

# kismetical **LOVE**

by  
Roochi Gupta

*Destined to fall in love*



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*This book is a piece of my heart, and it wouldn't have been possible without the people I've met along the way—some who stayed, some who didn't, and some who may never know the impact they had on me.*

*To everyone I've crossed paths with—friends, acquaintances and strangers—thank you. Your words, actions, and even silences have helped shape the emotions, characters, and reflections in this story.*

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*To my readers, thank you for giving your time to this story. If any part of it resonated with you, made you think, or simply made you feel less alone, then this book has done its job.*

*And lastly, to life as it is—imperfect, unpredictable, and yet strangely poetic. This book is a reminder that we all carry stories within us: some we share, some we live, and some we're still trying to understand.*

*With sincere gratitude,*

***Roochi Gupta***

## *Prologue*

*They say you always have a choice—and I believe that's true. But I also believe this: no matter which path you take, some destinations are written in the stars. We may arrive through different roads, carry different scars, love different people, or stumble at different moments...yet we're all walking toward the same horizon.*

*In the end, we all wither. But what matters is **how** we lived—how we loved, laughed, cried, broke down, and got back up. How we made mistakes, and sometimes made them twice. How we kept choosing, even when it was hard. Especially when it was hard.*

*This isn't just a story about decisions—It's about how we carry them. About how each version of us—the brave one, the broken one, the bold one—is still moving forward.*

*So, whichever chapter you're on, whichever page you turn to, remember: you're allowed to wonder what might have been, but never forget the power of what is.*

*Welcome to Riya's story. Maybe it's a little like yours too.*

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# Chapter 1

## First Ripple

“I believe in Singlism. It is of no use and makes no—why should I?” I reply to her while packing my last suitcase.

It has been two months since I began my graduation and moved to the capital city of Rajasthan for my studies. Due to the unavailability of rooms in the campus hostel, I had been staying with my uncle for the time being. This evening, I received a call from my warden, confirming that a room in the hostel is available now. It felt like a part of her money-making strategy: first refusing, then charging high. I was packing my luggage to move into the hostel the next morning when Avni called me, and, as usual, her conversation turned to Rudra.

“There doesn’t always have to be a motive; you can do it just because I’m asking you to do it. He’s very amiable, very intellectual—the kind of person you always believed boys could never be,” Avni says, a note of seriousness in her tone.

“Just because he’s intelligent and pleasant doesn’t mean I should agree to talk to him.”

I reply self-importantly, sitting on the suitcase. “I don’t trust that category of the human race at all,”

“So, you think you’re someone outside the bounds of this civilization? By the way, Miss Riya, not everyone is like your ex... ” She hadn’t even finished her sentence when I snapped.

“Avni, how many times do I have to tell you not to bring him up?” I snapped, my voice trembling with barely contained rage. “That smug, sharp-tongued coward with his fake charm and that revolting grin—why do you keep making me remember him? Every time you mention his name, it’s like ripping open a wound I’ve been trying so hard to let heal.”

I paused, my breath catching in my throat.

“I was humiliated because of him, Avni. I actually believed he was the one, the so-called dream boy. And what did I get in return? Insults. Disrespect. He made me feel like I was nothing. Trash. He took everything good I saw in myself and twisted it.”

My voice cracked as I added, quieter but still burning with emotion, “He was the one who killed the dreamer inside me.”

I stood up and walked towards the exit gate.

Stepping into the terrace garden, I searched for peace among the sleeping flowers and the falling night.



Avni is such a sweetheart. I met her in college, unaware that this one encounter would change my entire life. It was the first day of college (*since it was an all-girls' college, I obviously wasn't expecting any boys*). She has a fair complexion, tiny eyes, a roly-poly figure, and slender lips—she looked remarkable. She was wearing a white, flower-patterned top and sapphire-wash jeans. A very unusual and distinctive city girl. We bumped into each other while trying to find our classrooms.

Later, I came to know that she, too, was from a medical background and had spent a year after her secondary education in Kota, where she found her first *love* through an internet browser.

Meeting her on the very first day, as the very first person in college, was something very wonderful—the result was that we shared the best allyship for the following months. She was a day scholar (*someone who does not live in the hostel*), unlike me.

We used to drive around a lot in her Santro, exploring different streets, markets, cafes, and restaurants. She always loved to bunk classes and head to the canteen. We spent a lot of time together there and in the garden.

While I was buried in my books, she would usually be on the phone with her boyfriend.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you. Why are you still trapped in your wrong perceptions? Why are you still measuring all boys with the same scale? Not all boys in this world are the same, and not everyone is going to wound your soul,” Avni says courageously, yet so delicately.

“They’re all turncoats, faithless Judases,” I reply, my voice sharp with contempt.

"Hey, hey! I get it; they can be a handful of rogues, but it’s really just a matter of who’s the lesser evil. Moreover, darling, if you’re not destined to be with someone, you just won’t be—take my word for it. I’ve evaluated Rudra, and honestly, I found him even better than my *funta* (*boyfriend*). This is your chance to let go of your mistaken beliefs and experience the brighter side of life,” Avni says promptly.

“At least give me some time—let me think about it,” I ask her, mostly as a way to dodge the topic for now. Or so I thought.

“You’ve been dragging this for too long. You need to make a final decision today. And yes, it’ll be final from my side too.”

“You have one hour. I’m going to help Mum in the kitchen, and I’ll call you after dinner. Okay, bye—take care!” she signs off.

The moment Avni ended the call, my cousin sister called me. She had exciting news: her parents had finally agreed to her marriage with her *funta*. She had been in a relationship with him for eight years, and now they were getting married. WOW.

For the first time in the real world, I was witnessing something like this. After seeing so many of my friends go through breakups, crying, sleepless nights, their broken voices on late-night calls with me, their despair, I was suddenly hit with this rare and wonderful version of *love*. It felt unreal.

Darkness had settled. It was 10.45 p.m. on my Fastrack watch, and I was sitting on a chair on the terrace garden, trying to piece together and consolidate the scattered memories of my past life—memories spread across the years like pages torn from different chapters.

Like many other teenage girls, I, too, found great joy in living in my own world of fantasy. Whether lounging on the couch or sipping coffee from my favourite mug, whether relaxing in the loo or taking a shower, whether pretending to understand what was being taught in college—most of the thoughts running through my mind were flights of imagination.

Even while grabbing lunch during a break, my mind wandered off to distant dreams and vivid stories, blurring the lines between reality and fantasy.

With each passing generation, the tastes of young people have changed dramatically. The image of Prince Charming riding a white horse through the clouds has faded. Now, rugged, assertive boys with fierce passion and intense possessiveness are in vogue—the kind who will cross all boundaries to make their girl happy.

I've always believed that God has already created my soulmate; it's just our encounter that's yet to happen.

But perhaps, for my perfect boy, I may not be a perfect girl. With a 5'6" frame, a decent complexion, large expressive eyes, and a somewhat slender figure, I might be only somewhat perfect to him. I may not be his dream girl, but I know I'll complement his dreams.

Then again, do boys really look for a girl who complements their dreams or one whom they can complement?

As shown in so many TV shows and films, there's this idea that someone, somewhere, is made just for you, and everything depends on how and when you meet them. I had woven my *love* story around that belief—a story that was shattered long ago when I was still in school.

Today, the long-asleep dreamer inside me was stirring again. But that dreamer had already led me into heartbreak once, and the scar it left is still fresh.

Even after five years, it's still hard for me to forget what it felt like to see someone for the first time and believe he was the one God had created for me—to *love* him with all my heart, to accept it openly, to go crazy over him. I used to sleep with his notebooks by my side, stare at him throughout the class, only to discover in the end that I was being used for school assignments, for project reports, and to help him score better in tests. How could I have made such a mockery of myself?

Avni thinks I'm still stuck in my old perceptions—that I judge every boy with the same measuring scale. She believes not all boys are the same, that not every one of them is a heartbreaker. But maybe she believes that because she's never had to go through what I did. She hasn't faced the kind of humiliation I did, when my own classmates laughed at my feelings. That kind of pain doesn't go away.

As far as I'm concerned, the concept of a '*dream boy*' or '*true love*' just doesn't exist.

I hadn't even recovered from my own trauma when another blow struck again, at the hands of this betraying gender. Navya was shattered, just like me.

I still remember the day I met Navya. It was in the society lawn, and I later found out she was my senior in school. We quickly became on-road buddies, and a genuine connection began to form between us.

One day, she told me she had fallen in *love* with a boy named Dev, whom she had met on a shady SNS (*social networking site*)—the kind that first creeps into your drawing room, then your mind, and eventually into your veins until you're addicted. I've never liked such platforms that make your personal life so public. While I hold no personal grudge against them, they've always been a strict no for me.

At our school's farewell bash, I visited Navya's place. I expected to see her beaming, but instead, her face was clouded with anger and sadness. When I asked her what was wrong, I dug out the truth: her *funta* had betrayed her. Dev already had a girlfriend.

In the moments that followed, I got to know the entire story.

Navya, an internet enthusiast, had come across Dev through a mutual friend's (*Suresh's*) friend list. They started talking, and soon, Navya was smitten. She found Dev charming and stylish, and Dev responded warmly, as most boys would. They exchanged numbers and spent countless restless nights on the phone.

Navya fell deeply in *love* and confessed her feelings openly (*we girls often don't know how to keep the lid on our hearts*). Dev accepted her proposal, and what followed was a virtual romance, full of affection and exchanged kisses over calls.

Then came the twist.

Suresh, the mutual friend, was also in *love* with Navya. She had rejected his proposal long ago. Out of spite, when Suresh learned Navya had fallen for his friend Dev, he manipulated Dev into playing along. He encouraged Dev to lead her on and then betray her, just so she would experience the same rejection and heartbreak Suresh had gone through.

That day shook me to my core. It was the second time the dreamer within me was stabbed. And this time, the walls around me only grew thicker. I became more certain than ever that this gender carries an inborn ability to betray, to hurt, and to inflict pain. They are, I believed, heartless and Judas-like.

How could Suresh ever claim to *love* Navya when he could hand her over like that to Dev? What kind of *love* was that? And what kind of friendship did Dev have with Suresh that he didn't even hesitate before doing something so dishonourable and cruel?

Did they not have even a shred of feeling for Navya? How could they hurt her like that?

And why was she the one left broken? What was her fault? What was my fault, loving truly and passionately?

That night, I cried myself to sleep, drenching my pillow with tears. It wasn't just Navya's heartbreak; it was my own wound being ripped open all over again.

And today, Avni wants me to change. But why should I? How can I?

*Love* has always been the most complicated subject for almost everyone on this planet. Whether one believes in it or not, falls into it or not, or even tries to understand it or not, *love* exists. There are no lectures on it, no formal curriculum, no degrees awarded, yet it remains one of the most talked about, sought after, and least understood aspects of life.

Still, over time, I have come to understand a few things about *love*. First, *love* does exist. People may not understand it, but they still chase it. Second, *love* is not a predictable process. There are no rules that certain things will happen and others won't. Third, *love* can be both beautiful and brutal. It carries not only feelings of joy and warmth, but also bitterness, betrayal, and despair.



Whenever I revisit my old diary pages, they're filled with rage and heartbreak, full of bitterness toward *love*. My scar speaks through my pen. I may not be a celebrated author, but I write from my soul. My spirit urges me to express what it feels.

In one of my poems, I wrote: *'There is nothing else you can fall in when you fall in love, because it is the deepest ditch you can fall in.'* That line sums up how I feel. *Love*, I've always blamed it—for broken hearts, for shattered homes, for crushed parental dreams, for lost careers, and for the chaos it injects into people's lives.

Everyone may define *love* differently. While we all may begin at the same starting line, the paths we take and the relationships we choose to build differ vastly.

We often assess ourselves based on past experiences, and most people won't even realize how much they've changed over the years. Mistakes are natural; some stem from influence, some from circumstance. But some people never seem to learn. They keep falling into the same traps.

And sometimes, I wonder, why?

Maybe the answer is *love*.

Is *love* an illness, like paralysis, leaving you helpless and dependent? Is it contagious? Or is it a drug—addictive and all-consuming—enslaving its victims to their own desires? *Love* often erodes dignity, tramples self-respect, and leads people to destroy themselves and others.

When I finally called Navya after everything, all she said was:

*“Riya, I love Dev so much. I know he cheated on me. I know he doesn’t love me. I know his girlfriend is far more gorgeous than I am. But I can’t stop thinking about him. I’ve tried so many times to let him go, to not talk to him, to block him from my thoughts—but I fail every single time. He verbally abuses me, yet I still can’t stop missing him. I feel so helpless. I hate myself for this and I feel like I’m dying every day without him. Please save me from all this.”*

That day, I decided, I would never fall in *love* again.

It’s true girls are more sensitive than boys, and they get hurt more easily. Maybe it’s because they are more future-oriented. From the very moment they realize they’re in *love*, they begin weaving their future around that one name, dreaming about marriage, imagining their home, planning daily routines, and even picking names for their future children.

And when all those tender hopes are crushed by the wrong person, they shatter completely.

It's true: the more you expect, the more you set yourself up to be broken.

But was falling in *love* really a bad experience only for me? Or maybe just for Navya?

Avni had been in a happy relationship for two years. My cousin sister had been with her *funta* for eight years, and they were now getting married.

Could *love* really be controlled? Was it just *destiny*, as Avni believed?

Maybe Avni was right about boys after all.

Maybe *kismet* did play a role.

After all, eight years is a long time, and my cousin and her *funta* had survived it together.

*Kismet*, a word so complicated.

When life feels out of control, we cling to the idea of fate. It becomes our hope. Our excuse. Our invisible enemy. Sometimes it feels like it doesn't exist at all, and other times it feels like it's the only thing that explains everything.

Were Avni and my cousin destined for *love*, while Navya and I were destined for heartbreak?

I was still tangled in this web of confusion when my phone rang. It was Avni.

“So Miss, concluded anything yet?” she asked, her voice playful.

Sometimes, I think we are predestined for everything that happens in our lives.

If Navya was meant to be hurt by Dev, maybe nothing in the world could have prevented it.

Maybe it was a blessing in disguise. Maybe it’s not about whether fate can be changed—maybe the real question is: *can we make our own destiny?*

Sometimes in life, we reach points where we question our past decisions. We wonder if choosing a different path might have led us somewhere better. But the truth is, we’ll never know. Would the road we didn’t take have been grander? Or even worse?

What if, really, we could turn back time and change just one decision?

What if just one thing could revolutionize our entire life?

One person. One day. One moment. One right ‘no’ or one wrong ‘yes.’

I had made my choices—chosen my roads. But if you had been in my place, what would you have chosen?

Like so many others, I believed that saying yes and talking to someone was harmless. But that yes changed my life in ways I never imagined.

If you’re with me, keep reading the story of what happened after I said yes to Avni. But if there’s a gut feeling inside you whispering that I should have said no then maybe, in some way, you’re helping me see my life differently—helping me imagine another path, another possibility.

*If you think I should have said NO, go to page 26.  
If you think I should have said YES, keep reading.*

## Chapter 2

### Winds of Maybe

Avni's words were still spinning in my mind.

Maybe—just maybe—I did want to break free from the prison of my own rigid beliefs, the ones that had chained my spirit for so long. My sister had found her *love*. So, why not me?

I wasn't saying I'd fall in *love*, but I could at least talk to a boy.

I wasn't sure what I was doing. But something deep inside me—something invisible and urgent—pushed me to say yes.

A strange buoyancy lifted me. It was like an inner force, gently nudging me toward a place I'd never been, a place I deserved to be, a place that felt destined.

"Okay fine. Tell him he can talk to me," I said quietly, not even sure if I meant the words.

"Good, Riya! I bet you'll never regret this decision. He's such a sweetheart. He'll call you today, and if you don't like him, just stop talking. No pressure," Avni chirped, clearly thrilled.

Then, giggling, she added, “By the way, hooray! You proved Harry wrong.”

“I didn’t get you,” I said, confused.

“Harry said he suspected you might be into girls,” Avni whispered with a mischievous smirk.

Harry, Avni’s *funta*, was someone I had met at our fresher’s party a few days back. We were all dolled up in saris, and Avni, wanting to flaunt her look to Harry, had invited him over.

He and I had a brief, awkward chat. The first thing he asked was, “Do you have a *funta*?”

I replied, “I’m not interested in boys.”

He had just grinned in response.

Avni was madly in *love* with him—so much so that she was willing to elope. But to me, he seemed stoic and, well, kind of a smug jerk. I had even told her I doubted his intentions.

Big mistake.

You never criticize someone’s *love*. Avni had been stunned. How could I judge a person based solely on a five-second look at his face?

I had no answer to that, so I stayed quiet.

But honestly, if *love* at first sight is a thing, why can't doubt at first sight be real too?

"Wow," I said now, sarcastically. "So, if a girl says she's not into boys, it automatically means she's into girls? That's like saying if I don't like something, I must hate it. Can't I just be neutral?"

"What a messed-up logic," I muttered. "No wonder he just grinned at me that day."

"Chillax, baby," Avni laughed. "Now that you've said yes, trust me, you'll soon be fascinated by boys. They're God's finest creation." She cackled like some mischievous villainess, "Hu-ha-ha!"

"Alright, gotta go, Harry's calling," she said quickly.

"Of course! Time for your phone sex," I teased.

"Excuse me! It's not phone sex, it's PS... *Perm Sukh*," she laughed.

I grinned, curiosity getting the better of me. "Okay, too personal maybe, but, what exactly happens in a PS session? I mean, how does one even go about it?"



“Oho! Not into *love*, but full of questions about sex, huh?” Then, with a mock-serious tone, she added, “Well, think of it like a solo movie night —only you’re both the star and the audience. No one else involved. Just self-service.”

She then whispered dramatically, “*Savari apne samaan ki khud zimmedar hai.*” Then burst into giggles. And I... I just blushed. Hard.

"Okay then, I have to go. It's high time," Avni said before hanging up.

I started waiting for Rudra's call.

What would it be like? Had I done the right thing? Would it hurt me again? Would history repeat itself? Wild thoughts darted around my mind like shooting stars.

It was late at night. I was flipping through a glossy magazine, casually glancing at pictures of stylish boys and girls, trying to distract myself, when suddenly, my phone chimed.

I picked it up, trying to sound as positive as I could.

"Hello?" I answered cheerfully.

"Hi, am I speaking to Miss Riya?"

His voice was even more confident and graceful than mine.

"May I know who's calling?" I asked, pretending not to know. (*Girls will always be girls—always well-informed, yet forever pretending otherwise!*)

"I'm Rudra. Avni might have mentioned me?" he said casually.

"Oh yes, she did! How are you, Rudra?" I replied, feeling a little more at ease.

"I'm doing well. And you? You study with Avni, right?" he continued.

"Yes, she seems to have told you at least that much," I teased. "By the way, what else has she told you about me?"

He chuckled. "Ah, not much. She's quite the storyteller about herself, so she didn't leave much room to talk about you."

He said it so sweetly that I couldn't help but smile.

"Rudra, there's a lot of background noise. Is it from your side or just a bad network?" I asked, trying to sound casual.

"I'm on a train right now, heading to a business conference," he replied smoothly, his tone effortlessly composed.

"Oh wow! What business are you into?" I asked, curious.  
(*Girls and questions—inseparable, aren't we?*)

"There isn't just one," he replied, a hint of pride slipping into his voice. "I handle many things at once."

"Many?" I asked, intrigued.

"Yeah. Property, import-export, handicrafts, the stock market, call centre work—basically, a bit of everything," he explained.

I was genuinely surprised.

"You seem to be around my age, probably doing your graduation? How do you manage all this?" I asked, amazed.

"The only thing life taught me was management. I started young. My life wasn't easy; it was full of thorns. Such a life teaches you to juggle things. Sometimes, you throw yourself into work to cover your guilt and sadness. By the way, I'm just nineteen," he added, his voice filled with pride.

"You sound like such an experienced man." I said, then quickly added, "I mean... boy," realizing just how young he actually was.

"But doesn't all work and no play make Rudra a dull boy? And what guilt are you talking about?" I asked, curious.

"It's not about being dull. My work gives me diversity. And besides," he paused, "I used to be a racer. I was part of J.K. Tyres' racing team."

"Wow! Now that's what I call *awesometastic*!" I exclaimed. "How did you even find time for that?"

"I'm not involved anymore," he said with a hint of sadness. "I made a promise to my dad that I would quit racing forever."

"That's strange. Why?" I asked gently.

"I had a terrible accident once. It scared him. So when he asked me to stop, I didn't think twice."

I stayed silent for a second. "That's a complicated situation. I shouldn't comment. But, do you miss it?"

"I force myself not to. Missing it would only bring pain, no solutions," he said softly. "That's why I feel guilty. I couldn't stay loyal to something I loved deeply—racing."

I felt a strange respect for him at that moment.

"I thought you'd be more into social networking or stuff like that," I said lightly, trying to lift the mood. "These days everyone's crazy about it."

He laughed. "Nope, no time for that. But trust me, social media has a big future. In a few years, it'll rule the world."

Little did I know back then how prophetic his words would turn out to be.

And with all the blah-blah and giggles, our conversation danced along the ticking minute hand of the clock, faster than I had expected. Then finally...

"Riya, it was lovely talking to you," Rudra said. "But since I'm on the train, the network's starting to give up. I think I should catch you some other time. Hope that's okay with you?"

"Yes, of course. It was really nice talking to you too. Bye, goodnight!" I said warmly.

"*Salamat Malam*, that's 'good night' in Indonesian. Learned it from one of my clients," he added before hanging up.

We had spoken for a whole hour. I swear, I hadn't even realized how time had flown.

I had uncovered so many facets of him, most of them unusual. He worked through most nights and part of the day. He barely slept. He had worked in a call centre in Delhi as a recruiter, left it, and now was into a whirlwind of things—shares, commodities, real estate, handicrafts, import-export—while pursuing a commerce degree through distance learning.

How he managed it all was beyond me. But one thing was clear: though he carried the typical traits of a boy, he was less of a boy and more of a man. And yet, he was different. Some of his differences were striking. Some, oddly beautiful.

I genuinely enjoyed talking to him. I felt proud of my decision to say yes. But at the same time, I was scared. Terrified. What if I was walking into another heartbreak?

I couldn't sleep that night. I tossed and turned on the couch, replaying the conversation in my head. The way he spoke, so composed, so fluid—it was awesometastic. His voice? Deep and undeniably sexy.

How could someone so young juggle all those massive responsibilities and still manage to be so graceful?

Was it all real? Or was he simply crafting castles in the air? Butterflies weren't just fluttering; they were chasing each other inside my stomach.

But what was going on in his Delhi belly?

One thing I remember vividly: the impact of his words. He didn't make me feel weak, no. But he did stir something inside me, something no one else had in years. Still, I reminded myself: my path is different.

There's no room for reckless feelings in my life anymore. I can't afford to let myself down again. No one—absolutely no one—gets to dominate me or reduce me to a public shame again. If solitude is the price for peace, I'll gladly pay it.

And yet...

As I lay awake through the night, *Salamat Malam* echoed in my ears like a lullaby I refused to forget.

*Go to Page 31*

## Chapter 2

### Fragments of Truth

Avni's words kept knocking at the walls of my mind.

Maybe she was right.

Maybe I did need to break free from the chains of rigid beliefs, those outdated notions that had been gripping my life for too long. And yet, even though something deep inside me tugged at my heart, trying to push a "yes" from my lips, something else clamped me down.

"No. I'm truly not interested," I said, though I wasn't even sure if I believed myself. "Maybe you're right about what you said, but for me... it's just not the right moment."

"Amazing. You silly, *chicken-hearted* fool!" Avni snapped. "Fine, then go marry your regulations and policies, cuddle up with your rights and wrongs. But mark my words Riya, everyone in this world is selfish. It's just a matter of degree. And if you think that saying no will save you from your *kismet*, then you're more foolish than I thought."

I stayed quiet, not because she was right, but because deep down, I feared she might be.



“If you're destined for something, or someone, you'll end up there anyway. Directly or indirectly. It's okay if you don't want to talk to him. But for God's sake, come out of your mental shackles!”

She wasn't done.

“You know what Harry said?” Avni added, her voice tinged with mischief. “He thinks you're probably fascinated by girls.”

Excuse me, what?

Harry, Avni's “*funta*”, was someone I had met at our fresher's party a few days back. We were all dolled up in saris, and Avni, wanting to flaunt her look to Harry, had invited him over.

He and I had a brief, awkward chat. The first thing he asked was, “Do you have a *funta*?”

I replied, “I'm not interested in boys.”

He had just grinned in response.

Avni was madly in *love* with him, so much so that she was willing to elope. But to me, he seemed stoic and, well, kind of a smug jerk. I had even told her I doubted his intentions.

Big mistake.

You never criticize someone's *love*. Avni had been stunned—how could I judge a person based solely on a five-second look at his face?

I had no answer to that, so I stayed quiet.

But honestly, if *love* at first sight is a thing, why can't doubt at first sight be real too?

"Wow," I said now, sarcastically. "So, if a girl says she's not into boys, it automatically means she's into girls? That's like saying if I don't like something, I must hate it. Can't I just be neutral?"

"What a messed-up logic," I muttered. "No wonder he just grinned at me that day."

"Alright, gotta go, Harry's calling," she said quickly.

"Of course! Time for your phone sex," I teased.

"Excuse me! It's not phone sex, it's PS... *Perm Sukh*," she laughed.

I grinned, curiosity getting the better of me. "Okay, too personal maybe, but what exactly happens in a PS session? I mean, how does one even go about it?"

“Oho! Not into *love*, but full of questions about sex, huh?” Then with a mock-serious tone, she added, “Well, think of it like a solo movie night, only you're both the star and the audience. No one else involved. Just self-service.”

She then whispered dramatically, “*Savari apne samaan ki khud zimmedar hai.*” Then burst into giggles. And I... I just blushed. Hard.

"Okay then, I have to go. It's high time," Avni said before hanging up.

Isn't it a bizarre theory, that if a girl is not interested in boys, then she must be interested in girls?

I admired myself in the mirror that night and wondered if Harry was right.

Fuck, goddamn! Shit!!!!

Is there any bodily distinction between girls who are interested in boys and those who are interested in girls? I was getting twitchy.

I picked up a glossy magazine and started flipping through its pages, gazing at snapshots of boys and girls, trying to figure out my feelings.

I observed that every time I look at a sexy striking guy, I feel butterflies fluttering in my stomach. But when I see sexy, raunchy girls, I feel jealous and think that they're the perfect bastardizations of femininity.

Yippy! I was jealous of sexy girls, which meant... I was straight.

I had a fantastic catnap after finally being clear about my sexual preference. And as for that fahoodled asshole Harry...just FUCK OFF!!!

## Chapter 3

### Faded Bonds

After that night, I woke up with a sense of excitement buzzing through my veins. That morning felt brighter than any I'd known before. I was finally heading to my hostel. It felt like stepping into a grand adventure. Yes, leaving behind the comfort zone can feel rough and unfamiliar at first, but eventually, you do taste the fruits of freedom. That morning, I felt as if I'd conquered the impossible. Joy brimmed inside me as I crossed the narrow college road, admiring the trees and buildings that now seemed to welcome me into this new chapter. As I stepped through the half-chained gate of the campus hostel, I smiled. This half-open gate felt like a doorway to complete freedom.

As a small-town girl, I had always dreamt of studying away from home—not just for quality education, but to explore, to grow, and, perhaps, because it had become the trend. All my friends were leaving town. There's a natural urge in every student to move beyond: from village to town, town to city, city to capital, and then, maybe, abroad.

After my 10th, I had hoped to go to Kota for CPMT coaching, but financial constraints didn't allow it.

Those coaching centres drain parents' pockets just to squeeze their children's minds. I've always believed that while good guidance matters, it's the child's effort that truly counts. Anyway, that unfulfilled dream finally took a different shape when I scored well in my Senior Secondary exams and got admission into a government-aided college. And you know what I loved most about government colleges? Low fees and high freedom.

My dad wasn't exactly thrilled, though. He believed I should stay in town for my graduation and think about moving out only for post-graduation. But I wasn't ready to compromise. Tenacity, rudeness, even a dash of defiance helped me win that battle. I didn't want to be that way; I always wanted to be liked, to be seen as kind. But it felt like my fate was scripted to earn me a not-so-pleasant image in everyone's eyes.

Parents often say that *destiny* is already written, that we're all just puppets on this stage called Earth. If that's true, then why blame us when things go wrong? If being stubborn or misunderstood is part of our *destiny*, then maybe their argument is with God, not with us.

And so, I transformed, from a small-town girl into a city lady.

My only mission in college? Study. No distractions. No boys. (*As if I could actually escape them.*)

The early days in the hostel were tough. Lonely. Dreary. That haunted building with its bland food, the unfamiliar faces, the muted corridors—I had to grow resilient fast. I was desperately trying to find a sense of belonging, trying to build a family among strangers.

Thankfully, I missed the classic ‘ragging’ phase. Joining late had its perks. My neighbour filled me in, though. Ragging, apparently, was chaos masquerading as tradition. Freshers were made to wear tri-colour outfits: a salwar of one colour, a kurta of another, and a dupatta of a third. In the hostel, they took it up a notch. A water mug tied to the nada of the lower, dragging across the floor with each step; two tightly oiled ponytails; thick kajal smeared outside the eyes; lipstick drawn well outside the lips. And, of course, stooping at a ninety-degree angle to salute the hostel seniors while the mug tied to the nada make a tap noise. All sorts of ridiculous antics.

Thankfully, a senior dialled ‘100’ and put an end to that circus within a week.

College itself was steady, but the transition from my uncle’s house to the hostel took time. In upcoming days, I met many new people, some become dear friends.

Avni, though, was already my constant. We talked daily. Best friends.

Sometimes I wonder how strange it was, how I was initially rejected from the hostel the very day after joining the university. My dad had made it very clear: I could study in the city only if I secured a room in the campus hostel. A PG was out of the question. So, I applied, and based on my academic record, I got in. But it wasn't smooth.

I was pursuing a professional course, BBA at Rajasthan University. Since it was self-financed, only two out of two hundred hostel seats were reserved for the entire BBA batch. Both went to commerce students. I was from a medical background. The list didn't differentiate by stream, just by percentage. I was third in line.

They say my palm lines show I'll have to struggle a lot in life. I've made peace with that. I like being constantly engaged, and if that means struggling, so be it.

So, I moved to Jaipur and stayed at my uncle's place while waiting for hostel room allocation. Just when things seemed settled, I was informed that my seat had been withdrawn. A new admission had scored 0.4% more than I had. Since the rooms hadn't been officially assigned yet, she got the slot.

Convincing the warden, finding an extra bed, making adjustments—it took two full months. During that time, I stayed with my uncle.



More importantly, in those two months, I grew close to Avni.

Sometimes I wonder: if I had gotten my room right away, I might have ended up with different friends. I might have become part of some other college group. But then, Avni may never have found that place in my life.

In the beginning of my college life, I was a regular in class, never missed a day. I took pride in dressing up, often coordinating my outfits with matching jewellery and makeup. My first year became an outlet for all the repressed desires I'd held back at home—to be expressive, bold, even a bit glamorous. I've always loved lipstick, but I never had the freedom to wear it at home. In college, though, it became a daily ritual. Smearing my favourite shade on my perfectly shaped lips felt empowering.

To sum it up, I was a blend of seriousness and sparkle: a studious, geeky, traditionally glamorous girl. Not conventionally attractive, and yes, I wore round spectacles that only exaggerated that image.

Hostel life, however, was far from lively. I buried myself in books, rarely making time for anything else. But the core truth is, if Avni hadn't come into my life, I would've stayed that same old Riya. Yet she had to come. Maybe it was *Destiny's* way of shaking things up.

Avni was the opposite of me in many ways—carefree, loud, and a classic big-city girl. She, too, came from a medical background and had taken a gap year after school to prepare in Kota—the very place I once dreamed of being. It was there that she also found her first *love*, through a social networking site.

Despite our differences, we shared so much: both from the same academic stream, both one-year droppers, and, interestingly, we were the first people each other met on the very first day of college. That marked the beginning of a close friendship.

We spent countless hours together, chilling in the canteen, wandering the garden. While I buried my nose in books, she was usually glued to her phone, talking to her boyfriend, Harry—a man seven years older than her. She craved *love* deeply and found it in him. Though Harry didn't match her in terms of social status, she loved him with a kind of passion that didn't care for such barriers. I saw in her the heart of a true lover—unshaken by practicalities, undeterred by judgment.

She often asked me about my views on boys and *love*, unaware that I had already tasted what she was just discovering. My first brush with those feelings had come in eighth grade. Many called it infatuation, and maybe they were right. But if that's all it was, why did it hurt so much?

That heartbreak taught me a harsh lesson, I swore never to fall into that emotional trap again.

As the months rolled on, I began missing home. Eventually, I packed up and returned to my hometown for a short visit. Avni was thrilled, but not because I was leaving—she was just excited to meet Harry.

I sat on the bus, gazing out the window as the scenery blurred by. These moments often stirred the musical side of me, and that day, I found myself composing lyrics in my mind:

*It's very hard to wait yaar on the way,  
You cannot stay when you are on the way,  
Your feelings to and fro and sway,  
You wonder why you are still 'so away...'  
You cross streets and roads and lanes,  
The deterrent distance doesn't change, change, change, change,  
change.*

I was lost in that rhythm, absorbed in my own quiet creation when my phone began to buzz. It was Avni.

She was crying. I froze. Fear gripped me. I kept asking her what was wrong, but all I could hear on the other end was her sobbing.

“Hello Avni! What happened?” I asked, my voice trembling with worry.

“He betrayed me, Riya, he lied to me... he cheated on me...” she sobbed uncontrollably.

“Harry?” I asked, although I already knew the answer.

“Yes, Riya. Harry. I loved him, more than my family, more than myself, more than anything in this world. Why would he do this to me, Riya? Why?” Her voice cracked as she poured her heart out.

My own chest tightened, suffocated by the pain in her voice. This wasn’t the first time I had witnessed someone I cared for fall apart like this. After what had happened with Navya, hearing Avni go through something so similar made my heart ache in silence. I couldn’t speak, my throat clogged with the weight of her sorrow.

“Don’t cry, Avni. Please tell me what happened exactly,” I said gently, trying to calm her.

“I checked his phone, Riya,” she whispered, her voice trembling. “And there were chats with another girl—flirty, personal, and way too familiar. It wasn’t just casual talk. The things they said to each other... it felt like a betrayal.”

“And that wasn’t all. There were other conversations too, with guys, where they spoke about girls like they were trophies, about one-night stands, sex. It was disgusting. I felt sick reading it.”

“What?” I gasped, stunned.

“But Avni, how could you not see this coming? You’ve been together for over a year. Didn’t anything seem off before?”

“It was pure chance, Riya. We met at a café. He went to the washroom and, for the first time ever, left his phone behind. Usually, he carries it everywhere, even to the loo. There was no password. I opened it and read everything. What I saw shattered me. He was having explicit, degrading conversations with multiple girls. I can’t handle this, Riya... I’m falling apart.”

She paused, trying to catch her breath before continuing.

“And the worst part? He just walked away. Left me at the café. No call, no message. It’s like... like he’s done with me.”

I could hear her breaking down all over again. Then she added, between sharp breaths, “You know, Riya, this whole time, because we were in a long-distance relationship, we mostly talked over the phone.”

“Whenever he came to meet me, I’d notice how he guarded his phone. I asked him about it many times, but he would just change the topic and start touching me, kissing me, running his fingers through my hair, making me feel wanted. I thought it was *love*. I was blinded by it. I trusted him completely.”

“Avni, please don’t cry. I know it hurts. I know it’s shattering, but you have to let this go. You can’t stay stuck in this moment forever,” I told her, trying to sound stronger than I felt.

“No, Riya, he is my life. I *love* him more than anything else in this world. Then why did he play with my emotions?” Avni cried, her voice trembling with despair. “What was I lacking? I’m young, I’m from a well-off family, and I don’t think I look that bad to be forsaken, then why did he do this to me? You know how much I loved him, Riya. I kept a Karva Chauth fast for him, dreamed of him as my husband, promised myself I’d give up all my riches just to be with him. I never let his age or his lower status come between us, still, he betrayed me. Why, Riya? Why?”

She was on the edge, emotionally unhinged, barely holding on. I had witnessed the depth of her commitment. She had given everything for him—lied to her family, fought with her brother, and ignored every glaring difference between them.

His age, his background, his lack of ambition—none of it mattered to her. She had convinced herself that *love* was enough. That he was enough.

And yet, Harry—a man loved so deeply—couldn’t change even for her. A man like him, drowning in shallow pleasures, probably believed he could float through life on the attention of random women. But what happens when he’s sixty, when his body fails, and no “fun” remains? Who will he turn to when life demands more than flesh?

Avni wasn’t just another girl in his life; she was the heroine of his story. But he discarded her without a second thought, like something replaceable. Watching that unfold changed something in me. Boys started to seem less like romantic leads and more like tricksters—charming on the surface, but full of hidden betrayals. I wasn’t becoming cynical without reason; I was learning from what I saw.

They say we don’t see people as they are, but as we are. But maybe it’s more accurate to say: we see them through what we’ve been through. And that’s why Avni’s pain ran so deep. She had offered Harry the kind of unwavering loyalty she carried in her own heart, and he gave her nothing but betrayal in return.

“Avni, he’s a complete loser. A pathetic, gutless man to hurt someone like you,” I told her firmly. “Don’t destroy yourself over him. He doesn’t deserve your tears.”

“Not my heart... but I’ll surely hurt myself,” she said, her voice trembling “I’m holding a blade...”

“What?! Avni, what the hell are you doing?” I screamed, my heart racing. “If you want to hurt someone, go slice that jerk’s d\*\*\*, not yourself!”

“No...I’m the one to blame. I trusted him. I loved him. I expected him to *love* me back. That was my mistake, not his. He didn’t promise anything. I’m the fool. I deserve the punishment,” she mumbled, spiralling deeper into despair.

It’s often said girls are emotional fools. Maybe it’s true. Maybe we think with our hearts too much.

Just yesterday, I’d read the Archie comics in the Times of India—the classic Betty Cooper versus Veronica Lodge. Betty: kind, emotional, always giving, losing everything. Veronica: sharp, strategic, always getting what she wants. Every girl has both inside her. It just depends on which one she chooses to let lead.

“Seriously? You’re blaming yourself for what he did?” I barked, my anger flaring.



“If you don’t stop this right now, I swear I’ll call your mother, and I mean it.”

“Why would you tell my family?!” she cried, panic threading her voice.

“Why are you acting like this, then? You’re crossing every limit of idiocy!” I snapped back, my voice rising.

“That scumbag shattered your trust, and now you want to reward him by destroying yourself? You treated him like your Mr. Perfect, and this is what you get? Shit. Girls like you let your faith get stomped by some SNS creep. I warned you the day I met him, but you wanted proof. Well, *do you have your proof now?!*”

I was fuming, shouting, furious, desperate—more scared than I’d ever been.

“And now that he’s dumped you like garbage, you want to harm yourself? Is that your idea of justice?”

“Please don’t hate him, Riya,” she whispered, barely audible. “I loved him so much. I still do. I’ll *love* him my entire life. You never forget your first *love*...”

“Avni, sweetie, snap out of this fantasy. He’s not coming back. He didn’t even stop you at the café. He doesn’t deserve your *love*, not even your memory.”

“If you really want revenge, tell me. I swear I’ll drag his sorry ass through hell.”

I took a deep breath, trying to steady my voice, fighting back the lump in my throat. “Listen to me, sweetheart. You’re stronger than this. Please, let that outdated excuse of a man go. For the sake of our friendship, promise me you won’t waste another thought on someone so undeserving. You’re worth so much more than the pain he’s caused.

ALAS... my phone died. The screen went dark. Just like the silence that followed.

I stared at it in disbelief, panic clawing at my insides. What if she did something reckless? What if I wasn’t there to stop her? My hands shook as I fumbled to switch it back on, but it was useless. Dead

Girls often allow themselves to become deeply entangled in emotional bonds, while for many boys, it’s often just a temporary setup. *Love* today seems to follow a predictable pattern: it begins with conversations, blossoms through frequent meetings, and slowly fades under the weight of overcommunication. Both genders contribute to this cycle, but the outcomes often impact girls more profoundly.

It's said often: boys will be boys, and girls will be girls, but there's more nuance behind that cliché. Girls may act coy at first, pretending not to care, masking their emotions, while boys are an unpredictable species. Their interest in continuing with a girl can hinge on the strangest factors. If a girl is too eager, he loses interest. If she seems indifferent, he chases. The irony? Boys often crave the ones who remain distant, while easily overlooking those who wear their hearts on their sleeves.

It's like every Bollywood romance ever made—she loves him with everything she has; he ignores her. The moment she steps back, he has an epiphany that she's his soul mate. What a ridiculous reversal.

Perhaps it's wiser for girls to remain guarded, to hold back the flood of emotions and let a hint of mystery linger. Maybe that's why many girls come off as distant or exude an air of attitude—it's not arrogance, it's armour. A shield against vulnerability.

Seeing Navya's and Avni's heartbreak made *love* feel even more perplexing to me. How do people open their hearts so fully to someone in mere moments—just 90 seconds to 4 minutes—and hand over the reins to their most fragile emotions? How do they entrust the keys to their emotional world before even knowing if the person is even worthy?

The real tragedy is that by the time we realize we've let the wrong person in, it's too late. They already taken hold, and we're left powerless—adrift and hollow—watching shadows of who we used to be flicker behind the cracked glass of shattered expectations.

I've decided that not just anyone will have the privilege of entering the sacred space of my heart. No trespassers—only someone truly deserving, if ever.

Biologically, men and women are differently. Testosterone and estrogenic shape how we *love*, how we attach, how we desire. Sociologically, we are conditioned differently too. Boys are raised to be dominant, detached, and emotionally restrained. Girls are nurtured to be gentle, caring, and open-hearted. It's not just science; it's society. No wonder girls mature faster.

This imbalance is one of the core reasons relationships often crumble. Men seek freedom; while women crave security. When these desires clash, heartbreak is almost inevitable.

I was overwhelmed, flooded with a chaotic emotions. A chemical locha in my brain. My journey back home was nearing its end, but Avni's emotional journey had just begun.

The difference was: mine had a destination; hers didn't. We were both traveling—but for entirely different reasons. And yet, the ache, the restlessness, the emotional toll—it all felt hauntingly similar.

*It's very hard to wait yaar on the way,  
You cannot stay when you are on the way,  
Your feelings to and fro and sway,  
You wonder why you are still 'so away...'  
You cross streets and roads and lanes,  
The deterrent distance doesn't change, change, change, change,  
change.*

Fortunately, Avni started healing after a few weeks. It was a relief to see her getting back on her feet. Rudra and I helped her a lot, but I believe it was Rudra who made the bigger difference.

After my phone died that night, she had called him. Being a mutual friend of hers and Harry's, he handled the situation with incredible maturity. He cracked jokes at his own expense, mocked typical guy behaviour, and did everything he could to lighten her heart.

Back home, I was soaking in the warmth of my family, whom I had missed terribly during my hostel days. The comfort of being surrounded by loved ones felt like a balm for my soul.

I also visited Navya. She seemed to have moved on—chatting with her guy friends on social media, smiling, engaging, and looking happy. She was no longer crying over her ex; instead, she'd scattered pieces of her heart to many others.

The truth is, we all crave someone to talk to, someone who listens, someone who understands. More often than not, that someone belongs to the opposite gender. Girls often find comfort in sharing their problems with boys, perhaps because their problems usually stem from boys in the first place.

Whatever the coping mechanism—new friendships, distractions, or venting—the only important thing is that it brings peace in the present. Letting go of the past is never easy, but it's necessary.

Even though Navya pretended to be okay, I could still see the traces of pain in her eyes. It reminded me, once again, that *girls will always be girls*. They might slam doors, scream that they hate you, pretend to move on, but deep down, they remain soft-hearted souls, easily broken by the ones they *love* the most.

The remnants of *love* still lingered in Navya's gaze. But I was certain... those, too, would fade with time.

## Chapter 4

### The shining STARS

I returned to the hostel and slipped back into the rhythm of the college life. A few weeks in, the unfamiliar faces began turning into friendships, and soon, those bonds grew stronger. I found my tribe—five girls who were as different as chalk and cheese but clicked like a dream. We became inseparable and eventually formed our own little gang. I named us *STARS*—*Shruti*, *Tisha*, *Anu*, *Riya* (*that's me*), and *Sofia*.

Let me give you a glimpse of each one of us:

**Anu** was the sunshine of our group. Soft-spoken, warm-hearted, and always dressed in elegant salwar kameez, she had a sweetness that could calm the most chaotic of days.

**Tisha** (T) was the rebel, a total tomboy with a razor-sharp tongue and a wardrobe filled with Bermudas and oversized shirts. She was our senior in the hostel, and her spirited nature made her the unspoken leader of many of our wild plans.

**Shruti** was the quintessential glam girl. With her glossed lips, perfect eyeliner flicks, and flowing dresses, she moved as if she belonged on a film set. Every corridor turned into a runway when she walked by.

**Sofia** had a bold, unapologetic charm. She carried herself with flair and dressed like she owned the streets of Milan. Heads turned not just for her fashion sense, but also for her undeniable confidence.

And finally me, Riya—the observer, chronicler, and often the glue holding our contrasting personalities together.

Sofia and I shared a room, while the other three bunked together. We were rule-benders, laughter-lovers, and hostel explorers. With Tisha's senior privileges as our shield, we broke curfew often, sneaked in snacks, and turned the city of Jaipur into our weekend playground—exploring forts, food joint, hidden cafés, and sprawling malls.

Despite our different backgrounds, styles, and quirks, we formed an unbreakable bond. A gang of five girls with big dreams, loud laughs, and even louder opinions, we were the STARS in our own right.

We even had a theme song, composed by me to capture our madness. It was a silly, empowering chant we'd burst into while walking down hostel corridors:

*"We are the wild naughty cats—just look at us!  
We say miaow, miaow, miaow!  
We don't need no boys, no stress, no noise!  
Just us, our gang, our voice!"*



It was all in good humour, but somehow, singing it gave us a strange sense of solidarity. We weren't anti-boys; we were just fiercely pro-girl-gang.

During one of our late-night gossip sessions, T shared some rather wild stories about our hostel's so-called '*legacy batch*', the legendary seniors who, according to her, had single-handedly given our hostel its rebellious reputation. They were a bold, unapologetic bunch, known for challenging every rule in the book.

Some of the stories bordered on the outrageous. It was said that a few of them were romantically involved with each other, and their public display of affection often made others uncomfortable. They supposedly went to great lengths to keep their moments private—covering ventilators, tinting windows, and transforming their rooms into secret hideaways. The wilder rumours even mentioned strange discoveries in the overgrown backyard—leftover objects that fuelled endless speculation and whispered laughter.

But what truly startled us were the tales of ragging from those days—brutal, invasive, and far beyond anything we'd experienced. T hinted at certain extreme dynamics in those relationships that crossed into uncomfortable psychological territory, where control and vulnerability were twisted into something almost sinister.

I wasn't sure whether to be shocked or sceptical. My mind felt caught between disbelief and fascination.

That night, as the lights dimmed and the hallway chatter faded, I couldn't help but think: people are complicated. Behind the layers of lipstick, sarcasm, hoodies, and gossip, we all carry stories that even fiction might hesitate to tell.

As I lay in bed reflecting on T's stories, something shifted in me. Until then, I had unconsciously held onto a rather sheltered image of girls—sweet, subtle, always fitting a certain mould. But suddenly, those assumptions began to crumble. The tales of the hostel's wild past opened my eyes to how intricate and layered people could be. Desires, choices, and identities weren't always neatly packaged or easily understood. It made me more observant, more curious, maybe even a little more cautious. Perhaps that's why Harry's smirk the other day had felt laced with hidden meaning. Maybe he knew more than I did about the history buried within the walls of our hostel.

As October came to a close, the real buzz of college life kicked in. One evening, I was out with Shruti in the avenue markets, hunting for a birthday gift for her sister when she stopped abruptly at a bookstore. "*How's your year going to be?*" she read aloud from the cover of a glossy magazine.

Without hesitation, she bought it. I didn't say much, just watched her excitement with quiet amusement.

"I just want to see what the stars have to say about my first year here," she said, her eyes gleaming with anticipation.

Shruti—and girls like her—held a firm belief in *destiny*, in cosmic timing, in the idea that *love* was written in the stars. I, on the other hand, believed that when it came to romance, having the right person mattered more than having the perfect month. Still, I couldn't deny that timing played its own role. There's probably a reason why winter sparks so many *love* stories and summer leaves behind a trail of breakups.

Back in the hostel, the magazine became an event. Shruti read out horoscopes for each of us STARS girls. Everyone huddled together as she called out our birthdays and described what the universe supposedly had in store.

When she got to mine, this is what it said:

*"You're on the verge of a whirlwind of change and fresh beginnings. Your spark and spontaneity might just open unexpected doors, leading you into intriguing encounters and connections that are unlike any you've experienced before."*

*As new people drift into your orbit, don't be surprised if someone, or something, challenges the way you feel, think, or even love. The world's about to feel a little different, and so might you."*

I was a bit puzzled by what I had just heard. That horoscope was supposedly meant for a whole cluster of people—specifically those born between July 3rd and 14th. So, was everyone in that bracket destined to experience the exact same changes?

That's always been my dilemma with horoscopes. How can all Aries men be alike, as Linda Goodman insists? How can every Cancer man or woman share the same fate written in the stars?

Maybe horoscopes only work for those who truly believe in them. After all, your thoughts shape your life. What you believe becomes your reality. If you think horoscopes are nonsense, they'll never hold any power over you. But if you believe in them, they might just charm you into noticing the patterns you wish to see.

Even with those doubts buzzing in my head, I wasn't too concerned with the world outside. I was simply tuning my mind to the frequency of that month—true or false, fake or fated, whatever people wanted to call it. The truth was, I had been affected by it.

November began uneventfully, until the third day, when Sofia came running up to me with her usual urgency. She needed to go to the studio to develop the pictures we'd clicked throughout the previous month. And I had a strange feeling that something was about to shift.

*If you agree with my decision to speak to Rudra, if you believe that sometimes revisiting the past is the only way forward, then keep reading.*

*But if you feel I should've walked away for good, that something more meaningful awaits me elsewhere this year... turn to page 64.*

## Chapter 5

### When Silence Spoke

We had dropped off our photos for development, and the shopkeeper had asked us to collect them the next day. So, we returned to the shop, and on our way back to the hostel, my phone buzzed, it was Rudra calling. He usually called once or twice a week—maybe Avni had told him that I wasn't the kind of person who entertained frequent calls. Our conversations so far had been mostly surface-level.

Feeling cheerful, I handed the album to Sofia.

"Hi Riya, how are you?" Rudra greeted me.

"Hi Rudra, I'm good. Nice to hear from you," I replied, feeling surprisingly at ease.

"Well, nothing much. I just had a talk with Avni and thought I'd give you a call too," he said casually.

As we talked, Sofia nudged me that Anu had called—she wanted both of us to meet her brother. We were just nearing the hostel, and once we arrived, we went straight to see her brother, with Rudra still on hold.

“Hey Riya, Sofia, meet my brother Raj,” Anu said proudly.

“Hello Mr. Raj,” Sofia greeted him with her signature cheeky grin.

I just smiled politely.

He stood about 5'8", with a complexion slightly darker than mine. He wore olive green pants paired with a crisp white shirt. He wasn't extraordinarily built, but the slightly unbuttoned shirt revealing his firm chest and his well-defined biceps under the half sleeves gave him an undeniable charm. His spiked hair, the stubble framing his jawline, and the black sunglasses completed the look. He looked like he had just stepped off the cover of a magazine.

“Anu, I have an important call; I need to go,” I said, trying to keep my voice neutral. She glared at me like I had just committed treason.

“Sorry, Raj. Catch you some other time,” I added quickly with a polite smile, noticing that his eyes were still fixed on me as I made my exit.

Both siblings looked like they wanted to kill me. Before they could act on it, I slipped out of the room.

“Is everything okay? You sound a little off,” Rudra asked, clearly sensing the tension.

“Not exactly. Anu’s brother had come to meet her, and she dragged all of us along to meet him too,” I said, making my way back into the hostel.

“All of you? Like the entire hostel?” he chuckled.

“No, just the STARS,” I smiled, heading towards my room.

Our conversation flowed easily. Over time, Rudra and I had developed a good rapport, sharing bits and pieces of each other’s lives. He knew about the STARS and much more. But that day, he let something slip—something that shook me.

Casually, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, he mentioned that he had always known Harry was a Casanova.

I Froze.

“What? You knew about Harry and still said nothing to Avni?” I asked, trying to hide the sudden wave of anger bubbling up inside me. My hands clenched involuntarily, and I felt my voice trembling despite my effort to stay calm.



“Harry has been my friend for years. I couldn’t ditch him for someone I’d only known a few months. I never meant to harm Avni, she’s a good friend too,” Rudra explained, his voice steady, almost too calm.

Rudra was a mutual friend of both Avni and Harry, but it was clear his loyalty leaned more towards Harry. He had once accompanied Harry to Jaipur to meet Avni, and that’s how he and Avni became friends.

“Rudra, Avni’s hurt because of you,” I said, my voice firm, weighted down by the gravity of what he had just confessed.

He paused, his voice softening. “I don’t know what you think of me, Riya... but I really do see a... friend in you,” he hesitated, letting the words linger.

“Harry is who he is,” Rudra continued, his tone resigned, “He flirts with innocent girls and keeps toxic ones around for fun. He never expected Avni to get so serious. Now that she has, he wants to end it before it turns into something messier. He was never going to commit.”

His words felt like a slow unravelling, each one peeling back layers of pretence I hadn’t even realised I was wearing. With every sentence, the air around us thickened, pressing down on my chest.

“And yes, you’re right. Avni’s pain today... it is because of me. I was the one who gave Harry the idea to leave his phone unlocked on the table when he went to the washroom... so Avni would see his chats and break up with him.”

I stood frozen. Shocked. Speechless.

“Harry never asked me before getting involved with her. But when Avni made me part of it, it got complicated. I didn’t want her to suffer more in the long run. I knew Harry would never marry her. So, I did what I thought was right... in my own way,” he said, almost as if he were justifying it to himself more than to me.

His voice softened. “And Riya...I know what I’m asking is unfair, but please... don’t tell Avni. She might not understand. I’ve tried to be loyal to my friend, and I can’t ask you to betray yours. But trust me, this... what happened to her... it’s a blessing in disguise.”

“Hello? Riya?” Rudra’s voice cut through my haze of disbelief.

“Yes,” I replied automatically.

But while I was merely responded to his “hello,” Rudra took my answer as a promise—not to tell Avni about our conversation.

“Thanks a lot. I should go now. Take care of Avni... and take care of yourself too. Bye,” he said before hanging up.

“Yes, bye,” I whispered to the silence, the line already dead.

I sat still, the phone clutched in my hand, my mind racing. Rudra claimed he did what he did for Avni’s sake to save her from deeper heartbreak, to spare her the inevitable. Their relationship had always been fragile, a house of cards waiting to collapse. And Rudra had simply given it the final push.

But the dilemma was gnawed at me. Should I tell Avni the truth? My best friend, the girl I had shared secrets and laughter with? Or should I protect Rudra, someone I only knew because of her?

If I kept Rudra’s secret, would I be betraying Avni? Or would I be protecting her from unnecessary pain?

The questions swirled in my head like a storm. Avni trusted Rudra deeply; she leaned on him during her worst times. If I told her what I now knew, would it shatter that trust forever? Would she sever ties with him completely?

Could she understand that Rudra never wanted to hurt her—that what he did was, in his own strange and twisted way, an act of care?

Rudra had always been honest with his own friend, Harry. So why was he asking me to hide the truth from mine?

The contradictions unsettled me.

What if I told her and it shattered whatever fragile stability she had just begun to build? What if it unravelled her healing, dragging her back into that pit of sorrow she had barely climbed out of? What if it planted seeds of doubt and confusion just when she was finally beginning to move on?

Yes, Rudra manipulated the situation—but only to help her walk away from a toxic relationship. He had been by her side through the worst of it, helped her pick up the pieces, stayed when others had walked away. In those lonely moments of despair, he was the one who had pulled her back to her feet.

And now that Avni was slowly emerging from the shadows of that heartbreak, what good would it do to reopen those wounds? His intentions weren't malicious. His methods? Questionable, yes. But his heart wasn't in the wrong place.

After a long, restless pause, I made my decision.

I would not tell her.

“Where were you, Riya?” Anu shouted the moment she entered the room. “I called you so many times, but your phone was busy. I finally had to call Sofia just to tell her about my brother’s arrival. And you didn’t even stay for a minute! What was so urgent about the call, huh? If you hadn’t disappeared, you could have joined us for your favourite butterscotch ice cream at MI Road!”

The room buzzed with chatter. Sofia had taken centre stage, dramatically describing Raj to the whole group, her excitement spilling over like it always did.

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## Chapter 5

### The Grand Debut

We had dropped off our photos for development, and the shopkeeper asked us to collect them the next day. When we returned to pick them up, I was clutching the newly developed album as we made our way back to the hostel. Just then, my phone buzzed—it was Anu.

“Hey, my brother’s here from Delhi! Come quickly; I want you and Sofia to meet him!” she said excitedly.

While answering the call, I handed the album to Sofia, and we rushed to the hostel without wasting a second.

“Hey Riya, Sofia, meet my brother, Raj,” Anu beamed.

“Hello, Mr Raj,” said Sofia with a teasing grin, clearly in her element.

I simply offered him a polite smile.

He stood about 5'8", with a complexion slightly darker than mine. He wore olive-green pants paired with a crisp white shirt. He wasn't extraordinarily built, but the slightly unbuttoned shirt revealing his firm chest and his well-defined biceps under the half sleeves gave him an undeniable charm.

His spiked hair, the stubble framing his jawline, and the black sunglasses completed the look. He looked like someone straight off a magazine cover.

Anu started chatting animatedly with him, talking about us and our group. Within minutes, he seemed to know almost everything about us. Honestly, girls are the fastest medium of communication in the world.

Sofia handed over the photo album to Anu, who instantly began flipping through it with interest. After scanning the entire album, she turned to her brother, cocking her head like a child seeking approval.

“Tell brother, how did I look?” she asked sweetly.

Although we were the same age, Anu often seemed younger—possibly because she'd always had a brother who doted on her since they lost their mother when she was just a child.

“As usual, Gecko,” he laughed.

Anu hated lizards, and he never missed a chance to tease her with that nickname. Fuming, she stormed inside the hostel, and Sofia ran after her to console her. Almost theatrically, at that very moment, Shruti got a call, and the warden summoned Tisha. Suddenly, it was just Raj and me in the guest room.

“Anu’s still a little girl at heart,” he said warmly. “I hope you don’t mind looking after her in my absence.”

“Of course not. She’s a sweet soul. And you needn’t worry—she’s surrounded by people who care about her.”

He nodded. “I work in Delhi, I do real estate flipping. Our family’s from a village near Jaipur. I’m actually planning to shift here soon so that Anu doesn’t have to stay in a hostel anymore.”

“Though we’ll miss her terribly, it’s lovely that she’ll be with her family,” I said sincerely.

“Riya?” he asked, as if double-checking he’d heard my name right.

“Yes,” I replied.

“I liked your photos,” he said gently, yet boldly—calm, but unexpected.

I didn’t know how to respond. My cheeks flushed ever so slightly.

Just then, Anu barged back in with Sofia, her pout now replaced by a mischievous grin.

“If you want me to talk to you again, brother, you’ll have to take all of us to the ice cream parlour!”



Raj chuckled, glancing at me as he replied, “Of course. I knew you were acting out for ice cream. I know you too well, Gecko. I’ll take all of you.”

Anu giggled. Moments later, Shruti finished her call, and Tisha reappeared. The room quickly filled again, but something about that moment lingered—unspoken, subtle, but impossible to ignore.

“Where were you?” Anu asked Tisha.

“The warden called me. Since I’m graduating coming March, she wanted me to complete some formalities,” Tisha replied with her usual straight face.

Tisha was our senior and the first among us to graduate soon.

“You’ll leave us behind?” Anu asked, her voice dipping with sadness.

“Hey Gecko, don’t get all teary-eyed,” Sofia jumped in, our unofficial, always-on-duty planner. “Let’s hit the ice-cream parlour!”

We all went along with Raj to have ice cream. He arrived in a white Skoda Octavia—a sleek sedan with smooth lines and a classy, stylish look that stood out effortlessly.

The car matched Raj's cool vibe perfectly, making the whole outing feel a little more special.

Honestly, it fit the whole '*Prince Charming on a white horse fantasy*' perfectly. How on earth had he managed to afford such a car while working in this so-called *real estate flipping*? But before I could even finish that thought, Sofia voiced it out loud.

"Wow! A Skoda? Impressive! How did you manage to get your hands on it while working in the '*real estate flipping*', Raj? Does it really earn that much?" she asked, her curiosity sharp.

Oh, God. Do all girls think alike? I was stunned that Sofia had the exact same thought I did. Maybe it's true what they say—girls really are mind readers.

"This car? I earned it myself," Raj said, adjusting the rear view mirror with a calm, satisfied smile. "Hard work and smart choices paid off. My dad's done well as a landowner, sure, but this—this is all on me. And yes, it definitely brings in good money."

"When I came here for graduation, my brother finally felt a sense of freedom from the responsibility of looking after me," Anu added softly, her voice tinged with a mix of gratitude and relief.

“Anu, you are my life, and not just a responsibility” Raj responded.

“I know, brother, how you nurtured me since mother left us. I *love* you, brother,” Anu said, her voice heavy with emotion.

We somehow squeezed into the five-seater, heading to an ice cream parlour on MI Road. There was a moment of stillness in the car—a hush that came from unspoken feelings. Raj didn’t say anything, but I noticed his fingers tighten ever so slightly around the steering wheel, his jaw set, his eyes fixed ahead.

Then, just as the heaviness of the moment began to settle, he caught my gaze again in the mirror. This time, he didn’t look away. It wasn’t flirtatious—it was searching, quiet, almost like he was reading the emotion on my face. I held his gaze for a second longer than I intended before the car rolled to a soft stop.

“We’re here,” he said, his voice gentle.

We stepped out into the soft glow of the streetlights and the unmistakable scent of freshly made waffle cones.

The ice cream parlour buzzed with laughter and sweet cravings—a welcome contrast to the quiet thoughts swirling in my mind.

“So here we are, girls. Order what you like,” Raj announced gallantly.

“Strawberry,” Anu chimed in.

“Chocolate,” said Shruti and Sofia.

“Tutti Frutti,” Tisha added.

“Butterscotch,” I said.

Raj turned to the waiter and said, “One butterscotch for me too.”

And there it was, that cheesy, borderline adorable ‘*Wow! We have the same choice*’ moment. Either it was a coincidence, or he’d overheard me and played along. I couldn’t tell. And I didn’t want to.

We enjoyed ourselves, laughed over silly things, and shared ice cream like carefree teenagers. Eventually, Raj drove us back to the hostel.

Anu was visibly emotional by now, tears threatening to spill any second.

“Take care, Anu,” Raj said softly.

Anu broke down and clung to him.

“Come on, Anu, be a brave girl. You’ll turn nineteen soon; don’t be like this,” Raj coaxed her gently.

Anu cried harder. I’ve never been able to stand tears. I pulled her close, wiped her face, and tried to comfort her. Sofia, Shruti, and Tisha joined in too. After a long, tear-stained hug, we all turned to head inside.

Just then, Raj called out.

“Hey Riya... can I talk to you for a minute? *I hope you don’t mind.*”

“Yes?” I said.

Anu and the girls moved in, leaving me outside.

This ‘*hope you don’t mind*’ phrase? It’s never about permission. It’s code for “I really want to talk to you—will you let me?”

“I had a really nice time today,” Raj said.

“Same here,” I replied casually, though my heart had decided to beat a little faster.

“You know, I worry about Anu a lot. She’s so innocent... I hope you’ll look out for her,” he repeated, his concern genuine.

“I promise. You can be at ease,” I reassured him.

He hesitated for a second, then looked directly at me.

“Riya, sometimes Anu’s phone is switched off, and I lose all contact with her. So... I was wondering, I mean, only if you’re okay with it, can I have your phone number?”

And the way he let out a breath after asking, like he’d just completed a marathon, left me confused.

The trees seemed to be laughing at me, the birds in the garden were twirling mid-air like mischievous dancers, and even the water gushing from the pipe curved in the air like a joker, giggling at my expense. And then, there she was—Avni—appearing in my head like she always did when I was in conflict, laughing out loud.

“Now say *NO*, Riya! How could you give your number to a boy?” she mocked, hands on her hips, smirking. “You do realise this means you’ll have to talk to him now, right?”

“Hello? Riya?” Raj’s voice snapped me back from my bizarre mental theatre.

“Can I please have your phone number?” he asked again, more softly this time.

“Yes, sure,” I replied, and like a reflex—without planning, without overthinking—I found myself saying the digits aloud. I hadn’t even processed it. It just... happened. Like blinking. My brain hadn’t signed off on it, but my mouth had already done the job.

“Thanks a lot. I should head off now. Take care of Anu... and take care of yourself too. Bye,” he said, his voice sincere as he turned to leave.

“Yes, sure. Bye,” I replied, still half in a daze, as I walked toward my room, passing the same water pipe, the same teasing trees, and the same fluttering birds. But somehow, everything looked a little different now.

“What a piece of muscle Raj is!” Sofia gushed. “Wow, what a boy—good body, great features, a Skoda Octavia, killer dressing sense... I was impressed,” she said, flipping her hair like she was auditioning for a shampoo advertisement. “The way he drove the car! And those sunglasses? Hot.”

“I think you like my brother,” Anu teased Sofia. “Should I talk to him for you?”

“You mean he’s single?” Sofia asked, genuinely surprised.

“Yeah, he doesn’t go for girls wearing itty bitsy clothes; there are plenty of those in Delhi,” Anu said with a smirk, nodding at Sofia’s spaghetti-strap top.

“So he prefers *jhatka-matka* types like Shruti?” Sofia fired back, half-teasing.

“Nope,” Anu grinned. “He never liked those either. My brother has a very specific, tasteful type.”

“Oh please,” Sofia rolled her eyes. “Such a handsome boy, living in Delhi with a Skoda? There’s no way he’s still single.”

“Well,” Anu shrugged, “he’s shifting to Jaipur soon. And with you around, he might not stay single for long.”



“Why is he moving here?” Sofia asked, her curiosity piqued.

“Dad wants both of us closer, so brother will shift here. And once he does, I’ll move in with him.”

That started another round of chatter, questions, and laughter until finally, the crowd began to thin out.

Once the room emptied, Anu turned to me.

“So, how did you find my brother?” she asked casually.

I froze. “Why the interrogation?” I laughed nervously.

“Nothing. Just noticed something... unusual today.”

“What do you mean?”

“He kept looking at just your photo in the album,” Anu said.

I was stunned.

“My brother’s different, Riya,” she continued. “Since Mom passed away, he’s been like a parent to me. He stayed with me till 10th grade, then moved to Delhi. He’s never been the romantic type, never been obsessed with girls. But today... I saw something in his eyes. A kind of spark I’ve never seen before.”

She paused, her voice softening with nostalgia. I didn't say anything; there was something sacred in her honesty that I didn't want to interrupt.

Just then, my phone chimed with a low buzz on the side table, pulling me momentarily out of the conversation. I glanced at it, my heart beating a little faster, but I didn't pick it up right away.

Anu stood up quietly, brushing invisible creases from her kurta.

"I should get some sleep. Goodnight," she said gently before walking out of the room, leaving behind the faintest scent of sandalwood.

I leaned back, staring at the dim ceiling as the night deepened around me. Outside, the sky had turned velvet, scattered with distant stars. My phone lit up again with the message still unread. I finally opened it.

*"It was nice talking to you, Riya. I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable. Hope we get to talk again soon..."*

I stared at the message, reading it twice, maybe three times, unsure how I felt. A swirl of emotions danced in my chest—curiosity, confusion, maybe even a hint of something warmer.

Just as I was about to type a reply, my phone lit up with an incoming call.

Avni. Perfect timing, as always.

“Hey Riya! How are you, my sweetie?” she chirped, unusually cheerful.

“I’m fine,” I said cautiously. “You sound like you’ve won a lottery. What’s up?”

“You know what? Some hot guy proposed me today!” she squealed.

“What?! You’re getting into that mess again?” I asked, half-shocked.

“Oh relax. It’s not about *love*, romance, and all that crap anymore. It’s just fun now. Just time pass,” she said coolly.

“Time pass? That sounds like trouble.”

“Not this time. Harry brought out the worst in me. If he can mess around, why should I play the saint? I’ll live my life the way I want now,” she said confidently. “I’ve started a new chapter. I’ll show him what he’s missing.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but she cut me off.

“Riya, when I was with Harry, I imagined life to be something else. But now, I know what it’s really going to be—graduation, marriage to some rich guy who’s already ‘experienced,’ boring household chores, babies, and a normal dull life. Let me live a little before that happens. I gave *love* a chance but it failed.”

“So now you’re doing to someone what Harry did to you?” I asked, quietly.

“Not really. Back then, I loved Harry; he didn’t *love* me. But now? Neither of us cares. This guy’s also a *Casanova*. No attachments. I’m just tired of loneliness.”

Her words made me uneasy. While I saw pain as something that demanded healing, she saw it as something to override with distractions.

Avni thought it was about one boy. I always thought it was about something deeper, something bigger.

I didn’t argue. I just prayed she wouldn’t get hurt again.

## Chapter 6

### Midnight Mayhem and Melted Boundaries.

December had begun unfolding its mysteries. The horoscope hinted at dramatic turns, and I couldn't help but wonder what more the month had in store for me.

My life had shifted in a way I hadn't expected. I was finally content with my surroundings. The food no longer tasted bland, and the building didn't seem eerie anymore. I missed my family, but I wasn't homesick. I had found a group of friends who made this place feel like home.

Our hostel was a two-storey structure with an open courtyard in the middle. Rooms surrounded this open space in four segments. It was spacious, with wide galleries outside the rooms where we often walked and talked under the stars.

It was around 11:35 PM—I remember the time clearly because Shruti's birthday was just minutes away, and we were counting down. My room was fully decked out with bright decorations, her favourite chocolate cake ready and hidden from her. We wanted the celebration to be a surprise.

As I paced back and forth along the gallery of our wing, I suddenly heard something strange—crashing sounds, like objects being thrown or broken. I paused, trying to figure out where it was coming from. A few seconds later, the noise returned, more intense this time, almost like someone crying out or pleading.

Curiosity and unease gripped me. I scanned the area and locked my gaze on one room in particular. The sound seemed to be coming from there.

I hesitated. Should I knock? What if I was wrong, or worse, what if someone dangerous was inside? I noticed some old chairs and tables stacked nearby. Quietly, I dragged them over, stacked them, and climbed up to peek through the ventilator, which was sealed with thick iron bars.

What I saw sent a chill down my spine.

Without a second thought, I jumped down, grabbed my phone, and called Sofia.

“Come quickly. Bring Tisha and the others near wing D. Now,” I whispered urgently.

Within minutes, they were there.

“What the hell, girl? I thought someone was assaulting you!” Sofia barked.

“Shh! Keep your voice down,” I warned.

“What’s going on?” Tisha asked, alarmed.

“Just climb up and see for yourself.”

Tisha climbed first, followed by Sofia, Shruti and then Anu. All four came down, visibly stunned—eyes wide, mouths open.

Inside the room, chaos was unfolding.

What we witnessed was bizarre, shocking, and disturbing. Two girls, completely undressed, were engaging in acts that were not only intimate but aggressive. One of them had smeared chocolate over the other and was performing acts that made all of us freeze in disbelief. It wasn’t just the physicality; it was the intensity—the violence of pleasure and domination.

I stood frozen for a moment, then instinctively reached for Shruti’s phone, climbed up again and began recording. I’d only captured about a minute when her phone suddenly lit up and rang—her ringtone echoing through the quiet room: *‘Pal bhar ke liye koi hume pyaar kar le, jhootha hi sahi...’*

It was midnight. The birthday calls had started pouring in. We scrambled down from the makeshift platform and dashed back to our room, breathless and shaken, leaving the stacked chairs and tables behind. Once inside, we peered through the window. A few moments later, the door of that room opened. The two girls came out, checking the area, probably suspicious about the noise or the mess left behind. Their act may have ended that night, but it wouldn't remain a secret for long.

I switched on the light.

The shock from the incident had hit us so hard that we completely forgot we had decorated the room for Shruti's birthday.

"Happy birthday, Shruti," I said, half-dazed.

"Oh yes! Happy birthday, Shruti!" everyone suddenly chimed in.

We had the cake ready, but the gooey chocolate didn't feel appealing anymore—not after witnessing the other use. Instead of eating it, we smeared most of it on Shruti's face and clothes. Tisha and Sofia led the cake fight, much to Shruti's horror as she begged for mercy.

We eventually gave her the new dress we had bought. She hugged us tightly, saying, "Thanks, everyone!"



After the sugar rush and the chaotic celebration, Sofia broke the silence.

“Okay, seriously, are we not going to talk about what just happened? That was freaking crazy. Did you see those girls? Total man-haters,” she added, shaking her head. “Though, I’ve got to admit, I don’t hate the chocolate idea...” she added, licking frosting off her finger.

“They don’t necessarily have to be man-haters,” I replied, trying to stay neutral. “I mean, why does society insist on labelling everything? If a girl isn’t into boys, it doesn’t automatically mean she’s into girls. And even if she is, does that mean she hates men? Why do we always have to fit people into boxes?” I rambled, my mind clearly somewhere else.

The others stared at me blankly.

“Seriously, though,” Shruti added, “whatever that was, it was messed up. I mean, there are still plenty of guys around!”

“Maybe they just like a different kind of chocolate,” Sofia quipped. “The kind without nuts.”

“Good *sismance*,” she added cheekily.

“What does that mean now?” Anu asked, eyebrows raised.

“*Sismance*. Like bromance, but for sisters,” Sofia giggled.

“You and your made-up words,” Anu muttered. “Girls like us are already confused enough with what you say.”

Tisha suddenly chimed in, “It’s not just our hostel, by the way. Last year, something similar happened at that fancy girls’ college in town.”

“Wait, what?” I asked, surprised.

“Yeah. One girl ended up in the emergency in the middle of the night.”

“Why?”

“Well... Apparently, the candle broke. Inside.”

“Oh my God,” Sofia laughed. “New tagline: *Candle, candle, candle – the one that won’t leave you stranded mid-adventure!*” She waved a candle from shruti’s birthday cake in the air like it was a magic wand.

Anu had reached her breaking point. “I’m done. I want to be out of this hostel. I’m not losing my virginity like this! I’m calling my brother,” she said, nearly in shock as she punched in numbers on her phone.

“Whoa, Anu! Please don’t say anything to him,” I stopped her. “You don’t have to go anywhere. They will.”

“Listen, we’re not judging who they *love* or how they *love*. Everyone deserves the freedom to explore their identity. But there’s a time, place, and respect that comes with living in a shared hostel space. What we saw was just... not okay here. We’ll show the video to the warden. Once she sees it, those two will be out of here for good,” I added.

“Exactly. We can’t let the cast of that movie grow,” Sofia smirked.

“Oh, and Shruti,” I turned to her with a grin, “your ringtone was perfectly timed. Almost poetic.”

We all burst out laughing.

The night was finally behind us, and our spontaneous pajama party had lifted everyone’s spirits a bit. The next morning was peaceful. We walked over to the mess for breakfast. Life in a government hostel wasn’t fancy by any means. At the mess, we had to stand in line with our mess cards in one hand and steel plates in the other. When we got to the front, Baiji would pour milk into our cups, plop some mystery food onto our plates, and mark our cards to make sure we didn’t come back for seconds—as if anyone actually wanted more.

Sofia and I were in line when we noticed the same two girls from the previous night, standing just a few spots ahead of us.

"I still can't get over what we saw," Sofia whispered, clearly uncomfortable. "Some things just aren't meant for shared spaces like a hostel."

"Shh! Don't stare. If they realize we saw them last night, we're done for. Their eyes are scanning the crowd already, probably looking for the director of their midnight movie. And honestly, we shouldn't be judging them," I whispered.

Sofia shot me a look and shrugged. "Whatever. I don't care about your TED Talk right now."

After finishing breakfast, we made our way straight to the warden's office, the weight of the previous night still lingering heavily on our minds. The corridor felt unusually quiet, as if the walls themselves were holding their breath. Inside, the warden looked up from her desk, surprised to see us so early.

As we began recounting everything that had happened—the eerie sequence of events, the confusion, the fear—her face shifted from mild curiosity to complete stillness. She listened intently, her brows furrowing with each detail. At times, her hand paused mid-air over a notepad, as if

trying to grasp the full gravity of what we were saying. When we finally finished, there was a long silence before she nodded, her voice steady but edged with concern.

“Thank you for bringing this to me,” she said firmly. “I’ll look into the matter and ensure its handled with the seriousness it deserves.”

As we stepped out of her office, a strange calm washed over us. The tension in our shoulders began to ease—finally, that unsettling chapter felt like it had reached its end. For the first time in hours, we allowed ourselves to breathe a little easier.

Now, it was time to shift gears—back to something lighter, something worth celebrating: Shruti’s birthday.

## Chapter 7

### From Banter to Butterflies

“Hey friends, I’m glad you’re all here,” Shruti said, walking up with a big smile. “So, what’s the plan for today? Have you all decided where we’re going?”

“Not yet,” Sofia replied casually, still busy filing her nails.

“Ved called me,” Shruti said, blushing slightly. “He wants to take all of us out to celebrate my birthday.”

Ved was Shruti’s *funta*—her go-to guy for everything fun and flirtatious. Unlike Navya’s and Avni’s *funtas*, I secretly hoped he would be different, someone genuinely decent. Because if this turned out to be a third consecutive disaster, I wasn’t sure I’d be able to hold back my own frustration or cynicism.

In photos, Ved looked incredibly innocent. But I had learned not to trust appearances. It’s a myth that cheaters or manipulators always have shifty eyes or sinister smiles. Sometimes, the most deceptive people wear the most trustworthy faces. Even history’s most dangerous individuals often looked harmless. Of course, I wasn’t claiming Ved is any of that, but I’d grown cautious. Harry, for instance, had that typical look of a cheat, and well, he lived up to it—no surprises there.

“I don’t mind, more guys, more fun!” Sofia chimed in.

“Same here,” T agreed without hesitation.

And just like that, the majority ruled, Anu and I didn’t even need to vote. The plan was set.

“Alright then, girls! Get ready for the blast!” Shruti shouted excitedly.

“What do you think would look best on me?” Sofia asked while digging through her cupboard.

“It’s my birthday, so obviously, I need to look the best,” Shruti replied, half-laughing, half-defiant.

“Please don’t tell me Ved is going to be the only boy at the party,” Sofia said, rolling her eyes with theatrical exasperation.

Their playful banter continued like always. The competition was unofficial, but real. Shruti, no matter how confident, was up against Sofia—the self-proclaimed queen of the internet. From fashion blogs to adult forums, Sofia knew more than any of us. She practically lived in cyber cafes, scrolling through every bit of information she could absorb on relationships, attraction, and everything in between.

Her go-to movie marathons were sequels of *American Pie*, and her digital world was drenched in pinks, reds, and magentas.

Eventually, we all got dressed for the outing. Shruti looked stunning in her birthday outfit: a pink-striped long top, white leggings, pink dangles, and pink pencil heels—a total head-turner.

T stuck to her signature tomboy style—blue t-shirt, denim khakis, and a tilted cap that gave her a street-cool vibe.

Anu looked as sweet as ever in her soft pink salwar suit with white polka dots—simple and elegant.

Sofia brought the sass in a white tube top, her loose hair flowing over her shoulders, and a denim skirt that made her look like she belonged on the cover of a teen magazine.

As for me, I wore a red kurta and white leggings. No frills, no fuss. I've never been into revealing trends or distressed fashion. I believe charm lies in subtlety; sometimes, it's more about what you don't reveal than what you do.

Ved arrived to pick us up with two of his friends.



“Hi baby, you’re looking smoking hot,” Ved grinned, leaning in for a big hug, which Shruti quickly blocked with a laugh.

“Hi baby, meet my girls—Tisha, Sofia, Anu, and Riya,” she said.

“Hey everyone, these are my buddies, Gaurav and Nikhil,” Ved gestured toward the two guys standing by a black Scorpio.

Ved wore a navy blue shirt with the top three buttons undone, paired with low-waisted jeans that looked like they might slide off at any moment. He had decent features, but his excessive body hair—especially on his chest—was a bit off-putting.

Gaurav was tall and muscular, with the physique of a dedicated gym-goer, exuding the typical macho man vibe. Nikhil, in contrast, was shorter and more low-key, dressed neatly in a shirt and jeans. He appeared to be the most well-mannered and decent of the group.

One thing I couldn’t help but notice was how most people were dressed in pink or blue. The association of pink with girls and blue with boys has always been a prevailing reality. I once read that, in ancient times, blue was believed to protect the soul from evil spirits.

In a male-dominated society, boys were considered more valuable, so parents dressed their sons in blue to shield them from harm. They believed that evil spirits wouldn't bother with girls, so there was no need for protection—a misguided belief.

As for the choice of pink for girls, it's said that the societal roles played a part. Men were hunters, and women were homemakers. This made women more attuned to colours—sensitive to ripened fruits or changes in their babies' faces, like the redness from a fever. Over time, this awareness grew into an affinity for colours like red and pink.

Society, parents, and male-biased rules have shaped gender roles according to their narrow perceptions—turning men into sycophants and reducing us to mere commodities, driven by their frenzied thoughts. In reality, there is no such thing as a '*weaker sex*.' It's merely the outcome of how we are nurtured.

"Let's move, baby," Ved said, taking Shruti's hand as they headed toward the car. We all followed.

"Surprise!" he shouted, opening the Scorpio's back door.

Inside, a small table was set with a chocolate cake, balloons, flowers, and a pink-wrapped gift.

“Wow! Thank you so much, baby,” Shruti said emotionally.

We gathered outside while she cut the cake, clapped, and celebrated once again. This time, though, there were no cake fights—everyone was too concerned about their outfits.

“First stop: Mc Donald at GT (*Gaurav Tower*),” Ved announced. “Let’s grab a bite and then plan the rest of the evening.”

Ved took the wheel, Shruti sat beside him in the front, and the rest of us girls squeezed into the middle row. Gaurav and Nikhil took the back seats.

As we drove, Ved kept brushing Shruti’s hand, and she seemed to enjoy the attention. Flirty glances and subtle caresses flew between them.

“Shruti, you seem to be having the time of your life,” Sofia teased.

Shruti smiled, while Ved smirked.

“By the way, Shruti’s never really told us how you two got together,” I chimed in. “It’s always been a bit of a mystery.”

“Really, Shruti? Why so secretive?” Ved turned to her, amused.

“It’s nothing, just never came up,” Shruti said casually.

“Should I tell them?” he asked, watching her face closely.

“Go ahead,” she said softly.

“Well, long story short, we were all classmates back in school. Shruti was dating this guy Ajay—who turned out to be a possessive mess. Constant drama. Eventually, she broke it off, and I was there for her. Since then, we’ve been together. We both moved to Jaipur for college, and the rest is history.”

Shruti stayed quiet, her eyes focused on the passing road. And suddenly, it all made sense—why she rarely opened up about Ved or her past.

Why is it that first *love* so often ends in heartbreak? Maybe there shouldn’t even be such a thing as “first *love*.” Perhaps we should start counting from the second one onward.

And as for boys—why can’t they ever just be normal? They’re either emotionally absent or completely overbearing.

Just yesterday, in my economics lecture, the professor discussed different economic systems—capitalist, socialist, and mixed. He said the best system is one that avoids extremes. I couldn't agree more. Maybe relationships need the same balance—not too much, not too little. Just... enough.

“Come on, Shruti, why are you sad? By holding on to the past, you're insulting your present,” Sofia said, snapping her back to reality.

“You know, these days perfect boys have become an endangered species. You're lucky to have one. So enjoy your piece of meat and have a good appetite,” Sofia added with a touch of wit, drawing frowns from everyone around.

“What do you mean by that?” Gaurav asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I mean Ved is such a wonderful person. Shruti should enjoy being with him instead of brooding over his past. Do you mind me saying that?” Sofia retorted, her voice unapologetic.

“Well, Sofia, people tend to focus only on the things they want to experience in life. So, what are you focusing on? I mean, what are your aspirations?” Gaurav asked, turning the conversation back to her.

“Some things may seem very close and easy to reach, but they might not offer the right kind of satisfaction. One must always stay alert and examine their surroundings for opportunities. So, focusing on everything is important, as far as my ambition is concerned. Honestly, I’ve never really thought about it,” Sofia replies.

I could feel the tension. I wished I could smash my head against the car’s front seat just to break the awkwardness. Why was Sofia provoking the whole situation?

Sofia is a kind and helpful person, but sometimes she can be incredibly unpredictable. I silently prayed the situation wouldn’t escalate. Before Gaurav could say anything more, we finally reached our destination.

The familiar buzz of McDonald’s greeted us—kids squealing, the soft hum of conversations blending with the occasional sizzle from the kitchen. The air smelled of fries and something fried-sweet, probably the apple pies. Bright lights and red-yellow décor made everything feel strangely comforting, like nothing too serious could ever happen here. It was crowded but not chaotic—the kind of place where people came to unwind, laugh, and forget their worries over a tray of burgers.

We placed our order. Ved and Shruti went to pick it up.

“Anu, you’re quiet. Aren’t you enjoying?” Nikhil asked.

“No, I’m fine. I’m enjoying,” she replied with a polite smile.

“And I hope Tisha and Riya are enjoying too?” Nikhil added, glancing at us. We both smiled and nodded.

“Friends, let’s play ‘Truth or Dare.’ It’ll be fun,” Nikhil suggested.

I’ve always hated this game. If you pick truth, they call you a coward for not choosing dare, then bombard you with mind-drilling questions. And if you pick dare, they say you’re trying to hide something and make you do something wild. It’s too stupid to even be stupid.

“I’m ready. Ask the others,” Sofia said, glancing vaguely at Gaurav.

“I’m in too,” Gaurav replied.

“Ved won’t mind either. It’s one of his favourite games. What about you, Anu?” Nikhil asked.

“It’s okay with me,” she replied.

“We’re ready too,” Tisha said, speaking for both of us.

Nikhil quickly went outside and brought a bottle, setting it in the centre of the circle. By the time he was ready, Ved and Shruti had returned, each holding a tray loaded with fast food.

The aroma of freshly fried fries and sizzling burgers filled the air as they placed the orders on the side table, careful not to disturb our game setup. The colourful packaging, the shiny paper wraps, and the familiar scent made it feel like the start of a perfect day.

With their orders set aside, we got ready to dive into the game. Nikhil spun the bottle, sending it spinning with a dramatic flair.

“Wow, first up is the birthday girl’s boyfriend,” Nikhil exclaimed with a grin. “So, man... truth or dare?” he asked, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

“Truth,” Ved replied, settling into the moment, his fingers still grazing the wrapper of his burger.

“What? You’re going for truth today? Scared of the girls?” Gaurav laughed.

Before Ved could respond to Gaurav’s teasing, Sofia blurted out, “Are you a virgin?”



Bizarre. I never expected that to be the opening question of the game. It shocked me—and I think the others too. As we chewed on our food, the question hung in the air, setting the tone for what was to come.

“Yes, of course. Shruti never gave me a chance,” he said, gently brushing her chin. Shruti blushed, her cheeks turning a soft shade of pink as she lowered her gaze.

“Okay dude, control your emotions. We don’t want you losing your virginity right here,” Gaurav grinned, causing the rest of us to burst out laughing. Shruti, still blushing, could hardly look up from her tray. Sofia and Gaurav, it seemed, were equally adept at stirring the pot.

The second round began, and this time the bottle pointed to me. With a full mouth, I leaned in and picked truth as well.

“Okay, Riya, let me ask,” Ved says. “Tell me honestly, five things you think boys hate about girls.”

“Well... five things...” I started, pausing to wipe my hands on a napkin before continuing.

“Firstly, I think boys always see girls as drama queens. They think we overreact, but honestly, we’re just more emotional, and we can’t help it.”

“Secondly, boys think girls are possessive. But honestly, boys are even more possessive about the girl they truly *love*.

“Thirdly, boys hate girls who cry a lot; they prefer girls who make them laugh. But you know what? If a boy ever cries for a girl, that means he truly loves her.”

“Fourthly, boys don’t like being kept waiting.”

“And lastly, a boy wants to be the only man in his girl’s life. They hate the idea of a ‘boy best friend,’ ‘bro friend,’ or even ‘the best boyfriend’ title being shared,” I finished confidently.

“Remarkable, Riya. I must say, you really understand boys,” Gaurav said, sounding genuinely impressed.

“I agree,” Nikhil added, nodding in approval.

“Same here,” Ved concluded, smiling as he picked up a fry.

Sofia, Shruti, Tisha, and Anu all stared at me in surprise; none of them had expected me to be so perceptive about boys. I’d never been in a relationship, but I’d seen so many of them—begin, break, fall apart, thrive, turn toxic, and bring both joy and heartbreak.

This general awareness didn't come from experience but from observations, something I'd always been good at.

The game continued, and the bottle pointed to Shruti. She chose truth as well, setting down her burger to focus on the next question.

"What's one thing you'd like Ved to change about himself, for you?" I asked her.

"Thanks for the question, Riya. Ved, don't feel bad, but I seriously don't like your chest hair. With them, you look like a tarantula," Shruti answered, her voice teasing but firm.

Everyone burst out laughing.

"Fine, Shruti. You could've told me this in private. I mean, saying it in front of everyone..." Ved muttered, while nervously adjusting his buttons.

"I'm sorry, Ved. I didn't mean to spoil your mood," she replied gently.

"Come on, Shruti. Chest hair is a sign of masculinity. Only the 'chocolate boys' shave their chests," Gaurav chimed in, defending the hair situation.

"So are you one of them?" Sofia grinned, raising an eyebrow.

“Definitely not,” he replied, unbuttoning the top of his shirt to show Sofia. He had chest hair.

“And I’ve got hair in many other places too,” he added with a smirk.

“Okay, let’s focus on the game,” I quickly interrupted and spun the bottle. It was the best thing I could do to stop that hairy conversation before Gaurav started revealing more of his body.

This time, the bottle pointed to Gaurav.

“Okay, Gaurav. What do you like most in your life and why?” Anu asked.

“Beer,” Gaurav replied instantly, without a second thought.

“And why?” she asked again, her curiosity not yet satisfied,

“Because it’s better than a woman,” he replied, leaning back confidently.

“Care to explain that?” Shruti asked dramatically, truly the drama queen.

“Leave it, Shruti. If I explain, it might get nasty, and you all won’t like it,” Gaurav said, taking another sip.

“No, we don’t mind. But we do want to know—how exactly is beer better than a woman?” Sofia pressed, her arms crossed as she leaned forward.

Gaurav’s eyes lit up as if he’d been waiting for this. He raised his finger, ticking off each point:

1. A cold beer can satisfy you—a cold woman may not.
2. If you take a second beer, the first one doesn’t get jealous.
3. You can always be sure you’re the first one to open the beer.
4. Even if you shake a beer, it eventually calms down.
5. You know exactly how much a beer costs.
6. A beer doesn’t ask you to cuddle half an hour after having it.
7. And most importantly—a beer wouldn’t get angry even if I said all this to it.

He finished his list with a triumphant look, staring directly at Sofia as if daring her to counter it.

We girls exchanged looks while Nikhil and Ved giggled like schoolboys. Sofia got her answer loud and clear, but had a feeling Anu might have regretted asking Gaurav that question.

Just then, Sofia leaned in close and whispered something into my ear. I couldn't catch all of it, but she ended with,... "just follow the lead". I nodded, trusting her instinct.

The bottle spun again, and this time, it pointed to Tisha.

"Tisha, tell us about the most exciting situation you've ever experienced in your life," Nikhil asked, his eyes bright with curiosity.

We all exchanged glances, a flicker of shared memory passing between us—the infamous '*sismance*' incident from the previous night, still fresh and unspoken.

Tisha laughed nervously before answering.

"In our village, during a wedding, a twenty-year-old guy who was completely drunk got up on the stage and started dancing like crazy," Tisha said.

"What's so exciting about that?" Nikhil asked, his brows furrowing.

"He was totally out of it. Danced without a single piece of clothing on. A 100% pure, naked beast," Tisha replied casually, crunching her burger as if she hadn't just dropped the wildest bomb of the evening.

Everyone burst into laughter, the kind that makes your stomach ache and your eyes water. I had to cover my mouth to stop bits of fries from flying out. Even Gaurav, who usually tried to keep his cool, doubled over, clutching his side.

The bottle spun again, its rhythmic whirl building anticipation. It finally pointed to Sofia. We had started skipping those who had already had their turn, so the excitement stayed fresh. I caught her eyes, and she gave me a subtle nod, signalling she was ready.

“Okay, Sofia, let me ask you the same question—what do you like most, and why?” I jumped in quickly, not giving anyone else the chance to speak, and before she could even pick Truth or Dare. This was the question she’d been holding onto as her comeback for Gaurav.

Sofia straightened her back, her eyes locked on Gaurav. “Well, I like chocolates the most, because they’re better than men.”

1. Chocolate always smells good.
2. It doesn’t matter how many pieces you’ve had before.
3. You always know if someone else has taken a bite out of your chocolate.
4. For chocolates, size doesn’t matter.

5. Chocolate never complains if you want to cuddle it.
6. You're never disappointed when you unwrap it.
7. And most importantly, chocolate doesn't have a chocolate ego."

Sofia finished with a triumphant smile, the kind that suggested she had been waiting for this moment. Gaurav raised his brows and leaned back, clearly taken aback by the lean shot she had just fired.

"I also like surfing the net," Sofia added in a low voice, as if it was an afterthought, but her eyes were still on Gaurav, observing his reaction.

I sensed something unpleasant flash across his face, but it disappeared just as quickly. The rest of us however, were thoroughly entertained by the *nok-jhok* between Sofia and him. It felt like the perfect balance of tension and fun, a subtle war of words that added spice to the evening.

Later that day, we made our way to *Mr. Bean*, a cosy, casual hangout spot that had become our favourite retreat. It's warm, dim lighting, paired with rustic wooden interiors and soft indie music, created the perfect setting to unwind after a long, eventful day.



The walls were adorned with quirky artwork and vintage posters, giving it a bohemian charm that felt both familiar and welcoming. We settled into a corner booth, its cushions soft and inviting. The chatter of people around us blended harmoniously with the low hum of jazz playing in the background.

Sofia, Tisha, Shruti, and the guys immediately ordered hookah—blueberry mint—its sweet, fragrant smoke curling around them in delicate spirals as they laughed and shared stories. The hookah itself was ornate, with vibrant glass patterns that sparkled under the muted lights. Each pull sent plumes of scented mist into the air, weaving through the soft glow of fairy lights strung along the walls.

Anu and I, not really into the whole hookah thing, opted for mocktails instead. Our drinks arrived in tall, colourful glasses, complete with little paper umbrellas and slices of citrus that added a playful touch to the evening. Mine was a *Mango Tango*—a burst of fresh mango puree mixed with lime and a hint of mint. Anu had chosen the *Berry Bliss*, a vivid blend of strawberries, raspberries, and soda, topped with crushed ice.

We clinked our glasses with a grin, the sound of ice cubes tinkling against glass blending into the easy atmosphere around us.

## Chapter 8

### Blessings and Bruises

It was late afternoon when Gaurav suddenly suggested something.

“Hey friends, what if we head to Ajmer to visit the Dargah Sharif of Hazrat Khawaja Moinuddin Chishti?” he proposed.

“Oh no! We’ll be too late getting back, and we won’t be allowed into the hostel,” Shruti protested.

“I think it’s a great idea, Shruti! At least we’ll get to spend more time together,” Ved chimed in enthusiastically.

“No, but what about our hostel entry?” Anu pointed out.

“I’m against it too. It’s already late, and Ajmer is two hours away. Maybe you can go with Shruti some other day,” I said firmly.

“Let’s make it happen today. We have the occasion, the resources, the mood, and the people. Everything’s in place,” Gaurav insisted, his eyes fixed on Sofia.

Again, I sensed something off about him. God bless my instincts.

“I support the trip,” Tisha announced.

“Tisha, what are you saying? Are you sure about this? What about our hostel entry on the way back?” I asked, confused.

“Leave that to me. Let’s go to Ajmer. This is my last year here, and I want to make it memorable. This will be my last trip with all of you. No more discussions, please, let’s just go,” she said, her voice filled with emotion.

And with that statement, everyone gave in, and our plan was set into motion.

Dargah Sharif was about 135 kilometres from Jaipur. I had heard so much about it—about couples visiting to tie a sacred thread around the shrine while making a wish, and returning to untie it once the wish came true. Since it’s nearly impossible to locate the exact thread afterward, they’re allowed to untie any one among the many wrapped around the lattice.

I was excited about the trip, but inside, a storm was brewing—a tsunami of thoughts and tangled emotions.

For the first fifteen minutes, the car ride was wrapped in silence. Ved and Shruti were quietly lost in their little world, gently caressing each other’s hands. Nikhil kept stealing glances at Anu.

Gaurav sat back with his eyes closed, his head tilted in what looked like meditation. Tisha was busy texting someone, while Sofia seemed absorbed in watching Gaurav. And I simply sat there, praying inwardly that everything would go smoothly.

“Hey Nikhil, let’s hear something from you,” Ved finally broke the silence, pulling me out of my thoughts.

“No yaar... I’m not ready,” Nikhil replied, shaking his head.

“Come on, just sing casually, like you always do when it’s just us,” Ved encouraged.

“Getting shy because of the girls?” Gaurav teased, finally opening his eyes.

“Why does every sentence of yours have to end with ‘girl’? Are you that obsessed?” Sofia snapped.

“I don’t find that question worth answering,” Gaurav replied coolly.

I quickly gestured to Sofia to calm down, trying to keep the atmosphere light.

And then, in his soft, melodious voice, Nikhil began to sing.

*“Kyun aajkal neend kam khwab zyada hai  
Lagata khuda kaa koi nek iraadaa hai  
Kal tha fakir aaj dil shahzada hai  
Lagata khuda kaa koi nek iraadaa hai  
Kya mujhe pyaar hai yaa  
Kaisaa khumaar hai yaa  
Kya mujhe pyaar hai yaa”*

Everyone clapped and smiled, but for a moment, the energy in the car shifted. Nikhil wasn't just good—he was heartfelt. That song, drenched in the ache of love and unspoken emotions, requires just more than just a voice; it demands feeling. And Nikhil sang it like someone who wasn't merely performing, but living it.

The signs had been there—subtle, almost imperceptible. When we were getting into the car, he had instinctively stepped aside, allowing Anu pick her seat first. She picked the window, and he quietly took the seat behind her, as if he had always belonged to him. At McDonald's, while we all hovered indecisively over menus, Anu was torn between two options. Without any fuss, Nikhil ordered one for her.

Even now, in the dusky glow of the moving car, his gaze would drift toward her every so often—not in a way that sought attention, but as if her presence alone was enough to bring him comfort.

And in the way he poured his soul into that melody, it felt less like a performance and more like a confession wrapped in rhythm. Maybe no one else saw it. But I did.

Amid all the singing, laughter, and undercurrents of unspoken emotions, we finally reached Ajmer around 8:15 PM.

The marketplace near the Dargah shimmered like a dream, lit up with twinkling lights, bustling with the chatter of visitors, and suffused with the fragrance of incense and roses. The streets were packed, and a solemn reverence hung in the air.

Ajmer Sharif Dargah is one of India's most revered spiritual sites. It houses the tomb of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, a 12th-century Sufi saint from Persia who came to India and became a symbol of compassion, unity, and healing. Legend has it that the Mughal Emperor Akbar walked barefoot from Agra to Ajmer to pray for a son. Today, people of all religions come here with their wishes, tying threads of hope and returning with gratitude when their prayers are answered.

Most of the buildings were painted green, mirroring the sacred hue of the Dargah's dome. The grand entrance was a deep, glistening green as well. I recalled that green holds a special place in Islam, symbolizing life, fertility, and peace.

Just as Hindu brides wear red for its association with passion and prosperity, I had seen Muslim brides adorned in green, representing growth and harmony. Interestingly, when you mix red and green, you get yellow—a colour often linked with sacredness and royalty in both traditions. It felt almost poetic.

We paused by a shop to buy the offerings—a chadar and fresh flowers—to place at the shrine of Hazrat Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti. It is believed that laying a chadar at his tomb invokes blessings and divine grace.

Then came the wait. We joined a long, winding queue. Ved led the way, followed by Shruti, then Tisha, me, Anu, Sofia, Gaurav, and finally Nikhil. The crowd was overwhelming—the body heat, the noise, the slow crawl forward—all of it tested our patience. Within minutes, we were drenched in sweat.

By the time we reached the inner sanctum, it was 8:45 PM. One by one, we placed our offerings. A Khadim collected the chadars and flowers, laying them respectfully at the shrine. Inside, the space thrummed with movement and devotion. People rushed in all directions, eager to complete their rituals before closing time.

A surge of bodies surged from behind.

The evening crowd was desperate to make it inside before the final call for prayers, swept through the narrow passage like a tide. I stumbled a step forward, but steadied myself just in time. In that same heartbeat, I saw Sofia lose her balance.

Before anyone else could react, Gaurav's hand shot out instinctively and protectively. He caught her by the arm, gently but firmly. Sofia clutched his wrist, her eyebrows raised in surprise, her breath held. For a fleeting moment, the chaos around them blurred into a distant hum. The crowd, the chants, the noise—all of it faded.

Their eyes met.

Not in the usual defiance that Sofia threw his way, nor with Gaurav's signature smirk. This time, there was something unspoken—a softness, a stillness. It was as if, in that fragile moment, they saw each other—not through the lens of past jibes or sarcastic banter, but simply and honestly.

She didn't pull her arm away immediately. He didn't let go too soon either. It lasted only a few seconds. But something had shifted.

A silence passed between them—not awkward, but tender. The kind that doesn't need words to fill it.



Another “kal tha fakir aaj dil shahzada hai” moment.

Once again, it was Sofia and Gaurav. And though neither of them said a word, the silence spoke louder than anything they had ever exchanged.

After stepping out of the shrine, we all moved toward the sacred area to tie our holy threads. Everyone seemed to have something close to their heart—an unspoken wish, a silent prayer. But as I held the thread between my fingers, I felt... nothing.

What vow could I possibly make?

I stood there, motionless for a few seconds, clutching the sacred thread as if it were just another piece of string. My mind wandered—not toward dreams or desires, but toward doubts. I tried to focus on something important enough to ask for, something worthy of divine intervention. But nothing surfaced.

If I believe in horoscopes, if I even remotely believe in *destiny*, then I must accept that everything is already written, etched in some cosmic ledger I can't read. And if that's true, what's the point of tying a thread or whispering a wish? What good is a prayer if my story has already been decided?

Was betrayal always meant for Avni and Navya? Did God choose devotion for my cousin sister and heartbreak for them? And if so, how do I believe in the fairness of a God who writes such biased fates? It felt like trusting this ritual meant accepting that some people were just born luckier in *love*.

“Hello madam, only one wish per holy thread. How many do you have to ask?” Tisha’s voice broke into my thoughts like a lightning bolt.

I looked up, startled, realizing I had been standing there, frozen in my storm of philosophy.

“Let’s move out; it’s almost closing time,” Nikhil added gently.

I walked behind the others, the thread still dangling from my hand like a question I hadn’t yet answered.

As we exited the Dargah, Gaurav turned to the group. “What about dinner?”

“You tell, Shruti,” Ved asked. “Where do you want to go?”

“Well, no preferences,” Shruti shrugged.

“If no one minds, there’s this Dhaba nearby, Mata Vaishno Dhaba. The food’s excellent. I’ve been there a bunch of times,” Gaurav suggested casually.

“No!” Nikhil said sharply, concern creasing his forehead. “It’s late. That place is packed with truckers and locals. It’s not safe for the girls.”

“Come on, Nikhil,” Gaurav responded, his tone noticeably softer. “We’re all together. Nothing will happen.”

“Oh yes, Nikhil,” Sofia chimed in, to everyone’s surprise. “Gaurav’s right.”

All eyes turned toward her. It was probably the first time she had agreed with Gaurav without a hint of sarcasm.

"Yes," she said with a subtle smile. "With someone like Gaurav on our side, there's nothing to worry about. You've got this, right, Gaurav?"

The group fell silent. Gaurav didn’t reply. He simply looked ahead, his expression unreadable. But something in the air had shifted, softened.

By the time we reached the Dhaba, the sky was draped in indigo, and the stars blinked faintly overhead. Ved slowed the car. “Here we are. So, are we going in?”

“It’s fine,” Tisha answered on behalf of us all. “It’s late, and we’re starving.”

Mata Vaishno Dhaba was buzzing with the evening crowd. A low murmur of conversations and the occasional clang of steel plates filled the air. Most of the patrons were truck drivers and middle-aged men, their weathered faces illuminated by tube lights and flickering TV screens mounted high on the walls. The aroma of fried onions, earthy spices, and sizzling tandoori smoke lingered hung thickly in the air, wrapping around us as we entered.

We stood awkwardly at the entrance for a few seconds, all of us acutely aware of the countless eyes that had turned toward our group. The ratio of women in the Dhaba was so negligible that we might as well have been a newly discovered species. Mouths paused mid-bite. Conversations halted. Some men shifted in their plastic chairs, their gazes unblinking. I instinctively adjusted my kurta pulling up my shoulders, shielding my bosoms from the invisible yet palpable scrutiny.

Ved led the way, confidently asking a server for a table big enough to seat all eight of us. After a few murmurs and a gesture to clear one of the longer tables at the side, we were guided to a spot near the wall—away from the main crowd, but still in full view.

We dragged the mismatched plastic chairs around the table, their legs scraping noisily against the floor. I noticed how Anu chose the chair tucked safely between me and Shruti, while Sofia, unusually quiet, sat across from Gaurav without a word. Nikhil hovered at the end next to Tisha, casting glances toward the counter—perhaps still scanning the place with protective eyes. Ved and Shruti side by side.

As we settled in, I observed how everyone, even the most carefree among us, wore a subtle Armor of caution. Shoulders a little stiffer, words a little fewer, laughter held back—at least for a moment.

But the moment food arrived, all apprehension took a backseat.

Our table was nothing short of a culinary celebration, a full-blown festival of flavours. *Dal Makhni*, rich and creamy, shimmered under the overhead light. *Shahi Paneer* glowed a soft orange, with generous chunks of paneer bathing in its regal gravy. The *Mix Veg* looked like a garden had taken shelter in a *kadhai*, and the *Raita* cooled the scene with flecks of cucumber and coriander floating like confetti. Steaming bowls of fragrant pulao sat beside towering baskets of *Misi Roti*, *Naan*, and *Plain Roti—golden-edged and soft*. A colourful array of salad, lemon wedges, green chutney, and a trio of pickles completed the grand ensemble.

It looked less like a dinner table and more like someone had spilled an entire home-cooked wedding buffet onto it.

Plates clinked, spoons scraped, and laughter softened into the gentle hum of contentment.

"Pass the Shahi Paneer," Tisha mumbled with a naan half in her mouth, reaching blindly across the table.

"Wait, I haven't even had one spoon yet!" Nikhil exclaimed, half-laughing as he guarded his side of the platter.

"Looks like we need a second serving," Ved declared, already signalling a waiter with one hand while sipping water with the other.

Shruti, ever polite, said, "I'll just have a little more raita," but somehow her plate ended up with a second round of *Naan* too.

Meanwhile, Gaurav and Sofia, who had been surprisingly silent since the Dargah, shared the achar between them without a word, passing the tiny bowl back and forth like it was some fragile truce.

I glanced around the table, my heart strangely full.

Everyone looked flushed and happy—cheeks glowing, fingers greasy, bellies content. It wasn't just about food; it was the comfort of shared messiness, of stolen bites, of passing rotis and pulling plates closer. It was the kind of meal that didn't just fill the stomach but stitched people closer together in the fabric of quiet familiarity.

Some were full after the first round, pushing their chairs back with satisfied groans. Others, like Gaurav and Nikhil, seemed determined to break some unseen record, continuing to order rotis like they were in a roti-eating championship.

"Last one," Nikhil announced dramatically, only to sheepishly whisper a minute later, "Okay, maybe one more."

We laughed, wiped our hands, and leaned back—heavy but happy. It was more than just dinner; it was a memory in the making.

"Oh God, I'm so full. I'm going to wash my hands," Sofia muttered, pushing her plate away slightly, her hand resting on the table.

"Wait, I'll come with you," I said, standing up immediately. A strange tightness in my chest, one I couldn't explain. Maybe it was the place, or just an instinct.

We made our way to the corner where an old, rusted washbasin hung lopsidedly on the wall. The flickering tube light above cast long, strange shadows. It smelled of steel, wet earth, and soap that had long lost its scent.

As we were rinsing our hands, I sensed movement behind us. One man approached—close, far too close. He bumped into Sofia, almost pinning her between himself and the basin.

“Hey, Mister! Watch it! Can’t you see I’m washing my hands?” Sofia’s voice had steel in it, her eyes sharp with anger.

“I see you, Madam. That’s exactly why I came here,” the man sneered.

He was in his thirties, dressed in a crumpled dhoti and an off-white shirt stained with betel. The stench of alcohol clung to him like a second skin, and his thick moustache twitched as he spoke.

“What do you mean? Behave yourself!” Sofia snapped, stepping back, but he moved forward again.

“Don’t teach me manners, girl. Look at yourself—clothes like that, roaming around here? When sweets are left in the open, flies will come,” he leered, his voice thick and threatening.



And then, he reached out, his hand grazing Sofia's cheek and starting to move lower—

“HELP!” I screamed, my voice cutting through the crowd like a blade.

Within seconds, Nikhil, Gaurav, and Ved came charging in, their eyes blazing with fury. Anu, Shruti, and Tisha were right behind them.

The man still had his hand on Sofia's neck. She stood frozen, her face blank as if her breath had been snatched away. Gaurav didn't hesitate for even a second.

“You bastard!” he roared, slamming his palm hard against the man's face.

The delicious dal makhana from earlier was smeared across his cheek, dribbling down in thick streaks.

The man staggered back, humiliated. Red with fury, he lunged forward, grabbing Gaurav's collar, but Ved stepped in, landing a solid punch to the man's gut, sending him reeling.

His companion, enraged, rushed toward Ved, but Nikhil intercepted him with a swift kick that sent the man stumbling.

Chaos erupted.

A cloud of dust rose around the flailing limbs, curses, and scattered crowd. It felt like we were in the middle of a roadside wrestling ring. Men stood around watching, some shouting, but none intervening. The Dhaba owner hovered nearby, uncertain whether to step in.

And then, the unthinkable happened.

The man in the dhoti drew out a knife.

Before any of us could scream, he lunged at Gaurav. The blade caught his left arm in a quick, shallow slash.

“Gaurav!” Sofia gasped, finally snapping out of her stupor.

But there was no time.

Nikhil yanked Gaurav back just in time to avoid another blow. The man turned again, wild with rage, but Ved stepped in. “You bloody animal!” he shouted, landing another blow, just as the knife found its mark on Ved’s chest.

“VED!” Shruti’s scream echoed across the open air.

People now rushed in, pulling the man away, holding him down, shouting, pushing. He thrashed like a madman, possessed by something vile and beyond reason.

We didn't wait. The chaos gave us a small window, and we took it.

Shruti grabbed Ved, half-dragging him toward the car. Anu pulled Nikhil, Sofia was holding onto Gaurav as if he might disappear, and Tisha and I ran behind them all, my heart thudding in my ears.

The car doors slammed shut one after the other. Nikhil took the wheel, Anu beside him. Ved lay groaning in the middle seat with Shruti cradling his head, panic written all over her face. The rest of us squeezed into the back, still shaking.

Shruti leaned over Ved, her hands unsteady as she rummaged through her purse for anything useful.

She found a clean napkin. Gently, she dabbed at the blood on his chest, rinsing the wound as best as she could. It looked nasty but not deep—more shocking than serious. She tried to keep her voice calm even as her eyes shimmered with unshed tears.

Gaurav, meanwhile, was struggling to wrap his handkerchief around his injured arm, but the pain made it nearly impossible. He winced, his breath catching.

Without saying a word, Sofia reached over and gently took it from him.

Her movements were focused, almost too careful—deliberate in their silence. She never looked at him, but her damp eyes and the slight tremble of her lips spoke volumes.

Gaurav didn't stop her.

By the time we had set out on Shruti's birthday, we were just a group of friends—one couple, six individuals.

Now, as we drove into the night, we were something else.

Three couples. Two individuals. And one night none of us would ever forget.

I sat silently in the backseat, watching the headlights paint long streaks of gold across the highway. The night outside felt heavier now, like it was carrying more than just shadows.

Two couples sat before me, newly formed, unexpected, yet strangely fitting.

And I? I felt... nothing. Or maybe everything. It was hard to tell.

I wasn't sure whether to be happy for them or quietly unsettled. The warmth of their closeness stirred something inside me, a kind of ache I couldn't name. Was it envy? Loneliness? Or just disbelief?

Since the time I started trying to understand *love*, it had kept changing its face, like a shapeshifter playing hide and seek with my heart. First, it wore the innocent charm of fairy tales. Then, the messy layers of real-life choices. And now, it seemed to arrive like a plot twist—sudden, intense, and without warning.

“The *love* at first sight.”

Nikhil had loved Anu— or at least attracted towards her—from the moment he saw her. Clear, certain, a straight line.

And Gaurav and Sofia? Two people who couldn’t stand each other just hours ago were now bound in something quiet, fragile, and raw. A kind of tenderness had emerged between them from the rubble of aggression and adrenaline, like a flower blooming in a battlefield.

I watched them in silence—his wounded arm, her gentle hands.

And I wondered if *love* was just another form of survival. A soft landing after a hard fall. Or maybe... a mirror we hold up to the chaos to find something human.

Either way, I wasn't ready to believe the face *love* was showing me tonight.

Not yet.

We reached Jaipur around midnight. Now came the real challenge: getting back into the hostel unnoticed. All eyes turned expectantly toward Tisha.

“What about the entry?” I asked her quietly.

Tisha pulled out her phone and made a call.

“Yes, we’re here. Make the passage,” she said on the call.

We stood behind the hostel building, cloaked in darkness. Tisha turned to us and whispered instructions. First, we had to climb over a high boundary wall to reach the inner side of the campus.

The wall looked daunting, but Tisha moved with ease. She pulled out a loose brick, clearly tampered with earlier to appear intact. We used the gap as a foothold, with the boys helping us climb one by one.

Once we reached the other side, we crept along a narrow path lined with thick bushes and overgrown plants. Tisha pushed aside the branches, revealing another section of the wall—this one patchy and worn. She knelt down and carefully removed a brick from a hidden opening, then began pushing more bricks inward.

Oddly, we didn't hear the clatter of bricks falling on the other side.

"Someone's there," Sofia whispered.

Sure enough, Tisha had an accomplice. A girl stood on the other side of the wall, catching the bricks silently and stacking them aside. Within minutes, they had cleared a hole just large enough for us to crawl through.

Tisha lay flat and wriggled her way to the other side, where the girl helped her out. One by one, the rest of us followed, each of us ducking and sliding through the narrow opening.

Once we were all through, Tisha and her friend quickly restored the wall, replacing the bricks and covering the hole with the same hostel scrap that had concealed it before—old chairs, broken cots, rusted logs. It was all so perfectly placed, you'd never guess a secret passage existed there.

Government hostel conditions were miserable, no doubt. But survival, and perhaps success, lay in knowing how to make the best of broken systems—something Tisha and her friend clearly understood.

“Sensational! That was such an adventure. How do you even know about this passage?” Anu asked, eyes wide with awe.

Tisha grinned. “A parting gift from my seniors. When they graduated, they passed the secret on to me. And now, it’s yours too.”

“Strange that the warden hasn’t found out about it yet. Hasn’t anyone ever been caught?” Sofia asked.

Tisha shook her head confidently. “This route was created by a small group of trusted seniors. No one outside that circle knows. Plus, the warden never bothers with the old junk here—it’s been lying in the same spot for over four years. The risk of discovery is almost nil.”

Once we made it back to our rooms, Shruti sent Ved a quick text to confirm our safe return. After that, the boys quietly made their exit.

The next day, we learned that *Sismancer* had been rusticated from the hostel.

December had brought more than just winter; it carried a soft, romantic breeze through the corridors. In the following weeks, the air seemed to hum with new beginnings.



Gaurav and Sofia, who had been fierce rivals just days ago, were now speaking frequently. Eventually, it was Sofia who proposed, and Gaurav said yes. Anu and Nikhil had grown closer too, though their feelings remained unspoken. The bond was there—visible in glances and shared silences.

Shruti was now regularly meeting Ved.

Avni, meanwhile, was happily occupied with her new flame.

My cousin's wedding came and went, I didn't attend. It felt too distant, both emotionally and geographically.

A few days later, Anu moved in with her brother into their new home.

And me?

I remained unchanged. Life didn't shift drastically for me. No new declarations, no whirlwind romances and no dramatic goodbyes.

But still, something within me stirred. A strange sense of calm wrapped itself around my chest—not heavy or overwhelming, just a gentle warmth that refused to leave.

Maybe it was the air of December, or maybe the way *love* had silently walked into everyone else's lives this month.

All of it—each story, each gesture—was like a mosaic forming around me. I wasn't part of the picture, not yet. But for the first time, I didn't feel like an outsider. Instead, I found myself quietly wondering what it might feel like to belong to such a story.

Somewhere deep inside, a quiet voice whispered—not demanding or urgent, just patient and sincere:

*Maybe... maybe I should give myself a chance too.*

*"Said 'yes' to Rudra? Let's see where that choice takes you. So continue reading. If you said 'no'—no worries, flip to page 142 and follow your own path.*

## Chapter 9

### Unspoken Story

December still had a lot of bombshells waiting for me. I was enjoying my time with Rudra. I really liked our conversations, and unlike what I had heard about boys, he actually enjoyed listening to me.

I found myself growing more and more drawn to him. Navya's and Avni's incidents had left a negative image of true *love* in my mind, and my past kept resurfacing, scratching at old wounds. But I could also see how happy my sister, Sofia, and Shruti were. In fact, Shruti had moved on from her ex and was happy today. Ved loved her, and she, too, was content with him.

It's true that sometimes we fail the first time, but that doesn't mean we should shy away from trying again.

In the brief time since I began talking to Rudra, I've shared more of myself than I ever thought I could. My heart, which had been so guarded for so long, began to open up to him in ways I never imagined. I told him my deepest secrets, things I had never spoken aloud to anyone. I shared my most intimate thoughts, the ones I had kept buried in the corners of my mind for years.

There were so many unsaid things I had held on to, but with him, I found the courage to finally voice them. I opened up about my childhood—how both innocent and painful it had been, how the scars of my first betrayal still haunted me, and how my family had shaped me into who I was. And then there was my writing, the one part of me that had always been my refuge, yet something I had never fully revealed to anyone. Rudra, with his genuine curiosity and warmth, asked about my poems, my songs, the very pieces of my soul I had written with trembling hands.

But it wasn't just about words. Rudra was there for me in ways no one had ever been. When life weighed heavily on my heart, he was the one who lifted me up. He was there in my moments of pain, standing beside me with quiet strength, offering me comfort when I thought there was none to be found. And when I found joy, he celebrated with me, making even the smallest of victories feel like the most significant moments in the world. Our conversations became my lifeline. Most of them took place late at night, when everything else seemed still and the world felt far away. Those late-night talks became a sanctuary for me, a place where I could let my guard down completely and be vulnerable, where I could share pieces of myself I had kept hidden for so long.

Talking to Rudra didn't just bring me closer to him; it helped me heal.

The more I talked, the more I began to release the hurt I had been carrying for so long. I let go of the painful philosophies and mindsets that had once kept me anchored in the darkness. Slowly, I began to shed the layers of pain, and with each word, I felt the weight lifting from my chest. The darkness that had once consumed me slowly started to fade, and in its place, I felt a lightness I hadn't known in years. It was as if my heart, once so closed off and cold, was beginning to thaw, blooming in ways I had never thought possible. I even wrote a song for him, something I had never done for anyone before. It was a piece of my soul, a reflection of the emotions I had felt as I journeyed through this healing process, and a tribute to the incredible bond we had started to build.

With every conversation, with every shared moment, our bond grew deeper. It wasn't just about the stories we told or the laughter we shared; it was the way we understood each other, the way we accepted each other's flaws and imperfections without judgment. Rudra became more than just someone I talked to; he became a part of my life, a chapter that had completely changed the course of my story. He became the light in my life, the one person who made everything seem brighter, clearer, and more hopeful.

And for the first time in a long time, my world no longer felt dark. The shadows that had once held me captive began to fade, and I could finally breathe. My heart, once so guarded, began to blossom. I could feel myself opening up in ways I had never allowed before, and it felt both terrifying and beautiful. With him, I finally saw the possibility of a future full of light and of healing. And in my heart, I knew that this was just the beginning.

It was a cool December morning. Anu had moved into her new house three days ago and had finished setting everything up. She came over to invite us to her housewarming party, and we were all getting ready when my phone suddenly beeped.

“Hey Riya, how’s it going? I hope you’re chilling out with the STARS. I’ve sent you an email. Please check it as soon as you can,” Rudra had texted me on my not-so-smart Motorola phone.

“Riya, I need to talk to you about something important,” Anu said as soon as she entered my room.

“Hmm... Say it,” I replied absently, distracted.

“Sofia, can I borrow your phone? I need to check my email. My internet pack is over,” I asked Sofia.

“Go ahead, Anu,” I urged, as I opened my account.

“You do your thing. I’ll come to your room later,” she said before leaving.

I was about to follow her, but my account finally loaded.

## EMAIL

*Fond of loneliness, there was once a boy who spent most of his day tucked away in a quiet corner of his house, his own secret spot where, in his mind, no one could find him. His favourite pastime? Smearing coal tar all over his body and playing alone. He wasn't born lonely; his loneliness was cultivated, grown slowly from circumstances he couldn't control.*

*His father underwent open-heart bypass surgery at Bombay Hospital in 1987. At just three years old, all the care and attention that should have been his from his mother was redirected toward his father's recovery. Since then, his father's health remained fragile, casting a long shadow over the boy's early years.*

*Caught in this quiet solitude, he became unaware of even basic rhythms, when he slept or when he woke. Emotionally withdrawn, he began forming a complex inner world. He never cried at the barber's, never raised his hand in class to ask for water or to excuse himself for the bathroom. He became silent in ways no one noticed.*

*By the age of six, he had already experienced the sterile corridors of a hospital when his brother was admitted for an eye operation. Oddly, he found the hospital fascinating—a world away from school and home, offering a strange kind of comfort.*

*At six and a half, he stood emotionless at his unmarried uncle's cremation. Family members placed a clay pot on his head, pierced it to let water drip out, and made him circle his uncle's lifeless body. He did so without understanding the gravity of the moment, what he was doing, or what he had lost forever.*

*He ran errands to the medical shop for his father's medicines, cried alone on the terrace at night for the uncle he barely understood he'd lost, and watched his family grapple with financial hardship. Somewhere in those years, his childhood quietly slipped away.*

*Sent to live with his grandparents for schooling, he failed to thrive academically and became the most notorious boy in school. Eventually, he dropped out and chose work over education.*

*He joined Yamaha F1 Racing, made plenty of money, and ultimately settled in Delhi. Today, he has everything—wealth, a car, a home, success at a young age—but the loneliness inside him remains unchanged.*

*That boy... is me. Rudra.*



*And I'm telling you all this, Riya, because for the first time, I want to share this part of me—with you.*

*When I talk to you, I feel alive. Your simplicity, your voice, your laughter, your conversations—all of it is enchanting. I see a future with you. I admire your honesty, your opinions, your way of thinking. I love you, Riya.*

*You're the first girl, no, the first person, I want to open my heart to. I want to share my loneliness with you, and perhaps, find a place to finally settle my soul.*

*I'm in Jaipur right now, sitting at Costa in Crystal Palm.*

*Waiting for you...*

*Rudra*

*I didn't know how to react, how to feel, what to think. Just when I'd started to consider giving love a second chance, Rudra dropped the three words that suddenly changed the gravity of everything.*

*His words kept echoing in my mind like a soundtrack on repeat.*

*He said he loves me... but we haven't even met. We've only shared a few phone calls, no photos exchanged, not even a single real meeting.*

How could someone say something so intense, so certain, without even laying eyes on me?

What if I'm not what he expects?

He's not even on any social media, I can't stalk him, can't decode him through filtered photos or posts. I have absolutely no idea what he looks like. Is this some kind of prank? Is he bluffing?

Let's face it—most boys are driven by looks at first. And he hasn't even seen me. How could he say he wants to "settle down" with me? It felt overwhelming. Unreal. Almost like a scam.

Yes, it's been about 6-7 months of conversations, but *love*?

My thoughts were spiralling. I was growing fond of him, there's no denying that. But this declaration, out of the blue, had shaken something inside me.

Could someone truly *love* beyond the physical? Or was this just a beautifully told story with missing chapters?

And then the part that hit me hard: "*Sitting at Costa in Crystal Palm, Jaipur, waiting for you.*"

Was he expecting to meet me right now? Was this some pre-planned setup? How could he be so certain, so bold, without even seeing me once?

Panic surged in my chest. I rushed to the corridor and called Avni, unable to hold it in.

“Avni... Rudra wants to meet me,” I blurted the moment she picked up.

“I know... I mean, I get it,” she replied calmly.

“What do you mean, you get it? He sent me this whole emotional email—his backstory, his feelings—and said he wants to settle with me!”

“Well, calm down. Don’t shout,” Avni said in her usual laid-back tone. “Just breathe, Riya. Relax...”

*Go to page – 147*

## Chapter 9

### Unveiling Intentions

December hadn't finished with me yet; it still had a few bombshells to drop.

Raj had started calling more often. But back then, those calls meant nothing to me. They weren't for me; they were through me. Just a means to reach Anu. He'd call when Anu's phone was off, unreachable, or when she was caught up with something. And I, somewhat reluctantly, became the messenger in between.

At first, I barely acknowledged his voice. I'd pass the phone or just say, "She'll call you back." That was it. He was just 'Anu's brother.' I didn't even bother saving his number.

But slowly, things started to change—not abruptly, but in the most ordinary, unnoticed ways.

He began sending me brief texts: "Good morning." "Had dinner?" "How was your day?" It was strange. Unexpected.

I didn't know what to make of it at first. I wasn't encouraging it, but I wasn't stopping it either. Maybe I was being polite. Maybe I was simply... curious.

Our conversations started as nothing more than surface-level chatter. Small talk. Stranger stuff. But somehow, the exchanges began to stretch—five minutes turned to fifteen, and then to an half an hour, without either of us realizing.

It wasn't flirty. It wasn't romantic. It was just... comfortable. I was still cautious, guarded, even. But I noticed things.

His voice was calm, assured. There was something gentle in his tone, a kind of steady warmth. He had a unique way of speaking—articulate, yet natural. And the way he talked about his sister, Anu, struck me. There was genuine respect, an almost endearing protectiveness in how he spoke of her. I admired that.

And that admiration, slowly began to stir something unexpected in me.

I hadn't looked for this, I hadn't even wanted this. I was still in my "no space for *love*" phase. But something about our conversations—those lingering pauses, the unspoken understandings, the subtle shifts in tone—began to feel different. Safe. Soft.

Still, I wouldn't have called it fondness. Not yet. We were still strangers, but somehow, in the quiet corners of conversation, he was becoming someone.

And perhaps that's how it always begins—not with a spark, but with a whisper.

Anu had moved into her new house three days ago and had finished setting everything up and today, she'd come to take us with her for the housewarming. We were all getting ready when she suddenly walked into my room, her face carrying a seriousness I hadn't seen in a while.

"Riya, I need to talk to you. It's something important," she said, standing at the door.

"Hmm... say it," I replied casually, not really paying attention. I was rummaging through my things.

"Sofia, can I borrow your noodle-strap chappals? Mine just broke," I called out, mid-sentence.

"Say it, Anu," I prompted again, my hands still buried in the almirah, not looking at her.

"You do your work. I'll come back later," she said, turning around.

"Hey, Anu, don't be upset, I'm listening!" I followed her out.

She stopped in the hostel corridor and turned to me.

In a low but trembling voice, “Riya... my brother is in *love* with you.”

“What?” I froze, stunned, like a statue. I couldn’t move, couldn’t blink.

“I saw your photos in my brother’s phone,” she continued. “Snaps from our hostel album. That’s when I realized he’s caught feelings. I even confronted him. And he admitted it. He said he’s in *love* with you and plans to propose today. That’s why he invited you all home. The housewarming, it’s just a pretext.”

Her voice softened, eyes starting to glisten.

“Till now, I thought I was the only girl he loved like that. The way he used to care for me, I saw the same tenderness in his eyes for you. And it’s not jealousy I feel, Riya. It’s fear. Fear of what will happen to him when you reject his proposal, because I know you don’t believe in *love*. And I know you’ll turn him down.”

“I *love* him, Riya. He’s not just my brother; he’s been my everything—like a mother, like a protector. He’s never been involved with any girl before. You’re the first. And he’s serious. Truly, deeply serious.”

“I’ll be happy—really happy—if something blossoms between you two. But I can’t bear to see him shattered.

That's why I'm not forcing you, I'm pleading with you: if you don't see a future with him, stop talking to him. Don't come to our place. End it. Completely. I'm a sister first, and then a friend," she said and walked away, her eyes wet but her steps steady.

I stood there, speechless. Anu's words had left me reeling. I'd always sensed something in Raj, something different—but this? *Love*? His "I *love* you" was now ringing in my ears like an echo I couldn't shake off.

I had just made up my mind to consider giving *love* a second chance. But was Raj the one?

My thoughts tangled in confusion. I hurried to the corridor and dialled Avni.

"Hey Riya! How's my Jaan?" she chirped as soon as she picked up.

"Anu just told me her brother is in *love* with me," I blurted out, my voice uneven.

WHAT?" Avni gasped, clearly as stunned as I was.



## Chapter 10

### The Leap Forward

“Avni, I’m scared. Really scared,” I whispered into the phone, my voice trembling. “You remember we went to Shruti’s birthday party? I told you everything, right?” I didn’t wait for her response, I began recounting the whole evening—how I had observed the ease, the comfort, and the joy between the two couples that night.

“There was something about seeing them together. It did something to me. Something unfamiliar. It stirred up feelings I thought I had buried forever,” I confessed, pausing to steady my breath. “I felt these strange, aching hiccups inside my chest. Like maybe the rusted gates of my heart were creaking open after being sealed shut for so long.”

“I thought maybe I could try again. Maybe I could give myself a second chance. Maybe people can really be happy with their second *love* too. But just when I was trying to process that fragile possibility, suddenly, he says he loves me.” My voice cracked. “It’s too soon. Too sudden. Too much.”

I was unravelling.

“I’ve built a shell around me, Avni. I’ve worked so hard to get to this place of calm, even if it’s just surface-level. I’m content with this version of life. Not joyful, not ecstatic, but manageable. Safe. And I know myself—I don’t have the strength to survive another heartbreak. I can’t go through what I did last time. I’m not like you, or Shruti, or even Navya. You all found the courage to rise again. But me? I’m fragile. I’ve barely patched up my pieces from before. I’m not whole. I’m not healed. It took me over five years just to feel less than normal again.”

Tears had begun to roll down my cheeks now. “I’m not ready for this. Not for another rollercoaster.”

Avni’s voice was calm but sharp, firm yet kind. “Riya... just breathe. You said you wanted to give yourself a second chance, didn’t you? You even said you want to change your old beliefs. Then why the hesitation now?”

I didn’t have an answer. Only silence.

She continued, “Look, Riya, you haven’t truly moved on because you haven’t let go. You’re still holding on—not to the *love*, but to the pain. The betrayal. You think you’ve closed the chapter, but in reality, you’re re-reading the same page every day. Until you forgive him, you won’t be free of him.”

She paused for a moment, and though I couldn't see her, I could almost feel her gaze through the silence before she spoke again. "You're not struggling to forget him; you're struggling to let go of the anger, the disappointment, the 'why me.' It's taken root so deep in your heart that it's left no room for something new."

She paused before delivering her next words like gentle truth bombs: "Hatred occupies space. Let *love* seep in and reclaim it."

I wiped my tears, but my heart still felt heavy.

"Riya," she said softly now, "how long will you keep chaining yourself to the past? Look around—life is moving on, people are too. Relationships today may be fragile, yes, but that doesn't mean *love* doesn't exist. You know what I went through with Harry. You know how much I gave and how little I got. Still, I moved forward. And you can too."

"Riya, you are a special child of God—don't roll your eyes," she added quickly, knowing me too well. "You're blessed, and you're strong in ways you can't even see right now. But you need to forgive. That's your first step. And maybe, just maybe, you don't need to fall head-over-heels in *love* today. Maybe you can accept his proposal—not as a declaration of *love*, but as the beginning of a journey. Let it unfold naturally."

And then came the question that made my breath stop cold.

“Tell me, Riya... do you still *love* your ex?”

The words struck like thunder. I froze.

I couldn't answer. I didn't want to answer.

“You see?” Avni pressed. “That's the problem. You're not avoiding *love* because you're over him. You're avoiding it because you're not. You don't hate him, Riya. You miss him. You're not angry because he broke your heart; you're angry because he's no longer a part of your life. You're not mad at men—you're just scared they'll never measure up to the ghost of someone you haven't let go. You're not protecting your heart. You're hiding it. From everyone. Even yourself.”

Avni's words echoed inside me, each one peeling away another layer of denial.

Was she right? Had I spent all these years building walls only to discover I was still looking through the same window?

It felt as if, in just a few words, Avni had held up a mirror to my soul.

Her sentences weren't merely questions—they were truths I had been avoiding, walls I had built around myself for years that she knocked down effortlessly.

"NO, I DON'T!" I screamed into the phone, sobbing. "I don't *love* that betrayer anymore. I don't *love* that stupid toffee wrapper I preserved like a relic for five whole years. I don't *love* those bougainvillea flowers he pretended to bring me as a surprise. I don't care about his pencil that he left on my bench, which I kept like a treasure, nor the page from his notebook I held onto like a memory I couldn't tear away from. I don't even care about the page where I wrote his name a hundred times, as if ink could seal a promise that never existed."

My tears fell faster now, my heart pounding with a blend of rage, grief, and helplessness. "He is no longer a part of my heart, Avni. Not my life. Not my memories. I don't miss him. I DON'T!"

But shouting didn't ease the ache.

"Being angry won't heal you, Riya," Avni said gently, unfazed by my outburst. "That frustration has been locked inside you for too long. You're not just angry at him; you're angry at everyone who ditched your friends, everyone who played with feelings and left."

She paused, her eyes softening as she continued, “Until you take that bitterness out, how will you make room for anything beautiful, darling?”

I couldn’t take it anymore.

“I just want to be alone for some time,” I said, my tone curt, clipped, almost rude.

But Avni wouldn’t let go. “I’m not leaving you alone until you throw out that toffee wrapper, those fake flowers, that old page, and all the pain attached to them. Your heart is full of debris. Clean it out, Riya. Only then will you feel light again.”

That was it.

My throat choked. My fingers trembled. I couldn’t say another word; I didn’t have the strength to argue, to cry, or to agree. I quietly pulled the phone away from my ear, stared at the screen blankly for a moment, and with a heavy heart, pressed the red button.

Call ended.

But the conversation didn’t.

It kept echoing in my head, louder than ever.

In that moment, something broke inside me.

I realized something I had never admitted out loud before: no matter how much time passes, you never really forget your first *love*. Your first boyfriend. Your first crush. And more than anything, your first betrayal.

I didn't know what was right or wrong anymore. But one thing was clear—I wasn't ready for this. For *love*. For anything that resembled a relationship.

I felt like a volcano had erupted inside my skull. My body temperature spiked, ears burning, nose reddened. I wasn't just angry—I was angry at myself. For not being able to defend my own emotions. For letting Avni's questions pierce through the walls I had fortified with so much effort.

Did I... still *love* him?

I remembered something I once read: An adolescent girl is like a creeper plant. The first affection she clings to becomes her support. And even when it withers, she can't easily detach herself from it.

Maybe I was that creeper. Maybe I hadn't moved on. Maybe I sounded silly, ridiculous, dramatic. But the truth—the raw, unfiltered truth—was that somewhere deep inside, my heart was still held hostage by him.

“Why did they inform me so late? I need at least an hour to get ready!” Sofia’s voice cut into my thoughts as I walked back into the room.

“Riya, what are you wearing? What should I wear?” she asked casually, flipping through her cupboard.

I didn’t respond.

“Hello, Riya madam,” she teased, putting extra emphasis on the word madam.

“Can you just shut up and wear whatever you want?!” I snapped, the words escaping before I could stop them.

Sofia turned to look at me, surprised. “Are you okay, Riya?” she asked, her tone softening.

“Yes, I’m fine. Just leave me alone for a while, please. And inform Anu, I won’t be coming today.” I grabbed my diary and left the room without looking back. Sofia kept calling my name, but I didn’t turn.

It wasn’t just a diary. It was my confessional, my sanctuary. The pages had absorbed tears that never made it to my cheeks and secrets I hadn’t dared to speak out loud. I didn’t know what I’d write today—maybe nothing at all. But I needed to hold it, to ground myself with something that had always known my truth.



I cradled it in my arms like a fragile memory, and stepped out. I needed space. Air. Solitude.

I walked to the hostel's backyard and found the old bench beneath the neem tree. I sat down slowly, letting the quiet of dusk embrace me.

In those moments, my life flashed before my eyes—not like a movie reel, but like overlapping sketches of who I had been: the timid child who feared the world, the impulsive teenager who chased illusions, and the so-called mature adult who was still chained by confusion and pain.

I couldn't take decisions. I couldn't even understand what I wanted.

Why was I so distant from every boy who tried to come close?

Did I still want him, even after everything he had done to me?

I held my diary close, but it couldn't soothe me.

My heart felt like it was being squeezed—tight, breathless.

It was as if someone was draining every last drop of blood from it.

I closed my eyes and whispered into the wind:

What is wrong with me?

My mind was clouded with countless thoughts when suddenly my phone buzzed. It was Avni calling. I decided not to pick up and let the call ring out. As soon as her call ended, Anu's name flashed on the screen. The process kept repeating in turns—Avni and Anu had been chasing my phone number for more than 5 minutes.

Why is everyone destined for only one particular *love*? Is it really something like one person being genetically programmed for another?

I had been sitting alone, lost in my thoughts, at the quiet, secluded backside of the hostel for about an hour now. That corner wasn't frequented by many girls; it was a little dusky, dirty, and deserted. But to me, it felt more beautiful than what I was feeling inside.

The dried leaves and scattered bushes around me seemed livelier than my broken heart.

I was hopeless and confused, still tethered to the past—unable to forgive, unable to forget him. The weight of old memories blurred my present, leaving me adrift.

I felt utterly alone. This was the loneliest hour of my life—not because I was physically by myself, but because, despite having so many good friends, I felt an emptiness gnawing at me. Avni, the STARS, my family, my hostel friends—each of them cared, each tried in their own way. Yet their presence only made the emptiness inside me more apparent. Nothing could fill the silence he had left behind. It wasn't just him I missed—it was the part of me that had felt whole, certain, alive when I was with him. And now, that part seemed lost forever.

I kept cursing myself: for loving him, for missing him, for letting him walk all over me, for allowing him to dominate my thoughts, and most of all, for letting him stop me from loving someone else.

When we fail in life, we always have the option to try again—smarter, better. But why doesn't that principle apply to *love*? Why does failure in first *love* feel so helpless and destructive? Why can't I give myself a second chance, even when I desperately want to?

I was scribbling these thoughts into my diary, penning down the turmoil as it poured out of me, raw and unfiltered. The words tumbled onto the page in no particular order—fragmented, messy, much like my heart at that moment.

In between the lines, I absentmindedly scratched patterns into the sand with a twig—circles, spirals, broken stars—shapes that held no meaning, just a desperate need to move, to feel something. The cool breeze brushed against my skin, and the faint sound of rustling leaves filled the silence. My tears fell quietly, soaking into the paper and blurring the ink, as if my grief was trying to rewrite itself.

Suddenly, I heard footsteps approaching—rapid, heavy, and breathless, breaking the stillness like a shout in a library. I froze, instinctively clutching my diary closer, my heartbeat quickening. Whoever it was, they were coming fast—urgent, almost frantic, as if they had been looking for something... or someone.

## Chapter 11

### The Final Verdict

“RIYA...” I heard Sofia scream.

I turned around. She was drenched in sweat, her forehead glistening, and tears streaking down her cheeks. She was breathless, bent over with her hands resting on her knees, gasping for air. It looked like she had sprinted the whole way to find me.

“What’s wrong, Sofia? Why do you look so panicked?” I asked, startled.

“Riya, come fast! Just run with me!” She grabbed my hand and pulled me into a double-paced sprint.

“What happened? Will you please tell me first?” I yanked my hand back, still clouded with anger and confusion.

“Shruti has attempted suicide,” Sofia said, her voice shaken.

“What the hell, Sofia! What are you saying? Shruti? Suicide? Why?” I was devastated.

I grabbed her shoulders tightly, tears instantly flooding my eyes and rolling down my cheeks. Goosebumps shot across my arms, and my mind went completely blank.

“How would I know?! Just come, Riya!” Sofia screamed, still pulling me by the hand.

We rushed toward the hostel room.

A crowd of girls had gathered outside the door. Pushing through them, we managed to get inside. Anu and Tisha were sitting on the floor, holding Shruti in their laps. The warden stand nearby, stunned and silent.

Shruti’s body was pale. Drops of Dettol stained her lips. The broken bottle lay shattered on the floor. I froze in place. My knees buckled, and I gripped the door handle for support. Tears wouldn’t stop pouring. I couldn’t even bring myself to ask her why. I just wanted her to wake up, to answer me, let me hug her—but I was helpless.

“Ambulance has arrived!” someone shouted from the hallway.

Two men dressed in white rushed in with a stretcher.

“Move aside! Make way!” one of them shouted.

They gently placed Shruti on the stretcher and carried her away. Anu, Tisha, Sofia, and the warden followed closely behind.

“Come on, Riya, hurry!” Sofia called out, noticing I was still frozen.

“Why so many girls, madam?” one of the ambulance men asked the warden. “Only one can accompany the patient.”

“Let them come, bhaiyaji. They’re more than sisters,” the warden replied softly.

“We don’t have enough space in the ambulance,” the other man said.

“All right, Shyam, take my car and bring all the girls to the hospital. I’ll go with Shruti in the ambulance,” the warden instructed her driver as she climbed in beside Shruti.

At that moment, I realized, even the warden understood how strong our bond was.

But my mind kept racing: Why, Shruti? Why did you take such a drastic step?

We reached the hospital. Shruti was rushed into the emergency ward. The doctors immediately began checking her vitals. We waited outside, tense and teary-eyed, while the warden handled the paperwork and made phone calls.

Suddenly, Tisha walked up to us.

“Do you guys have any idea why Shruti did this?” she asked, her voice trembling.

“How would we know? You know I wasn’t even there when all this happened. She’s crazy. Everything was going fine in her life; why would she do something like this?” I replied, my voice rising.

“Riya. I think I know why she did this,” Tisha said calmly.

Everyone turned to stare at Tisha.

“Come with me. I want to show you something,” she said, turning to walk away.

We all followed her silently.

“Read this message,” Tisha said, handing me Shruti’s phone.



*Hey Shruti,*

*Last night was unforgettable, but not for the reasons you think.*

*You were good, no doubt. But you really think I loved you? You thought I came to Jaipur for romance? That I cared? What a joke.*

*Do you remember the day Ajay slapped me in front of everyone because of you? Just because I touched your back. He humiliated me like I was trash, and said I didn't even deserve to look at you. That day, I swore I'd destroy both of you.*

*I planted every doubt between you and Ajay. I made sure you two drifted apart. And then, step by step, I played you. Gained your trust. Got close. And finally... last night happened.*

*It wasn't love, Shruti. It was revenge. Every second of it. I wanted to see you fall, and I succeeded.*

*Ajay will get the video any minute now. So will a few of our friends. Maybe more. Let the world see what this touch-me-not Shruti really is.*

*Now we're even.*

*Your boyfriend for exactly one mission.*

The phone trembled in my hand. And then I opened the video.

It was the video. Shruti and Ved. My chest tightened.

I was about to smash the phone when Tisha grabbed my wrist.

“That monster! That heartless, disgusting coward!” I screamed, my voice shaking with rage. “How can someone be so cruel? So manipulative? She trusted him, and he used her like a prop in his petty revenge plot. And then this? Recording it, sharing it, like she’s not even a person with emotions!”

“Riya, breathe... please try to stay calm,” Tisha said, trying to comfort me.

“Calm? You want me to be calm? For how long, Tisha? I’ve watched this happen to me, to Avni, to Navya, and now to Shruti. How many times do girls have to be broken like this? Is it so easy for boys to just walk away after saying ‘I love you’, like it meant nothing? What gives them the right to play with someone’s heart and dignity like this?”

Tears streamed down my face as my breathing grew heavier.

“Why do girls trust so easily? Why is it so hard for us to move on once we’ve truly loved someone? This isn’t just about Shruti; it’s about all of us.”

Tisha pulled me into a hug. I cried in her arms—furious, heartbroken, and trembling.

For nearly half an hour, we all sat in silence—stunned, grieving, trying to process what had just unfolded.

Then I stood up.

“It’s time to take action.”

“Action?” the others looked up.

“Yes,” I said firmly. “Tisha, call the police. Share Ved’s address, his PG. Tell them to get there immediately. Sofia and Anu, avoid talking to Gaurav and Nikhil; we don’t know if they were involved. And someone has to stay with Shruti. Her parents could arrive any moment, and the warden’s already suspicious. We can’t all leave together.”

“Riya... are you sure about this?” Sofia hesitated. “Shouldn’t we talk to Shruti first? This is deeply personal. If this goes public, it could really affect her.”

“She’s already affected, Sofia,” I replied sharply.

“She tried to take her life. Do you think her parents won’t find out? The warden had already called them. And I know how her family thinks—they’ll lock her away, maybe even force her into marriage. We don’t have time. And what if Ved uploads the video online? We can’t risk waiting.”

I turned to leave.

“Are you going alone?” Anu called after me.

“Yes. I have to. Someone must stay here with Shruti. We can’t all disappear at once.”

“Where are you going?” Tisha shouted.

“Just do as I said,” I replied, already rushing toward the exit.

I don’t know what came over me. It was as if years of anger, heartbreak, and helplessness had built into a storm inside me, ready to explode. I wasn’t afraid. Not anymore.

Today, I had nothing to lose.

As I stepped out of the hospital, I saw Raj walking in. Anu must have called him.

“Hi Riya, how’s Shruti?” Raj asked softly, his concern evident.

I didn’t respond. I just stared at him for a few seconds—cold, distant—and then resumed my stride.

“She’s going to Ved’s PG, Raj,” Tisha blurted out, breathless. “He recorded an MMS of Shruti and sent it to her ex. Riya’s going there to confront him. Alone.”

Raj’s eyes widened in shock. He started following me instantly, calling out behind me, “Riya! Listen to me. If you’re really going there, at least let me come along!”

“I don’t need anyone,” I said, not turning back. “Especially not a boy.”

“But there will be other boys there...” he tried to reason.

“So what?” I snapped, cutting him off before he could finish. “Are they going to eat me alive? Don’t even start, Raj.”

“Riya, please stop,” he pleaded.

He caught up to me and grabbed my hand. In a split second, my body collided with his. The momentum made it inevitable. But something strange happened. Time seemed to freeze.

There was no noise. No traffic. No chaos. Just... silence. I couldn't feel my breath. My heartbeat seemed to vanish into a void. It was like my rage had been paused.

His eyes—steady, silver-like, so calm—they were an ocean I never knew I could drown in. For a fleeting moment, my fury dissolved into their depths. His touch was firm yet safe, grounding me in a way that made me feel like I wasn't alone. Like maybe I didn't have to carry the fire burning inside me all by myself.

But that wasn't the time for softness.

I broke eye contact, yanked my hand away, and marched ahead.

“Wait here. I'll bring my car,” Raj called out.

I didn't reply. I just stopped.

Moments later, his Skoda pulled up with a screech beside me. Wordless, I climbed in. The next 30 minutes blurred by. I stared out the window, refusing to meet his eyes, as tears silently traced paths down my cheeks.

I wasn't just going to Ved's place for Shruti now.

This wasn't just her story. It was mine too.

And it was time to end it.

This wasn't a rescue mission. This was a war. I was done being the girl who swallowed her pain in silence. Not anymore.

Images from my past crashed over me like waves, drowning me in memories. Grade 8. The corner bench. The violin music playing in my mind the first time I saw him. He had a face that shimmered, hair the colour of sunlit sand, and a presence that made you pause. Krish.

He sat just one bench away, and I remember watching him through the corner of my eyes, already feeling something I couldn't explain.

The teacher introduced him, a new admission from Dehradun. Asked us to help him with notes. And for some reason, I moved. I, who had never dared to approach a boy first, walked up to him. My fear of losing him, even before I had him, pushed me forward.

"Hi, I'm Riya," I said, stretching out my hand.

"Hi, Krish this side," he replied, shaking mine gently.

"If you need any help with notes, I'm here. I can even help you with the English workbook due Friday," I offered, holding it out with more excitement than I should have shown.

That was the beginning—of everything. And also, of the end.

“Where can I get these books?” he asked.

“I’ll show you during recess. For now, we have Science class,” I replied.

We settled in for Science, but I couldn’t focus. My eyes kept drifting to him. Watching him when he wasn’t looking had already become a habit.

True to my word, I took him to the bookstore during recess. I walked him through the process—books, uniforms, everything a new student would need. I had become his guide, his go-to for every small school task.

Our conversations were almost always academic—assignments, notebooks, submissions. He’d just hand me his notebooks like it was the most natural thing in the world. I was doing two sets of work every day: one for me, one for him.

Then one day, he handed me a bunch of pink bougainvillea flowers.

“Why?” I asked.

“I like you. You’re kind-hearted,” he replied casually. “It’s just a thank-you for everything you’ve done for me.”



That night, I fell asleep clutching his notebook along with mine—the one where I had carefully tucked the bougainvillea petals between its pages, like a quiet secret only I knew.

He started spending every recess with me. Because of him, other girls began gravitating toward me too. He was the heartthrob of the class. The girls from his bus, the so-called *Red Bus Gang*, were always around. I didn't ride that bus. My house was next to the school. I came on my bright red Bazooka cycle. Still, they let me into their circle. I never belonged, but I was tolerated—because of him.

Sometimes, I waited after school, just to watch his bus pass. He always waved. One day, he tossed an Eclairs candy through the window. I caught it and later placed its wrapper inside a white envelope marked “With Love, Krish.”

Then came Christmas—the most awaited celebration in our convent school. A day before our Secret Santa event, he came to me, unusually cheerful.

“Hi Riya!” he beamed.

I was busy finishing the last line of his assignment, sitting in the middle row, fourth bench.

“I’ve decided to give my Christmas gift to you,” he said.  
“No matter whose name chit I get, I’m going to exchange it with whoever has yours.”

My heart skipped a beat. My breath caught. I couldn’t move. Was this real?

“You’re okay with that, right? I just wanted to be sure,” he said, waiting.

Still no words.

“RIYA!” he snapped.

“Yes,” I whispered.

“Don’t tell anyone,” he added quickly. “Or I’ll get scolded.”

“I won’t,” I managed.

He turned and walked out. I stayed frozen in place, staring blankly at the front board. I didn’t move until the next bell rang.

He wants to give me a Christmas gift. Was it just friendship? Or... did he feel the same? I couldn’t tell.

But I was sure of one thing—I wanted to do the same.

I would find out who had his chit and make sure we exchanged gifts. That way, we would both be each other's Secret Santa. How perfect.

The next day, during recess, I began my search. Someone mentioned Garvi had his chit. I scanned the playground but couldn't find her. With only ten minutes left, I decided to head back to class and finish some assignments.

As I neared the classroom, I heard voices—muffled but distinct. My name came up. I paused, stepped closer, leaned against the wall, and listened.

“Are you serious, Krish? I heard you took Riya's chit from Deepak,” Garvi's voice echoed, followed by laughing.

“He already spends all his time with her. He must be in *love*,” Aisha teased.

Both burst into giggles.

Garvi. Aisha. His *Red Bus* girls. The ones always around him.

Krish laughed—a sound that once made my heart flutter but now pierced through it like a blade.

“Come on. Nothing like that. Riya? Really?” he said with a scoff. “Have you seen her? Dark skin, pimples, that hair always drowned in oil and pulled so tight it looks painful... and that old-fashioned long skirt? She’s definitely not my type.”

Each word dropped like poison. I felt my chest tighten, as though the air had been sucked out of the corridor. My hands trembled, pressed flat against the wall I was hiding behind.

So that’s how he saw me.

Not as the girl who guided him when he was new. Not the friend who stayed back after school, helping him study, completing his assignments. Not the one who blushed when he smiled, who saved every little gesture he made like it was something sacred.

He saw none of that.

All he saw was the surface—the skin I was born in, the breakouts I couldn’t control, the hair my mother lovingly oiled every morning, the modest skirt I wore because it made her proud.

He saw me not as someone kind, or helpful, or real, but as a checklist of flaws. Someone to be used, then discarded.

And still, I stayed quiet.

The classroom erupted in laughter.

“She’s such a weirdo,” Aisha added, “But then, why’d you swap chits just for her?”

“Just part of the act. Keeps her motivated,” he said casually.

That moment, that cruel, mocking betrayal, burned into my memory like acid.

“I need to impress her and pull her into my charm,” Krish said, smirking. “She’s already head over heels for me—I’ve seen it. The way she looks at me, like I’m something special. It’s pathetic, really. But useful. I mean, why not use that? She’s mad about me, and I can make that work in my favour. Exams are around the corner, and that damn project file carries 30 marks. It’ll take weeks to finish, and I’m not wasting my time on it. I just want Riya to do it for me. That’s it. She’ll think I like her, that she means something to me. But I don’t give a damn. I’ll say what I have to, act sweet, give her some fake attention. Just enough to make her feel special. Then she’ll do whatever I want. It’s all about luring her in... using her feelings while she’s too blinded to see what’s really going on.”

He said it shamelessly, like it was a strategy—like I wasn't even a person, just a tool he could manipulate.

Garvi laughed, her voice ringing with cruel amusement. "You're so badass, Krish, playing with an innocent girl's emotions."

Their laughter stabbed at me like knives. The warmth in my cheeks wasn't from blushing this time; it was shame, heartbreak, and humiliation, all swelling at once.

I stood there frozen—my back pressed to the cold wall outside the classroom, every word echoing louder in my mind than the last. I felt stripped bare, my affection, my kindness, my silent hopes all laid out, mocked, and crushed beneath their voices.

Then suddenly, a nudge from behind.

"Move in, Riya," Amit said, and I was pushed forward, swept into the classroom by the crowd of students rushing back from recess.

And just like that, I was face-to-face with them.

Krish. Garvi. Aisha.

We locked eyes. Just for a moment. A moment where my heart broke all over again.

I didn't scream. I didn't cry. I just walked quietly to my desk and sat down. Numb.

From that day, I began to disappear from his world—silently, without explanation. When he tried to talk to me, I ignored him. I gave him back every notebook, every half-done assignment, as if I were returning pieces of myself I wished I had never given.

I took study leave soon after, just to avoid him. Avoid the betrayal. Avoid the shame. It was my first heartbreak, and I didn't know what to do with all the emotions clawing at my chest. I didn't know if I should be angry at him for using me or angry at myself for believing that a girl like me, who didn't look like the others, could ever be admired by someone like him.

I thought staying away would be easier.

But I felt like a coward. I didn't confront him. Or Garvi. Or Aisha. They were the ones who laughed at me, yet I was the one hiding, like I was the one who had done something wrong.

Yes, I liked Krish. I adored him. I genuinely cared about him—not because I wanted anything in return, but because that's who I was.

If he had just asked me, even as a friend, I would've happily helped with his project, done his assignments, stayed up late finishing his files. I would have done it all, willingly.

But instead, he chose to play with my feelings.

He didn't have to charm me or pretend to care. He didn't have to weave false hopes or make me feel seen, only to later mock that very affection behind closed doors. He could have just been honest—a friend. But instead, he made a joke out of my kindness. He used my admiration like a lever—to get his work done, to impress his friends, to feel powerful.

Why?

Why did he have to make my emotions the punchline of his jokes?

That's what hurt the most. Not the rejection. Not even the cruel words. But the betrayal of something so simple: trust.

He didn't just break my heart; he crushed the dreamer inside me.

I couldn't focus on my exams after that. I lost the confidence I once had.



I even requested to change schools—just to escape those memories. Just to breathe.

Later, I heard that Krish's father had been transferred, and they moved away. He was in my life for just one year.

But the damage he left behind... that stayed much longer.

I spent the next four years of school walking past Garvi and Aisha in silence. We never spoke again, but their faces were daily reminders of that one recess. That one moment that broke me.

This realization shattered my dreams and left me feeling used and betrayed. It was a painful lesson, teaching me that not everyone I cared about and loved would treat me with the same kindness and respect in return. And even though Krish eventually left, the scars he left behind would linger, reminding me of the painful truth about *love* and friendship.

“Riya! We’ve reached,” Raj’s voice pulled me out of my thoughts.

He hadn’t spoken at all during the ride. Maybe he sensed I was caught in a storm of emotions.

We reached the building and walked up to the door. I knocked. A woman in her forties, wearing a white floral sari and simple gold jewellery, opened the door. She adjusted her spectacles and looked at me curiously.

“Yes?”

“Does Ved Malhotra stay in your PG?” I asked.

“Yes, he does. Who are you?”

“Aunty, I need you to know—Ved has done something terrible. He’s not who you think he is. He’s hurt someone deeply. He doesn’t deserve to stay here.”

She frowned, uncertain. “Excuse me? Do you know what you’re saying? Ved is such a well-behaved boy.”

“I understand how it sounds,” I said, reaching into my bag. “But please watch this first. After that, you can decide.”

I handed her Shruti’s phone and showed her the forwarded message and the video.

As she watched, her expressions shifted rapidly—shock, confusion, anger. Her brows furrowed, and her face hardened.

She was silent for a long moment before finally saying, “I can’t believe this... An MMS? He circulated this? This is disgusting.”

She picked up her own phone and dialled the number from which Shruti had received the message. Ved’s name flashed on the screen. She looked at me with disbelief. “It really is him.”

“Shruti is my friend, Aunty,” I said, my voice shaking. “She attempted suicide because of what Ved did. She’s in the hospital right now. My friend has already informed the police. I’m not here to beg for sympathy. I’m here to ask that you no longer give him shelter. He needs to face the consequences.”

The landlady nodded grimly and called Ved downstairs.

When Ved entered the room and saw me, his face went pale. His usual smugness vanished. He looked terrified.

“I trusted you, Ved,” I said, standing up. “Shruti trusted you. And you broke that trust in the most disgusting way possible. You didn’t just betray a girl; you ruined her dignity, her peace, her life. What made you think you had the right to do that?”

He stayed frozen, unable to meet my eyes.

Then I lost it.

“You used her, and for what? A sick sense of revenge? For ego? For laughs with your friends? You shared her pain like it was some cheap gossip. You don’t just deserve to be thrown out of here; you deserve to be exposed for what you are.”

Ved tried to stop me, clinging to my hands, but Raj stepped in.

“Let her speak,” Raj said quietly.

The landlady raised her voice then. “Enough, Ved! What kind of monster are you? She tried to kill herself. And all this time, I thought you were a decent boy. Shame on you!”

Ved was trembling now. “Aunty, I didn’t know... I didn’t think she would... I’m sorry. Please... forgive me.”

“Forgive you?” I snapped. “You think a few tears will undo what you’ve done? You made a choice, Ved. And now you’ll live with the consequences. Police is coming”

“Police?” Ved’s voice cracked. He dropped to his knees. “Please Aunty, I’ll apologize. Please save me!”

But the landlady’s voice was firm. “Rammanohar! Start clearing his room. He is not welcome here anymore.”

As her servant headed upstairs, Ved begged her again.  
“Please, don’t do this to me...”

She looked at him coldly. “You should be grateful all I’m doing is throwing you out.”

“You deserve far worse than just being thrown out...” I was still speaking when Ved suddenly erupted.

“Shut up! Enough of your self-righteous nonsense,” Ved shouted, his face twisted in rage. “Who do you think you are? Some kind of saviour? Mother India? Phoolan Devi?”

As he hurled those words, Ved suddenly lurched forward toward me, his fists clenched and his steps forceful—as if he was trying to intimidate me or maybe even lash out.

Raj instantly stepped between us.

“Back off!” he barked, eyes blazing.

But Ved didn’t stop, his body language was menacing, his anger out of control.

That was it for Raj.

Without another word, Raj’s landed a punch square on Ved’s jaw, sending him stumbling backward.

The sound echoed through the room like a warning bell. Ved recovered quickly and threw a wild punch in return, hitting Raj's shoulder. And just like that, the air grew thick with fury, the two of them locked in a fierce fight.

In seconds, it turned into a full-fledged fight—fists flying, tempers burning. The landlady shouted from behind, trying to stop them, but they were far beyond hearing.

Though Ved was heavier, Raj's fury was unmatched—fuelled by a sense of justice and loyalty. They burst out of the PG and onto the street. A crowd began to gather, drawn by the commotion. People watched, whispered, some even cheered.

I could see things spiralling out of control.

“Raj! Don't waste your strength wrestling with someone who already lives in the mud,” I said, pulling him away. “Let the law deal with him.”

Just then, the police arrived.

Sensing trouble, Ved tried to bolt, but Raj grabbed him tightly.

“Inspector, that's him,” I said, pointing. “He's the one who made an obscene video of my friend and circulated it. She tried to take her own life because of him.”

The inspector didn't hesitate. "Constable! Detain him. Boys like him don't just break the law—they break trust, destroy lives, and disgrace their families."

Two constables rushed forward and wrestled Ved into control. He fought back like a wild animal, but they overpowered him and pushed him into the police jeep. Raj and I followed in our car.

At the police station, we handed over Shruti's phone and showed them the message, the video, every piece of evidence we had. The inspector listened carefully, his expression turning serious as he reviewed the material. He assured us that they would look into the matter thoroughly and that strict action would be taken. Though they hadn't yet visited the hospital or spoken to Shruti directly, he promised that a team would be sent shortly. For now, Ved had been arrested for creating a public disturbance, but the inspector made it clear this was just the beginning. They would not let the issue slide. His words, calm yet firm, gave us a flicker of hope—that this time, something would actually be done.

After nearly half an hour of statements and formalities, Raj asked the inspector if we could leave.

"Yes, you may go for now. We'll stay in touch," the inspector replied.

“Let’s go, Riya,” Raj said gently.

We stepped out of the police station and into the fading light, ready to drive back to where it had all started—the hospital, where Shruti lay, still fighting.

I am incredibly happy today. Not because I brought down Ved’s world, not because the police humiliated him or his landlord threw him out of the PG. Not even because punishing Ved felt like punishing Harry—the one who ruined Avni’s life—or because I emerged victorious over the betrayers of Avni, Navya, and Shruti.

I’m happy because I healed the dreamer inside me. I finally overcame the defeat, shame, questions, confusion, and betrayal I’ve been carrying for the last five years.

I’m happy because Shruti will get justice.

For so long, I was broken inside. And broken hearts don’t fall in *love*; they only cry.

But today, seeing Ved behind bars—with guilt clouding his eyes, tears streaming down his cheeks, and sweat glistening on his forehead— I felt like I had taken my revenge.



Ved became the face of every betrayal I had endured. Seeing him punished felt like a blow struck for every time I had been wronged.

It felt as though I had slapped Krish for abandoning me, kicked Dev for ruining Navya's life, and punched Harry for breaking Avni's trust.

For the first time in years, I felt light, as if the rusted gates of my heart were finally creaking open.

And from within, a broken angel emerged. She smiled, holding her heart in her hands, and whispered: Move on. Give *love* another chance. Don't judge everyone through the same shattered lens.

I am truly blissful today. It feels like I've finally conquered my past. The heavy chain that once wrapped around me is loosening, and I'm ready to break free.

*Those who supported my story with Rudra, keep reading, others go to page 213.*

## Chapter 12

### Six coffees later

“It was very brave of you,” Raj said, attempting to break the silence. I turned to look at him.

“I mean it,” he continued. “People these days struggle to take a stand even for themselves. But you did it for your friend. That’s commendable.”

“I’m not brave,” I replied. “I’m a coward. A runner. It took me five years to overcome my fear. That’s not courage, that’s just... delay.”

Raj looked thoughtful. “Anu told me... about what happened. That you were betrayed back in school. That it changed the way you saw *love*.”

“Yes,” I nodded, voice quiet but firm. “He was my first crush, if I can even call it that. I was drawn to him—maybe it was the way he looked, his unique eyes, his porcelain skin. But if he disliked me for not having the same, why should that make me feel less? Still, using my emotions for his benefit...that was cruel. Especially for a boy in eighth grade.”

Raj listened intently, his silence encouraging me to continue.

“We don’t see things as they are,” he finally said. “We see them as we are. You saw good in him because you’re good. Loving someone isn’t a mistake, Riya. And no one understands *love* better than time does. Maybe the universe is planning something bigger for you.”

He looked into my eyes—gently, but deeply. His words seemed to settle somewhere in the quiet corners of my heart, lingering there like a gentle whisper.

“Do you believe in *destiny*?” I asked him, unexpectedly emotional.

“People say if you desire something with all your heart, the entire universe conspires to make it happen. Then why didn’t it happen for me? Why did my *love* stay incomplete?”

He smiled faintly, and said, “We don’t always get what we desire, Riya. We get what we deserve. And sometimes... what you desire is far less than what you truly deserve.”

That line struck me. Clear. Precise. A masterstroke of wisdom in a moment of vulnerability.

As I processed his words, a different worry surfaced. Rudra.

I had completely forgotten. He had asked me to meet him at Crystal Palm. It had been three hours since his message.

Would he still be there? Probably not. Who waits for someone that long?

But... what if he was?

“Can you drop me at Crystal Palm?” I suddenly asked Raj.

“Crystal Palm? Why do you want to go there?” he asked, his tone filled with concern.

“Someone’s expecting me. I just... I need to check,” I replied, the urgency in my voice unmistakable.

Raj looked confused, hesitant even.

“You sure? Shruti’s still in the hospital. I thought you’d want to go back to check on her?”

“I will,” I said. “But please... just drop me there first. It’s urgent.”

Though I sensed reluctance in his eyes, he didn’t say no. He simply nodded and turned the car towards Crystal Palm.

When we reached, I stepped out quickly, barely saying a word. My mind was a whirlpool of thoughts.

As I walked towards the mall, a storm of emotions gathered inside me— nervousness, anticipation, fear and hope.

Why was I even going? Rudra had messaged hours ago. There was no logical reason to believe he'd still be there.

But something inside me—maybe foolishness, maybe courage—pushed me forward. I crossed the concrete jungle of shops, scanning every signboard for one word: *Costa Coffee*.

And then, there it was.

A large, square-shaped space in the centre of the mall, slightly sunken like a mini basement. Stairs led down to rows of cushioned chairs and round tables. People were scattered around, their backs turned to me.

Could he be among them?

How would I even recognize him?

I had never seen him before.

The only option was to call.

With slightly trembling fingers, I dialled his number.

*‘Zara si dil mein de jagah tu...’*

My heart skipped.

The song echoed from one of the tables below—and stopped.

A boy picked up the call.

My eyes locked onto him.

It was him.

“Hello, Riya,” the boy at the table said, his voice warm but calm.

My heart skipped a beat. There was no mistaking it now. The boy sitting across from me was Rudra. And I realized with sudden clarity that he’d been waiting for me since last three hours.

“Hello, Riya,” he repeated with a smile, this time with a soft chuckle in his voice.

I stood there, frozen, unable to respond. My thoughts scrambled, heart racing.

Then, suddenly, he stood up, turning around to face me.

For the first time, our eyes met. Time seemed to stretch as I looked at him. He moved toward me like a character from a romantic film, the scene playing in slow motion. For a moment, I could almost hear a violin playing, as if the world had become a movie set.

He was slender, with sharp features—a pointed nose, deep brown eyes, and pale, almost porcelain skin. He was dressed in a crisp white shirt, blue jeans, and loafers. His blackberry phone and Armani watch gleamed in his hands.

As he closed the distance between us, my heartbeat quickened. I could feel my pulse thudding in my ears, and my breath came unevenly, as if every part of my body was aware of this moment.

For a brief instant, Krish flashed across my mind, his dismissive words echoing: “I would never even look at a girl like her.”

The words stung, and I could almost hear the familiar story starting to repeat itself—the handsome boy and the “not-so-beautiful” girl.

I stood there, feeling small in my casual outfit—jeans and a simple top, hair flowing untamed around my shoulders. I hadn’t dressed for a date, let alone for this.

I had just come from a hospital, from a fight, from a police station. I wondered if I smelled bad, or if my skin was too oily. A thousand thoughts raced through my mind.

But he seemed unaffected by it all—his presence so striking, so confident—while I felt like I was just another face in the crowd.

“Finally, you came,” Rudra said with a smile, his voice laced with a trace of relief.

“Hi,” I managed to say, my voice barely above a whisper.

“You made me drink six coffees already, Riya,” he replied, a teasing tone in his voice. “Now I’ll be awake all night for sure.”

I blinked, surprised by the playful banter, and suddenly found myself following him without question. It was as if some force beyond my understanding was guiding me. My feet moved of their own accord, and though I was silent, I was alive—alive in a way I hadn’t felt in a long time.

Is my eyebrow done right? Are there any hairs on my arms? Why did I come here? I should’ve gone to the hospital instead.



Rudra led me to a disc-shaped table, its surface scattered with empty coffee cups, a Nokia E-7 mobile, a pair of keys, and a yellow rose. He pulled out a chair for me, and I sat down, still a little unsure.

“Somewhere deep inside, I knew you’d come,” he said, breaking the silence and sliding the menu towards me.

“How were you so sure I was Riya?” I asked, my eyes scanning the menu to avoid looking directly at him. “You’ve never seen me before.”

He met my gaze with a smirk. “I always knew I would recognize you when the time came.”

I blinked, taken aback by the intensity in his words.

“What would you like to have?” he asked, his fingers hovering over the menu.

“I’ll have a café latte, medium,” I replied, still a little nervous.

“Anything to eat?” he pressed, not letting the menu go.

“I insist,” he said, his hand gently placing itself on the menu, awaiting my choice.

“Blueberry muffin,” I said, picking the first thing that came across me, hoping to avoid the awkwardness.

His hand was so close to mine that I could smell his cologne—a mix of crisp, smoky, and slightly musky scent. It made me uneasy, and yet, I couldn't pull my hand away.

He called the waiter over.

“One café latte, medium. One large *Americano*. And one blueberry muffin. Please make sure there's no honey in the topping, unlike what's mentioned in the menu,” Rudra ordered smoothly.

I blinked, surprised. I had once mentioned my allergy to honey. I hadn't realized he'd remembered, let alone been thoughtful enough to check the ingredients before ordering for me. It was a small detail, but it meant something.

“This is for you,” Rudra said, handing me the yellow rose. “At least we're friends, if not more.”

“Thank you,” I whispered, taking the flower from him, feeling the weight of his gaze on me.

He leaned back in his chair, his eyes softening. “You made me wait a lot, Riya. What took you so long?”

I paused for a moment, feeling a knot in my stomach.

I then explained everything with Shruti—the hospital, the fight, the police station—that had kept me from showing up earlier. Rudra listened silently, his brows furrowed in concern.

“That’s horrendous,” he muttered after a pause. “Boys like him make it hard for good girls like you to trust decent guys like me.” He tried to keep his tone light, but I could hear the worry beneath his words. “I know you’re bold; you probably handled it all better than most would, but still... it scares me to think what could’ve happened. You shouldn’t have had to deal with something like that alone.”

I shifted in my seat, feeling vulnerable.

“I had emotions bottled up for years,” I said, trying to make sense of it all. “Ved had to bear the brunt of that.”

Rudra nodded thoughtfully. “Yeah, Avni told me about your past... the disastrous one.” He cleared some space on the table for the waiter to place our order.

“You seem to talk a lot about me to Avni,” I remarked, lifting my eyes from the table and meeting his gaze.

“I’ve been in touch with Avni for almost a year now. She shares everything with me,” Rudra said, casually sliding the latte towards me. “

After she started dating Harry, she became my friend too. And whenever there was a problem in their relationship, she'd call me. I ended up being her relationship counsellor, guiding her through it. I consider her a good friend of mine."

"Good friend? Seriously?" I replied, my words edged with disbelief. I took the latte from his hand but couldn't hide my frustration. "If you considered yourself her good friend, you would've warned her about Harry. You could've told her the truth, not let her get involved with him."

Rudra sighed, running a hand through his hair before answering, his voice steady but laced with regret. "Riya, I've told you this before. I was their mutual friend. I wanted happiness for both of them. In the beginning, I wasn't as close to Avni as I was to Harry. I couldn't just ditch my best friend for a girl I barely knew. But then, as I spent more time with Avni, I saw how deeply she loved him. And Harry made it clear to me that he was just playing with her. That's when I had to step in."

He took a sip from his *Americano*, eyes distant for a moment as if reliving the past. "I did what I could. Harry was ready to end the relationship, realizing how serious Avni was, and he wasn't prepared for it. I just suggested an easy way out. It wasn't perfect, but it worked. And as far as I know, both of them are happy now."

I sat silently for a moment, processing his words.

“And Riya,” he continued, his eyes now meeting mine, “why are we still talking about them? Aren’t they sorted out now? I think we should be talking about us.”

He slid the muffin toward me, breaking the tension with a small gesture, but I wasn’t ready to let go of the conversation just yet.

“What do you want to talk about us?” I asked, cutting a piece of the muffin with my fork. “We’ve been talking for a while now. We know most things about each other. This is our first meeting, but not our first conversation.”

Rudra leaned back in his chair, eyes fixed on me, his voice serious but gentle. “I want to ask you something.”

I paused, the fork still in my hand, close to my mouth. “What?” I muttered, distracted.

He locked eyes with me, and his voice dropped slightly, as though it were a question that had been eating at him for a while. “Why did you come here to meet me? When your best friend is in the hospital?”

My hand froze, the fork barely touching my lips. The question hit me like a wave.

Why was I here? Instead of going with Raj to the hospital, I'd come here. I could feel the weight of the decision pressing down on me. Is Shruti not important to me? Is Rudra more important to me than her? Why did I make this choice?

The thought spiralled in my mind. The situation was already sorted out. I could have gone to the hospital, explained to Rudra, and maybe promised to meet him later. It's not like he would have stopped talking to me. He would have understood, right?

But then, there were already people at the hospital with Shruti. My presence there wouldn't have made a huge difference, but here, with Rudra, I was making an impact. This moment, this connection, was something I hadn't expected, but I was living it.

Had I come here because I *love* him too? I thought of Rudra's words, his confession of *love*. Was this my way of accepting his proposal? Was this the beginning of something between us?

I felt a mix of guilt and confusion. Why was I sitting here, enjoying coffee and muffin, when my friend was in the hospital—when she needed me?

The guilt gnawed at me, but there was something else, something I couldn't ignore.

The sudden ring of my phone pulled me out of my thoughts. It was Tisha.

“Where are you? You went to Ved’s PG, right? What happened?” she asked, her voice frantic.

I took a deep breath before answering. “Tisha, actually, I had something important come up, so I couldn’t go with Raj. I’ll be at the hospital soon. How’s Shruti?”

“Couldn’t come with Raj? What do you mean? Raj isn’t at the hospital anymore? It’s so late. What’s going on? Where are you? And what could be more important than a dying friend?” Tisha’s voice came through, filled with concern and surprise.

“What! Raj isn’t there by now?” I was taken aback. “Maybe he went home. I’ll explain everything to you later, once I’m back. Just... please be on my side. Tell me, how’s Shruti?”

“She’s still unconscious,” Tisha replied. The doctor said she’s out of danger, but it’ll take some time before she regains consciousness. They’re expecting her to wake up by early morning.”

I let out a sigh of relief, feeling some weight lift off my chest. “That’s some relief. Are all of you still at the hospital? Did the warden allow you to stay?”

“Yes, she did. I’m taking advantage of being in my last year. Plus, the warden’s a good soul; she understands people’s feelings.” Tisha’s voice softened, showing gratitude for the care they’d received.

“That’s good to know. So, I guess my absence won’t be too noticed for now, right? I’ll be there soon.” I tried to reassure her, though a part of me was still torn.

“Okay. See you then,” Tisha replied. “And I’m looking forward to hearing about this important thing. Bye.”

Rudra couldn’t help himself and chimed in with a grin, “At least I’m important.”

I cleared my throat, avoiding his gaze as I mulled over my own feelings.

“Tell me, am I?” He leaned in slightly, pressing for an answer.

I took a deep breath, setting down my fork, and looked him in the eye. “I don’t know if you’re important to me or not,” I began, my voice steady but soft. “But I do know that I want to move forward with this... whatever this is.” I hesitated for a moment, feeling exposed, but pushed on, “I like talking to you. I want to keep doing this. After seeing Ved face the consequences of his actions, I feel... lighter. Somewhere inside, a change is blooming.



I've held myself back for so long, keeping a wall up, afraid of getting hurt again. But today, I feel ready to take a step forward. When you emailed me to meet, I was not sure about coming. But after what happened with Ved, something shifted inside me. I feel like I'm ready to try things I've resisted for too long."

Rudra straightened up, his expression turning serious. He set his coffee down, eyes intent on mine. "It matters to me a lot that you feel this way" he said softly. "And I'll wait for this change to fully bloom."

For a long moment, we just sat there, eyes locked, both of us caught in the gravity of what had just been said. Eventually, I looked away, feeling a mix of vulnerability and hope.

"Let's walk outside," Rudra said, breaking the silence.

"Okay," I replied quietly.

He waved to the waiter to bring the bill. As the waiter handed it to him, he slid his card inside without breaking eye contact, a gesture that seemed effortless yet confident. He stood up and gestured toward the exit.

We walked outside, and I couldn't help but notice the way other girls glanced his way.

It wasn't lost on me how effortlessly people were drawn to him, and to my surprise, he didn't seem to notice at all.

"Girls seem pretty interested in you," I teased, a hint of jealousy creeping into my voice.

"Well, yes, I'm used to it," he said with a casual shrug, slipping on his sunglasses with that familiar confidence.

His charming demeanour and the way he carried himself made it clear why people gravitated toward him. From the first moment I'd met him at the café, his magnetic presence had been undeniable. Whether it was his sparkling eyes, the confidence in his smile, or his sense of style, he had a way of commanding attention without even trying.

We walked in comfortable silence for a while, the evening air growing cooler as we strolled. The conversation flowed naturally, like we had known each other for ages. The world around us felt quieter, and I was lost in the moment. The gentle breeze brushed against my hair, sending shivers down my spine as I realized how at ease I felt with him. This walk felt surreal, like something out of a dream.

"It's getting dark," I finally said, breaking the silence. "I think I should leave now."

“Yeah, true,” Rudra agreed, glancing up at the darkening sky. “It’s getting late.”

“Come on, let me drop you to the hospital,” he insisted, pointing toward the parking lot.

“Thank you for offering, but it’s okay. I can take a cab or an auto,” I replied, hesitant to accept his offer.

“No chance,” he said firmly. “I want you to be safe, and I want to make sure I drop you off. Plus, I’ll get some extra time with you.” He gestured toward the parking lot, his eyes never leaving mine.

As we reached the parking lot, Rudra walked ahead and, with effortless grace, opened the door of his white Skoda Octavia for me. The car gleamed under the soft lights, its polished surface reflecting the quiet elegance he seemed to carry with him. That simple act of chivalry left me momentarily speechless. It wasn’t just about manners—it was thoughtful, deliberate, and surprisingly endearing.

He moved swiftly around the car and settled into the driver’s seat, his movements smooth and confident. The interior was understated yet refined—leather seats, a faint citrus scent, and a dashboard lit in warm tones. Before starting the engine, he glanced over to make sure my seatbelt was secure.

“Are you comfortable? Should we head out?” he asked, his voice calm and caring.

“Oh yes,” I replied, still wrapped in the warmth of the gesture.

As the car rolled forward, my eyes caught sight of another white Skoda Octavia parked nearby. It tugged at a memory. Raj. Strange how this car always seemed to appear in moments that mattered. Maybe it’s just a coincidence. Or maybe some things, like emotions, have a way of circling back—uninvited, yet familiar.

“Shall we?,” he asked, starting the engine. The car hummed to life, and I felt a strange sense of comfort wash over me. His presence was reassuring, and for the first time in a long while, I felt truly cared for. Every action, no matter how small, spoke volumes about his character.

“Avni told me you were betrayed in *love* during your school days. She said it made you lose faith in *love*,” Rudra said, his voice low but firm.

“Yes, I was betrayed. Those were the horrendous years of my life. I was attracted to his sheer glamour. I liked him probably because of his different eye colours and very fair skin. So, if he disliked me for not having the same, why should I be sad?”

“But using my emotions to get his work done...that was cruel, especially for a boy in eighth grade,” I continued.

Rudra’s voice softened. “We don’t see things as they are; we see them as we are. You saw the good in him because you are good.

“Loving someone isn’t a crime. And time will help you understand *love* better. The universe has something better planned for you.”

His words were profound, and as he spoke, his gaze locked with mine, as if searching for something deeper.

I felt it—a connection that transcended words. His eyes seemed to see right through to my soul, and I couldn’t help but feel that he was someone who would never betray me. He radiated kindness and a sincerity that was rare to find.

“What do you like in me?” I asked, the question slipping out before I could stop it. “I mean, you’re handsome, too good to be true. A lot of girls must have had crushes on you. Well, it’s not your fault you never saw me before. Maybe if you had, you wouldn’t have bothered meeting me. I’m just... average-looking. You must regret waiting three hours for me.”

Rudra's gaze softened, and he took a deep breath before answering. "Hey, listen, I can't stop thinking about you. Our conversations feel like windows to our souls. We share our fears, our dreams, and our deepest thoughts. That connection is what matters to me; it's what makes me understand you. It's not about looks; it's about how you make me feel when we're together. It's your smile, the way you laugh."

"I cherish every moment we spend talking because those moments are when I feel closest to you. You're not just your looks to me. You're your heart, your soul. Your eyes are like windows to a world I never want to leave. Every time I look into them, I feel like I'm home. Your smile... it's like the sun breaking through the clouds, warming everything in its path. I could get lost in that smile forever."

"And waiting for you? It was worth every second. Trust me, I wouldn't change a thing about meeting you. You're not average-looking. You're special, and I'm glad I found you."

His words left me speechless. I was starstruck, frozen in place. The world outside seemed to fall away, leaving only the two of us. There was a strange stillness in the car, no sound, no movement—just the intensity of his gaze.

His eyes shone like silver, and I could feel the weight of every word he said. They felt like promises, ones I didn't know if I was ready to accept.

As we continued to drive, the minutes seemed to stretch on endlessly, and I found myself lost in him. His presence, his words—everything about him pulled me closer.

When we finally arrived at the hospital, Rudra's voice broke the silence. "I don't want this moment to end. It feels like we just met," he said quietly, parking the car in front of the hospital gates.

The stillness between us was palpable. Our eyes met, and our hands brushed against each other, sending a jolt of electricity through my body. I couldn't stop staring at him. His eyes sparkled in the dim light, and his hand felt cool against my skin, yet I felt drawn to him.

He leaned towards me, almost instinctively. The space between us dissolved into something electric—charged, quiet, intimate. Our faces were inches apart, and I could feel his breath, warm and steady, brush softly against my skin. My heart pounded against my ribs, louder than it should have, like it wanted to speak before I could.

For a split second, the world outside the car blurred and vanished. There was only him—his presence, his gaze, the unspoken something hanging between us. I felt the pull, the kind that tempts you to forget everything else. My fingers curled slightly, yearning, but I caught myself. I inhaled deeply, as if air alone could bring back balance. I straightened in my seat and closed my eyes briefly, chasing clarity in the chaos of feeling. It was a moment where I almost gave in—a moment I knew I'd remember.

Rudra didn't move away. He stayed right there, still and unwavering, as if holding space for something I couldn't name. Then slowly, deliberately, he raised his hand. Before I could speak or react, his fingers brushed the seatbelt clasp. With a soft click, he unbuckled it—carefully, gently—as if even that touch carried meaning.

He stepped out and walked around to my side, opening the door for me with that same effortless grace. He extended his hand with a smile that felt like a promise. "Come on," he said softly. "Let me help you out."

We looked into each other's eyes one more time before I started walking inside.

After a few steps, I turned back. He was still standing in the same spot, watching me with that same tender expression.



“I promise, I’ll make sure we have more moments like this,” I said, my voice steady but soft.

Both of us smiled.

I walked straight into the hospital, resisting the urge to turn again. The lingering scent of his cologne clung to the evening air, soft and comforting. But as I approached the hospital entrance, it faded, replaced by that familiar mix of antiseptic, sweat, and something metallic—pulling me out of the softness of the evening and into the harshness of reality.

Tisha, Sofia, and Anu were sitting in front of the emergency room. The moment they spotted me, Tisha and Sofia came running, their faces etched with worry. Anu, however, remained seated, her eyes fixed on the floor, lost in her own thoughts.

Suddenly, I sensed movement behind me. I turned and startled to see Raj walking in just a few steps behind me. My mind froze for a moment. He had left me at the café long ago. Where had he gone? Had he gone home first and then come to the hospital? If so, how did he manage to reach here just as I did? The timing felt too perfect, too strange.

“Raj, both of you took so long? Tell us what happened,” Sofia asked, her eyes darting back and forth between us.

I glanced at Raj, searching his expressions for answers, but his face was unreadable. My mind buzzed with questions I didn't know how to ask. Something didn't add up, and I couldn't shake the unsettling feeling that there was more to this story than I knew.

There was a brief exchange of words, and soon, everyone knew the entire story. There wasn't much left to say after that—just a heavy silence that enveloped us, occasionally interrupted by the distant hum of hospital announcement or the soft shuffle of nurses' shoes on the linoleum floor. The adrenaline had faded, leaving behind a peculiar stillness, a collective exhaustion we didn't speak of. We huddled together in the uncomfortable plastic chairs of the waiting area, and eventually, one by one, we all drifted off to sleep.

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## Chapter 12

### Tea, Trauma and Truth

“It was very brave of you,” Raj said, finally breaking the silence.

I turned to look at him.

“I mean... people don’t even stand up for themselves these days, and here you are, standing tall for your friend. That’s something,” he added.

“I’m not brave,” I replied. “I’m a coward. The kind that runs away. It took me five years to face my fear.”

“Anu told me...” he said gently, “that you were betrayed back in school. And that since then, you’ve stopped believing in *love*.”

So he knew.

He knew about my past—the pain, the betrayal.

And yet, he was still here. Still about to propose to me, if Anu was right.

I wanted to question him. I wanted to ask why, knowing all this, he still wanted to take a chance on me. But I chose silence. I chose not to ruin the moment.

“Yes,” I admitted. “I was betrayed. It was a horrible time. I was drawn to him—his glamour, his rare eye colour, his fair skin. Maybe he disliked me for not having those things. That’s fine. But using my feelings just to get his school assignments done? That’s cruelty. Especially for an eighth-grade boy.”

“We don’t see things as they are,” Raj said quietly. “We see them as we are. You saw the good in him because you are good. And loving someone is never a crime. No one understands *love* better than time. The universe is still writing your story.”

He looked straight into my eyes, his gaze deep, steady, and warm. It wasn’t just words—I felt them.

I felt them sink into my chest like soft rain on dry earth.

He seemed genuine. Gentle. The kind of person who wouldn’t break my heart but hold it carefully, like something fragile and sacred.

“Do you believe in *destiny*?” I asked softly. “The universe... things like that?”

“People say if you want something with your whole heart, the universe conspires to give it to you. Why didn’t the universe conspire for me? Why did my *love* stay incomplete?”

He paused, then said, “We don’t always get what we desire. We get what we deserve. And maybe, just maybe, what you desired... was less than what you actually deserve.”

His answer was like sunlight breaking through storm clouds—gentle yet powerful, warming the parts of me I thought would stay cold forever.

We remained silent after that. No more words. Just thoughts, tangled in quiet understanding, until we reached the hospital.

Tisha, Sofia, and Anu were waiting near the emergency room. As we walked in, Tisha and Sofia rushed to us, eager to hear what had happened. Anu, however, remained seated, expression unreadable. I sensed she wasn’t happy seeing Raj and me together.

We exchanged a few sentences, and soon everyone knew the whole story. There wasn’t much left to say after that—just a heavy silence that settled among us, broken only by the occasional hospital announcement or the shuffle of nurses’ shoes on the linoleum floor.

The adrenaline had worn off, and what remained was an odd stillness, a shared exhaustion we didn't talk about. We curled up in uncomfortable plastic chairs in the waiting area, and eventually, one by one, we drifted off to asleep.

Suddenly, I woke up.

It was 3 a.m.

Everyone was still slumped in their hospital chairs, lost in restless sleep.

Everyone except Raj.

He was watching me.

Had he been watching me while I slept?

Feeling a bit self-conscious, I adjusted myself.

"Good morning," he said cheerfully, as if it wasn't the middle of the night.

"Good morning," I replied, my voice groggy, eyes heavy with sleep.

"Tea?" he asked.

How could I say no to that? I'm a tea lover through and through. In India, tea isn't just a beverage—it's an emotion, a ritual, a moment of pause woven into our daily lives. From roadside stalls brewing strong, sugary chai in metal kettles to the quiet comfort of homemade masala tea, it's part of who we are. No wonder that, despite being the world's largest tea producer, we end up consuming nearly 70% of it ourselves. Tea is how we begin conversations, soothe nerves, or simply mark time—and I was no exception.

"Sure," I replied, almost smiling.

He gestured for me to follow. Like a zombie pulled by caffeine and curiosity, I trailed him to the hospital canteen. Raj ordered two teas and, unexpectedly, a plate of pav bhaji.

"Are you really that hungry?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Aren't you?" he countered. "In all this Ved drama, none of us had dinner. I was actually waiting for you to wake up so we could grab a bite."

He was waiting for me?

My eyes searched his face, unsure of what to say.

“I had planned a house party tonight,” he added with a wry smile. “Ironically, everyone ended up at the hospital instead. Life is unpredictable, you know. But Life is also beautiful—conditions apply.”

I said nothing. After all, I wasn’t planning to go to that party anyway. Anu had warned me to stay away from her brother.

Our tea and pav bhaji arrived—hot, fragrant, and oddly comforting in the cold silence of the hospital canteen.

At around 3:15 a.m., we sat down to eat.

And then, out of nowhere, Raj spoke.

“Riya... I know what you feel about *love*. I know your philosophy. But I need to tell you something.”

I paused, pav in hand, suddenly aware of the heaviness in his voice.

“I like you. I’ve liked you since the first time I saw you—when you walked into the guest room wearing that pink salwar suit, with metallic earrings and jingling bangles. I still hear the sound of your bangles in my dreams.”

I stared at him, stunned, speechless, with bhaji-smeared pav frozen in mid-air.



“I used Anu as an excuse to get your number,” he continued, his voice steady. “There’s just something about you. You’re innocent in a world that rarely is. You’re strong yet gentle. When I texted you asking about Anu, I just wanted a reason to talk to you.”

He paused, almost as if he were gathering the courage to continue.

“I even organized tonight’s house party just to spend time with you. It had been too long. I missed you.”

His words hung in the air, seeping into my skin, lingering in the space where silence lived.

“I know,” he said, “you’ve been through a lot. And maybe today, after seeing Ved’s truth, it feels like heartbreak all over again.”

“I’m not asking for anything, Riya. Not now. I just want you to know how I feel. It’s getting hard to hold it all in. I *love* you. I really do.”

I froze.

He looked into my eyes—steady, respectful.

“You can take your time,” he added gently.

“There’s no pressure. I won’t ask you for anything. I can’t force you to *love* me back. But you can’t stop me from loving you either. I just hope that if one day your idea of *love* changes, I’ll be the first to know. Till then, let’s at least be friends. If you’re okay with that.”

Then, breaking the weight of the moment, he asked, “You want more pav?”

I almost laughed. How can he be so normal after saying all that? Was he a pro at this? Or was he just incredibly comfortable in his own skin? Maybe *love*, for him, was as natural as hunger, thirst, cold... or boredom. No drama. Just pure, honest feeling.

How could he confess his *love* over pav bhaji?

It amazed me how he could look right into me without making me want to hide.

He was composed. Mature. Genuine. But... was I ready?

A few hours ago, I had felt like I was breaking free from my past—ready to change my mindset, to let the broken angel within me breathe again. But this...this felt sudden. Too soon.

Raj was a good boy. But being good doesn’t guarantee *love*.

Falling in *love* isn't about logic or timing, it's about a spark. A spark that could strike now, or later...or maybe never.

And even though he said he didn't expect anything, how can anyone just stay friends after a confession like that? Wouldn't every word, every smile, give him hope? Wouldn't staying close to him mean leading him on?

I was confused. We sat there in silence, finishing our food. Raj stole glances at me, but he didn't push. He didn't make me feel awkward. If anything, I felt safe. But I was still torn, trapped between the weight of my past and the uncertainty of a future I wasn't sure I could build just yet.

With the last sip of tea and a few remaining crumbs, our midnight feast came to an end.

"Are you done?" Raj asked.

I looked at him, puzzled.

"With the pav bhaji," he clarified, a soft smile playing on his lips. "Shall we move?"

Ah. For a moment, I thought he was reading my thoughts. We left the canteen and walked silently toward the emergency room.

“Shruti is conscious now.” Sofia came running, breathless.

In an instant, we all rushed toward the emergency room, hearts pounding with anxiety and relief. The doctor met us at the door, his expression calm but firm.

“She’s stable. Please be gentle with her. No stress, no bombardment of questions. You can take her home, but only if she remains calm.”

The tension in the air was almost suffocating.

As soon as we entered the room, emotions erupted like a storm breaking loose.

“How could you do something so reckless, Shruti?” Tisha’s voice cracked, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“We were terrified! What if...what if something had happened to you?” Sofia’s voice trembled.

“You didn’t even think about your parents...” Anu’s words dissolved into sadness.

I could feel Shruti shrink beneath the weight of their words. Her eyes were red, her hands fidgeted nervously under the blanket.

Her breathing came quick and shallow. She looked like a child caught in the flood of her own mistakes, drowning silently in regret.

“Everyone, stop!” Raj’s voice sliced through the chaos like a knife. “She’s not ready for this. She needs time, not an inquisition. Give her space. Please.”

The room fell silent, except for the beeping of a monitor and Shruti’s soft sniffles.

“I’m sorry...I should never have done this,” Shruti whispered. Her words spilled out slowly, like water dripping from a cracked faucet. “I became fragile, terrified, numb. I just... stopped thinking. When I saw Ved’s message, it felt like everything around me collapsed. My mind and body stopped working together. I thought...this is it. This is my end. I’ve thrown myself into the dirtiest soup, and I’ll never be clean again. He used me. I was a fool. Just a tool to stroke his ego...”

Her voice broke, and she covered her face with trembling hands. Her shame was louder than her words.

I walked over to her, gently placing my hand on her shoulder.

“Shruti, please don’t cry. You need to heal—physically and emotionally. Just rest. Don’t think about anything else right now.”

I didn’t tell her Ved was behind bars. That truth would come later, when she was strong enough to bear it.

Suddenly, the door swung open with a burst of energy.

“How are you, my child?”

An older woman stepped in, her printed skirt swaying with each hurried step, a long kurta flowing behind her. Her head covered in a dupatta, eyes brimming with tears as she rushed to Shruti’s bedside.

“Maa?” Shruti blinked, her voice a whisper of disbelief. “How... how are you here?”

“The warden called us,” her mother replied, gently cupping Shruti’s face. “She said it was a suicide attempt... something about a boy... Why, Shruti? Why didn’t you think of me? How would I have lived without you?”

And then came the thunder.

“What will you do with such a shameless girl!” boomed a deep, wrathful voice.

Everyone turned toward the door.

A man in his forties stood tall and rigid, his white kurta and dhoti immaculate, his turban tightly wound, and his moustache curled like judgment itself. Shruti's father.

"You didn't think of your family? Your siblings? Our village? Our name?" His voice cracked like a whip. "I was against sending girls to study out of town. This is what comes of it!" His voice grew sharper with every word. "You went to study or to indulge in these characterless acts? I didn't even want to see your face."

Shruti shook uncontrollably, her body curling inward as if she could disappear into herself. Her mother hushed her, placing a trembling hand on her back, whispering soft prayers into the air as if her *love* could shield Shruti from the weight of his words.

"At least speak kindly. She's still recovering. Let her get better first," her mother pleaded, her voice frail but firm with motherly instinct.

But her father's rage was a boulder rolling downhill—unstoppable.

"For me, she is dead. I only came because your mother insisted. What shame she has brought! All those years of our ancestors' honour, destroyed in one act of filth."

“She slept with a boy before marriage, and there’s even a video! What face will I show to my ancestors when I meet them in heaven?” he continued.

The silence was suffocating.

Shruti’s sobs had turned silent, her shoulders trembling with the weight of her father’s condemnation. Her mother wept quietly, her hands still clutching Shruti’s.

And then, Raj.

His voice rang out, clear and unyielding. “Uncle, are you sure you’ll be going to heaven?”

A gasp swept through the room.

“Who are you, boy?” Shruti’s father turned, thunderclouds swirling in his eyes. “And how dare you interfere in our family matter?”

Raj stepped forward, shoulders squared, gaze steady. “I’m someone who gives more importance to humanity than so-called honour,” he replied, his voice calm yet unyielding. “Your daughter was used, manipulated, and humiliated by someone who should be rotting in jail— he is. And instead of standing beside her, you’re adding to her wounds. What kind of father does that?”



The man's eyes flared with indignation. "This is none of your concern," he shot back, voice trembling with rage. "If it were, you wouldn't be creating a public scene in a hospital ward. And how are you so sure you'll go to heaven? People who don't respect women... God doesn't reserve a place in heaven for them."

The room felt silence. Even Shruti's father faltered, his gaze flickering between Raj and the cold, sterile floor. His fists clenched, knuckles whitening, but his voice did not rise again.

"Boys like Ved take advantage of girls like Shruti," Raj continued, his voice gaining strength with each word. "They know village girls won't get support from home, so they act without fear. And somewhere deep down, Shruti already knew you'd never accept her after all this. That's why she did what she did. If she's lying on this hospital bed, it's not just because of Ved. It's because of you."

The accusation landed like a slap. Shruti's father's chest puffed with indignation. "Why are you interfering in our family matter? She is my daughter—I'll decide what to say and do with her."

Raj didn't flinch. His voice remained steady, almost serene. "She's not your property, Uncle. You should consider yourself lucky to have a daughter at all."

“By saying such things, you’re not just insulting Shruti—you’re insulting your wife who gave birth to her, and your own mother who gave birth to you.” He kept talking.

A ripple of shock passed through the room. Raj’s words hung heavy in the air, sharp and unyielding. He pressed on.

“Shruti trusted the wrong person, yes. But her mistake was emotional, not immoral. She had dreams—plans. But things didn’t go her way. Now, more than ever, she needs your support—not your shame, not your fury.”

Shruti’s father glared, but something in Raj’s words had splintered the rigidity in his expression. A crack in the stone. His gaze wavered.

“And who are you to her?” he snapped, his male ego clearly bruised. “Why are you speaking like this in front of her own parents?”

Raj’s voice softened, but his resolve did not. “She’s my sister’s friend, and I consider her like my own sister. And even if I didn’t know her at all, I would have still stood up for her. Because that’s what decent human beings should do.”

A heavy pause settled over the room.

Shruti's mother stepped forward, her voice trembling but her eyes steady. "He's right," she said quietly. "Let go of your anger, Shruti's father. Take your daughter home. She is still the same little girl who used to run around after you, calling your name. She's ours. It's our job to protect her."

Her words fell gently, like feathers settling on still water. For a moment, no one spoke. Her father stood there, chest rising and falling, fist slowly unclenching. Then, without a word, he turned and left the room, footsteps echoing down the corridor.

Shruti broke into fresh tears.

"Don't cry, my child," her mother whispered, pulling her into a hug. "Your father... he's gone outside to lighten his heart. He's a man. He can't cry in front of all of you. But I know him. I know he's hurt too. Just promise me one thing—you will never take such a step again. Ever."

Shruti clasped her mother's hands, her body shaking. "I promise, Maa."

She buried her face in her mother's shoulder, letting her tears soak into the fabric. The pain didn't disappear, but something in that embrace made it bearable. The cracks had begun to heal.

That evening, Shruti was discharged from the hospital. Her parents, still reeling from the shock but trying to stay strong, decided to take her to a relative's home in the city for some privacy and peace—away from the noise and tension. They didn't want her to return to the PG or be anywhere near the college.

This time, her father was different—more present, more understanding. It was as if something had shifted in him. He still held on to certain traditions, but now, he looked at his daughter not through the lens of customs, but with quiet pride and empathy, finally seeing her for who she truly was.

Shruti's father had always been a man of tradition, quick to judge her when news of her involvement with Ved surfaced. His harsh words stung deeply, fuelled by the weight of societal expectations. But everything changed when the truth began to unfold. His perspective shifted, and for the first time, he saw Shruti as a victim rather than a source of shame.

Determined to stand by her, Shruti's parents fully cooperated with the police, aiding the investigation in every possible way. They took her back to their village for safety and assured the authorities that she would be present whenever required for the case.

Her father, once bound by rigid beliefs, now stood strong, vowing to fight for justice.

With the support of a dedicated lawyer who promised Ved would face consequences, the family prepared for the long legal journey ahead. Shruti decided to take a gap year, stepping away from the chaos to heal. We would see her again when she returned for the court date—stronger, braver, and ready to fight back.

## Chapter 13

### Dawn of Transformation

Anu invited all of us to the new Year. At the same time, Avni too had invited me over—Rudra was in town, and the celebration sounded promising. Shruti had gone back to her village with her parents, trying to rebuild herself.

Sofia and Gaurav? They were now seasoned night-outers, thanks to their '*secret chamber*', which gave them a strange sense of freedom.

It was later confirmed that Gaurav and Nikhil weren't involved in Shruti's MMS scandal. They had no idea about Ved's betrayal and distanced themselves from him once the truth came out. There was relief in knowing they weren't part of that darkness.

Tisha and I, on the other hand, had no solid plans for New Year's. Sofia had pleaded with us to join them, but we didn't want to be the unwelcome third and fourth wheel in their romantic night.

Besides, he had been messaging me since morning, inviting me to join his party. It sounded tempting, but I wasn't sure. I was drifting, undecided.

I hadn't seen Tisha all morning.

"Where were you?" I asked as she finally walked in that afternoon, lugging a suspiciously bulky shopping bag.

She shrugged. "Just out."

I narrowed my eyes. "You were shopping? Alone?"

"Yes," she replied nonchalantly.

"Really? Let me see what you've got!" I tried to snatch the bag from her before and she protested.

"I'm sorry, you can't see it," she said, suddenly serious.

"Why not?" I asked, narrowing my eyes further.

She didn't answer. Just marched to her bed, clearly avoiding me. Of course, I chased after her.

"Why can't I see it, huh?" I insisted.

"It's not for kids. It's for big girls," she replied with a smirk.

"You calling me a kid?" I asked, crossing my arms.

"Yes... at least for me," she said, tossing the words like confetti.

Fuming, I snatched and yanked the bag open.

Out came a bar.

Kingfisher pints. Absolute vodka. Mixers. Chips. Soda. And—oh god—a pack of Benson & Hedges Lights.

“What the hell is this?” I shouted. “Are you planning to open a bar in the hostel?”

Tisha didn’t even flinch. “Just a few hours of heaven, Riya.”

“You mean to say, tonight, here, you’re going to drink in the hostel?” I was stunned.

She rolled her eyes. “You fraidy-cat. That’s exactly why I didn’t want to show you. Don’t create a scene, please.”

She threw herself on the bed dramatically. “Riya, you can forget all your heartbreaks, failures, drama... all of it. Just one thing matters: if there is a heaven, it’s right here,” she said, arms wide, eyes dreamy.

I sighed, shaking my head. “I think your definition of heaven and mine are poles apart. Carry on.” I walked out, confused and mildly horrified.

We had winter vacations, but many girls chose to stay back just to party on New Year’s Eve.



I had also decided to stay because there wasn't anyways much to do at home. Also, Tisha had pleaded not to leave, saying this was our last year together. I hadn't realized this was part of her plan.

I stood at the room gate, watching her.

She looked... content.

Each sip she took was savoured like nectar. Her face glowed with joy, as if she'd discovered life's secret. It was unsettling—the way she held that bottle, I could almost believe it was sacred.

I stared, torn.

Should I try it?

Just once?

What's the worst that could happen?

Tisha would be there. She knew what she was doing... right?

Suddenly, she caught sight of me.

“Ohhh Riyaaa! Come, honey,” she slurred, laughing.

“Welcome to my heaven!” She grabbed my wrist and dragged me into the room, her steps unsure but her enthusiasm loud.

“You know Sofia calls you Miss No-No?” she giggled.

“Miss what?” I asked, confused.

“Miss No-No! You say no to everything—no to boys, no to drinks...” She lifted the vodka bottle dramatically. “No to short skirts, no to yes, no to no.”

“Tisha, look at yourself! You’re almost fainting,” I said, trying to help her sit properly.

“It’s not fainting. It’s flying, baby. Flying in the airrrrr!” she declared, pouring herself another glass.

“Come on, Riya. Just one glass. That’s all. When life feels like crap, when you feel worthless, alcohol gives you a little magic. Just one sip and poof! You’re free,” she whispered, swirling the drink with reverence.

I hesitated.

“Tisha, I didn’t expect this from you. You’re from a village and—”

Her expression changed instantly.

“Excuse me?” she snapped. “You think alcohol is just an urban thing? Cities grew out of villages, Riya. You have no idea how much stuff village folks consume. The narcotics department would faint if they saw the stats. More than half of my village people are involved in opium production.”

Tisha presents me with the factual data from the narcotics department.

I stood there, silent, not sure if I should laugh, cry, or get angry. This wasn't just about drinking. It was about identity, pain, rebellion... and maybe some misplaced idea of freedom.

“Really? You mean to say villagers drink more alcohol than urban folks?” I asked, curious.

“You have no idea about their capacity. In villages, even sixty-year-old women take drugs. Hiding tobacco pouches inside their blouses is so common. Men constantly have smoking pipes filled with cannabis, bidis, cigarettes, gutka, tobacco, marijuana—it's all so common,” she replied, laughing and taking another swig.

“Tisha, are you mad? Look at the way you're pouring alcohol into yourself,” I scolded.

“Leave me alone. You know, God can’t be everywhere all the time in every situation—that’s why he created addiction. I’ve been drinking for the last three years. My father wanted to marry me off to a rich old man back then, but somehow my mother convinced him otherwise. She sent me here to escape the daily flights at home,” Tisha said, her tone laced with emotion.

That night, Tisha was filled with both emotions and alcohol. Usually quiet, she was now pouring out her heart and soul. That’s when I truly realized the effect alcohol can have.

“I was sick of my home—constant arguments, and my father always scolding my mother for not giving birth to a son. Every year, we had a new baby. It was like kids were our annual family ritual. Finally, it stopped when my mother had a boy, after three more daughters. And now that I’m graduating, I have to return to that life,” Tisha said, taking a drag from a cigarette.

Tears welled up in her eyes, ready to mix with the alcohol on her lips. I placed my hand over hers, feeling deeply empathetic.

“Come on, don’t make that miserable face. This is a gala night. Have this vodka and fly with me,” she said, passing me a glass.

Somewhere in my mind, I had already decided to taste it—not just for the drink, but to be fully present with Tisha, in spirit and in experience.

I took the glass from her hand and gulped it down.

“Whoa! You should take it slow,” Tisha warned.

“It’s blistering! I can feel it sting inside my throat. How do people like this? It has no taste and doesn’t appeal to me,” I said, shaking my head.

“Everyone feels that way the first time, but gradually, you start enjoying it,” she said, handing me a second glass.

After two glasses, I started losing my senses. The whole room seemed to be spin. Though I wasn’t entirely in my right mind, I could still feel an overwhelming pool of emotions swelling in my heart.

As the evening wore on and the alcohol took hold, I found myself opening up to Tisha more than ever—voicing my uncertainties and fears.

“Tisha, I don’t know what to do with my life. Is it okay to fall in *love* again? What if I get hurt again? I’m really hesitant,” I confessed.

“It’s okay, Riya. We’re all figuring things out,” Tisha reassured me, gently placing a hand on my shoulder.

“But remember, life is too short to be stuck in indecision.”

“But what if I make the wrong choice? What if I end up regretting it?” I sighed, clouded by doubt.

“There are no wrong choices, Riya—only lessons to be learned. It’s better to take a chance and learn from it than to live with the regret of never trying,” Tisha said, smiling, her eyes glinting with unexpected wisdom.

“Thank you, Tisha. I needed to hear that,” I said, gazing into her eyes with gratitude.

“Anytime, Riya. I’ll always be here for you, no matter what,” she replied, grinning, clearly uplifted by my newfound resolve.

Feeling clear and decisive, I knew what I had to do. No more second-guessing or holding back. I made the call—ready to join the New Year’s party.

“Hi, I was thinking of joining the party. Is it too late?” I asked him, standing outside the room, staring at the old furniture behind which lay the secret passage.

“Hi Riya! Of course not. Deep down, I was hoping for your call. I knew you’d reach out. My feelings for you won’t go in vain. This party doesn’t feel alive without you,” he replied warmly.

“All right... can you come pick me up? I hope it’s not too much to ask,” I said.

“Definitely! I’ll be there in 20 minutes. Outside the hostel, right?” he responded quickly. I could already hear his keys jingling.

“Not outside the hostel—just a little farther, near the crossroads. I’ll come there,” I clarified.

“Perfect. See you soon,” he said before hurriedly hanging up.

“I called him and asked him to come pick me up so we can celebrate New Year’s Eve together,” I told Tisha excitedly, walking back into the room.

Tisha was half-asleep.

“You called whom?” she mumbled.

“R... Tisha, how will I leave the hostel? You’re not exactly in shape to help me out,” I asked nervously, stopping myself from saying his name.

“Call Zam from my phone. Ask her to help. If she refuses—and she will—just say ‘*Banana Sandwich*,’” Tisha muttered, then dozed off again.

I grabbed her phone, searched the contact list, and tapped on Zam’s number.

“Yes, Tisha? Having another party with your juniors, as always? What do you want now?” the voice on the other end answered coldly.

“Hi! This is Riya. Tisha asked me to call you. She’s dozed off, and I need help sneaking out of the hostel,” I said quickly.

“What?! She told you juniors about the secret chamber too? Anyway, I’m not in the mood to help you. I’m cosy and settled in. No time for your affairs,” she snapped, nearly hanging up.

“*Banana Sandwich!*” I blurted out just in time.

“Yaar! Sister-f\*\*\*er Tisha! When do you want to go?” she snapped, flipping sides instantly.

“In 20 minutes?” I said, sensing victory.

“Fine. Give me a missed call when you’re near the secret chamber,” she said and hung up.



I wondered what the secret behind “*Banana Sandwich*” was. I’d ask Tisha some other time.

Now, I had to get ready—really ready. I wanted to be beautiful tonight.

I opened my cupboard and began selecting the perfect dress. It had to be elegant yet graceful. After a moment, I chose a knee-length pastel pink one-piece frock, adorned with delicate flower embroidery. The fabric was light and flowing, perfect for the evening, though maybe not ideal for Jaipur’s winter chill. But I wanted to look just right.

I slipped on my Fastrack watch—the only one I owned—and grabbed a muffler, just in case the cold got to me. I paired it with my ballet flats. Letting my hair fall loosely over my shoulders, I applied light makeup, just enough to highlight my features. A touch of pink gloss, a rosy tint on my cheeks, and a dab of kohl on my eyes. Perfect.

After adjusting my dress and running my hands through my hair one last time, I grabbed my handbag, ready to make an exit.

As I stood in front of the mirror, a smile spread across my lips. Every sense in my body buzzed with excitement for the evening ahead. With a flutter in my chest, I picked up my phone and gave Zam a missed call, then walked out the door—ready to slay.

Outside, I saw the girls already at work. I couldn't help but notice the way they moved—their busy chatter mixing with the rustle of furniture being shifted.

Three of them were clearing the clutter that sat lifeless in front of our secret passage.

“Are you the one who made us work on New Year's Eve?” one of them slurred, half-drunk, holding a brick in her hand. Her tone was teasing, but playful.

“Me... ah, yes...” I replied quickly, my gaze darting to the side, scanning for an escape route in case she actually tossed that brick my way.

“Ugh... that Zam should've been more careful that day. How many times has Tisha blackmailed us with that video? Just delete it already,” the second girl muttered irritably, her hands full with a broken chair.

Are they serious? Does Tisha really have a video of them? Is she using it to get what she wants?

But whatever the truth was, I wasn't going to waste time wondering. My plan was working. I was getting closer to him.

"All right, you're free to go now. Once you're through, we're sealing this passage for good," the third girl said, rolling her eyes and giving me an impatient look.

I moved quickly, sliding through the passage, careful not to let my pastel dress snag. I needed to emerge just as radiant and graceful as I had been when I got ready. Nothing was going to ruin this moment.

I reached the other side and was about to thank them, but before I could say a word, they were already sealing the passage shut—ignoring me in their haste.

I took a deep breath and looked ahead. There it was—the wall I had to climb.

Wait... What?

How was I supposed to get up there?

I turned back, but the passage had already been closed behind me, and the girls were long gone.

Forcing down a wave of panic, I steadied myself. I couldn't let fear ruin this evening—the first one in so long that felt right. But seriously, how was I going to climb this wall?

I remembered Tisha casually pulling out a loose brick from this very wall and scaling it with ease. The key was finding that hidden, misplaced brick.

I began pressing on several bricks, hoping one would budge, but they were all tightly fixed in place. After what felt like an eternity of false starts, I finally found it—the loose brick. With a quiet thud, it fell to the other side of the wall. My heart raced, terrified someone might have heard it.

Taking a steadying breath, I placed my foot on the fissure and pulled myself up with all the strength I could muster.

Even once I reached the top, I had to carefully plan my next move—sitting on the edge, sliding one leg down carefully, then letting the other follow until both feet were on the ground.

I groaned inwardly. Why hadn't I planned this better? My dress was completely wrong for this kind of adventure. I should have dressed for a climb, not a night out. What was I thinking?

With all the energy I had left, I finally made it to the top of the wall. As I peered over the edge, ready to make the next move, I saw him.

His eyes locked with mine.

I froze, breathless. “YOU?”

“YES, ME,” he replied with that same charming grin that always left me unsteady.

A flood of emotions washed over me as I stood there, precariously perched on top of the wall, my eyes locked with his. A mixture of surprise, disbelief, and something deeper—something that felt like the beginning of something new—coursed through me. I had never expected this moment, but here he was, standing below me in the moonlight, as captivating as ever.

His presence sent a shiver down my spine, a sensation that felt both electric and unsettling. He looked just as I remembered: well-groomed, mysterious, and entirely too charming for my own good. The air between us crackled, and I found myself struggling to find my voice, my thoughts swirling in a chaotic dance.

I opened my mouth to speak, but before I could get a word out, he stepped forward, closing the gap between us. His nearness made my heart race, and I couldn't tear my gaze away from his intense eyes.

"Surprised to see me?" he asked, his voice teasing but warm, a playful gleam dancing in his eyes.

"More than surprised," I whispered, my voice barely audible. My heart was racing, but I nodded, unable to look away.

With a sly smile, he reached up and offered me his hand—his touch a promise of something I wasn't sure I was ready for, but couldn't resist.

"Well, I couldn't let you embark on this adventure alone, could I?"

His words sent a wave of relief through me, easing a tension I hadn't even realized I was holding. At the same time, they filled me with warmth, a rush of feelings I couldn't quite name. My hand found his, and he guided me down the wall, his grip steady—offering not just physical support, but a sense of security I didn't know I needed.

As my feet finally touched the ground, I took a deep breath, grounding myself. My pulse quickened, my heart caught somewhere between happiness and nervous anticipation. The ground beneath me felt real, solid, and yet, the world around us seemed to hold its breath.

“Thank you,” I murmured, my eyes meeting his. “For being here.”

His smile softened, and his gaze lingered—warm and sincere.

“Always,” he replied, his voice low and genuine. His eyes sparkled as he nodded toward the road ahead.

“Shall we?”

I smiled, my heart lifting. “Yes,” I replied. And without hesitation, I took a step forward, falling into step beside him.

As we walked together into the night, I felt a rising sense of anticipation. This wasn’t just a walk—it was the beginning of our journey.

As the shadows of the past faded into darkness, the promise of whatever lay ahead lit up the path like a beacon.

This was just the beginning.

I couldn't stop wondering how he had discovered the wall and the secret passage. And why hadn't he followed my request to park his car farther from the hostel? Instead, he had come right up to it.

"How did you find out about the passage and the wall?" I asked, curiosity getting the better of me.

"I specifically told you to park away from the hostel. So why are you here?"

He gave me a playful smile. "I couldn't resist the urge to see you," he said, his voice warm and sincere. "I wanted to make sure you were safe—that sneaking out wasn't too risky for you. So I decided to walk to the hostel. Then I heard this brick fall and realized you were trying to climb the wall from the other side. But don't worry, I parked my car a lane away, just like you asked. I did what you wanted."

His words caught me off guard and filled me with gratitude.

We began walking side by side, our steps quiet but in sync as we made our way down the dimly lit lane. We didn't speak, but there was something comforting about the silence between us—easy, unforced.



When we reached his car, I settled into my seat as he started the engine, the soft hum calming my nerves.

As I sat there, processing what he'd said, a wave of relief washed over me. But my mind couldn't stop wandering to the *what ifs* of the night.

What if he hadn't been there tonight? What if I'd been left to climb that wall alone?

I shuddered at the thought. The idea of scaling that wall without anyone to help me—without the safety net of his presence—felt overwhelming. How would I have managed it, especially in this dress? The delicate, flowing fabric was the worst possible choice for such an adventure. It would've been a total disaster—my dress catching, me stumbling, maybe even falling.

And then there was the date itself—my perfect, carefully planned evening. What if I had finally made it over that wall, only to arrive flustered and dishevelled, looking like I'd just wrestled with a concrete monster?

Definitely not the radiant, put-together girl I'd hoped to be tonight. All that effort—my makeup, my hair, my outfit—would've gone to waste in one clumsy moment.

But now, with him here, everything felt easier. He made the impossible seem simple. He was the reason this night still had magic.

I glanced at him and felt a warmth rush through me. Without him, this could've been a complete mess. Instead, it had become a memory I'd cherish.

As we drove through the quiet streets, I got lost in my thoughts, the city lights blurring like streaks of watercolour outside the window. I didn't even notice how far we'd gone until he gently broke the silence.

"So, where to?" he asked, glancing at me with a playful glint in his eye.

I turned to him, and in that look, I saw something more—a quiet intrigue, a flicker of connection. My heart fluttered with anticipation. I didn't care where we were headed. I just knew this night was no longer about the destination. It was about the journey. With him.

"Surprise me," I said, my voice light but layered with meaning. "Take me somewhere unexpected."

He gave a sly smile, a mischievous spark in his eyes. "You got it," he said, nodding.

And with that, he refocused on the road.

As we drove deeper into the night, the city seemed to blur around us, fading into something dreamlike. A thrill of adventure coursed through me.

I had no idea where we were going, but I didn't need to.

This was already turning into a night I'd never forget.

## Chapter- 14

### Under the Starlit Sky

The cool night air streamed through the partially rolled-down windows, carrying with it the faint scent of freshly cut grass and the promise of adventure. We drove through the city, the headlights cutting through the darkness, illuminating the streets we had both wandered countless times—but never together, not like this.

His presence beside me was both comforting and thrilling—a strange blend of familiarity and excitement. The radio played softly in the background, the music filling the space between us, but it was his quiet energy that filled the silence. I couldn't help but glance at him now and then, noticing the way his jaw was set, his fingers lightly gripping the steering wheel, and the fleeting smile that crossed his face when he caught me looking.

"Where exactly are we going?" I asked after a few minutes, unable to resist the curiosity bubbling up inside me. "Do you even know?"

He chuckled and glanced at me with a raised eyebrow. "I know exactly where we're going," he said.

His voice was smooth and reassuring—though there was a glint of mystery in his eyes. "But if I told you, it wouldn't be a surprise."

I felt my pulse quicken. There was something intoxicating about not knowing, about trusting him enough to let the night unfold as it would. Whatever the destination, it was clear he had a plan. And I was eager to see where it would lead.

After a while, we veered off the main road and onto a quieter path—the kind that wound its way through trees, offering only glimpses of the city's glow in the distance. The gentle hum of the tires on the road was the only sound, adding to the calm, almost surreal feeling of the moment.

Eventually, we stopped in front of an old, weathered building, its stone exterior bathed in the soft light of a nearby streetlamp. It looked abandoned, faded—like it had stories to tell but no one to listen.

"What is this place?" I asked, my curiosity piqued.

"You'll see," he replied with a grin while opening the door. His energy was contagious, and as I stepped out of the car and into the cool night air, I could feel my heart racing with anticipation.

He led me to the entrance, the door creaking as he pushed it open, revealing a narrow staircase that spiralled upward into darkness. I hesitated for a moment, my hand instinctively reaching for his—but he was already a few steps ahead, waiting for me with a look that invited me to follow.

"You trust me, don't you?" His voice was low, almost playful, but there was an underlying sincerity—a reassurance that made my heart settle.

I took a deep breath and nodded. "I do," I whispered.

Together, we ascended the staircase, the air growing cooler with each step. It was a strange feeling, as though we were entering another world—one where the rules didn't quite apply, and time moved differently.

When we reached the top, I was greeted by a stunning sight: an open rooftop offering an unobstructed view of the city.

But it wasn't the view that caught my attention; it was the way he turned to me, his eyes gleaming under the stars.

"I thought we could watch the night unfold together," he said softly, his voice like a gentle breeze. "There's something magical about being up here, away from everything. Just the city, the stars, and us."

My breath caught in my throat as I took in the scene before me. The city stretched out in every direction, its lights twinkling like a thousand stars fallen to earth. The sky above us was clear, the stars so bright they seemed close enough to touch.

I stepped forward, drawn to the edge of the rooftop, the wind teasing my hair as I absorbed the breath taking view. This was unlike anything I had expected—and yet, in that moment, it felt exactly right.

He joined me, standing beside me—close, but not too close. We both stood there in silence for a while, the world below us fading away, leaving only the quiet hum of the night and the sound of our breaths.

"This feels like something out of a dream," I whispered, my voice barely audible.

He smiled—a soft, knowing smile. "Maybe it is."

As the minutes passed, I found myself sharing more than just the view with him. I told him about my dreams, the things I had always wanted to do but never had the chance. He listened quietly, his gaze fixed on mine, never once interrupting. When it was his turn, he spoke of his own ambitions, his own secrets—things he had never shared with anyone else.

The more we talked, the more I realized how easy it was to be with him, how natural this connection felt, as though we had known each other far longer than we actually had. But there was a certain magic in the air—something unspoken, but palpable.

And just as I thought the night couldn't get any more surreal, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, delicate box. My heart skipped a beat as he opened it, revealing a silver necklace with a tiny star-shaped pendant.

"It's for you," he said, his voice soft, almost shy. "A reminder of this night. Of us."

I was speechless for a moment, the gesture overwhelming me. All I could manage was a smile—one that reached my eyes—as he stepped closer, holding the necklace delicately between his fingers.

"Turn around," he said softly.

I did as he asked, my breath catching as I felt his fingers gently brush the back of my neck. He fastened the clasp with quiet care, and for a second, his hands lingered, sending a shiver down my spine.

"There," he whispered, his voice close to my ear. "Perfect."



I turned back to face him, emotion swelling in my chest. “Thank you,” I whispered, my voice thick with emotion.

His warmth wrapped around me like a blanket, and for a moment, everything felt still, as if the world had stopped turning just for us.

“To many more nights like this,” he murmured. And before I could respond, he leaned in, his lips brushing against my forehead in a gesture so tender, so full of promise, that I felt my heart soared.

As we stood there under the stars, the city below us, I knew this was only the beginning of something incredible—something that would change us both forever.

“Alright, I think it’s time we get out of here,” he said, his voice laced with excitement.

“Go out?” I asked, surprised.

“Do you honestly think we’re going to spend the entire night here on a rooftop? It’s getting cold, and I’ve got a lot more planned for tonight.”

His playful tone made me chuckle, but it also made me realize how little time we had, how fast this night was already moving. There was a spark in his eyes, one that promised adventure, and I wasn't about to let that go to waste.

"Where are we going?" I asked, already intrigued by the mischief in his voice.

With a grin, he grabbed my hand, guiding me down the stairs, through the narrow hallways, and back into the cool night air. He didn't answer right away, but I could feel the anticipation building. The car was waiting, and as we slid into it, he pulled out his phone and began dialling someone. His voice lowered as he spoke in quick, urgent tones, though I caught the words "special" and "reserve a spot."

I sat back, trying to make sense of the night's whirlwind. He was in touch with someone, clearly making arrangements, but the excitement in his voice made me more curious than ever. What could be so special that he needed to make sure we had a spot?

We drove through the night, the city lights blurring by. After what felt like no time at all, we arrived at a massive building that pulsed with energy even from the outside. The neon lights above the entrance spelled out "LAS VEGAS" in bold, flashing letters.

This was no ordinary club. It looked like something straight out of a movie—extravagant, loud, and almost too glamorous to believe. The line outside stretched down the block, but as we approached, a man in a sharp suit spotted us. He approached with a warm smile, extending his hand to shake mine before turning to him.

“So good to see you,” the man said with a grin, then nodded to a nearby security guard. “Right this way.”

We were escorted past the line, through thick red velvet ropes, and directly into the heart of the club. The thumping bass of the music hit us as we stepped inside. The air was thick with anticipation for the countdown to midnight.

The décor was a mix of glitzy glamour and edgy modernism. Gold chandeliers sparkled from the ceiling, and abstract art lined the walls. A massive bar stood at the centre, serving cocktails that glowed under the dim lighting. The dance floor was already alive with movement.

I had to admit, I was overwhelmed. I’d been to clubs before, but this place was on another level. It wasn’t just a party, it was a spectacle.

He led me through the crowd, his hand still holding mine as he navigated past dancers and drinkers to a raised VIP section. As we walked, I caught glimpses of the crowd, everyone was celebrating in their own way: laughing, hugging, flirting. The energy was infectious, and I felt myself getting caught up in it, my heart racing with excitement.

When we reached our table, it was already set with two glasses of champagne. He smiled at me, the mischievous gleam in his eyes never fading.

“Do you like it?” he asked, leaning in slightly.

I nodded, still taking in the incredible surroundings. “It’s... beyond what I imagined. You certainly know how to make an entrance.”

He chuckled and took a seat, motioning for me to sit beside him. “Only the best for tonight,” he said, his voice a bit softer now. “And we haven’t even gotten to the best part yet.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What’s next?”

He just grinned. “Wait and see.”

As the minutes ticked down to midnight, the crowd grew even more electric. Anticipation hung in the air like a heavy fog. People were dancing, singing, counting down in hushed voices. The clock on the wall glowed, and the tension was palpable.

He turned to me, his gaze intense, holding mine for a moment before speaking again. His voice was raised, trying to overpower the DJ's beat.

"This is going to be a night to remember," he said, his thumb brushing lightly over my hand, sending a shiver through me.

Just then, the DJ dropped the beat, and the room erupted in cheers. People stood up as the countdown began.

"Five... Four... Three..."

I looked at him, his hand still clasped in mine, and something in his eyes made my heart skip a beat.

"Two... One..."

The entire club shouted, and then, fireworks.

The sky outside lit up in a burst of colour as fireworks exploded above the building, and the crowd went wild. Everyone was kissing, laughing, celebrating. Cheers and the crackle of fireworks filled the air, but it was the way he was looking at me that made everything else fade away.

He turned to me with a playful gleam in his eyes, extending his hand as if asking for permission to dance. The gesture was almost gallant, like he was waiting for me to honour him with the privilege.

“May I have this dance?” he asked.

I smiled, heart racing. Of course, I wanted to dance with him. But the way he asked, so sincere, so gentle, made the moment feel even more special. Without hesitation, I placed my hand in his, feeling a spark as our fingers intertwined.

The DJ launched into the next song—*Desi Girl*! The crowd erupted. Time seemed to slow as he led me onto the dance floor, his steps confident, his rhythm infectious.

I was surprised at how effortlessly we moved together, like we’d been dancing partners for years.

He wasn't just good, he was magnetic. Every step was fluid, every beat matched perfectly. I couldn't keep up at first, but the way he guided me made it all feel so natural. He took my hand in a swift, smooth motion and spun me around—a perfect whirl, like a scene from a romantic movie.

I got lost in the moment. He was fearless on the floor, owning the space. And I was right there with him. The music, the lights, the crowd—they all faded away. All that mattered was us, moving in sync, our eyes locked as if nothing else existed.

I wasn't thinking anymore—no worries, no past, no future. Just us, caught in the rhythm.

When the song ended, reality slowly crept back in. I stood there, breathless, my heart still pounding from the rush of it all.

The music had stopped, but no one around us had moved. The people who had been dancing had gradually pulled back, and I realized the floor was now mostly empty. It was just us, still dancing, still lost in each other, bathed in the spotlight as the rest of the crowd stood at a distance, clapping and cheering.

The realization hit me like a wave: the energy of the room had shifted, and somehow, we had become the centre of attention. Shouts of "Best couple!" echoed from the sidelines, full of admiration. The applause swelled, and a rush of warmth flooded through me.

He grinned, his charm shining brighter than ever, and gave a small, playful bow in acknowledgment. But it wasn't just the crowd's applause that made my heart soar—it was the way he held me, the way we had danced like the world had melted away, that made this the best moment of my life.

I couldn't stop smiling, and neither could he. The room dissolved around us—just us two, dancing, laughing, wrapped in the magic of the night.

But as the music played on again, I felt my nerves creeping in. The applause still echoed in my ears, and I started to feel a little self-conscious under the spotlight. All those eyes on us—it was thrilling, yes, but also a little overwhelming. I felt the heat rise to my cheeks and shifted, unsure.

He must've noticed. Just as I began to pull away, he gently took my hand, his voice low, warm, and tinged with playful ease. "How about we get some fresh air?" he asked, a glint of mischief in his eyes.



I nodded, grateful for the break. The last thing I wanted was to stumble over my own emotions in front of everyone. With an easy smile, he guided me off the dance floor, through the crowd, and out into the open night.

The cool air hit me like a breath of relief. The street outside was quieter, calmer. For a moment, it felt like we had slipped into a different world—one where only we existed. The pulse of the club faded behind us, replaced by the distant hum of the city and the shimmer of lights overhead.

He looked at me, a reassuring smile softening his features. “You okay?” he asked, genuine concern in his eyes, but there was something else too—a quiet intensity that hung between us.

I nodded, the tension starting to ease. “Yeah, I just got a little overwhelmed, I guess.” I laughed lightly, still a little flustered.

He chuckled, “I get it. Not every night ends with a spotlight and a standing ovation.”

I smiled, more at ease now. “Definitely not.”

For a few moments, we stood in silence, simply breathing in the night. The air between us was still, heavy with unsaid things.

Then, he stepped closer. His hand rose slowly, reaching up to tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear. His touch was feather-light—barely there—but it sent a current through me. His fingers lingered just a moment longer than necessary, and in that pause, I felt my heart stutter in my chest, unsure whether to leap or stay still.

“Tonight’s been incredible,” he said, his voice lower now, more intimate. “But I feel like there’s one more place we need to go.”

I tilted my head. “Where?”

He just smiled and took my hand again, his grip sure and steady. “Trust me.”

We walked down the street, away from the crowd and neon lights, into a quieter part of the city. After a short while, we arrived at a small, hidden park tucked between two buildings—so easy to miss unless you were looking for it. A fountain bubbled softly nearby, and the trees swayed gently in the breeze. It felt like the world had paused, just for us.

He stopped, turning to face me, our hands still intertwined.

“Is this okay?” he asked, his voice a whisper now, barely carried on the breeze. He stepped closer, close enough that I could feel the warmth of him, his breath brushing against my skin.

I looked into his eyes, and in that moment, everything else fell away.

I nodded, unable to find the words, my breath caught in my throat. This was it—the moment I hadn’t even known I’d been waiting for.

He didn’t need any more encouragement. Slowly, deliberately, he leaned in, his face just inches from mine. One hand gently cupped my cheek, his thumb brushing over my skin with a tenderness that made my pulse quicken. I could feel the electricity between us, alive in the silence.

And then, he closed the distance.

His lips met mine in a kiss that was soft and tentative at first—gentle, searching—but beneath it was something deeper. A spark. A question. A promise. I kissed him back, my heart racing, and yet, for the first time that night, everything felt still. Calm. Right.

This wasn’t just a kiss. It felt like a beginning.

When we finally pulled apart, we stayed close, our foreheads resting together, our breath mingling in the quiet night. I could still feel the warmth of his lips, the echo of something just awakened.

“That,” I whispered, barely able to speak, “was worth the wait.”

He smiled, his lips brushing mine again, feather-light, before pulling back just enough to meet my eyes. “I think the night’s still young,” he said. “And there’s a lot more adventure to be had.”

And in that moment, I knew, whatever came next, this was the moment I’d carry with me—the one that changed everything.

The night had been nothing short of magical, each moment unfolding like a dream I never wanted to wake from. As I stood there with him in the quiet park, something shifted in my heart—a gentle flutter I hadn’t felt in a long time. It was as though the broken pieces of my past were slowly realigning, mending themselves in the warmth of a *love* I hadn’t even known I was ready for.

The kiss we shared, tender, filled with silent promises, had awakened something deep within me—something I thought was lost forever.

Beneath the soft glow of the city lights, I realized that *love* wasn't some distant fairy tale. It was real. And it was here. With him. Now.

As I pulled away, the night felt suspended in time—as if the universe had slowed down just for us. Every step, every stumble, every detour in my journey had led me here, to this kiss, this quiet park, this boy. It was as if *destiny* had been writing our story long before we ever met.

I thought of all the choices I had made, each one seeming small, even meaningless in the moment. But now, they all made sense. Life is a series of interconnected moments, like puzzle pieces that only reveal the full picture when you see them together. And here, in this moment, I saw it clearly. I was meant to be right here. With him.

A deep peace settled over me. The pain, the doubts, the 'almosts' and 'maybes'—they didn't matter anymore. They were all stepping stones on the path that led to this love. A love I was destined for.

I looked into his eyes, finding the same recognition there, the same belief. This wasn't coincidence. It was fate.

“I’ve waited for this,” I whispered, my voice trembling with wonder. “It was meant to be.”

He smiled, his hand brushing gently against my cheek. “I’ve always believed the universe has a plan,” he said softly. “And this—” his eyes held mine, “—this is it.”

Then, with that certainty between us, he pulled me into another kiss, one filled with quiet intensity—a promise written in silence. As our lips met, the world around us vanished. In that kiss, I found clarity. Peace. Home.

When we finally pulled apart, I felt something in me shift again—this time with joy. With hope.

He leaned in, his lips brushing against my ear. “We have all the time in the world, you know that?”

I smiled, the words echoing in my heart. “We do. And it’s going to be perfect.”

And so, under the stars, two souls finally found each other—no longer wandering, no longer waiting. Just here. Together. Living a love that had been written long before the first page turned.

The end of one chapter.

The beginning of the greatest love story I would ever know.

*The End.*

*(Curious how things could've turned out differently?  
Flip back and explore the story from the other path.)*