaked gym floors, and the satisfying crunch of a perfectly landed punch. She takes a deep breath, her chest swelling with pride and determination.

She turns back to the court, where the kids are still dribbling, passing, and cheering. Sandhya claps her hands loudly, snapping herself back into the present.

"Alright, break's over! Let's see some hustle out there. Show me your best moves!" She rejoins the session.

The children respond with a chorus of cheers, and the game resumes, the ball bouncing with fresh energy as Sandhya joins them, her mind already setting goals for the tournament ahead.

## 20

The warm, golden afternoon light filters through the tall windows of the school auditorium, casting a soft glow over the polished wooden stage. The air is alive with a mixture of nervous excitement and youthful energy as the students slowly fill the rows of foldable chairs, whispering to each other and tuning their instruments. A few curious faces peek out from behind the heavy red curtains, adjusting their guitar straps and nervously tapping their drumsticks.

Manav, dressed in a casual yet professional ensemble – a neatly pressed shirt and comfortable jeans – stands at the centre of the stage, adjusting a microphone stand. He takes a deep breath, feeling the familiar rush of being in a space filled with music and young, eager minds. This was his element.

As the students settle down, he steps up to the microphone, his voice carrying a reassuring warmth that immediately grabs their attention.

“Alright, everyone! Welcome to the music fest auditions. I know some of you might be a little nervous, but remember – this isn’t just about singing or playing an instrument. It’s about feeling the music, connecting with the audience, and most importantly, having fun!”

A few students in the front row exchange excited glances, their initial jitters easing under Manav’s positive energy. “So, who likes classic rock? Pop? Classical music?”

A small, curly-haired boy timidly raises his hand. "Sir, I like playing the drums... I've been practicing the beat for 'We Will Rock You' by Queen."

Manav replied, "Ah, a classic! I like your choice. That song has the kind of energy that can really get a crowd moving. Alright, you're on the list for the rhythm section."

He moves to a tall girl sitting at the edge of the stage, her violin case resting on her lap. She nervously fidgets with the clasps. Manav asks the girl, "What about you? What do you play?"

"I play the violin, sir. I was thinking of performing something a bit more... classical." The girl replied.

"Excellent! We'll need a strong melody line. Let's work together to blend that classical touch into a fusion piece. It'll add a beautiful layer to the overall performance." Manav cheered.

Manav went on auditioning participants, "And you girls? Singers, I presume?" He turns to a group of girls whispering excitedly among themselves

They nod enthusiastically, one of them speaking up.

"Yes, sir! We've been practicing an old Hindi song... something with a lot of soul."

Manav claps his hands together, clearly impressed by their passion. "Perfect! We can work that into the lineup. I want this fest to be a mix of different styles and genres – a true celebration of music. Let's see how we can blend classical

strings, powerful drums, and soulful voices into one beautiful performance.”

As the students continue to share their musical preferences, Manav jots down notes in his small leather-bound notebook, his mind already weaving together the various musical threads into a cohesive, exciting program for the festival.

Finally, he steps back onto the stage, raising his hands for attention. “Alright, everyone! We’re going to make this fest something to remember. So, let’s start with some warm-ups, a few scales, and then we’ll get into the auditions. Ready?”

The auditorium fills with the sound of students clapping, tapping their instruments, and exchanging eager smiles, the energy in the room palpable.

Manav takes another deep breath, his heart swelling with pride as he watches the young musicians around him, each one a budding artist ready to share their passion with the world.

The auditorium is alive with the warm hum of eager voices, the occasional clink of a cymbal being adjusted, and the gentle plucking of guitar strings as students prepare for their auditions.

Manav stands at the edge of the stage, casually leaning against a speaker, his fingers tapping a gentle rhythm against his notebook. He scans the faces of his young musicians, making mental notes of their potential.

A young girl, steps forward, her hands nervously clutching the strap of her guitar. She hesitates for a moment, then clears

her throat, her voice trembling just a little as she addresses Manav.

"Sir, may I... may I perform a solo? I have a song in mind."

Manav straightens up, intrigued by her soft, yet confident tone.

"Of course! Which song do you have in mind?"

The girl's eyes brighten as she motions to the keyboard, her fingers already itching to play.

"I'd like to play 'Can't Help Falling in Love', if that's alright."

Manav's face lights up, clearly impressed by her choice.

"Excellent choice. That's a classic. Alright, go ahead. Show us what you've got."

The girl takes a seat at the keyboard, her fingers trembling slightly as she sets them against the ivory keys. She takes a deep breath, closes her eyes, and begins to play the familiar, hauntingly beautiful intro of the Elvis classic.

As her voice rises, soft yet clear, the gentle piano notes fill the auditorium, casting a spell over the scattered students. The room falls into a respectful, entranced silence, each note resonating with a timeless magic.

Halfway through the first verse, Manav, feeling the warmth of the moment, reaches for his guitar resting against a nearby amp. He slings the strap over his shoulder, quickly tuning it to match the key of the keyboard. He gently strums the first

few chords, sinking into the melody, his eyes closed, allowing the music to carry him.

At that moment, Sandhya enters the auditorium, the door creaking slightly as she steps inside. She pauses at the doorway, her eyes immediately drawn to the impromptu duet unfolding before her. The soft, romantic strains of the song wash over her, the delicate harmonies weaving a blanket of warmth around the room.

Sandhya leans against the doorframe, her lips curving into a gentle, appreciative smile as she watches Manav, his fingers dancing effortlessly over the guitar strings, his body swaying ever so slightly in tune with the music. For a moment, she forgets the noisy bustle of the school corridors and the endless clamour of the gym, lost in the pure, unfiltered emotion of the song.

As the girl's voice swells for the final chorus, Manav, sensing a presence, slowly opens his eyes. His gaze drifts to the back of the room, where he catches sight of Sandhya, her eyes locked on his, a soft, admiring glow in her expression.

Their eyes meet, and for a brief, magical moment, the music seems to bridge the gap between them, speaking a thousand unspoken words. Their eye contact lingers, the silent exchange more meaningful than any conversation.

The song draws to a gentle close, the final notes lingering in the air like the last rays of a setting sun. The auditorium erupts in appreciative applause, the young girl blushing as her classmates cheer her on.

Manav, feeling the warmth of Sandhya's gaze still on him, slowly lowers his guitar, his heart racing just a little faster than before.

The school bell rings, cutting through the haze of the performance, snapping everyone back to reality. Sandhya straightens her momentary daze broken. She offers Manav a final, knowing smile before turning to leave, her footsteps echoing softly against the polished floors.

Manav watches her retreating figure, his own lips curving into a quiet, satisfied smile, the lingering notes of the song still resonating in his mind.

As the door swings shut behind Sandhya, Manav exhales, his heart lighter, his mind already wandering back to the melody they had just shared.

## 21

The warm, inviting aroma of freshly ground coffee fills the air, mingling with the soft hum of background jazz and the gentle clinking of ceramic cups. The coffee shop is alive with the quiet chatter of patrons, the hiss of the espresso machine, and the occasional shuffle of chairs against the polished wooden floor.

Manav carefully balances a tray holding two steaming cups of coffee and a glass of fresh fruit juice as he approaches the table where Sandhya sits, her eyes casually drifting over the bustling café. He sets the tray down with a careful grace, his movements deliberate yet natural. He places a cup of black coffee in front of himself and the glass of fruit juice in front of Sandhya, catching her eye with a warm, appreciative smile.

“Here you go. Fresh fruit juice for the champion.” He smiled at her.

Sandhya chuckles softly, a hint of admiration flickering in her eyes as she wraps her fingers around the cool glass. She takes a sip, letting the refreshing burst of citrus awaken her senses. She looks up at Manav, her eyes reflecting a genuine warmth.

“You know, your talent in music is just mind-blowing. I genuinely enjoyed watching you and the kids at the music rehearsals today. It was... wonderful.” Sandhya smiles at Manav.

Manav's smile broadens, a faint blush colouring his cheeks as he brushes off the compliment with a modest nod. "Thanks. That means a lot."

He glances down at his cup, gently stirring the dark liquid, trying to steady the sudden, unexpected flutter in his chest. There's a slight hesitation in his smile, a hint of something unspoken hanging in the air between them.

He takes a slow, deliberate breath, his mind racing with the words he wishes to say but struggles to voice.

Just as he musters the courage to speak, Sandhya sets her glass down, the thin layer of condensation on its surface trickling down like tiny raindrops. She takes a breath, her eyes momentarily flicking to the distant street visible through the café window before returning to Manav's attentive gaze.

"You know, I don't think I'll be able to return after the vacation." Sandhya speaks.

Manav's eyebrows knit together in confusion, the relaxed warmth in his expression replaced by a sudden concern.

"But why is that?" Manav looks a bit confused.

Sandhya's fingers gently trace the rim of her glass, the cold moisture lingering against her skin as she gathers her thoughts.

"Actually, I've decided to participate in the upcoming Interstate Boxing Tournament. I have to get back to Delhi and start my practice. It's a big opportunity for me, and I

can't afford to miss it." She confirms her upcoming plan for the tournament to him.

Manav leans back slightly, his shoulders relaxing but his mind still racing. He hadn't expected this news, and the sudden shift leaves him momentarily speechless.

He responds, "Oh, I see. That's... that's great. I mean, it's a fantastic opportunity."

Sandhya offers a small, appreciative smile, but there's a hint of unease behind her eyes, as if the weight of her own words has just hit her. She takes another sip from her glass, her gaze momentarily drifting to the thin layer of ice slowly melting at the bottom.

Manav, sensing the unspoken tension, takes a long sip of his coffee, letting the bitter warmth settle his nerves.

He glances at the rack of tissue papers on the table, his eyes catching the bright, cheerful slogan printed on them – "KEEP SMILING @ BARISTA" – a stark contrast to the uncertainty building in his mind.

He finally finds his voice, speaking gently, his tone tinged with curiosity. "What do you plan to do after this tournament?"

Sandhya leans back in her chair, her fingers still tracing the cool glass, the ice within almost fully melted now, its once sharp edges softened into harmless, rounded curves.

She says, "Well, this is likely the last big tournament I'll participate in. I've been thinking about retiring from boxing after this one."

Manav holding the cup high to take a sip “Retiring? That’s a big decision. And then?”

Sandhya’s lips curve into a wistful smile, her eyes drifting again to the empty glass, the last of the ice now just a ghostly sliver clinging to the side.

“My parents want me to settle down, maybe start a family. After this tournament, I think it’s time I start searching for a suitable life partner.” Sandhya smiles at Manav.

His heart skips a beat, his fingers tightening slightly around the warm ceramic of his coffee cup. He takes a deep, slow breath, struggling to mask the flicker of disappointment that flashes across his face.

Just as he tries to gather his thoughts, Sandhya breaks the brief silence, leaning in slightly, her tone suddenly light and playful.

“You know, after this tournament, I’m going to search for you.” Sandhya rests her palm around Manav’s.

Manav’s head snaps up, his eyes locking with hers, the playful sparkle in her gaze sending a surge of warmth through his chest.

“Seriously?” Manav astonishingly smiles in relieve.

Sandhya chuckles softly, her fingers tapping lightly against the glass, her confidence growing as she watches the wave of relief wash over Manav’s face.

“Absolutely. Only if I’m okay for you. I mean, I’m not as talented as you are, but I’ve definitely fallen in love with your music.” Sandhya smiles at Manav.

Manav’s heart races as he instinctively reaches across the table, his hands gently covering Sandhya’s as they rest on the cool, polished surface.

“You’re perfect for me.” Manav smiles at Sandhya.

At the quiet corner of the coffee shop, the couple’s hands entwined, their faces glowing with unspoken promises, the soft jazz in the background swelling into a cheerful, romantic melody.

## 22

Children are practicing their PT drills at the school playground, their laughter and the rhythmic thud of running feet echoing through the crisp mountain air. The sky above is a bright, cloudless blue, and the surrounding hills cast long shadows across the field, the scene alive with youthful energy.

Sandhya stands a little apart from the lively scene, her eyes occasionally drifting to the children as she holds her phone close to her ear, speaking to her mother back in Delhi. Her expression is one of warmth, her voice light and affectionate.

“Yes, Maa. He’s a music teacher here at the school.”

Her mother, sitting comfortably in the family living room, brightens at the mention of this mysterious 'he.' She leans forward, a curious smile playing on her lips as she clutches her phone tightly, eager to hear more.

“Is he from Dehradun? How does he look?”

Sandhya chuckles softly, her eyes momentarily following a group of young students attempting to organize themselves into neat rows for their exercises, their playful chaos a welcome backdrop to her conversation.

“He looks good, Maa. Sings well too. He’s originally from Dehradun, but he has a place in CR Park.”

Her mother’s eyes light up at this revelation, her mind already racing ahead, connecting dots and imagining futures.

She leans back, a satisfied smile spreading across her face, her voice suddenly brimming with excitement.

“Well, that’s good! That means your in-laws won’t be far from us after marriage. We’re in Kalkaji, just a stone’s throw from CR Park. I’ll tell your father about your plans for settling down. I’m sure he’ll be very happy too.”

Sandhya’s face flushes slightly, a mixture of embarrassment and warmth at her mother’s enthusiastic response. She glances at the children, some of whom have taken to mimicking the martial steps of their PT instructor, their exaggerated movements drawing a soft, affectionate smile to her lips.

“Thanks, Maa.”

Sandhya gently disconnects the call, lowering her phone as the familiar sounds of the playground flood back into her awareness. She watches the children, their small, energetic forms darting about the sunlit field, their carefree laughter carrying on the breeze.

For a moment, she stands there, absorbing the warmth of the afternoon sun and the innocent joy of the children, her thoughts drifting to Manav and the possibilities that lie ahead. She lets out a deep, contented breath, her heart feeling a little lighter, her mind a little clearer.

## 23

The school auditorium is alive with the sounds of musical rehearsals, the air vibrating with the enthusiastic voices of young students and the occasional strum of guitars, the clink of tambourines, and the rhythmic beat of a cajón.

Manav is standing at the auditorium, his sharp ear catching every note, his eyes moving attentively across the students as they practice for the upcoming music fest. The stage is a delightful chaos of eager faces, all striving to perfect their parts under his encouraging yet meticulous guidance.

Amidst this creative swirl, Manav's attention shifts to a young girl standing near the center, Kavita, a small, determined figure clutching her microphone tightly. She is trying her best to keep up with the higher notes, her head tilting back slightly as she reaches for the upper register.

However, Manav notices something off – her breathing seems labored, and a faint tremor runs through her small frame as she struggles to hold the notes. She suddenly stops, her tiny chest heaving as a series of abnormal, sharp hiccups escape her.

Concerned, Manav steps forward, gently lowering his own guitar as he approaches the girl.

“Hey Kavita, are you okay, darling?”

The little girl, her eyes wide but her spirit clearly unbroken, manages a quick nod, trying to mask her discomfort.

“Yes sir, I’m okay.”

Manav offers a gentle smile, his tone both encouraging and protective.

“You keep losing your breath. Why don’t you take a sip of water?”

Kavita gives a small, appreciative nod, unscrewing the cap of her brightly colored water bottle and taking a few hurried gulps.

She wipes her lips with the back of her hand, trying to regain her composure before lifting the mic again. For a moment, she seems fine, her small voice blending in with the chorus around her as the music swells again.

But as the next verse approaches, the same issue returns – her breath catches, and the telltale hiccups break through her singing, her face turning slightly red with the effort of pushing past the strain. Manav’s eyes narrow with concern, his mind already running through possible explanations for her sudden breathlessness.

Realizing that this isn’t just a minor issue, he gently signals for the rest of the students to continue without her for a moment.

He steps closer to Kavita, lowering his voice so as not to embarrass her in front of the others.

“Why don’t you take a little break, Kavita? It’s okay, we can pick this up again after lunch. Just catch your breath, alright?”

Kavita hesitates for a second, her large, earnest eyes searching his face for any sign of disappointment. Finding

none, she nods, a small, relieved smile breaking through as she steps down from the platform, clutching her water bottle a bit tighter as she moves to the side.

Manav watches her retreat, a thoughtful frown forming on his face as he returns to the center of the stage, directing the other students through the next part of the rehearsal. He makes a mental note to keep an eye on her, determined to understand what might be causing her difficulty before the big performance.

Moments later, the loud, echoing clang of the school bell rings out through the hall, signaling the lunch break. The students eagerly set down their instruments, their voices dissolving into excited chatter as they make their way towards the exit.

Manav claps his hands to gather their attention one last time before they disappear through the doors.

“Alright, everyone! Good work this morning. We’ll pick up right where we left off after lunch, so make sure you’re back here on time. And Kavita,” he calls out as the little girl lingers at the back, “take a good rest, alright? We’ll work through this together.”

Kavita gives him a small, grateful wave before joining the line of her classmates heading for the cafeteria, her ponytail bouncing with each step.

Manav watches her go, his mind still occupied with concern, hoping that whatever is troubling her won’t hold her back from shining on stage when the big day arrives.

## 24

The school cafeteria buzzed with the lively chatter of students and the clinking of plates. The air filled with the warm aroma of freshly cooked food. Sandhya sat at a corner table, her gaze occasionally drifting to the entrance as she waited for Manav to arrive. She had already ordered their lunch for two.

Just then, her phone buzzed, the screen lighting up with the name 'Coach.' A bright smile spread across Sandhya's face as she quickly picked up the call, the familiar voice on the other end instantly lifting her mood.

“Hey Coach! How are you?”

“Hey Sandy, I'm doing well. Listen, the dates for the tournament have been finalized by the organizing committee. You have approximately two months left. So, you can come back and start your practice soon.”

Sandhya felt a wave of mixed emotions wash over her. She had been waiting for this news, but it also meant she might have to leave the place that had unexpectedly started to feel like home.

Her fingers tightened around the edge of the table as she considered her coach's words.

“Coach, the school is closing for vacation in about a month. Can I return at the same time when the school closes for vacation? That's in a month.”

“Yes, that’s fine, but make sure you return at the earliest. You’ll need every bit of time to get back into form. Okay, take care, and I’ll see you soon.”

“Thank you, sir. You take care too.”

As the call ended, Sandhya leaned back in her chair, her mind still processing the reality of leaving. She was about to tuck her phone back into her bag when she caught sight of Manav entering the cafeteria, his ever-present, charming smile lighting up his face as he waved at her from a distance.

She felt her heart lighten for a moment, her worries momentarily set aside as she waved back.

Manav quickly made his way through the scattered tables, finally arriving at hers and pulling out a chair to sit across from her. He adjusted his guitar strap on his shoulder before settling down, his expression a mix of apology and relief.

“Sorry I got late.”

“What happened?”

“There’s a little girl, Kavita. She had some breathing issues while singing during the rehearsals. I just wanted to make sure she was alright before I left.”

“Okay, but I’ve already ordered the lunch.”

“Hey, let me get it.”

Manav rose swiftly from his chair, walking over to the food counter and returning a moment later with two neatly arranged plates. He set them down on the table with a gentle, appreciative smile before sitting down again.

Sandhya watched him for a moment, noting the subtle lines of worry still etched on his face, possibly from his concern for Kavita.

As they started eating, Sandhya took a deep breath, realizing it was now or never to share her news. She looked at Manav, her eyes reflecting a mix of excitement and hesitation.

“The tournament dates have been declared. I don’t think I can return after the vacation.”

Manav’s fork paused halfway to his mouth, his eyes locking onto hers, the unspoken question clear in his gaze.

“What? But that means you won’t be able to attend the school fest.”

“I don’t think so.” Sandhya breaths a sigh.

For a moment, the vibrant cafeteria around them seemed to fade into the background. Manav lowered his gaze, his mind processing the sudden change in their plans. He took a deep breath, forcing a small, supportive smile onto his face as he met her eyes again.

“It’s okay, I think you’ve made the right decision. After all, you’ve been waiting for this event. It’s a big opportunity for you.”

“Thanks, I wasn’t so sure how to tell you.”

“I’m fine with your decision.”

A comfortable silence settled between them, the unspoken understanding of mutual respect and care bridging the gap that had briefly opened up.

Breaking the silence, Manav leaned forward slightly, his eyes brightening as he changed the topic to something lighter.

“Hey, listen, my mom is visiting town, and she’s staying at our native place, which is just an hour’s drive from here. I was wondering if you could join me tomorrow. I’m sure she would be excited to meet you in person.”

Sandhya’s eyes widened with a mixture of excitement and sudden anxiety, her mind racing at the thought of meeting Manav’s mother.

“That’s really nice. I’d love to meet her, but... hang on, there’s a problem.”

Manav, who had just lifted his fork again, paused mid-motion, his brows knitting together in concern.

“What problem?”

“I don’t have a saree. It would be so awkward not to wear a traditional saree when meeting your mom for the first time.”

Manav blinked, clearly caught off guard by the unexpected concern. He leaned back in his chair, momentarily at a loss for words, his mind struggling to come up with a solution.

Just then, the school principal, Ms. Sharma, entered the cafeteria, her elegant saree flowing gracefully as she made her way past the tables. Sandhya’s eyes followed her for a moment, a sudden spark of inspiration lighting up her face.

As Ms. Sharma exchanged a quick greeting with them before continuing on her way, Sandhya turned back to Manav with a mischievous grin.

“Don’t worry, I think I’ve just found a solution to my problem.”

Manav, still catching up, looked at her in confusion as she simply smiled, her mind already working on a plan.

## 25

The next morning, the sun was just beginning to rise, casting a warm, golden glow over the quiet streets as Manav parked his car in front of the WFS staff quarters. He leaned back in his seat, checking his watch and tapping the steering wheel with a mix of excitement and nervousness. He was about to call Sandhya to let her know he had arrived when he noticed a figure approaching from the building's entrance.

It was Sandhya, gracefully descending the steps in a stunning, flowing saree. The rich fabric, with its intricate golden border and vibrant hues, caught the morning light beautifully, making her appear heavenly. Manav felt his heart skip a beat, his fingers momentarily freezing on the steering wheel as he took in the sight.

She reached the car, her steps measured yet confident, a playful smile curving her lips as she noticed the wide-eyed, astonished expression on Manav's face. Without a word, Manav quickly unbuckled his seatbelt, pushed open the door, and stepped out to hold the passenger door open for her, his eyes never leaving her as she approached.

"Wow... You... You look absolutely stunning. Where on earth did you manage to find a saree at such short notice?"

Sandhya paused just before stepping into the car, a mischievous sparkle in her eyes as she leaned in slightly, her voice playful yet confident.

"I went to Ms. Sharma last evening and borrowed the saree from her."

Manav let out a soft, incredulous laugh, his head tilting back for a moment as he realized the cleverness of her plan.

“You are a genius.”

Sandhya straightened her shoulders, her chin held high as she slipped into the passenger seat, the soft rustle of the saree adding a touch of elegance to the moment.

“I know that. Now, drive please.”

As Manav rounded the front of the car and settled back into the driver’s seat, he cast another sideways glance at Sandhya, his smile refusing to fade. The car pulled away from the staff quarters, the warm, morning air swirling through the open windows as they headed out of the city towards his native place.

Throughout the drive, Manav found himself stealing glances at Sandhya, her carefree laughter and sparkling eyes only adding to the warmth he felt in his heart. She seemed to have a way of lighting up his world, her very presence turning even the simplest moments into cherished memories.

After a while, the narrow, winding roads gave way to the open countryside, the fresh, earthy scent of the fields filling the car as they approached the small, traditional house that had been in Manav’s family for generations.

As Manav parked the car in front of the neatly kept home, he noticed his mother standing on the veranda, her face breaking into a wide, welcoming smile as she caught sight of the young couple.

Sandhya stepped out of the car, her saree catching the gentle breeze as she approached the house. Manav's mother hurried down the steps, her arms outstretched as she embraced Sandhya, her heart swelling with affection for the young woman she hoped would soon be her daughter-in-law.

"Welcome, beta. I've heard so much about you. You are even more beautiful than I imagined."

Sandhya blushed deeply, her eyes shimmering with warmth as she returned the embrace, feeling a deep sense of belonging in the older woman's arms.

After a few moments, Manav's mother gently took Sandhya's hand, slipping a pair of intricately designed, gold bangles onto her wrists, their soft clinking filling the air with a musical note that seemed to echo the unspoken blessings of generations past.

"May you always remain as radiant and strong as this gold, beta."

Sandhya felt her heart swell with gratitude, her fingers instinctively tightening around the precious gift as she whispered a heartfelt thank you, her voice catching slightly in her throat.

The rest of the day passed in a blur of warm conversations, hearty meals, and the soft, comforting sounds of a family coming together. Sandhya quickly grew fond of Manav's mother, the older woman's kindness and nurturing spirit making her feel right at home.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting a warm, orange glow over the countryside, Manav and Sandhya made their way back to the car.

The drive back to the WFS staff quarters was filled with comfortable silence and occasional bursts of laughter, Sandhya resting her head against the window, a soft smile playing on her lips as she reflected on the day's events.

As they neared the quarters, Sandhya turned to Manav, her voice soft but full of genuine appreciation.

"I feel so fortunate to have met your mother today. She is such a wonderful human being."

Manav, his hands steady on the wheel but his heart brimming with warmth, simply smiled in response, his gaze momentarily drifting from the road to the woman beside him.

They reached the staff quarters, and Manav brought the car to a gentle stop, leaning back in his seat as Sandhya unbuckled her seatbelt and turned to face him one last time.

"Thank you for today. It was... perfect."

Manav, his own voice filled with a quiet, unspoken promise, simply nodded.

"Good night, and I'll see you tomorrow."

Sandhya stepped out of the car, the soft rustle of her saree accompanying her every step as she walked towards the entrance of the quarters, turning back only once to catch Manav's gaze one last time before disappearing inside.

As the car slowly pulled away, Manav felt his heart grow a little lighter, the memory of the day etched deeply into his mind, the gentle clinking of those golden bangles still echoing softly in his thoughts.

## 26

The brightly lit, echoing halls of the school auditorium, where the air is alive with the blend of youthful voices and the gentle strumming of guitars. The students are immersed in rehearsals, each note and rhythm shaping the fabric of their shared dream.

Manav stands near the stage, his watchful eyes moving over the group of young performers, his heart swelling with pride as he takes in their youthful energy. His gaze soon settles on a small figure towards the back, a little girl clutching her music sheet tightly, her tiny shoulders visibly tense – it's Kavita.

Despite the soft hum of voices around her, Kavita seems disconnected, her eyes darting nervously, her fingers fidgeting with the corners of the sheet as though trying to anchor herself in the swirling chaos of notes and melodies. Manav, ever the attentive mentor, notices her anxious posture and approaches with a gentle, reassuring smile, kneeling to meet her at eye level.

“Hi, sweetheart. How are you doing today?”

Kavita's head snaps up, her wide, frightened eyes meeting his. She manages a shaky smile, her tiny voice trembling with a mix of fear and respect.

“Sir, I am fine, thank you.”

But Manav isn't convinced. He gently places a reassuring hand on her shoulder, feeling the slight, nervous tremor

beneath his touch. He rises slowly, giving her a gentle nod before stepping back to the front of the stage, signalling the students to resume their practice.

As the rehearsals proceed, the familiar, haunting sound returns – a series of soft, irregular hiccups breaking through the chorus of young voices. It's Kavita again, her small frame now visibly shaking as the fear of being singled out and removed from the group tightens its grip on her. Her cheeks flush with embarrassment, and her eyes well up with tears, the shame of her uncontrollable hiccups overwhelming her.

Manav quickly steps off the stage, moving to where Kavita stands, her head bowed, her small hands gripping the music sheet so tightly that her knuckles have turned white. He gently kneels in front of her, his warm, compassionate eyes searching her tear-streaked face.

“Kavita, you are not able to sing.”

The words, though gently spoken, cut deep, and the tears she had been holding back finally break free, spilling down her flushed cheeks. She lowers her head further, bracing for the rejection she has been dreading. But Manav's smile only widens, his eyes twinkling with a hint of playful mischief.

He leans in a little closer, lowering his voice to a dramatic whisper as though sharing a delightful secret.

“Since you can't sing, you have to do what?”

Kavita, still sniffing, her tear-filled eyes blinking in confusion, manages to stammer out a response, her voice barely a whisper.

“Do what?”

Manav, seizing the moment, pulls a funny face, puffing out his cheeks and mouthing the words with exaggerated movements, his eyes wide and comically intense.

“Lip-Sync!”

For a moment, there is only stunned silence, the other children pausing in their singing to take in the unexpected spectacle. Then, a ripple of laughter spreads through the room, hesitant at first, but quickly building into a joyous wave as the children catch on to their teacher’s playful spirit.

Kavita’s tear-streaked face slowly breaks into a smile, her lips quivering as the weight of her fear dissolves into the warmth of the moment. She sniffles, her tiny fingers brushing away the remnants of her tears as she looks back at Manav, her eyes now shining with relief and a hint of amusement.

“Oh no! Why are you still crying?” Manav smiling at little Kavita.

Kavita blinks, a small, trembling smile breaking through her fear as she looks up at him, her tiny voice catching in her throat as she speaks.

“Because... I thought you will ask me to leave.”

Manav lets out a hearty, genuine laugh, his shoulders shaking with mirth as he reaches out to ruffle her hair affectionately.

“No, no! I will not ask you to leave, as you will do what?”

Kavita, catching his playful tone, her fear now fully replaced by a bubbling, joyous relief, giggles through her remaining tears, the sound small but full of hope.

“Lip-Sync!”

The room erupts in a fresh wave of laughter, the sound echoing off the high ceilings as the young performers, now fully caught up in the light-hearted moment, clap and cheer for their little comrade.

Unable to contain her emotions, Kavita suddenly throws her tiny arms around Manav’s neck, pulling him into a tight, grateful hug, her small frame trembling with the overwhelming relief of being accepted and understood.

Manav, caught off guard for a moment, gently wraps his arms around the little girl, his heart swelling with pride and tenderness. He stands, still holding her small hands, as the room continues to buzz with warmth and encouragement.

As Manav rises to his full height, he looks out over the beaming faces of his young students, his heart filled with the unspoken promise of a brighter, more hopeful tomorrow, where even the smallest voices are never silenced.

In that moment, as the music swells around him, Manav knows he has made a difference, not just as a teacher, but as a protector of fragile dreams.

The gentle hum of excited chatter fills the room as children tune their instruments and tap soft rhythms. Manav stands near the piano, holding a small notebook in hand, his expression calm but focused.

Alright, everyone — settle down for a moment. Manav grabs all attention.

The children quieten, their eager eyes on him.

As you all know, the Music Fest is just around the corner — right after the vacation and when the school reopens. This is your stage. Your time to shine.

He walks slowly across the front, gesturing toward their instruments.

Manav continues addressing the children, “But talent grows with practice. The lessons you’re learning now — they need your attention even during the break.”

Some students nod, others look thoughtfully at their music sheets.

“So, here’s your holiday homework, Practice your songs daily. Not for marks — but for magic.” Manav confirms.

A few children giggle. One of the younger students raises a hand.

“Sir, what if we forget a few notes?”

“Then you hum it out — music lives in you first, not on paper.” Manav smiles at the child.

“Now practice, play, and come back ready to fill this school with music!”

The children erupt in applause as the bell rings. Manav watches them run out, already imagining the melodies that will echo through the hall at the music fest.

The school grounds are buzzing with the cheerful chaos of students eagerly bidding their farewells as the vacation draws near. The warm summer sun filters through the leaves, casting playful shadows on the paths leading to the dormitories. The air is filled with laughter, the excited chatter of friends making plans, and the clinking of bags being dragged across the tiled floors.

In her cozy living quarters, Sandhya is in the midst of packing up her belongings, carefully folding clothes, tucking away cherished memories, and zipping up her travel bags in preparation for her return home to Delhi.

As she tightens the straps on her duffle bag, she pauses for a moment, her gaze settling on the trophies and medals that line her small bookshelf – silent testaments to her unwavering discipline and unbreakable spirit. She gently runs her fingers over the polished metal, feeling the cool weight of each accomplishment, before placing them carefully into a protective pouch.

Outside, the voices of children ring through the corridors, their cheerful calls of “Happy Holidays!” drifting through her open window. The echoes of their farewells tug at her heart, filling her with a mix of nostalgia and excitement.

Sandhya grabs her gym bag, slinging it over her shoulder, and makes her way to the gym for one last workout before the long break. As she steps inside, the familiar smell of rubber mats and polished floors greets her, a comforting

reminder of the countless hours she has spent pushing her limits within these walls.

She is immediately surrounded by a group of students, their faces bright with the thrill of impending freedom. They rush towards her, their hands filled with colourful friendship bands, each one a small token of the bonds they have formed over the months.

“Happy Holidays, Sandhya Ma’am! All the best for your tournament!”

“Yes, Ma’am! You’re going to win for sure!”

They gently tug at her sleeves, tying vibrant bands around her wrists, their young fingers working quickly as they chatter about their holiday plans. The thin, braided threads quickly multiply, their colours bright against her tanned skin, each knot a symbol of trust, strength, and friendship.

Among the crowd, a familiar face steps forward – the young boy Sandhya had once encouraged, the one who had found his courage under her guidance. He approaches her with a shy, respectful smile, a single band clutched tightly in his small hand.

“Ma’am, thank you for teaching me the true meaning of strength and courage. I will never forget your words.”

He gently reaches for her hand, his small fingers trembling slightly as he loops the band around her wrist, tying it with careful, deliberate movements. Sandhya lowers herself to his level, her eyes soft with pride as she watches him tighten the knot, his face glowing with newfound confidence.

“Thank you, champ. You have a strong heart. Never forget that.”

She raises her hand, offering him a high-five, which he meets with a resounding “smack!” that echoes through the gym, drawing smiles from the other students.

As the children slowly drift away, their laughter fading into the hallway, Sandhya stands in the centre of the gym, her wrists now a rainbow of woven threads, each band a silent promise of lasting friendships and shared victories. She raises her hands, looking down at the brightly coloured strands, her heart swelling with gratitude and affection.

She takes a deep breath, the familiar scent of the gym filling her lungs as she slowly turns in a circle, letting her eyes linger on the worn punching bags, the polished wooden floors, and the neatly stacked weights – each a silent witness to her journey of growth and self-discovery.

With a final, lingering look, she allows herself a soft, nostalgic smile, her mind already filled with the echoes of a thousand cheers and the whispered promises of a brighter tomorrow.

As she steps out of the gym, the last of the sunlight paints the corridors in hues of gold, the warm rays dancing across her colourful wrists, reflecting the vibrant spirit of the bonds she now carries with her – not just as a competitor, but as a mentor, a friend, and a true champion.

The principal's office, usually a place of stern discussions and administrative decisions, feels oddly heavy today. The air is tinged with the faint scent of antiseptic, and the blinds are partially drawn, casting long shadows across the polished wooden floor. A gentle breeze sways the white lace curtains, their soft rustle the only sound as Ms. Sharma, the respected yet aging principal, adjusts herself behind the large mahogany desk.

Ms. Sharma, her face slightly pale and her movements sluggish, sits back in her leather chair, a small container of pills within arm's reach.

She reaches for it, her hands trembling slightly, and fumbles with the cap before finally freeing a single white pill. She takes it with a careful sip of water, closing her eyes for a moment as if summoning the strength to carry on.

Seated across from her, Manav and Sandhya share a concerned glance. They are both aware of Ms. Sharma's declining health but have never seen her this visibly frail.

Ms. Sharma swallows the pill, her throat working painfully as she forces a weak but polite smile. She takes a moment to gather her breath, the faint sound of a wall clock ticking away the seconds behind her.

"So, Sandhya, I hear you won't be returning to us after the vacation. Is that true?"

Sandhya shifts uncomfortably in her chair, her shoulders slightly hunched, the weight of her impending departure heavy on her mind. She looks down at her tightly clasped hands before raising her eyes to meet the principal's expectant gaze.

“That’s right, Ma’am. I’ll be focusing on my tournament.”

“I wish you all the best for your upcoming competition. I’m sure you’ll make us proud.”

“Thank you so much, Ma’am.”

Manav, seated beside Sandhya, has been silent, his fingers idly tracing the edge of his chair. He senses the finality in the conversation, the unspoken reality that Sandhya might not return to the place where their connection first blossomed.

Realizing the weight of the moment, Ms. Sharma turns her attention to Manav, her eyes momentarily brightening.

“I’ve seen the preparations for the music fest, Manav. You’ve done a tremendous job so far. I assume only the final touches remain?”

“That’s right, Ma’am. Just a final rehearsal, and we should be ready.”

There is a brief pause, the sound of a sparrow chirping through the open window momentarily cutting through the tension in the room. Ms. Sharma’s eyes drift to the framed photos on her desk – students receiving awards, past school fests, moments frozen in time that remind her of her purpose.

A gentle knock interrupts the moment, and a staff member enters, carefully placing a tea tray on the small side table. The aroma of fresh Darjeeling tea fills the room, momentarily lifting the mood.

Sandhya, sensing Ms. Sharma weakened state, leans forward, her brow furrowing with concern.

“Ma’am, will you be going to the city for a break during the vacation?”

“Oh no, my dear. I can’t. We have a few students in the boarding who won’t be leaving for the holidays. With most of the staff away, I must stay back to ensure they’re well looked after.”

She takes a careful sip, her trembling hands barely managing to keep the cup steady. The two young teachers exchange a glance, their hearts heavy with respect for the aging principal’s unwavering dedication.

“It wouldn’t be right to leave them alone. They need someone here... someone to guide them.”

Sandhya nods in understanding, her eyes misting slightly as she absorbs the weight of the older woman’s words. She straightens in her chair, silently resolving to make the most of her remaining days at the school.

As the conversation winds down, Manav and Sandhya push back their chairs, preparing to leave. They stand; their bodies momentarily stiff from the long conversation. As they turn towards the door, Ms. Sharma attempts to rise from her chair to see them off.

But as she pushes herself up, her legs falter, her body swaying unsteadily. Her eyes glaze over, a look of confusion crossing her face as her knees buckle beneath her.

“Oh...”

Before Manav and Sandhya can react, Ms. Sharma collapses, her frail body crumpling to the floor, her cup shattering as it slips from her grasp. The sharp clatter echoes through the silent office, the sound of porcelain against marble ringing in their ears.

Both teachers rush forward, Sandhya dropping to her knees beside the fallen principal, her hands instinctively reaching for Ms. Sharma’s pulse. Manav scrambles for the office phone, his heart racing as he dials for help, his usually calm demeanor shattered by the sudden turn of events.

The atmosphere in the principal’s office is tense and heavy. The warm, comforting aroma of tea has faded, replaced by the sterile smell of antiseptic. Ms. Sharma lies unconscious on the office floor, her breathing shallow and her face pale.

Manav kneels by her side, his hand gently supporting her head, while Sandhya calls the school nurse, her fingers trembling as she relays the situation. Moments later, the school nurse arrives, quickly assessing the principal’s condition.

“I’ve called the doctor. He’s on his way.” The school nurse confirms.

Sandhya nods, kneeling next to Manav, her hand brushing Ms. Sharma’s forehead gently. They wait anxiously, their

hearts pounding as the nurse continues to monitor the principal.

The door opens, and the doctor, an elderly man with a calm demeanor and a reassuring presence, enters. He carries a small medical bag and immediately kneels beside Ms. Sharma.

“Please step back a little, give me some space.”

Manav and Sandhya move aside, but stay close enough to hear the doctor’s words. The doctor checks Ms. Sharma’s pulse, her pupils, and gently lifts her eyelids. He then takes out a small flashlight, examining her eyes for responsiveness.

“Ms. Sharma, can you hear me? It’s Dr. Dixit. Can you try to open your eyes?”

The principal stirs slightly, a faint groan escaping her lips. Her eyes flutter, and remain unfocused.

“You had a mild seizure. Just relax and breathe slowly.”

The nurse helps to lift Ms. Sharma onto the couch, where she lies with her head slightly elevated. The doctor continues his examination, checking her vital signs and making notes.

Doctor finishes his assessment and gestures for Manav and Sandhya to follow him outside. He stands with a calm but serious expression.

“Ms. Sharma has had a mild stroke. Fortunately, it wasn’t severe, but she must remain on complete bed rest for at least

a couple of weeks. Movement should be limited to essential activities only.”

Manav and Sandhya exchange worried glances, realizing the gravity of the situation.

“Will she need to be hospitalized?”

“No, not at this moment. As long as she’s monitored properly and gets adequate rest, she can recover at home. However, her medication needs to continue without interruption, and someone must be here to assist her at all time.”

The nurse nods, making a list of medications and instructions. Manav steps forward, his tone firm but concerned. Even the nurse would be leaving for the vacation.

“We’ll make sure she has everything she needs. I’ll get the medicines right away.” Manav assured Dr. Dixit.

The doctor takes a prescription pad and scribbles down the necessary medications.

“Here are the prescriptions. She needs these today itself. Also, make sure she has someone by her side at all times. Stress and fatigue could lead to complications.”

“Doctor, what about her diet?” Sandhya asked the doctor.

“Light meals, low on salt and fat. Lots of fluids. It’s important to avoid any triggers that could strain her body.”

“Understood, Doctor. Thank you.” Manav & Sandhya assure the doctor their support.

Ms. Sharma, slowly regains some strength, her voice barely audible. "I'm sorry for the trouble... I didn't expect this."

"Please don't worry, Ma'am. We'll take care of everything. You just focus on getting better." Manav places his hand on the principal's forehead as she lay still on the bed.

The doctor places a gentle hand on Ms. Sharma's hands. "You'll be fine in some time and with some care"

"Ms. Sharma, this was a warning sign. You've been under too much stress. It's time to let others handle things for a while."

The principal nods faintly, her eyes welling up with gratitude as Sandhya places a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"If you notice any changes in her speech, balance, or vision, call me immediately. Otherwise, just ensure she follows these instructions."

"Yes, Doctor. I'll get the medicines right away." Manav assures the doctor.

The doctor pats Manav on the back as he and the nurse prepare to leave. Sandhya stays by Ms. Sharma's side, gently tucking a cushion under her head.

"Remember, emotional support is just as important as physical care. Make sure she feels supported and stress-free." The doctor reiterates before leaving.

"We'll be here for her." Manav confirms as Sandhya stands by him assuring the doctor.

As the doctor leaves, Manav steps out to get the prescribed medicines. Sandhya sits beside Ms. Sharma, gently holding her hand.

“You’ve always been there for us, Ma’am. Now it’s our turn to take care of you.”

“Thank you... both of you.”

The long, echoing corridors of the school stand silent. The warm afternoon light filters through the tall, glass windows, casting a golden glow on the walls adorned with student artwork. The once bustling school premises now feel eerily empty, as most of the staff and students have left for the vacation.

Manav and Sandhya stand just outside the principal's room, their faces marked with concern and uncertainty. The faint, steady hum of the air conditioning is the only sound breaking the silence.

They exchange a worried glance, both struggling to grasp the weight of the responsibility that has suddenly fallen upon them. The absence of other staff means the well-being of their beloved principal now rests squarely on their shoulders.

“What are we supposed to do now? The doctor said she needs constant care.” Manav speaks looking concerned.

“I know... but we can't just leave her like this. We need to figure something out.” Sandhya nods.

Their anxious conversation is interrupted by the soft patter of small footsteps. A group of young boarding school children appears at the end of the corridor, their faces filled with worry. They cling to each other as they walk slowly toward Manav and Sandhya, their eyes wide with fear and uncertainty.

One of the younger boys, Rahul, clutches a small bouquet of wildflowers picked from the school garden. The petals tremble in his tiny hands as he looks up at Sandhya with hopeful eyes.

“Ma’am... is Principal Sharma going to be, okay?”

Sandhya kneels down to meet his eye level, her face softening as she places a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

“Yes, Rahul, she’s a strong woman. She just needs a little rest and care, and she’ll be back on her feet soon. I promise.” Sandhya smiled at the kid.

The children nod, their faces relaxing a bit, but the worry in their eyes remains. Sandhya straightens up, taking a deep breath as she looks at Manav, silently asking for his support. He gives a small nod, silently agreeing to keep the children’s spirits high.

“Come on, let’s go see her. She’ll be so happy to know you all care about her.”

The children, led by Sandhya, tiptoe into Ms. Sharma’s room. The curtains are drawn, and the soft, rhythmic beeping of a portable heart monitor fills the otherwise quiet space.

Ms. Sharma lies on the hospital-style bed, her face pale but peaceful. An oxygen mask covers her mouth and nose, her chest rising and falling slowly beneath the thin, white sheet. Her hair is neatly tied back, and her hands rest gently on the bed.

The children, unsure of what to do, stand by her bedside, shifting nervously. Sandhya steps forward, gently guiding

Rahul to place the bouquet of wildflowers on the small bedside table next to the bottle of IV fluid.

“Go ahead, you can talk to her. She might be asleep, but she can still hear you.”

The children exchange glances before one of the older girls, Priya, steps forward. She clutches the strap of her schoolbag tightly, her eyes shimmering with tears.

“We love you, Ma’am. Please get better soon.”

One by one, the children take turns speaking, their tiny voices filling the room with warmth and love.

“You promised to come see our dance practice, Ma’am. You have to get better, okay?”

As the children finish, Sandhya gently ushers them back, giving Ms. Sharma one last, lingering look before leading the children out. She pauses at the door, her heart heavy as she grasps the gravity of the situation.

As they walk back down the long, echoing hallway, Sandhya catches Manav’s eye. He manages a small, reassuring smile, silently acknowledging the strength they’ve found in each other.

The quiet hallway outside the principal's room is filled with the nervous murmurs of the young boarding school children. Their small, uncertain faces reflect the anxiety of the uncertain situation. Manav and Sandhya stand among them, their expressions marked with concern as they try to navigate the sudden responsibility that has been thrust upon them.

The school, once bustling with life, now feels like a ghost town. The distant sounds of chirping birds and rustling leaves outside are the only reminders that life continues beyond the heavy walls of the building.

Manav shifts his weight uneasily, glancing at Sandhya, who is deep in thought. They both know that someone needs to stay back to care for Ms. Sharma and look after the remaining children, but the weight of that responsibility is daunting.

"Listen, I'll stay back. I'll take care of Ma'am and the kids. Someone has to, and I think I can manage." Manav assured Sandhya.

She looks at him, her brows furrowing slightly. She knows that Manav is right – it's the only logical option. Her train to Delhi leaves in just a couple of hours, and delaying it now would mean missing her connection, possibly even the tournament.

"Are you sure you can handle everything on your own? It's a lot to take on." Sandhya asked Manav.

“I have to try. I can’t just leave them like this.” Manav responded to Sandhya’s concern.

Sandhya takes a deep breath, realizing that Manav has made up his mind. She looks around at the children, some of whom have started to gather around them, their curious eyes searching for reassurance in the faces of their mentors.

The children have now gathered closer, some sitting cross-legged on the cool, polished floor, while others lean against the walls. Their nervous energy fills the air, mixing with the faint antiseptic smell that seeps from Ms. Sharma’s room.

Manav glances at his luggage stacked near the wall, the guitar case leaning against his travel bag catching Sandhya’s eye. She notices the children’s anxious expressions and suddenly gets an idea to lift their spirits before she leaves.

“Hey, Manav, since I can’t be here for the music fest, how about you and the kids play a few of the songs you’ve been rehearsing for me? You know, like a little preview before I leave?”

A small smile breaks across Manav’s face. He appreciates her attempt to lighten the mood and distract the children from the heavy reality they are all facing.

“Why not! That’s a great idea. Alright, everyone, let’s give Sandhya a special performance!” Manav urged the children to gather for a small performance.

The children’s faces light up, their anxiety momentarily forgotten as they scramble to form a small, makeshift choir.

Manav picks up his guitar, the polished wood catching the warm afternoon light, and strums a few gentle chords.

The music echoes softly through the empty hallways as the children join in, their voices rising with newfound confidence. Manav leads them, his guitar providing a warm, steady rhythm.

Sandhya stands off to the side, clapping along with the beat, her head nodding to the familiar tunes. She notices Kavita, the little girl with bright, curious eyes, standing at the edge of the group. Kavita moves her lips silently, her small hands clasped nervously together as she struggles to keep up.

“Hey, why is Kavita just lip-syncing? She’s not singing like the others.” Sandhya asked Manav.

Manav glances at Kavita and then back at Sandhya, a sheepish smile spreading across his face.

“Oh, that’s because Kavita has some trouble managing her breath while singing. She gets these small hiccups, and it throws her off, so I told her it’s okay to just lip-sync for now.”

Sandhya raises an eyebrow, her lips curving into a playful grin. She steps closer to Kavita, gently placing a reassuring hand on the little girl’s shoulder.

“Why don’t you give it a try, Kavita? Don’t worry about the hiccups. Just sing along with us.”

Kavita hesitates, looking up at Manav for reassurance. He gives her a small nod, his fingers still dancing across the guitar strings. She takes a deep breath, her small chest rising with determination, and starts to sing.

After a few verses, the familiar hiccups return, breaking her rhythm. Sandhya notices this and her eyes narrow in thought. A sudden realization crosses her mind.

“Hey, this could be a mild form of myoclonus disorder.” Sandhya spoke looking at Kavita.

Manav stops playing for a moment, his fingers freezing on the strings as he looks up at her, his curiosity piqued.

“What does that mean?” Manav asked Sandhya.

“It’s a quick, involuntary muscle jerk. Hiccups are a type of this reflex – a sudden electrical response from the brain that triggers the muscles of the diaphragm.” She responded to his question.

Manav listens closely, visibly impressed by Sandhya’s medical knowledge.

“It’s usually harmless, and even healthy people can experience it sometimes. It’s just a matter of getting the timing right.” Sandhya explained the issue clearly.

“Wow, you know a lot about this stuff.” Manav smiled at her.

“I’m an athlete, remember? We have to learn about these things. It’s part of my training.” She smile back.

As Sandhya watches Kavita regain her composure and start singing again, a thoughtful expression crosses her face. She feels a sudden surge of hope for the little girl, sensing that this might just be a small hurdle she can overcome with the right guidance.

Manav checks his watch and realizes that time is running out.

“Sandhya, your train leaves in an hour. We need to get you to the station, or you’ll miss it.” Manav said to Sandhya looking at the watch.

He turns to the children, his tone growing more serious.

“Alright, kids, I need you all to stay here and keep an eye on Principal Ma’am until I get back. Be good, okay?”

The children nod in unison, their eyes wide with a newfound sense of responsibility.

The winding road to Dehradun Railway Station snakes through the lush, forested hills, the air crisp and tinged with the fresh scent of pine. The car hums along the narrow road, its engine echoing softly against the towering trees.

Inside, Sandhya sits in the passenger seat, her gaze fixed on the fleeting landscape outside. Her mind seems far away, the blur of passing trees matching the whirl of thoughts within her head.

Manav, gripping the steering wheel, steals a quick glance at her, noticing the pensive crease on her brow.

Unable to contain his curiosity, Manav breaks the silence, his tone light yet probing.

“You seem lost in thought. What’s on your mind?”

Sandhya, still staring out the window, hesitates for a moment before turning her head towards Manav. Her expression is unreadable, a mix of curiosity and distraction.

“Tell me, how long does it take to develop the muscle memory for playing a musical instrument, like a guitar?”

Manav raises an eyebrow, momentarily caught off guard by the unexpected question. He shifts his grip on the wheel, glancing at her sideways, trying to gauge the intent behind her inquiry.

“Hmmm, are you planning to pick up the guitar once you get back to Delhi?”

Sandhya rolls her eyes, a faint smile touching her lips. She turns back to the window, watching the flicker of sunlight breaking through the trees as they speed past.

“Just answer my question.” She asked Manav looking eager for his response.

Manav chuckles, a small, knowing smile spreading across his face. He adjusts his seat slightly, clearly enjoying the small break from the tension that had clouded their morning.

“Alright, alright. It depends on how dedicated you are. If you practice regularly, I’d say it takes about three to four weeks to build basic muscle memory – to get both your hands working together, feeling the strings, forming chords without having to think too much about it.”

Sandhya absorbs his response in silence, her face turning neutral again as her thoughts drift back to whatever had been occupying her mind. She leans her head back against the seat, her eyes distant as the scenery outside continues to rush by.

“Hmm... Okay.”

The conversation fizzles back into the quiet hum of the car’s engine, leaving Manav slightly puzzled. He casts a quick glance at her, wondering what might have sparked her sudden interest in guitars muscle memory.

The road ahead narrows as the car descends the winding path towards the bustling Dehradun Railway Station, the distant sound of train whistles echoing faintly through the thick mountain air.

Manav tries to read Sandhya's expression, but her face remains unreadable, her mind clearly elsewhere, lost in a labyrinth of thoughts that he can only guess at.

The Dehradun Railway Station is alive with the clamor of porters, vendors, and travelers. The iron wheels of the approaching train screech as it pulls into the platform, steam hissing and metal clanking, filling the air with a sense of urgency.

Manav and Sandhya stand amidst the chaos, their figures partially obscured by the passing blur of passengers and luggage carts. Sandhya seems lost in a maze of thoughts, her eyes distant, the noise around them failing to penetrate her inner world.

Manav adjusts his grip on her luggage, eyeing her with mild concern as the train inches closer, its heavy iron bulk rumbling to a gradual halt before them.

“Your train is here.” Manav speaks, looking at the approaching train on the platform next to them.

Sandhya snaps out of her reverie for a moment, her eyes meeting Manav’s before drifting to the massive train engine chugging to a stop just a few feet away. The whistle echoes across the platform, announcing its brief pause before the next leg of its journey.

As they walk toward the door of her reserved compartment, the crowd thickens, a small wave of hurried passengers pressing in around them. Manav prepares to lift her bags into the train, but Sandhya reaches out, gently stopping him.

“Don’t take the bags inside. I need to make a phone call.” She speaks holding Manav’s hand carrying the luggage.

The platform around them bustles with travelers, a sea of shuffling feet and clattering luggage. Sandhya steps away from the crowd, seeking a quieter corner near a rusted metal pillar where the noise of the train is slightly muffled. She pulls out her phone and dials her coach, her fingers trembling slightly as the phone rings.

Sandhya’s Coach is at the gym, a whistle around his neck, leaning against a stack of weights. His phone vibrates in his pocket, and he quickly pulls it out, a hint of surprise lighting up his face when he sees Sandhya’s name.

“Hey, Sandy! What’s up champ? Where are you?”

Sandhya glances back at Manav, who stands awkwardly beside her bags, watching her with a puzzled expression. She takes a deep breath, her resolve firming as she speaks.

“Hi, Coach. I’m at Dehradun station, catching a train back home.”

The Coach leans against a bench, grinning as he responds.

“Good! That means you can start training from tomorrow.”

Sandhya hesitates, her eyes catching Manav’s curious stare again. She looks down at the worn, dusty platform tiles beneath her feet, her pulse quickening as she speaks.

“Coach, I don’t think I can leave Dehradun today.”

The Coach straightens, his tone immediately shifting to one of concern.

“But why not? Is everything okay, Sandy?” the coach asked Sandhya sounding concerned.

The train whistle blows again, louder this time, the metallic screech of doors slamming shut reverberating through the platform. Manav catches Sandhya’s eye, gesturing towards the train as if to remind her that her window to board is quickly closing.

Sandhya clenches her jaw, steeling herself against the pull of the familiar, comforting voice in her ear.

“Sir, I think I have something important to fix here. I can’t leave just yet.” Sandhya explained her concerns to the coach.

The Coach leans forward, a thoughtful crease forming on his brow, sensing the resolve in her voice.

“If you believe it’s worth staying back for, then go for it, Sandy. Just make sure you can fix it.” The coach responded to her.

The train’s wheels begin to creak forward, the platform vibrating softly as the massive engine pulls the long chain of carriages away from the station. Sandhya watches the departing train, her heart pounding in sync with the receding metal clatter.

“I’ll try my level best, Sir.” She assures her coach.

The Coach leans back, a soft smile touching his lips, sensing the depth of his student’s commitment.

“I wish you all the best, Sandy. Take care. Bye-bye.” The coach laughed.

Sandhya pulls the phone away from her ear, her gaze still locked on the now distant train, a smile breaking through her earlier tension.

She tucks her phone back into her pocket and turns back to Manav, who stands dumbfounded beside her bags, the departing train's whistle still ringing in his ears.

"You just missed your train! What happened?" Manav looking puzzled.

Sandhya brushes a loose strand of hair from her face, her eyes glinting with a newfound sense of purpose.

"Don't worry... I just remembered there's some unfinished work back at the school. Let's go." She smiled at him.

Manav stares at her for a moment, caught between disbelief and admiration, before breaking into a relieved smile.

As the last echoes of the departing train fade into the mountain mist, the two turn back toward the parking lot, Sandhya's luggage in Manav's hands once again.

The sun casts long shadows over the chaotic parking lot as Sandhya slings her backpack over her shoulder and strides toward the car. Manav lags a few steps behind, his heart caught in a strange tangle of joy and confusion. He watches her with a mix of disbelief and silent relief, the weight of her decision settling on his shoulders like a warm, unexpected embrace.

For a moment, Manav pauses, the cool mountain air filling his lungs. He raises his hands high above his head, stretching his arms in a sudden burst of uninhibited joy, his face breaking into a broad, almost childish grin.

Sandhya, sensing something, stops mid-step and turns around, catching Manav in his exaggerated, celebratory pose. She arches a brow, her head tilting slightly as she takes in his ridiculous stance.

“Excuse me, what are you doing?”

Manav quickly drops his arms, his grin slipping into a sheepish half-smile as he tries to cover his moment of unguarded delight. He scratches the back of his head, trying to play it cool.

“Oh, nothing... just, you know, flexing my muscles a little. These bags are kind of heavy.”

Sandhya lets out a short, exasperated sigh, her lips twisting into a smirk as she turns back toward the car.

Sandhya, “Silly...”.

The car weaves through the narrow, bustling streets of Dehradun, passing by crowded tea stalls, honking scooters, and the distant echoes of school bells. The city rushes by in a blur of color and noise, but inside the car, an awkward, uncertain silence hangs between Sandhya and Manav.

Sandhya stares out the window, her fingers absently tracing the cool glass as her mind churns with unspoken thoughts. The shifting shadows of passing trees flicker across her face, a fleeting dance of light and shade that mirrors the turmoil in her heart.

Manav grips the steering wheel a bit tighter, his knuckles whitening as he sneaks a sideways glance at Sandhya. His earlier burst of joy has faded into a quiet, cautious optimism, tempered by the nagging uncertainty of her sudden change of heart. He swallows, trying to find the right words, but none come.

He lets out a small, nervous chuckle, more to break the silence than anything else.

“So... you just remembered some unfinished business at the school, huh?”

Sandhya continues to stare out the window, her eyes following the zigzagging power lines as they disappear into the hazy distance. She doesn't respond immediately, her silence stretching uncomfortably.

“Yeah... something like that.” Sandhya response to his question.

Manav clenches his jaw, sensing the emotional wall she has quietly constructed around herself. He shifts gears as the car approaches a narrow bend, his mind racing to make sense of her sudden decision to stay.

A brief, unspoken tension lingers in the air, each of them wrestling with their own unvoiced fears and hopes as the car winds its way back toward the hills, the sun dipping lower behind the tree line, casting long, uncertain shadows across the road ahead.

The late evening sun casts long, golden shadows over the deserted WFS junior school campus. The air is cool and tinged with the earthy scent of freshly mowed grass. Manav parks the car just outside the quiet, empty grounds.

The usually bustling basketball court in front of them now lies silent, a lone basketball resting near the center circle, its orange rubber surface glowing softly in the fading light.

Inside the car, Sandhya sits silently, her eyes staring at the deserted court, her mind still clouded with unspoken worries. She takes a deep, deliberate breath, the kind an athlete might draw before a decisive match, trying to shake off the weight of her thoughts.

Manav, sensing the tension, watches her out of the corner of his eye. He wants to break through the fog that seems to have enveloped her since they left the train station. His gaze shifts to the lonely basketball on the court. An idea strikes him.

Without a word, Manav steps out of the car, the cool breeze ruffling his hair as he crosses the gravel lot toward the court. He picks up the basketball, feeling its familiar, slightly sticky grip against his palm. He spins it on his finger, bouncing it a few times before attempting a quick crossover move, his sneakers squeaking faintly against the smooth concrete.

Turning back to the car, Manav flashes a mischievous grin, his eyes sparkling with a hint of challenge.

“Ek haath ho jaye...”

Sandhya, caught off guard, looks at him, her eyes narrowing as a faint, incredulous smile tugs at her lips.

“Seriously?”

Manav continues to bounce the ball, performing a quick dribble move and spinning the ball around his back with an exaggerated flourish, clearly trying to show off.

Encouraged by his playful challenge, Sandhya finally let’s go of the brooding silence she had wrapped herself in. She pushes open the car door and steps out, striding toward the court with a newfound energy.

She moves onto the court, her stance low, eyes locked on Manav like a predator sizing up her prey. Manav steps forward confidently, dribbling the ball between his legs, taunting her with each bounce. He makes a feint to the right, then a quick crossover to the left, slipping past her with a wide grin.

“Gotcha!”

Sandhya narrows her eyes, a determined smile breaking across her face as she circles him, already plotting her next move. She fakes a step back, then lunges forward, trying to snatch the ball, but Manav spins away, keeping control.

“Too slow, champ!”

Sandhya rolls her eyes, her competitive spirit fully ignited now. She steps back, adjusting her posture, her eyes sharpening as she fixes him with a knowing, slightly wicked smile.

“Let’s see how you score now.”

She steps closer, her eyes locking onto his with a spark of unspoken dare. Manav feels his confidence waver slightly, but he shakes it off, bouncing the ball a few more times as he prepares for a direct drive to the basket.

Just as Manav takes his first step toward her, Sandhya surprises him with a quick, fluid motion – she steps into his path, her body blocking his momentum, and in a flash, she reaches out, her fingers brushing against the ball.

Sandhya smiles, her eyes glinting with a teasing, almost flirtatious fire, then throws in a perfectly timed wink that hits Manav like a lightning bolt. He freezes, momentarily stunned by her sudden shift in energy.

“W-What...”

Before he can fully register what’s happening, Sandhya snatches the ball cleanly from his grip, pivots smoothly, and dashes toward the opposite end of the court. Manav stumbles, his sneakers scraping against the concrete as he tries to regain his balance and give chase.

But it’s too late. Sandhya leaps gracefully, her ponytail whipping through the air as she releases the ball with a perfect wrist flick. The ball arcs smoothly through the air and drops cleanly through the rusted metal hoop with a satisfying swish.

Sandhya turns back to face him, her chest rising and falling with the adrenaline of the moment, her grin wide and triumphant.

“What were you saying about scoring?”

Manav, still standing at mid-court, watches her with wide eyes, his heart thumping in his chest. He breaks into a wide, genuine smile, throwing his head back with a laugh as he jogs back to her, shaking his head in disbelief.

“Alright, alright... you win, champ.” Manav smiles at Sandhya.

The echoes of their laughter mix with the gentle rustle of the evening breeze as the sun dips below the tree line, casting the court in a warm, golden glow, their shadows long and intertwined against the worn concrete.

The school canteen is quiet, the rows of empty chairs and long, polished tables reflecting the sterile glow of fluorescent lights. The faint clatter of cutlery and distant, muffled voices echo from the kitchen as the staff prepares the evening meal. Manav and Sandhya sit across from each other at a corner table, the only occupants in the otherwise empty hall.

Manav shifts uncomfortably in his seat, his eyes flicking between Sandhya and the vacant tables around them. He leans forward, his elbows on the table, fingers nervously tapping the metal surface.

“What’s going on, Sandhya? You’ve been distant all day. Would you please just tell me what’s on your mind?”

Sandhya looks at Manav, her face softening for a moment as if deciding whether to let him in on her thoughts. She reaches into her backpack, pulls out her laptop, and quickly types something. The screen glows with medical journals and diagrams as she tilts it toward Manav.

“Alright, I’ll show you.” Sandhya turns the laptop screen towards Manav.

The screen displays articles and studies on Myoclonic Seizures – scattered neuron diagrams, brain wave patterns, and clinical notes.

Manav raises his eyebrows slightly, his fingers unconsciously tightening around the edge of the table.

“I understand what myoclonic seizures are.” He confirms.

“But do you know why they happen?” Sandhya awaits his response.

Manav leans back a bit, his brow furrowing as he considers her question.

“They’re often linked to neurological issues, sometimes due to birth defects”

“Exactly.” Sandhya responds.

At this moment, the group of children from the boarding section enters the canteen, their cheerful chatter briefly filling the air as they find their places at the far end of the hall. The clinking of plates and the hum of young voices create a soft, comforting background noise.

“But why are you telling me this? What’s the connection?” Manav asked Sandhya with high doubt.

Sandhya turns the laptop slightly, scrolling to a highlighted section of a paper from the American Journal of Neuropsychiatry. She points to a paragraph with conviction.

“Because I think this is what’s happening to Kavita. She struggles with singing because of myoclonic disruptions. But in her case, it’s not genetic.”

Manav looks at Sandhya, his expression shifting from curiosity to cautious understanding.

“I’ve watched her closely. Her muscle disruptions only happen when she’s under stress – like when she’s about to perform or sing in front of others.” Sandhya speaks eagerly to convince Manav on what she had in her mind all day.

Manav sits up straighter, his eyes locking onto Sandhya as he begins to piece together her line of thought.

“Look at this.” She clicks to another section.

“This paper suggests that yoga and breathing exercises can significantly reduce myoclonic seizures by improving brain function and activating the vagus nerve.”

“You really believe this could work for her?”

“I know it will. I had a similar issue as a kid. Practicing yoga and breathing exercises cured me a hundred percent over time. It worked. As I grew older, my muscle functions improved, and the problem just... disappeared.”

She pauses, her eyes glancing toward the group of laughing children a few tables away. Her face brightens, a faint, hopeful smile breaking through her otherwise intense focus.

“I truly believe I can help Kavita. I can help her make her dream come true.”

Without thinking, she reaches across the table, her hand lightly touching Manav's. Her fingers are warm and slightly trembling, her eyes full of conviction and hope.

Manav looks down at her hand, a slight warmth creeping into his chest. He slowly places his other hand over hers, completing the bond.

“I trust you.” Manav smiles at Sandhya.

They share a long, meaningful look, the unspoken understanding solidifying their connection. The voices of the

children around them grow softer, the world seeming to shrink down to just the two of them for a moment.

The room is dimly lit, the steady hum of medical equipment and the soft beeping of a heart monitor filling the silence. Ms. Sharma lies in the bed, her frail frame partially obscured by the thin, white sheets. An oxygen mask rests gently over her face, its rhythmic puffing a reminder of her vulnerability.

Manav and Sandhya stand at the foot of the bed, their expressions a mixture of relief and quiet concern. Ms. Sharma slowly blinks, her eyes adjusting to the soft glow of the overhead light. Her gaze shifts, settling on Sandhya first, then drifting to Manav. She musters what little strength she has, her trembling hand barely moving on the bedsheet.

Noticing the faint gesture, Sandhya steps closer, gently taking Ms. Sharma's hand in hers. She leans in, her face soft and encouraging.

“Thank you...”

Sandhya's lips curl into a gentle, reassuring smile. She squeezes Ms. Sharma's hand lightly, her eyes shimmering with empathy. She then turns to Manav, who meets her gaze with a similar warmth, their silent exchange a shared acknowledgment of the small victory in Ms. Sharma's recovery.

Sandhya and Manav walk side by side down the quiet, echoing hallway, the cool night air drifting in from an open window. Their footsteps are soft against the polished floor, the sound a comforting, familiar rhythm.

Manav glances sideways at Sandhya, his face softened with appreciation.

“Thanks for staying back... for some more time.”

Sandhya smirks, playfully tilting her head as she replies.

“Well, I felt you might need some help with your homework.”

Manav chuckles, his laughter echoing softly against the high ceilings.

“You mean my holiday homework?” Manav smiled.

They exchange a warm, knowing smile as they reach the door to the children dormitory. Sandhya pauses, her hand resting on the door handle, her eyes meeting Manav's for a lingering moment.

As she pushes open the door, the room fills with the quiet rustle of blankets and the soft, excited whispers of children. Dozens of small, curious faces peek out from beneath their covers, eyes sparkling with anticipation.

For a moment, the room is perfectly still, as if the children are holding their collective breath. Then, as one, they sit up, their faces breaking into wide, delighted grins.

“Didi!”

The room bursts into life, the children scrambling out of their bunks, rushing to Sandhya with open arms and eager chatter. She is quickly surrounded, her presence a comforting, magnetic force. She kneels, pulling the nearest child into a gentle hug, her face glowing with affection.

Manav stands just inside the doorway, his heart warmed by the scene before him. He leans against the doorframe, arms crossed, his eyes softening as he watches Sandhya laugh and embrace the children, her spirit seeming to radiate in the dimly lit room.

For a moment, Manav simply watches, a silent observer to this tender scene. He breathes in deeply, his earlier concerns melting away, replaced by a deep, unspoken appreciation for the woman before him.

The laughter of the children blending seamlessly with the distant rustle of leaves outside, the warm glow of the dormitory spilling softly into the cool, moonlit corridor.

The morning sun casts a warm, golden glow over the Basketball Court, where Sandhya leads a group of eager children through their morning workout. The air is crisp, filled with the echo of playful chatter and the rhythmic thump of running feet.

Sandhya stands at the center, her presence commanding yet encouraging. She watches closely as Kavita stretches her small arms above her head, her once timid expression now replaced with a quiet determination. Sandhya gently adjusts Kavita's posture, ensuring her spine remains straight, her lungs fully expanded.

Remember, Kavita, every breath you take is a step closer to finding your true voice. Feel the air fill your lungs, let it power your notes.

Kavita closes her eyes, focusing on her breath as Sandhya had taught her. She inhales deeply, her chest rising with a newfound confidence, and then slowly exhales, releasing the tension that had once choked her singing.

Over the next couple of weeks, Sandhya becomes the heart of these morning sessions. She leads the children through a mix of playful warm-ups and disciplined stretches, guiding Kavita with particular care. She teaches her breathing exercises to strengthen her diaphragm, postures to open her chest, and stretches to relax her throat muscles – all critical for vocal endurance.

Slowly but surely, Kavita begins to change. The hiccups that once shattered her confidence become less frequent, her voice steadier with each session. Her high notes, once shaky and breathless, now ring out clear and true, catching the morning wind as if carried on invisible wings.

Later that day, Sandhya and Manav make their way to the infirmary to check on Ms. Sharma who is now sitting up in bed, her face a shade brighter, her strength slowly returning. She smiles weakly as the pair enter, her eyes filled with quiet gratitude.

“Thank you both... for holding the fort while I was down. I heard the children are in high spirits...” Ms. Sharma speaks softly.

“They are. And Kavita... you should hear her now. She's singing without a hitch.” She responds with a confident smile.

Sandhya meets Manav's eyes, a silent acknowledgment passing between them – a shared pride in their small but meaningful victories.

During that evening's song rehearsal, the entire hall falls silent as Kavita steps onto the small stage. She closes her eyes, takes a deep, calming breath just as Sandhya taught her, and begins to sing. Her voice, once plagued by nervous spasms, now flows effortlessly, the notes rising and falling with a newfound grace.

The other children stop what they are doing, their mouths falling open in awe as Kavita hits a high note without the slightest tremor. The room fills with spontaneous applause,

the echoes bouncing off the walls, amplifying the joy in the space.

In the back of the auditorium, Sandhya stands beside Manav, her eyes brimming with quiet pride. He catches her eye, and with a gentle, admiring smile, he gives a small nod.

Sandhya responds with a similar nod, her heart swelling with the satisfaction of a mentor who has watched a student rise above their struggles.

The sun dips below the tree line, casting long, playful shadows across the Basketball Court, where the sound of laughter and the rhythm of playful claps fill the air. The children, their faces glowing with excitement, huddle in a loose circle around a small pile of handwritten chits scattered in the centre.

Sandhya stands among them, her eyes sparkling as she watches the children pick their chits one by one, each paper containing a dance challenge written in messy, childlike handwriting. The air is filled with a mix of anticipation and nervous giggles as they read their prompts aloud, mimicking clumsy ballet spins, dramatic Bollywood gestures, and even exaggerated moonwalks.

Manav, standing at the edge of the circle, hesitates for a moment before finally reaching down and picking his chit. He unfolds the small, crumpled paper and reads aloud with a half-smile:

“Partner dance – one male, one female.” Manav made a funny face.

The children break into a chorus of "Oooohs," their eyes darting between Manav and Sandhya, some of the older ones exchanging knowing glances.

Before Manav can even think of backing out, Sandhya steps forward, her hands resting confidently on her hips. She arches an eyebrow, her lips curling into a playful grin.

Well, come on then... show us what you've got, Mr. Holiday Homework.

The children burst into delighted laughter, clapping their hands in encouragement. Manav, momentarily taken aback, quickly regains his composure. He reaches out, offering his hand to Sandhya, who takes it without hesitation.

A small Bluetooth speaker crackles to life, one of the older kids hastily connecting their phone. A peppy, upbeat track fills the court, the rhythm bouncing off the high walls and drawing the children even closer, their eyes wide with anticipation.

Manav takes a deep breath, pulling Sandhya gently into the first steps of the dance. Their movements are awkward at first – a few misplaced steps, a near stumble that sends the children into fits of giggles – but slowly, as the music builds, they find their rhythm.

Their feet sync to the beat, their bodies swaying in perfect harmony as Manav twirls Sandhya into a graceful spin, her hair fanning out like a wave, catching the golden light of the setting sun. Their eyes lock as she comes back into his arms, their faces just inches apart, the brief moment of closeness catching them both by surprise.

For a heartbeat, the world around them fades – the giggling children, the rustling leaves, even the soft hum of the distant breeze – all disappearing into the quiet, electric space between their gazes.

Sandhya leans back slightly, one arm still in Manav's hand, her breath a little quicker, her pulse a little louder. Manav holds her steady, his eyes never leaving hers, a gentle, knowing smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

The music shifts to a slower, more romantic tempo, and without a word, they seamlessly fall into a closer, more intimate hold. Their bodies move in perfect sync, every step a silent conversation, every twirl a whispered promise.

As the song reaches its final, lingering note, Manav dips Sandhya low, her back arching gracefully, her eyes still locked onto his, their breaths mingling in the warm, summer air.

The children break into wild applause, their small hands clapping with unrestrained joy, some of them even whistling in exaggerated appreciation.

Manav and Sandhya snap back to reality, both suddenly aware of the small audience around them. They quickly straighten, the moment of unspoken connection hanging in the air between them, unacknowledged but undeniably felt.

As the children rush forward, pulling them into playful group hugs, Sandhya and Manav exchange one last glance. A look full of unspoken connections between the two grows deeper as their eyes speak of a love and respect that blossomed unexpectedly.

Manav and Sandhya stood on the crowded platform, the cool evening air tinged with the metallic scent of train tracks and the distant clatter of wheels on iron. Manav had just helped Sandhya with her luggage, his hand lingering on the handle of her suitcase for a moment longer than necessary, as if letting go of it would somehow speed up their impending separation.

They walked slowly toward the coach entrance, the surrounding bustle of porters and chattering passengers fading into the background. Sandhya paused at the door of the train, turning to face Manav, her eyes reflecting a mix of excitement and the weight of parting.

“Well,” she said softly, her lips curling into a small, uncertain smile, “I guess this is it.”

Manav tried to keep his own smile steady, his hand instinctively finding hers. “Yeah... Delhi is waiting for you,” he said, his voice carrying a warmth that masked the tightness in his throat.

As Sandhya stepped up into the coach, Manav followed her, helping her navigate the narrow aisle to her seat by the window. She set her backpack down, adjusting her scarf as she settled in.

“Take care,” he said, his eyes locking with hers. “And... don't forget to call me when you reach.”

Sandhya chuckled lightly, her fingers gently tightening around his. "You know I will. And you, take care."

Manav exhaled a soft laugh, his thumb instinctively brushing over her knuckles. "Not possible. You're kind of unforgettable."

Their fingers remained intertwined, the train's engine humming to life beneath them, a low, steady rumble that seemed to echo the ache in their hearts.

Manav leaned in close to the window, his eyes reflecting the soft glow of the platform lights as the train slowly began to pull away. He managed a shaky smile, trying to keep the mood light despite the weight in his chest.

"It's just five hours from Dehradun to Delhi," he said, his voice tinged with a playful melancholy. "But right now, it feels like Delhi is on the other side of the world. I feel like I'm going to miss you forever."

Sandhya leaned out of the window, her hair catching in the cool night breeze, her eyes sparkling despite the tear threatening to escape. She tilted her head, giving him a teasing smile.

The sharp, metallic screech of the wheels grinding against the track signalled the train's slow, reluctant departure. Sandhya's grip tightened as the carriage jolted forward, their hands stretching across the widening gap between platform and window, fingers slipping apart inch by inch.

“Manav,” Sandhya called out, her voice slightly strained, a flicker of worry crossing her eyes. “Promise me you won’t forget this summer.”

Manav matched her stride as the train began to pick up speed, his steps quickening to keep pace. “I won’t. Not a single moment,” he said, his eyes never leaving hers.

Their fingers finally slipped apart as the train gained momentum, leaving Manav standing at the edge of the platform, his arm still outstretched, his heart pounding in the hollow of his chest.

Sandhya leaned out of the window, her hair catching the wind, her eyes fixed on his rapidly shrinking figure. She waved, her arm moving in slow, deliberate arcs, as if each wave were a silent promise.

Manav continued waving until the train was nothing more than a speck of light against the darkening horizon. He stood there, hands in his pockets, a wistful smile on his face as the final echoes of the train’s whistle drifted into the dusk.

Inside her compartment, Sandhya leaned back against her seat, her eyes shining with the mixture of excitement and longing. She took a deep breath, feeling the rush of a new beginning yet carrying the weight of a bittersweet goodbye.

As the rhythmic clatter of wheels against the track filled the silence, Sandhya rested her head against the cold glass, her fingers tracing small circles on the foggy window. She whispered softly to herself, "I will come back."

The train sped into the distance, its whistle a long, fading note in the cool, dusky sky, carrying with it the promise of reunion and the warmth of a summer well-spent.

Manav was driving back to WFS, his thoughts wandering back to the platform he had just left behind. The road stretched out before him, winding through the familiar, mist-covered hills and dense pine forests. The early morning light filtered through the trees, casting fleeting shadows on the road, reminding him of the many moments he had shared with Sandhya in these very landscapes.

As he navigated the curves, he passed the small roadside tea stall where they had once stopped during a surprise rain shower. He remembered how Sandhya had insisted on getting drenched, her laughter echoing through the mist as they huddled under the flimsy tin roof, sharing a steaming cup of tea.

Further down, he crossed the clearing by the riverbank where they had once walked, their shoes sinking into the soft, wet earth as they talked about dreams, fears, and the fragile nature of life. He smiled at the memory of Sandhya's delighted gasp when she had spotted a pair of wild deer grazing nearby, her eyes sparkling with the thrill of the unexpected.

He reached the sharp bend overlooking the valley, the spot where he had once stopped the car just to watch the sunset with her, the two of them leaning against the hood, shoulders touching as the sky exploded into a thousand hues of orange and pink. It was here that Manav had presented her with the memento – a small, intricately carved wooden pendant in the

shape of a mountain peak, symbolizing strength, stability, and the shared peaks and valleys of their journey together.

Meanwhile, Sandhya sat by the window in her train compartment, her head resting lightly against the cold glass, her eyes tracing the ever-changing landscape rushing past. She looked down at her hand, fingers instinctively tightening around the memento that Manav had given her.

A small smile crept onto her lips as she gently turned the pendant, feeling the familiar grooves under her fingertips. She closed her eyes for a moment, remembering the warmth in Manav's eyes as he had placed it around her neck, whispering that it was a reminder of their shared strength, of the unspoken bond they had forged in the quiet corners of their shared world.

She leaned back into her seat, the rhythmic clatter of the train tracks a comforting soundtrack to her thoughts, her fingers still wrapped around the pendant as the train sped towards the sprawling city awaiting her.

Manav steps onto the empty basketball court, the echoes of past laughter and shared glances still clinging to the air. He stands there, the cool evening breeze ruffling his hair, his eyes tracing the lines of the court where Sandhya had danced so gracefully beside him. He can almost feel her presence, her smile lighting up the space around him.

“I can still see you here... every move, every step... it’s all still here,” he texts Sandhya.

Sandhya, on the other hand, finds his message while on a break in the gym dressing room. With no one around to judge her romantic impulse, she leans against the cool metal locker, a soft smile spreading across her face, and texts him back with a warm, heartfelt response.

Manav stands on the empty Basketball Court, a few children notice him and come running onto the court, their footsteps scattering the quiet. They gather around him, their eyes bright, sensing his moment of reflection. One of the younger kids, Riya, tugs at his shirt.

“Manav bhaiya, are you missing Didi?”

Manav snaps back to the present, his eyes softening as he looks down at the curious little faces around him.

“Yes, Riya... a little bit. She left a lot of memories here.”

Another boy, Arjun, bounces a basketball beside him, looking up with a playful grin.

“Manav bhaiya, if you miss her so much, why don't you just bring her back?”

“I wish it was that simple, Arjun. But until then... who wants to play a little game?”

The children's faces light up, and they rush to grab the ball, their laughter ringing out, filling the empty court. Manav, still holding Sandhya's memory close, joins them, letting the warmth of their energy pull him back into the present.

As the sun dips below the horizon, casting long shadows across the court, Manav stands amidst the children's playful shouts, his heart still aching but a little lighter.

“I'll keep your memories alive, Sandhya... until you come back.”

Ms. Sharma, once confined to her bed, now sits in a sturdy chair by the window, her frame thin but her spirit visibly stronger. The soft glow of the setting sun filters through the window, casting warm, hopeful hues across the room.

Manav enters, carrying a small tray with a glass of warm milk and some medicines. He sets the tray down on the small table beside Ms. Sharma and gently adjusts the blanket draped over her lap.

“Your evening medicines, Ma’am.”

Ms. Sharma smiles, her eyes crinkling at the corners. She slowly reaches for the glass, her hands still a bit unsteady. Manav instinctively supports her, his hands gently guiding hers.

“Thank you, Manav. You've been more than just a support... you've become my strength.”

Manav pulls a chair beside her, settling in as they watch from the window, the orange hues of the sky fade into a dusky purple.

“You're the real strength here, ma'am. We just gave you a little push... the rest was all you.”

Ms. Sharma takes a sip of the warm milk, a look of contentment crossing her face. She places the glass back on the tray and looks at Manav, her eyes reflecting a deep, maternal affection.

“You know, Manav... watching you with the children, I see the same light that Sandhya brought to this place. She chose the right person to carry it forward.”

Manav lowers his gaze for a moment, her words touching a tender chord in his heart.

“I just want to do my part, ma'am... and maybe, just maybe, make her proud when she returns.”

Ms. Sharma reaches out, placing her frail but warm hand over Manav's, her touch a silent blessing

“She will be... I have no doubt about that.”

They share a quiet moment, the only sound in the room the gentle rustling of the leaves outside, swaying in the cool evening breeze.

As the shadows lengthen and the day draws to a close, Manav rises, carefully helping Ms. Sharma to her feet. He guides her toward the open window, letting her feel the fresh air on her face.

“See? You're already on your feet... just a few more steps, and you'll be out there with the kids, telling them all your incredible stories again.”

Ms. Sharma chuckles softly, the sound carrying a touch of her old spirit.

“I look forward to that, Manav... I truly do.”

They stand there for a while, side by side, both drawing strength from the comforting, unspoken bond they share – a bond of resilience, gratitude, and silent support.

Manav sits alone at the canteen, his tray of food untouched as his mind drifts back to moments he shared with Sandhya. The faint chatter of children and the clatter of cutlery surround him, but his focus remains distant, his eyes fixed on the rustling leaves outside the canteen window.

Suddenly, his phone buzzes against the table, snapping him out of his thoughts. He reaches into his pocket, a subtle smile breaking through his otherwise pensive face as he sees the caller ID. It's Sandhya. His thumb hovers over the green button for a second, his heart picking up pace, before he finally taps to answer.

"Hello," he says, his voice soft but brimming with anticipation.

On the other end, Sandhya stands amidst the bustling chaos of Janpath Market, the air filled with the shouts of vendors and the clinking of colourful bangles. She leans against a stall filled with vibrant scarves as her mother haggles with a nearby shopkeeper. A gentle breeze catches her hair, and she brushes it back with a graceful flick, her eyes sparkling as she holds the phone close.

"Hey, what are you doing? Don't tell me you're still stuck with your canteen sandwiches."

"Well, someone has to keep this place running while you're off buying the entire market."

“Very funny. Anyway, I thought you might be missing me... and I was right, wasn’t I?”

“Me? Missing you? I’m just enjoying my gourmet canteen cuisine.”

“Oh, really? I should let you get back to your ‘gourmet’ lunch then.” Sandhya jokes.

“Alright, alright... maybe I was just a little distracted, thinking of something.”

“Good. Keep thinking of me, and I promise to bring you a little something from here.”

“Make sure it’s not one of those loud, glittery shirts your mom likes to pick out.”

They share a warm laugh, their voices blending seamlessly despite the distance, the connection between them as vibrant as ever.

The day of the final rehearsal had arrived, and the school grounds buzzed with a fresh energy as the gates reopened after the long vacation. The music fest was just around the corner, and the entire campus felt alive, its corridors echoing with the sounds of last-minute preparations and the hurried footsteps of students finding their places.

Manav stood at the edge of the stage, his arms crossed, a proud yet thoughtful expression on his face as he watched the young performers take their final run-throughs. The lights above cast long shadows, highlighting the nervous but excited faces of the students as they tuned their guitars, adjusted their mics, and ran through their notes one last time.

As the first group took their positions, the soft hum of the microphone filled the air, followed by the first strum of an acoustic guitar. The auditorium gradually filled with the rhythm of their music, each beat resonating with the hard work and dedication they had poured into their craft. Manav couldn't help but smile, his heart swelling with a quiet pride as he watched the children bring their talents to life.

Ms. Sharma, now fully recovered and moving about with the steady confidence of a seasoned educator, took a seat beside the other teachers in the front row. She observed the performance with a discerning yet encouraging eye, occasionally nodding in approval as each act unfolded.

As the final note of the last rehearsal echoed through the hall, the children erupted into cheers, their voices blending into a

joyful chorus of high-fives and laughter. Manav clapped along, stepping forward to join them on stage, his smile growing wider as the young musicians swarmed around him, their faces flushed with excitement and relief.

The principal approached Manav, her eyes shimmering with gratitude. She placed a gentle hand on his shoulder, leaning in to speak over the commotion.

“Well done, Manav. You've really brought out the best in them. The spirit of the school is alive, thanks to your dedication.”

“Thank you, ma’am. It’s the kids who did all the hard work. They deserve every bit of this applause.”

The other teachers joined in, offering their congratulations, their faces glowing with pride for their students. The entire hall felt lighter, as if the very walls were absorbing the positive energy and reflecting it back tenfold.

The school's corridors filled with the cheerful chatter of students heading back to their dorms, their footsteps echoing against the polished floors. The excitement for the upcoming fest was palpable, spreading like a gentle ripple through the entire campus.

The evening of the music fest arrived, and the school grounds transformed into a vibrant hub of energy and anticipation. Strings of lights lined the pathways, their warm glow flickering against the twilight sky, while colourful banners fluttered in the cool evening breeze. Parents, teachers, and students alike filled the open-air auditorium, their eyes bright with expectation.

One by one, the performances took to the stage, each act met with enthusiastic applause and ovations. The parents watched with teary eyes and proud smiles as their children danced, sang, and played their hearts out, their talents shining under the stage lights.

As the evening approached its grand finale, the school principal made her way to the stage, her movements deliberate and graceful, her presence commanding the attention of the entire audience. She adjusted the microphone, pausing for a moment as the crowd fell into a respectful silence.

“Good evening, everyone. What a beautiful sight it is to see this hall filled with so much talent, so much energy, and so many bright, hopeful faces. As educators, it is our privilege

to guide these young minds, to help them grow, and to witness them blossom into remarkable individuals. Our school has always stood for these values – discipline, creativity, and the unwavering spirit to push boundaries.”

She took a deep breath, her eyes scanning the crowd, the parents, the teachers, and finally resting on the rows of proud, smiling students.

“It is our duty, as teachers, to pass on the lessons of the past, to inspire the present, and to shape the future. Let us remember the wise words of those who came before us and strive to live up to the ideals they set. To all the parents here today, thank you for trusting us. And to my dear colleagues, thank you for your relentless efforts in shaping these young lives.”

She paused, her voice steady yet emotional, her eyes shimmering with a quiet pride.

“Now, I ask you all to rise for the national anthem, a moment of unity and pride for all of us.”

The final performance began, the students standing tall and proud as their voices rose in unison, the strains of the anthem echoing through the cool night air, filling the hearts of everyone present with a deep, abiding sense of belonging.

As the last note faded into the evening, the audience erupted into a thunderous ovation, the sound echoing off the walls and up into the star-streaked sky. The music fest had ended, but the warmth and spirit it kindled would linger in the hearts of everyone for a long time to come.

The Interstate Boxing Tournament had kicked off at the Indira Gandhi Arena, the crowd alive with anticipation. Bright lights flooded the ring, casting long, sharp shadows, while the low thud of entrance music pulsed through the concrete walls. Banners flapped high above, and the air was thick with the charged scent of sweat and adrenaline.

Manav, seated in the third row, leaned forward, his eyes locked on the tunnel where the fighters would emerge. He pulled out his phone, his thumb hovering for a moment before tapping sandhya's name. It rang twice before her voice crackled through, breathless and tinged with nerves.

"Where are you?"

"I'm right here... in my seat. Where are you?"

"In the dressing room... final touch-ups."

"Is everything okay? You're not nervous, are you?"

"Yes... everything's fine now. Just waiting for my turn."

"Good... that's the spirit! All the best, Sandhya. I'll be cheering for you from here."

"See you after the match... love you."

"Love you too... go rock that ring, champ."

The line clicked off, and sandhya took a deep breath, letting the sound of his voice linger in her mind. She turned back to the mirror, her eyes catching the fierce determination in her

reflection. She clenched her fists, feeling the weight of her gloves, the crack of leather against her palms.

As she stepped out of the dressing room, her coach gave her a reassuring nod, as they walked toward the entrance tunnel. The roar of the crowd grew louder, the thundering bass of her entrance music vibrating through the floor, matching the steady thump of her heartbeat.

Outside, Manav leaned forward in his seat, eyes locked on the tunnel, his heart racing as he waited for that first glimpse of her, his champion.

Sandhya steps onto the polished floor of the ring, her boots making a solid, deliberate sound against the canvas. She pauses, stretching and flexing her shoulders, rolling her neck to release the tension coiled within her muscles. She climbs the short, metal stairs, each step a drumbeat to her rising heartbeat, and ducks between the ropes, her eyes locking onto her opponent across the ring.

She paces in her corner, throwing a few sharp, shadow punches, the leather of her gloves snapping through the humid air. Her jaw tightens, her breathing steady as the crowd's roar blurs into a distant, pulsing hum.

The referee steps forward, beckoning both fighters to the centre. Sandhya's opponent is a towering, broad-shouldered figure, her eyes sharp, lips pressed into a thin, unyielding line. They meet, the referee's low voice cutting through the noise as he rattles off the standard rules – no low blows, no hits to the back of the head, protect yourself at all times.

The bell clangs.

The fighters touch gloves – a brief, tense acknowledgment – and retreat to their corners.

## ROUND ONE

Sandhya moves cautiously, her feet shuffling in a calculated dance as she studies her opponent's stance. The first few seconds are a feinting game, a test of range and timing. But her opponent charges first, aggressive and relentless,

throwing a barrage of jabs that force Sandhya onto the defensive.

A sharp right hook whistles past Sandhya's ear, grazing her cheek, and she slips to the side, countering with a tight left jab to her opponent's chin. The punch connects, snapping her opponent's head back, but it only seems to fuel the other fighter's rage.

As the first round unfolded, Manav found himself gripping the edge of his seat, his heart pounding in sync with every thudding blow that sandhya absorbed. His jaw tightened each time her opponent's glove made contact – a brutal left to her ribs, a snapping hook to her jaw. He flinched, his knuckles turning white as he clutched the metal armrests, the cheers and jeers around him fading into a muffled roar.

Sandhya's opponent closes the distance, driving a series of rapid body shots into her ribs, the thud of leather on muscle echoing through the ring. The crowd reacts with sharp gasps and murmurs.

The bell rings, and sandhya retreats to her corner, her chest heaving. She glances up at the scoreboard – her opponent is ahead on points, her aggression earning her the early lead.

## ROUND TWO

The second round opens with even more ferocity. Sandhya steps out, gloves high, but her opponent is already pressing her against the ropes, driving a punishing uppercut into her midsection that steals her breath.

Sandhya grits her teeth, pushing back, her feet moving in a tight circle to escape the corner. She lands a quick one-two combination to her opponent's ribs, but the taller fighter shrugs it off, answering with a brutal left hook that clips Sandhya's jaw.

The bell saves her this time, but the bruises are already blossoming beneath her skin, her arms feeling heavier, her breath coming faster.

#### FINAL ROUND –THE TURN OF THE TIDE

Sandhya slumps onto her stool, sweat dripping down her face as her coach leans in, his voice urgent but calm.

"Listen, don't get dragged into her fight. Play smart. She's leaving her left open every time she steps in. Watch for it. And for God's sake, keep moving."

Sandhya nods, her chest rising and falling in quick, shallow breaths. She closes her eyes for a moment, flashes of her friend's taunt from their first sparring session playing in her mind – the words that always lit a fire in her.

Friend (echoing in her memory, playful but sharp)  
"I'll put you down today, Sandhya. Let's see what you're made of."

She exhales, her jaw tightening. Her eyes snap open, sharp and focused as the bell rings for the final round.

Her opponent lunges in, leading with a heavy right, but sandhya slips to the side, feeling the air slice past her face. She plants her foot, pivoting with a perfect slip, and weaves

to the right, catching a glimpse of the surprise in her opponent's eyes.

## SLOW MOTION

Her opponent's arm hangs in the air, exposed, her balance compromised, and in that split second, Sandhya's mind fires with a single, explosive thought – *now*.

She cocks her fist, the muscles in her shoulder and back coiling like a steel spring, and releases a powerful uppercut, the leather cracking against her opponent's jaw. The impact shudders up her arm, a satisfying, bone-jarring connection.

The crowd erupts.

The other fighter's head snaps back, her legs buckling beneath her as her body crumples to the canvas, hitting the floor with a hollow, echoing thud. The referee drops to his knees, counting loudly, his hand chopping the air.

1... 2... 3...

The seconds stretch, each tick amplifying the roar of the crowd.

8... 9... 10.

The referee waves his hands – it's over a TKO.

Sandhya stumbles back, her gloves raised, eyes wide, breath coming in sharp, incredulous gasps. She throws her arms up, her mouth breaking into a victorious shout, her chest heaving as the noise crashes over her.

From the stands, Manav leaps to his feet, his fists pumping the air, his voice lost in the roar of celebration.

The referee grabs Sandhya's wrist, lifting her arm high, and the crowd rises to its feet, a wave of clapping and cheering rolling through the arena.

Sandhya glances into the crowd, her eyes locking with Manav's. He's still standing, his smile wide and unrestrained, his hands clapping loudly above his head.

She kisses her gloves, eyes shining, and waves back at him, her heart swelling with a fierce, burning pride.

It was over – and Sandhya had won the match.

Sandhya and Manav strolled through the bustling heart of Connaught Place, the warm glow of the evening lights casting a gentle hue over the white colonnades. They held their ice creams like delicate treasures, the cool, sweet flavours a quiet counterpoint to the warmth growing between them.

Manav's brows furrowed slightly as he took a slow lick from his cone, his eyes catching Sandhya's sideways glance. He took a breath, his voice tinged with lingering concern.

"I have to admit... there was a moment when I thought you might lose the match."

Sandhya stopped for a moment, turning to face him, her lips curving into a playful smirk. She gave him a gentle nudge with her elbow, the chill of her ice cream cone grazing his arm.

"Do you really think I'd give up that easily? You should know me better by now."

She took a step ahead, her white sneakers scuffing lightly against the polished marble of the walkway. Manav watched her, the corners of his mouth pulling into a relieved smile as she twirled around to face him again, walking backwards as her laughter echoed through the colonnade. He shook his head, unable to keep the grin from spreading across his face as he followed her playful lead.

They stand beneath the towering arch of India Gate, its sandstone structure glowing against the deepening blue of the sky. Manav wraps his arm around Sandhya's shoulder as a gentle breeze tousles their hair. She rests her head against his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart as the lights of passing cars streak by, blending into the warm hum of the city.

They wander through the lush, symmetrical gardens, their hands brushing against each other as they step over the ancient stone pathways. sandhya pauses to run her fingers over the cool, weathered marble of the tomb, turning back to catch Manav snapping a candid photo of her. She playfully sticks her tongue out, and he laughs, the sound echoing through the grand arches around them.

They stand at the base of the towering monument, Manav's arm wrapped protectively around sandhya's waist as they gaze up at the ancient stone pillar. She reaches up, her fingers brushing the stubble along his jaw as she whispers something into his ear, making him chuckle and pull her closer.

Their final stop - add "Sandhya and Manav spent a beautiful stretch of time discovering the many shades of India's vibrant capital. Delhi, with its old-world charm and modern spirit, became the perfect backdrop to their growing bond. From hand-in-hand strolls under the crimson hues of India Gate at dusk, to sipping steaming chai at quiet corners of Lodhi Garden, every moment felt painted with warmth and affection. They wandered through the bustling lanes of Chandni Chowk, laughed over street food adventures, and

paused to soak in the serenity of Humayun's Tomb and the towering grace of Qutub Minar.

In every monument, in every melody drifting through its streets, Delhi whispered stories of love—and Manav and Sandhya were now part of its living narrative. Beneath the city's chaos, they found a rhythm that matched their own, as if the capital itself was conspiring to keep them close. Delhi wasn't just a city to them anymore; it had turned into a canvas of shared memories, quiet glances, and unspoken promises. A place where history echoed romance and every alley invited them to fall a little more in love—with the city, and with each other.

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The doorbell rings at Sandhya's home, its chime echoing softly through the warm, sunlit hall. sandhya's mother wipes her hands on her apron, a hint of curiosity in her eyes as she pulls open the door.

Standing at the threshold is Manav's mother, her face lit with a gentle, welcoming smile, a large pack of sweets clutched in her hands.

"Namaste, didi. I hope I am not intruding."

Sandhya's mother's face lights up with genuine warmth as she steps aside, motioning for her to come in.

"Arey, aap yeh bhi keh rahi hain? Come in, come in. We were just having some afternoon tea."

As she leads her to the living room, Sandhya's father sets down his newspaper, his face breaking into a broad smile upon seeing his future sandhan. He rises to his feet, folding his glasses and placing them neatly on the side table.

"Ah, what a pleasant surprise!"

Manav's mother takes a seat on the plush, cream-colored sofa, and hands over providing the pack of ladoos to Sandhya's mother.

The subtle scent of jasmine incense lingers in the air, blending with the distant clatter of a cooking pot from the kitchen.

The parents settle into a warm, light-hearted conversation, their voices tinged with the soft, reassuring tones of two families becoming one. The discussion naturally shifts to the wedding – dates, venues, guest lists, and the endless stream of rituals and ceremonies that will soon unite their beloved children.

Meanwhile, across the city, sandhya and Manav sit in a cozy corner of Pizza Hut, a half-eaten margherita pizza between them, their fingers lightly brushing over the warm, cheesy slices. Sandhya's phone buzzes against the polished, red tabletop, her mother's name flashing on the screen. She picks up the call, her eyes glancing up at Manav, who leans back in his seat, watching her with an amused smile as he wipes his hands on a napkin.

"Hi, Ma... yes... oh, really? She's there now? Okay, okay... we'll be there soon."

She ends the call, slipping her phone back into her purse as Manav leans in, a curious look on his face.

"What's up? Looks like you just got summoned."

"Hmm... maybe. Your moms at my place, discussing our wedding. Seems like our lives are being planned as we sit here."

Manav chuckles, tossing his crumpled napkin onto the table. He stands, fishing out his wallet and heading to the counter to settle the bill. Sandhya watches him with a fond smile, her heart swelling with the quiet joy of this simple, shared moment.

A short while later, their cab pulls up outside Sandhya's home. As they step out, Manav reaches for sandhya's hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. They share a quiet, knowing glance before stepping inside.

The moment they enter, their parents rise from their seats, faces beaming with warmth.

“Ah, there they are, our soon-to-be bride and groom.”

Sandhya's mother steps forward, gently patting Sandhya's cheek as if she were still a little girl, and Manav's mother gives her son an approving hug.

Manav's mother stands, her eyes gleaming with a mix of pride and affection as she steps forward to hug Manav and Sandhya.

The living room is filled with the gentle hum of laughter and the warm, comforting presence of family, a soft breeze rustling the marigold bouquet on the side table – a quiet, blooming promise of the lives about to intertwine.

A grand arrangement has been made for Manav and Sandhya's wedding reception, the hall shimmering with twinkling lights and the soft glow of a thousand candles. The air is alive with the hum of cheerful conversations, clinking glasses, and the occasional burst of hearty laughter. Friends and family surround the newlyweds, their faces glowing with happiness as they line up to wish the couple a lifetime of love and togetherness.

Manav's friend Raghu, a stocky man with an ever-present grin, steps onto the stage with his wife. They embrace Manav and Sandhya warmly, Raghu's hearty slap on Manav's back nearly knocking him off balance.

"Finally tied the knot, huh? You did it, my brother! Now begins the real match."

His wife gently touches Sandhya's hand, her eyes brimming with affection.

"Wishing you a life filled with endless love and adventure."

The line moves on as Sandhya's coach approaches, a towering figure with a firm handshake and a bouquet of fresh, fragrant lilies in his hand. He leans in, placing the bouquet between the two, his eyes twinkling with a playful challenge.

"New round of the bout for both of you – all the best. Just remember, footwork is key... both in the ring and in life."

Sandhya laughs, lightly nudging Manav with her elbow as their coach steps aside, melting back into the crowd with a proud smile.

As the evening unfolds, guests move to the dance floor, the band playing a slow, romantic tune. The gentle murmur of conversations fills the air, punctuated by the clinking of glasses and bursts of laughter. The celebration is in full swing, the hall buzzing with the energy of loved ones coming together.

Manav, his arm gently wrapped around sandhya's waist, leans in close, his eyes catching the warm glow of the chandeliers above.

"I have a question in my mind."

Sandhya turns to him, her eyes sparkling beneath the delicate veil of her bridal attire, the soft hum of the music adding a perfect backdrop to their private moment.

"Oh? And what might that be?"

"Where should we go for our honeymoon?"

Sandhya tilts her head, her fingers lightly tracing the embroidered patterns on his sleeve as she leans in closer.

"Good question... I've already decided."

Manav's eyes widen slightly, a curious smile tugging at his lips.

"Really? And where would that be?"

"How about... Dehradun?"

Manav's smile grows into a broad grin, his eyes locking with hers in a moment of silent understanding. He gently squeezes her hand, the warmth of their bond radiating through the brief, wordless exchange.

"Then it's settled... we'll start where it all began."

They share a quiet, knowing glance as the band picks up a more romantic tune, the dance floor filling up once more. In that moment, the noise and chaos around them seem to fade into a soft, distant hum – the world reduced to just the two of them, wrapped in the warmth of their shared memories and the promise of a beautiful, shared future.

Manav and Sandhya arrive at the bustling New Delhi Railway station, their footsteps echoing against the marble floors as they rush through the sea of travellers. The station is alive with the clattering of luggage wheels, the distant chug of engines, and the sharp whistle of guards signalling departures. They weave through the crowd, dodging luggage carts and hurrying passengers, their hands tightly clasped as they glance nervously at the overhead clock.

The final boarding call echoes through the station, a loud whistle piercing the air as the train to Dehradun hisses and groans into life.

“Hurry, Manav! Or we’ll be waving at this train from the platform.”

“Relax, we’ll make it. We always do.”

They reach their coach just in time, clambering aboard as the train lurches forward with a metallic groan. They pause for a moment, catching their breath, sandhya clutching her handbag tightly as Manav steadies himself against the doorframe, a wide grin spreading across his face.

Making their way down the narrow corridor, they reach their designated berth and pause, eyes widening in surprise. There, settled comfortably with their luggage neatly tucked under the seats, are the elderly couple they had met on their earlier journey – the same gentle souls who had shared stories and laughter on that first blissful trip from Dehradun.

The elderly gentleman, his neatly combed white hair shining under the dim cabin light, breaks into a broad smile, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

“Well, if it isn’t our favourite young couple! What a pleasant surprise!”

His wife, her silver hair pulled back into a neat bun, claps her hands together, her eyes sparkling with warmth.

“Ah! It’s wonderful to see you both again! The stars must truly favour this meeting.”

Manav and Sandhya exchange a delighted glance, their earlier rush forgotten as they slide into their seats.

“I can’t believe we ran into you both again! Seems like destiny, doesn’t it?”

The train picks up speed, the rhythmic clattering of wheels against the tracks blending with the soft murmur of conversation as the four settle into a lively discussion, the memories of their previous journey adding a familiar warmth to the air.

“Looks like this trip will be just as memorable.”

As the train weaves through the dense, moonlit forests and open plains, their compartment fills with laughter, shared stories, and the clinking of steel tea cups – a small, moving world of warmth and connection, cut off from the hurried chaos they had just left behind at the station.

Manav and Sandhya arrive at the gates of the wisdom foundation school, the place that had been more than just a workplace – it had been the backdrop of their blossoming love, their shared struggles, and countless memories. The school, with its old brick walls and sunlit corridors, stands like a guardian of their past, the place where their bond had grown from tentative smiles to unspoken promises.

As their car rolls to a stop, they step out, the fresh mountain air filling their lungs. The morning sun casts long, warm shadows across the gravel driveway, the distant echoes of children's laughter already reaching their ears.

Approaching the entrance, they notice a small crowd gathered – Ms. Sharma stands at the front, her eyes bright with pride, her posture as dignified as ever despite her recent recovery. The children surround her, their faces lighting up at the sight of their beloved teachers. Some of the smaller ones hop excitedly on their toes, their uniforms neatly pressed, shoes polished to a shine for this special occasion.

As Manav and Sandhya step closer, Ms. Sharma raises a hand, her warm smile spreading wider.

“Welcome back, you two! It’s good to see our pillars of strength return to the place they’ve given so much heart to.”

The children break into cheers, clapping their hands, Kavita holding a small, hand-drawn welcome sign that she had clearly made in class – a few crayon flowers, a big red heart, and one sign that boldly read, “Welcome, Sir and Ma’am!”

Sandhya's eyes well up a little as she takes in the sight, the warmth of their little family wrapping around her like a familiar blanket. Manav, standing beside her, feels his chest swell with pride, his hand instinctively reaching for hers, their fingers intertwining – a silent affirmation of everything they had built together.

One of the younger girls, Kavita, the little singer who had once struggled with stage fright, runs forward and hugs sandhya around the waist.

“Ma'am! You came back! We missed you so much!”

Sandhya kneels down, brushing a lock of Kavita's hair behind her ear.

“We missed you too, Kavita. All of you.”

Manav, watching the scene unfold, can't help but chuckle as the other kids come running, pulling at his sleeves and clinging to his sides.

“Sir! You have to see the new basketball court! We've been practicing every morning, just like you taught us!”

The air is filled with the scent of freshly cut grass, the distant chatter of teachers preparing for the day, and the rustle of pine trees swaying gently in the breeze.

Manav and Sandhya, walk through the school's gate, hand in hand, surrounded by the excited shouts and beaming faces of their students, it feels like a fitting return – a homecoming to a place that had always been as much about love and care as it was about learning and discipline.

