

NOT YOU PLEASE

ANURADHA DEV



BlueRoseONE[®]
Stories Matter

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CHAPTER 1

Mishti

Do you ever wonder what your life would have been like without the presence of that one person in it? You know, the one person that just makes your day worse by being present in your field of vision? The person whose breathing around you annoys you just as much as them talking to you. You know of at least one such person, right? For me, that person is Vikram Sethi.

Unfortunately, he's the first person I see on the first day of my senior year in school.

As soon as I get off the bus, he hops off his bike.

Not only is he lean and athletic, but, at six-one, he's also the tallest guy in the senior class. Taking off his helmet, he combs his wavy, dark brown hair with his free hand. He has his earphones on and is dancing to the music only he can hear. Of course, he brought a mobile. Cell phones aren't allowed in our school, but rules don't apply to Vikram Sethi. Do they?

I know when his eyes spot me. Even through his sunglasses, I can see his brown eyes. He stops moving upon seeing me and smiles at me. God! I hate this smile.

I know, I know he's hot, but any guy ceases to be attractive to me when he acts like shit.

I don't know why he's smiling at me. The last indirect interaction we had was when he stole my English notebook from Mr. Jose's desk, and I got accused of helping him cheat. I never confronted Vikram about it as —I didn't want to deal with him. But I hadn't forgotten.

I turn around and retrace my steps through the gate I entered. Peeping through the gaps between the gate, I see him frown and sit on his bike with arms crossed. I hope he's not waiting for me to reappear, assuming I've left to pick up something from the bus. But, in a minute, he shrugs and moves on, no doubt realizing that I'm not worth the wait.

###

When I stumble into my class, I'm not surprised that nobody saved a seat for me. I sit with a new boy.

I wish, not for the first time, that my parents were not averse to homeschooling. I mean, what's the point of making introverts go through a forced socially stimulating environment for more than half of the day when we can learn alone at home. And we'll be happier that way. But this world, just like this school, is not cut for introverts.

That's why when my English teacher, Mrs. Khanna announces, "This year you will have fun while doing your English project," I pray to not let it be a group project.

“It's a group project. You have to make a group of three. All the members of the group have to read a book, a classic, and have to discuss their opinions on different aspects of the book. I will give you the list of points you have to discuss later. You have to submit the report before the half-yearly exams. And I reserve the right to switch the group's members.” Mrs. Khanna ends with a smirk.

Reading a book doesn't seem like much of a task, but discussing it in a group? Ugh. Plus, I need to watch academics and extracurriculars both this year. Soon, I will be filling out college applications. It should be impressive enough to get me into New York University because it has the best creative writing course.

Looking back at my class of thirty-one, I start picturing the groups of threes and find myself standing at the end, the thirty-first student. These stupid kids would rather gang up with their friends than with someone who would actually do some work.

For the first four periods, I don't have to change the classroom. It's the third period, and I haven't said a word to the new boy sitting next to me.

Turning towards him I say, “Hi, I am Mishti Ahuja. Wanna be my partner?”

“Yeah, sure, I am Saahil Mahajan.” He smiles.

Ah, dimples. I'm a sucker for dimples.

“Okay, Saahil, who do you think in this class can work with us?” I look around the class and mentally cringe at the faces I see.

“I don't know. I'm new.” He shrugs, following my gaze.

“As if that makes a difference. I have been studying here all my life, and I still don’t know.” There is no point in trying to hide my social ineptness.

“Come on. There must be someone you like in the class.” He bumps his shoulder against mine gently. He is cute.

“Yeah, yeah. There’s Mrs. Khanna. But not right now, because she gave us a group project, and I hate working in groups.”

He shrugs. “Well, I think they are fun. And it’ll give me a chance to make friends.”

“Friends are overrated.” I snap.

He looks like a sweet guy. I don't know why I am trying to scare him off. I used to have a best friend in junior high school, but she dropped me like a pile of garbage when she became friends with popular girls. She ignored my calls and texts, and one day, when I confronted her at school, she said I was boring because I didn't want to do girl stuff like shopping and makeup. How could I tell her that shopping was a nightmare for me because I could never find anything in my size?

“Maybe, but having one is not. You can use one, I can see.” Behind his glasses, his eyes reflect humor.

“Don’t make me look more pathetic than I am.” I turn away from him. My long-ingrained feeling of inadequacy surfaces.

“You are interesting, Mishti Ahuja, not pathetic,” he whispers, leaning forward and looking me in the eyes.

Oh my God! Is he flirting with me? I look away. I don't know what to do. My heart starts thumping, and I wonder if Saahil can hear it too.

“We’ll have to inform Mrs. Khanna that we need a partner,” I blurt. Dimwit that I am, I run to the teacher. Seriously, what is wrong with me? No wonder I am seventeen and have never had a boyfriend.

Mrs. Khanna is witnessing an intimate conversation between Vikram Sethi and Siya Sharma with narrowed eyes. She calls out, “Vikram, please come here.”

He whispers something in Siya’s ear that makes her blush and gets up slowly, unfolding his long body, a mischievous smile on his lips. Oh, that smile again!

I shake my head and mouth “NOOOOO” to Saahil. He frowns.

Vikram strolls toward us. “Yes, Mrs. Khanna,” he says, looking right at me.

“Vikram, I want you to join Mishti and Saahil’s group,” Mrs. Khanna says.

“But why? I am already a part of a group.”

“Don’t worry. Ananya is absent today. She’ll join that group.”

“But you can put Ananya with them.” He points at us.

Mrs. Khanna replies, “I’m the teacher. I gave you an option to make the groups. I can take that away from you if I want. Unless you have a valid reason, you are doing the English project with them.”

Vikram tilts his head, gives me a once-over. “Okay, Ma’am,” he says with special emphasis on ‘Ma’am’.

As if he is doing me a favor.

I don't need him. I'll get rid of him.

As we go back to our seats, I hear him muttering, “Sorry, Siya, someone else got lucky.” He has the gall to wink at me.

I look at Siya, who is blissfully unaware of her misfortune.

Vikram stands for everything I hate about boys. In middle school, chubby girls like me were a source of entertainment for him and his friends. I have never wanted their attention. Not even now, after I've been working hard to lose weight in the gym and eating nothing but boiled vegetables. In tenth grade, my gynecologist and my mother bullied me into making lifestyle changes after being diagnosed at the risk of PCOS. It changed my dress size, but it didn't change what I was inside. I still don't want their attention.

CHAPTER 2

Mishti

“We can't work with him,” I announce as I join Saahil, after navigating through the sea of closely placed tables and chairs in the lunchroom. The table is at the center of the room where nobody likes to sit. Teachers and staff are patrolling like hawks to see if we're eating vegetables or finishing our food. Being new, Saahil doesn't know that. He has a lot to learn.

“What?”

The lunchroom is buzzing with kids talking and dishes clacking. Looks like summer's here; they're serving summer special *tensi*, Indian baby pumpkin. The smell of the vegetable curry turns my stomach. I'll pass on the lunch. It's okay. I have better things to do.

I lean in. “We can't work with him.”

“Who?” Saahil looks at me, eyebrows knit together.

“Vikram. Who else?”

“Why?”

“First of all, he’s the captain of the basketball team and thinks he’s God’s gift to the female population of the school.”

“I can see why he would think that. He is good-looking.” Saahil glances at where Vikram is sitting, at the overstuffed table in the far corner.

“Oh, God! You too!” I whine.

“Don’t worry. I’m straight. He is all yours.” Saahil laughs.

“That’s good to know.” I don’t know why I said that.

“What? You like him? Could have fooled me.” He is messing with me. My cheeks grow warm.

“What? No! I meant that it’s good to know that you are...” I bite my tongue, realizing that it sounds like I’m hitting on him. “Never mind. What I’m saying is that he is a clown. He is never serious. It would be difficult to get any work done with him as a part of the group.” We look at Vikram doing a moonwalk in the middle of the lunchroom, and his dumb friends clapping for him.

“What are you suggesting?” Saahil asks.

“I’m suggesting that we convince him that we can do this project all by ourselves. We don’t need his help. We’ll promise him that we will get him A-grade. He doesn’t need to attend group meetings.” It’s a foolproof plan.

“And you think he would agree?”

“Who wouldn’t? He is getting an A without doing any work.”

“I wouldn’t. I love doing projects. I wouldn’t trade the experience for a grade.”

I look at him in awe.

“What?” he asks.

He comes to school for the love of learning.

“Aww, Saahil, where have you been all my life? I could have used a friend.” I put my chin on my hands on the table.

“Better late than never.” He shrugs.

“Where have you moved from? Tell me about your old school.”

“I’ve moved from Mumbai. I studied at Golden International School there. The school was half the size of this one. I can’t say much about the education as this is my first day here.” He gives his dimpled smile, and I feel the walls around my heart thawing. I’ve to get away from him.

I get up and march purposefully to where Vikram is sitting with his friends. Saahil follows me.

Vikram and the swimming champion, Ajay Tripathi, are arm wrestling on the table, and all the other boys and girls are circling the duo, cheering. Nobody notices us.

Vikram’s wrist is down and he is shaking with the effort, putting all his strength into getting the upper hand. Girls are rooting for him. I can hear their heartbeats drop and rise with the changing direction of his and Ajay’s wrists. There is a deep collective sigh when he loses the match. I’m just glad it’s over.

Saahil moves closer and whispers in my ear, “Uhm- Mishti, I think you shouldn't say anything now. He’s upset. He won’t agree to anything we say.”

Ah crap, he's right. I look at all the boys at the table and then at Saahil. He is sensible, not a quality I associate with boys.

He tugs on my hand. I nod, and we run to the classroom. It's been a long time since I've felt attraction towards a guy. I had a few crushes in middle school, but I was too shy, and no guy ever liked me back. A part of me craves the looks, the flirting, and the secret jokes that lovers share. And Saahil promises to be a guy like no one I've ever known. I look at our hands holding on to each other.

Saahil, who's breathing hard because of the running, asks, "Why are you smiling?"

"Oh, I'm just glad I have one sensible partner." I hide my face from him with my unruly hair. He smiles and squeezes my hand. My heart gives a leap. After a long time, I feel hopeful. This year might actually be fun.

CHAPTER 3

Vikram

“Do you know anything about the new boy?” I elbow Shivam.

My eyes are on Mishti and the boy she is sitting with, two benches in front of me in the left row. I have two periods with her, English and Economics.

She is smiling and occasionally laughing while talking to him. I haven't seen her talk to many kids in class, not to me for sure. She never even looks at me. Yesterday, I caught her entering the school gate. Seeing her after the long spring break, I instinctively smiled at her. But she turned and went back the way she came. I waited for her because I wanted to know what made her go back out. But then I got bored and moved on. After all, Vikram Sethi doesn't wait for anyone.

“Not much. I talked to him yesterday. He moved from Mumbai last month. His father's an IG. He's not into sports, so there was not much to talk about.” Shivam shrugs.

“I have to work with him and Mishti on the English project,” I say.

“Mishti!” His eyes widen. “RIP, Sethi.”

“Shut up. She’s not that bad.” I don’t know why I say it. I don’t even know her.

“I know she’s not, but you are.” He looks at her and then back at me and says, “You won’t get your way with her.”

Shivam is an asshole, but an asshole I like to keep around because he doesn’t mince words. We’ve been friends since middle school. I’ve never been friends with anyone for that long, except him. Most people—including girls—are just accessories to hang out with, but Shivam is more. He’s the voice of reason to my wacky tendencies. In eighth grade, we went to New Delhi for the IPSC basketball tournament. After getting detention for breaking curfew and visiting the hotel bar, we’ve become inseparable.

“You underestimate me, Chaudhry. There’s no girl I can’t charm.” I smirk and look at my latest conquest, Siya Sharma.

It was a mistake. Her eyes are already on me. She bats her eyelashes and gives me a coy smile. Scooting over to the corner of her seat, she pats the space beside her. I hate myself. When will I learn? I need to stop leading on girls I don’t actually like.

I gesture, indicating I need five minutes, and turn back towards Shivam. By then Nayak, the economics teacher, will come in and she’ll forget I promised to sit with her.

“What are you doing?” I watch Shivam scribbling away, copying from one notebook to another.

“Economics homework. Have you done it?”

“What? No!” I recoil in distaste.

“Sorry. I forgot you’re too cool for homework. But I need good grades to run away from my tyrant father, and I don’t have a basketball scholarship.”

I take the notebook he is copying from and check out the cover. ‘Mishti Ahuja XII-Humanities.’

Shivam pushes me back and snatches the notebook from my hand. “Sethi, go away. I don’t have time. Mr. Nayak will be here soon.”

My eyes turn to Mishti again. It’s only me she avoids. She giggles at the new boy’s joke. Witnessing her biting her lips to stop herself from making a sound, I forget to look away. Her mirth reminds me of the sunrises I sometimes witness when I get up early for practice. It makes me pause and enjoy the feast for my eyes. Everything else can wait.

She has medium height with a curvaceous body. Her curly hair is always tied back in a tidy braid at school but I’ve seen it down once. That image is the image I have in my mind when I think of her. And yes, I do think of her sometimes.

The short-spectacled guy with dimples, is looking in her big brown eyes and drooling. The poor guy is smitten.

“What’s his name?” I ask.

“Who?” Shivam doesn’t look up.

“The dimple boy.”

“Who?” Shivam looks at me like I’m crazy.

“The new boy, Yaar.” I give him a slap on the back.

“Saahil Mahajan.” He gives me a look. “Why are you so interested in him?”

“I’m not. Definitely not about working with these two weirdos. Tell you what? I’ll just bail. Let them handle it themselves,” I say.

“What about the grades? Khanna warned you.”

“I don’t care about stupid grades. And anyway, all these warnings mean nothing. At the end of the day, our teachers want us to do well in board exams. She won’t fail anyone in internals. They have to maintain the school’s reputation.”

Forcing my eyes away from my partner duo, I scan the classroom and, the dumbass that I am, I catch Siya’s eyes again. What the hell! I’ll just go sit with her. At least I have a better chance of hooking up with her than the girl who refuses to look at me.

I stroll to the third seat from the front. Dropping my backpack on the floor and sliding in beside her, I adjust the seat to accommodate my legs.

“Hey, Gorgeous,” I say. She’s tall and slim. Her hair is straight and long. She is the definition of gorgeous.

“Hello Champion, wanna hang out after school today?” She leans in. The strong smell of her rose perfume makes me move back.

“I have practice.” And I’m also planning to get something to read from the library, but she doesn’t need to know that. Maybe I’ll find *Virgin Suicides* by Jeffrey Eugenides. I’ve been looking for it since I watched the movie during spring break.

“Sad. I was looking forward to doing the English project with you. Looks like the universe is against us.” She pouts.

When she shows her dejection this way, with her plump lips, I feel deprived too.

“I feel ya. Let’s make up for it and meet for coffee tonight, what say?” There’s a sensible part of me, somewhere inside my head, that keeps warning me when my mouth goes off, giving out insincere invitations. But yeah, I never take note of it.

“Really! I would love that.” She squeals and links our arms to sit close to me.

Forcing my eyes away from my nemesis, I try to enjoy Siya’s warm body next to mine. “Ah, I love your smell. When will I get a taste?”

Keeping her eyes down, she smiles.

CHAPTER 4

Vikram

Bambi presses her wet black nose on my hand and sniffs. She seems tired and sleepy, but her tail is still wagging as if I am the greatest meal she has smelled today. It amazes me how every time she sees me, she is equally excited. Doesn't she get bored of me? Or boredom is a concept known only to civilized species.

Her mate, Dumbo, comes running after her. He licks my shoes and then looks for skin inside my trouser to lick some more. I dump my school bag on the garage floor where the two hooligans have cornered me, and sit crosslegged to give them full access to all my body parts. I laugh as Dumbo jumps and attacks my ears.

In a few minutes, I'm surrounded by their puppies, who are alternatively jumping on my lap and then going to their mother, Bambi, to breastfeed. Bambi is lying on the floor, panting, happy to watch the scene, and feeding her kiddos.

When the three puppies are suckling on their mother, and Dumbo is lying on his paws near my feet pretending to be asleep,

I take out my cellphone and take their picture. I stay there for half an hour before entering my house through the front door.

“Vikki, is that you?” Mom calls out from the kitchen.

Shit! I should have sneaked in earlier when she was down for her nap.

“Yo.” I raise my hand, drop my bag on the living room couch, and pick up some grapes from the dining table.

“Oh, are you hungry? Will you have lunch? I saved some for you.” She comes out of the kitchen and asks me.

“Mom, it’s four-thirty. I don’t want lunch. Besides you never make anything good for lunch.” What? It’s the truth!

“Okay, then tell me. I will make whatever you want. Do you want sandwiches?”

“No. Actually, I am not hungry anymore. Bye.” I go to my room and lock the door before she starts reciting the list of snacks to offer me.

I’m hungry but later I’m meeting guys at the CLAT coaching center. We’ll go to the chicken shawarma stall from there. It serves the best shawarma in Indore.

It’s quiet, as always. I’m glad that all four of my sisters (yes, I have four) have completed school and gone to college, or are married. Because I like the house dead.

Mr. Sethi is a rare finding in the 'Sethi Mansion'. My successful cardiologist father is out of Indore for most of the year. And when he is in, he only likes to speak about how I’ve ruined my life by not opting for Science in eleventh grade, and how I waste far too much time playing basketball and mooning over my dog family in the garage. Well, fuck him! I don’t care.

CHAPTER 5

Mishti

“How’s school?” Dad asks as I join him and Mom for dinner.

Ah, small talk. It should be illegal at home with your own parents.

“The usual. Mrs. Khanna announced some new activities to be held this year:- declamation, turn-coat debate, and panel discussions.” I try to concentrate on the whiff of burnt garlic rising from the curry I just served myself, instead of the long crucial year ahead.

“Are you participating in any?” Mom asks, bringing in the *rotis* from the kitchen.

“Mom, I’m busy preparing for the SAT right now. I don’t have time.” I go for the offense.

“Okay.” She backs off—literally, into the kitchen. But then she comes back, holding the rice bowl. “Mishti, are you applying for the student council?”

Ugh. “Maybe?” I avoid her gaze as I fill a glass with water.

“You should. I’m sure you can be the head girl,” she says as she settles on the chair next to me.

I choke on my water. As the cough subsides, I say, “Mom, you’re too optimistic for your own good.”

Mrs. Khanna had a talk with me about filling out the student council form today, but I don’t think I’m capable of winning the head girl position. There are many girls who are better qualified than I.

My mom wants me to participate because the head girl post would look good on my college application. I think it’s stupid. All the things kids in my class are doing these days are to add to their college applications. I want to get into NYU, and to make that happen, I know I need to participate more in school activities. But doing everything you do in school just to enhance your prospects of getting into the college of your choice feels too manipulative for my psyche.

“I doubt that. Mrs. Khanna always praises you and tells me you are an extraordinary girl,” Mom says.

Sometimes I think that my mom is trying to live her school life vicariously through me. I love Mrs. Khanna and my mom, but they expect too much from me. They wish to set me on a path to disappoint them.

“That’s right. Extraordinary, as in a freak. And nobody makes a freak the head girl.”

“Don’t say that.” She gives me sad eyes.

“Mom, can we not talk about this now?”

This time Mom listens to me, and we eat in silence for the rest of the meal.

After dinner, I tell my parents about the English project, making the mistake of letting them know I have to do it with two boys.

Mom asks, "Oh, who are the boys?"

"Vikram and Saahil. You don't know them."

"I know Vikram," she says, without looking at me.

"Why? How?" I narrow my eyes upon her.

"I don't know. I think I read his name on the school website." After a pause, she says, "Wasn't he the captain of the basketball team that won the IPSC tournament for your school?"

"Wow! Mom. Get a life. Why are you stalking my classmates? Am I not enough?"

"I don't stalk you."

"Yes, you do."

CHAPTER 6

Mishti

I wait for the clock to strike nine so that I can go to my room and talk to Megha, my friend who I met on an online poetry writing platform. I talk to her every night.

I've known Megha for two years, ever since I came across her soulful poetries, became a fan, and contacted her. We bonded over our love for poetry and Taylor Swift's songs. In fact, we can always find a perfect Taylor Swift song for whatever is going on in our lives. Presently, for her, it's 'Gorgeous'. There's a guy she has a crush on and can't stop talking about.

I text her.

Mishti: Everything has changed.

Megha: NO!

Mishti: Yes.

Megha: Wow!

Mishti: I just wanna know you better, know you better, know you better now...

Megha: Please tell me it's a boy. Although knowing your opinion of the male species that's impossible.

Mishti: Yes!

Megha: Noooooice. Who is he?

Mishti: He's the new boy in my class.

Megha: Is he hot?

Mishti: Yeah! He is soooo hot, but he's also nice and a nerd like me.

Megha: Tell me everything.

Mishti: So, the English teacher gave us a group project and asked us to find partners. Him being new, and me being me, we couldn't find any, so we kinda got stuck with each other.

Megha: I still can't believe you found a boy whom you like. Finally. I actually thought you were gay.

Mishti: In that case, I am glad to have set the record straight. Pun intended.

Megha: Lol.

Mishti: There's more. You'll love this. Since God doesn't have enough entertainment in heaven, he threw a curveball in the way of my eternal love.

Megha: ???

Mishti: Vikram Sethi is in our group.

Megha knows about Vikram because I've ranted to her about his childish behavior and how he disrupts the entire class during serious discussions.

Megha: Oh my God! I would love to be the lizard on the wall of the room where your group meetings will be held.

Mishti: Sad, you won't get the chance. Because I'm throwing him out of the group tomorrow.

Megha: How?

Mishti: I'll talk to him.

Megha: I repeat. I would love to be the lizard on the wall of the room when you try to throw him out of your group.

Mishti: I wish there was some other way to do this. I really don't want to deal with him.

Megha: The lady doth protest too much, methinks. Isn't he the same guy you had a crush on in middle school?

Mishti: I knew it was a mistake to tell you about it. I was twelve then. My cognitive abilities were overshadowed by my hormones. The good news is that my hormones may have gone into hibernation after that debacle, they are not dead.

Megha: Yayy!

Mishti: How's your mom? Still in the hospital?

Megha: Yeah. She is coming home tomorrow. The doctor told her that if she didn't quit drinking, next time she won't be going home at all. Sometimes, I can't wait to go to college and away from all this stress. I know it sounds selfish, but all the other kids are partying and stressing only about getting into a good college, not about what condition they would find their mother in when they reach home.

Mishti: I understand Megha.

Megha: I met my father at the hospital today and told him that I forgive him for leaving us. Especially since he has always been there for me and my brother.

Mishti: How did he react?

Megha: He had tears in his eyes. He hugged me and then we went out for lunch. I feel free of the anger and resentment I had been holding on to. It was a good day.

Mishti: Well, if it's a good day, then maybe you should take a chance and text your 'Gorgeous' WHATSHISNAME.

Megha: What do I say to him, genius?

Mishti: You tell him you 'feel free,' and maybe he will take the hint and ask you out.

Megha: *sigh* Now I know why you're single. All the best with the new guy, though.

CHAPTER 7

Mishti

“Who named you Mishti?” Saahil takes the seat beside me flashing his dimples.

“My dad, ugh, I hate it. It’s so cliché. Couldn’t he have given me a spicier name like *Khatta’* or *Teekha’?*”

Saahil laughs.

“I mean those names have more personality. Plus people who know me know that I’m not sweet at all.”

He pretends to think and nods. “You have a point.”

I push him away. “Mean.”

“What? You said that!”

I was scared it would be awkward with Saahil, after acknowledging my crush on him yesterday, but he is a dork, like me. We are a clique.

In the English period, I ask him, “Today, in the lunch break, shall we talk to Vikram?”

“Oh yes, Vikram. So, I thought about that.” He turns to me. “Mishti, do you think it’s fair for us to not even give him a chance? He might be interested in contributing to the project. Let’s have a meeting with him first and then decide.”

I can’t decide if I love him for his integrity right now or hate him for not going along with what I want. I keep my mouth shut and nod. I don’t want him to think I’m a selfish person.

But this minor obstacle won’t deter me from my goal.

#

After school, I stay back. Most of the students have already left and the parking lot, where I’m hoping to catch Vikram after his practice, will be deserted.

I’m killing time in the library, doing research for my psychology project, when I bump into someone.

“What are you doing here?” I say when I see it’s Vikram Sethi.

The library is not a place I would expect to see him. But it’s good, actually. I won’t have to wait till three-thirty for his practice to be done to talk to him. Just the thought of it makes me want to throw up my half-eaten lunch. It’s better to get it over with.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Oops, I offended him. Careful girl, you don’t want him to turn hostile against you.

“It’s just that I thought you would be at the basketball court for practice.”

“You thought about me?” He leans back against the psychology bookshelf I was browsing and crosses his legs.”

“I was not thinking about you. I needed to talk to you.”

“Ah, it’s about the English project. I should have known. Where’s the dimple boy? Or are we ditching him?”

No, we are ditching you, conceited jerk.

“First of all, his name is Saahil and he is part of the group. He had to leave early. I stayed back to study.” Okay, it’s time. I have to do this. “Vikram, in fact, I don’t think we need you.”

He narrows his eyes. His sharp gaze makes me squirm.

Gathering all my courage, I continue. "I mean, do you really want to read a book, let alone a classic? They are so boring if you ask me." I feign concern. “So, here is my proposal. We, Saahil and I, will do all the work. You won't have to come to our meetings, and we'll share the final work with you."

“Why did you ask Khanna to add me to your group if you didn’t want to work with me?”

“Oh, no-no-no. You got it wrong. I didn't do that. That was all her.” I put my hands up and back away from him.

“Why would you share your work with me, if I don't work?” He stands up straight and matches my steps.

I keep moving back. “Um- it’s just that you have such a tight schedule with basketball practice and the upcoming student council election. I wanted to spare you the stress.”

“How philanthropic of you.” He catches up and looms over me.

“I am a generous person.” I show my teeth in an attempt to pass a smile. As I move back one more step, I’m stuck between him and the dead artists’ biographies in the history section.

“I don’t doubt that. Now tell me, do you hate me? Or is it that you like the dimple boy and want to be alone with him?” He stops and folds his arms.

Right on both counts.

“No. It’s not that.” I shake my head.

He opens his arms and leans forward. “Do you realize you say ‘no’ a lot?”

“No. I don’t.” Duffer.

He smirks and leans forward to whisper in my ear. “It’s okay to say ‘yes’ sometimes, Mist.”

His hot breath makes me shiver. I rub my arms to dispel the goosebumps. God, why does he have to be so gorgeous? I slide away from between him and the bookshelf, so I don’t do something stupid like touch his face. The distance between us brings me back to my senses.

“What did you just call me?”

“Mist.” He turns and leans on the exact part of the bookshelf where I was a moment ago.

“But why?”

“It suits you.” Oh, God! His crooked smile again.

I put my hands on my waist. “Why would you give me a nickname? We are not friends.”

“That’s going to change. We’re going to work together on the English project.” He winks. Then turning his back to me, he saunters away.

CHAPTER 8

Mishti

“**D**ear children, faculty, and staff members, I, the Principal of Delhi International School, am ecstatic to announce that I have decided to get married to your Vice-Principal, Ms. Dubey. I cannot live without her and thus we are eloping. And that means school is over for today. Hurray!”

“You're kidding?” I watch Saahil's face for a sign that he's lying. “This didn't actually happen at your previous school.”

It's lunch break and Saahil is telling me stories of the school he attended before. I suspect they're more fiction than real.

Saahil says with a straight face, “It did, and the best part is that school authorities could never catch the guy who hacked the PA system. The school was in such chaos that it took the rest of the school day to get students inside the classroom. The principal was too embarrassed to show his face for the rest of the week.”

“Was it true? About the principal and vice-principal?”

“Yes, it was. Everybody knew about their affair. They got married three months later. Maybe they just needed a push,” Saahil says, picking a piece of cucumber from my plate.

“I cannot believe how bold kids can be. Weren’t they scared they’d get in trouble?” I say, shaking my head.

“What’s fear, Mist? It’s all in the mind.” The bane of my existence picks up a chair, turns it around, and plants himself on it.

Before I could answer him, he diverts his attention to Saahil. “Hi, I’m Vikram Sethi. Your partner for the English project. I thought it was high time I introduced myself.”

“Hello, I’m Saahil Mahajan. You would think I don’t know you, but you would be wrong.” Saahil takes Vikram’s hand in a firm grip and smiles, looking at me. Die, Saahil.

Vikram’s face twists in a grimace. He shakes his head, looking back at me. “Coming from my nemesis, it can’t be flattering. But I promise you, I’ll change your mind.”

“What are you doing here, Vikram?” I ask finally, not able to stomach his drama anymore.

“Mist, it’s not fair that you hog all of Saahil’s time and don’t let him talk to anyone else. Are you two married already, or what?”

Saahil spits the water he had been drinking from his water bottle on the table, on his food.

My eyes lock with Vikram’s in a staring contest. He’s relaxed, his chin on his hands, which rest on the back of the chair he’s sitting on. I want to wipe that smirk off his face. Who the hell does he think he is? He cannot just come into

my life and disrupt it like that. I won't give him the satisfaction.

I give up first and rise from my chair. "He's all yours." I motion toward Saahil and proceed to leave.

He grabs my wrist. "Stay, Mist."

"Stop calling me that." I close my eyes, frustrated with him beyond reason.

"I would if you tell me why you hate me."

"Can you blame me?" Turning to him, I free my hand and stand with my knuckles on my waist.

"Relax, Mishti, he's just having fun," Saahil the traitor says. "Don't react. He'll get bored and leave you alone."

"You wish, Saahil," Vikram says, turning his head to Saahil.

Saahil and I face Vikram.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I say.

"Saahil thinks he doesn't have competition when it comes to you. Do you really want to make it that easy for him?"

I turn red and can't look at Saahil. "No, Vikram, it's only you who thinks I am easy. Is it the reason behind your sudden interest in me? Newsflash! I AM NOT IN THE MARKET."

This time, when I leave, I don't look back.

###

I'm not twelve anymore. I shouldn't have run. His goal was to humiliate me as it had been five years back. I had raced out of the lunchroom crying then. Not much has changed

since then. I used to think losing weight would solve all my problems.

It's not easy being a fat twelve years old.

Even in seventh grade, when I was part of a group of five girls, I was never one of them. Once they ordered matching t-shirts for the group but not for me because they couldn't find my size. Or when we went to a cafe and I would order a brownie shake, one of them would ask, "Are you sure you want to have that? It's like five hundred calories."

Staying home, away from their subtle put-downs started becoming more appealing day by day. One day, they didn't invite me and, just like that, I was out of the loop.

Girls were still better. Boys were downright cruel. All they cared about was making their friends laugh and being the coolest in their group.

I had a crush on Vikram. Now that I think of it, I can't think of a single reason why I liked him. Maybe it was his crooked smile and long eyelashes. I had never talked to him but had heard that he wasn't exactly a nice boy. The lure of the bad boy escalated my attraction. One day, during lunch, he was sitting with his friends. I still have no idea if he knew about my feelings. I suspect he did. Why else would he single me out?

"Hey Mishti, come on, sit with us." I had never talked to any one of them. I was suspicious, but then Vikram said, "I really liked your poem 'Ants' in English class today. It was funny and deep. Where did you get the inspiration from?"

My lips curled in a shy smile at being appreciated. "When I was little I read a book 'Hey, Little Ant'. It's strange how

some books stay with you.” I took the only chair empty on their table.

There was a crackle, and I found myself on the lunchroom floor on my bottom. There was a burst of laughter. I refused to look at any one of them. Vikram got up from his seat. He gave me his hand to help me get up. He wasn’t laughing. I took his hand.

“Oh Mishti, I am so sorry. I think we should complain to the school authorities about the sturdiness of these chairs. I read somewhere that can bear a hundred kilograms, but some of us need more support,” Vikram said with a straight face.

I turned my face away to hide my tears and ran out of the lunchroom. At the door, I turned back and looked at them. Vikram was high-fiving his friends and laughing.

Later a friend told me that the chair was already broken. Vikram and his friends had assembled it to make it look like it was fine.

CHAPTER 9

Vikram

“**N**o offense, Dude. You are no competition. She hates you.” Saahil smirks.

Thanks for stating the obvious, Douchebag. “Ah, what a tragedy it would have been, if I cared,” I lean my face close to his and say.

“Good for you.” He shrugs and then adds holding up his hands. “And for the record, I am not interested in her.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Don’t tell me she is not your type.” Because as I see it, Saahil has a permanent drool on his face when he is with her.

“I don’t know how to explain it. She’s just too intense.” He twists his face.

Intense? What does that even mean? Mishti is the most sensible, independent, and nice girl I know. It’s another story that she is nice to everyone except me.

“I mean she just worries too much about everything.”

I don't need a heart-to-heart with you, Man. I rise to leave when Saahil says, "Wait."

I turn around.

He gets up and extends his right hand. "It's nice to meet you, Vikram. I hope we'll be friends."

I look at his extended hand and then at his face.

"We'll see about that." I leave with a salute.

#

I still don't know what triggered Mishti. I was trying to be funny. She can't hate me for that.

I'm going to make her like me, even if she falls in love with me after I'm done. Well, that's one of the few things I can't control.

After school, I wait for Mishti in the library. I don't know if she has stayed back.

When it's clear, after thirty minutes, she's not going to show up, I give up the pretense of reading Indian Economic Development by V.K. Ohri.

While crossing the Psychology section, on my way out, I remember Mishti browsing it yesterday.

At the reception of the library sits Mrs. Bhargava, an old lady, always judging our choice of books.

"Ma'am, I can't find a book I need. Can you help me?" I say.

Mrs. Bhargava looks from above her glasses. "Vikram, the kind of books you read aren't appropriate for your age. You won't find it in the school library. You should try reading something for your age, like Harry Potter."

“I read that at ten, Ma’am. But right now I am looking for a coursebook, Introductory Macroeconomics by Ramanujan,” I say.

She frowns. “Have you seen the Economics section?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“I’ll have to check the software. I am not very good at it. Usually, Priyanka does all work related to computers. It might take time.”

“That’s okay Ma’am. If you want I can search for it myself. I’m good with computers.”

“Of course you are. All the kids are these days. Come on, help me out.”

I get behind the desk and sit on the computer. She is watching me. I open the Economics folder and keep feeding the names of random authors. Ramanujan is an Indian scientist. It’s unlikely he would write an Economics book. She gets distracted when someone comes with a book to return. I open a new window and search the book issue history with a date. There it is ‘Mishti Ahuja-XII-Humanities. Book Name: Social Psychology by Myers. Phone number: 98932-56741.’

I feed her phone number on my cell phone discreetly and close the window.

“Thanks, Ma’am. Although I couldn’t find that book, I found another I can use for reference. Maybe I will take that.” I get away from the desk and leave before she could ask more questions.

###

Getting her number was the easy part. But now, I've been staring at the screen of my cellphone for ten minutes. I have never been nervous about texting a girl.

Okay, fine. She is just another girl. Let's do it.

CHAPTER 10

Mishti

It's eight p.m. Post dinner, I'm watching 'The Good Place' on Netflix in my room when I get a text.

Unknown number: Knock knock.

I stare at the notification for a few seconds. The only name that comes to my mind is Saahil.

Mishti: Who's there?

Unknown number: Level up.

Oh my God! Could it be Saahil? But I never gave him my number. I can't believe he would go through the trouble of getting it.

Mishti: Level up who?

Unknown number: Level up your sense of humor, Mist. You can't keep getting upset every time I make a joke.

My cellphone drops from my hands. It's a good thing I am on my bed. I pick it up again.

Mishti: Vikram?

Unknown number: The one and only.

Mishti: How did you get my number?

Unknown number: Stupid question. I'm Vikram Sethi, and I can do anything.

I don't get it. Why would Vikram go through the trouble of getting my number?

Mishti: I rephrase. Why did you get my number?

Unknown number: I quote Freud. 'My unconscious mind influenced my behavior.' Go ask my unconscious mind.

I'm impressed that he knows anything about Freud. Especially since Psychology is not his subject. I heard Freud's name for the first time when I took Psychology as my minor in eleventh grade.

Mishti: No thanks. I don't want to go there. Your conscious mind is hard enough to understand.

The phone rings and it's the same number.

Wtf?

I pick up the phone.

"I'm an open book, Mist. Come and read me anytime," Vikram says, "Speaking of books, when are we going to decide which book to read for the project?"

I don't believe that he is so committed to the project. What's his agenda?

I say, "Tomorrow after school, let's stay back in the library."

"Oh yes, library! I missed you there today."

What? He looked for me in the library. "You go to the library after school every day?"

“Nah. I was looking for someone who hates me, and I have no idea why? It’s a mystery I can’t die without solving. My ghost would haunt the school. Imagine the creaking floors, random screeches echoing the premises, and big black bats flapping their wings in the darkness. Our future generations would be deprived of visiting the school, where their parents or grandparents went.”

It starts with a giggle, and I’m full-fledged laughing in thirty seconds. “Vikram, you are so-”

I can’t find the right word.

“Funny? I know.”

“No. Random. You are so random,” I say.

“Duly noted. She never once said, ‘I don’t hate you, Vikram’. Okay. She better prays that I don’t die soon.”

I laugh. “I’m sure you won’t.”

“At least I make her laugh now. There is a light at the end of the tunnel.”

“It’s a loooooong tunnel, Vikram.”

“Seriously Mist, I’ve seen you with others. You’re nice to everyone except me.”

“Vikram, we haven’t talked to each other in five years and it’s because of the English project we’re talking now.”

“Why haven’t we, Mist? We have two classes together.”

“Well, if you are in the mood for soul-searching, why don’t you ask yourself?”

“You expect too much from me, Mist. I am not that deep.”

“Don’t I know that?”

"I know I'm an asshole. And if I have hurt you in the past that I have no recollection of, I'm sorry."

What? Vikram Sethi saying sorry to me. Is this some kind of trap? I wish I could see his face.

"Do you mean it?" I ask.

"Oh, God! It's really that. What? When? What did I do?"

"It was long back. In seventh grade. You probably hated me then. It's better to just let it go."

"I can't if you haven't and I've never hated you. For what it's worth, I do believe you. Because I would not like myself if I met myself then. But I was a child then. I've grown up."

"Oh, have you?"

"Okay. I know burning crackers in the boys' washroom and bringing screwdrivers in the school to unscrew random things, doesn't count as mature behavior but it could be worse. I could bring a gun to school."

"That's not funny."

"That's where you're wrong, Mist. That is funny because I'm not actually going to do it. I'm just saying."

"If you think attacking my attitude is going to make me like you better, think again, moron."

"Call me moron, immature or shallow, and get it over with. After that, if you can find it in your heart to forgive me, can we start again?"

"Start what?"

"Friendship."

"What if I don't want to be your friend?"

“Uh uh. Don’t dismiss me like that. Remember, you don’t know me.”

“And which drug do you suggest to facilitate this memory loss in my brain?”

“Have no fear Mishti Ahuja, we’ll make new memories. This year would be the best year of your school life.”

“I hate to say this, but I actually believe you, Vikram Sethi. Good night.”

I’m smiling as I cut the call. As I go through the call in my mind, the smile drops. I just made a deal with the devil himself. Hiding my face in the pillow, I groan.

CHAPTER 11

Vikram

“Didn’t think I would find this book in this orthodox place of doom,” I say as I throw a copy of ‘The Catcher in The Rye’ on the table. Mishti and Saahil are sitting, sifting through the pile of books they collected from the shelves.

“Why? What’s so special about this book?” Mishti asks as if she hasn’t heard the name of the book.

“Don’t tell me you’ve never heard about the most banned book of the twentieth century?” I take out a chair and sit between them.

Mishti, who had been leaning towards Saahil while talking, straightens and subtly moves her chair away from me. Ouch!

“Good game yesterday, bro. You killed it.” Saahil says as he picks up the book from the table and skims through it.

I didn’t know he stayed back to watch my game yesterday. He isn’t bad, but it would have helped if Mishti wasn’t

looking at him as if he was the chocolate cheesecake she has been depriving herself of since forever.

“Thanks, dude.” I shrug.



“Why am I not surprised with your choice of book, Vikram? Has it got excessive violence or vulgar debauchery to qualify to be the most banned book of the twentieth century?” Mishti says.

Oh, I love how this girl knows me so well. I smirk. “And why am I not surprised that you would dismiss my suggestion as insubstantial without even reading the book?”

“The guy’s got an attitude, but he is right,” Saahil laughs as he reads the book. “This Holden character is visiting some old teacher at his house and the teacher in his all-knowing way is telling him, ‘Life’s a game, boy. Life’s a game that one plays according to rules.’ Holden doesn’t disagree but his internal monologue is interesting, ‘[Game, my ass. Some game. If you get on the side where all the hot-shots are, then it’s a game, all right. But if you get on the other side, where there aren’t any hot-shots, then what’s a game about it?’

Nothing. No game’.” He looks up. “I like this book. Can I take it home, Vikram?”

“It belongs to the school library, not me,” I say, “And I’ve read it already.”

“Don’t tell me you are seriously considering this book?” Mishti frowns at the book, “What about the other options we had discussed?”

“I just want to read the book.” Saahil takes the book to the counter where Mrs. Bhargava was busy harassing a girl for being late in returning her book.

“Saahil gives me hope. Some of us have an open mind,” I say, turning my attention back at Mishti.

She opens her mouth wide to say something, but can’t find words, so her mouth opens and closes comically. She ends the embarrassing involuntary movement by saying, “I hate you.”

“Tell you what, if you still say ‘I hate you’ after reading that book, I would let you choose whichever book you want to.” I rise from my chair.

“Promise?” she asks.

“Promise.” I extend my hand to take hers.

She stares at my hand for a few seconds and raises her big brown eyes to my face. Her eyes are transparent- in saying that she doesn’t trust me to keep my promise.

I know the exact moment when she decides to let go and smiles. Just like that she is drop-dead gorgeous. Her mouth is wide and full. And I can’t look away. Until she takes my hand in her soft hand and gets up. Touching her makes me

feel like touching young puppies of Bambi and Dumbo, supple and full of life.

“Come on. We don't want to miss the bus,” she says tugging to make me follow her.

“I have a bike. I can drop you,” I say before I can stop myself. With a racing heart, I wait for her response, as I let go of her hand and follow her to the door.

She stops and laughs, looking at me with those chocolate eyes. “Are you serious?”

I'm offended. Calling myself all the synonyms of stupid, I say, “Yes, why won't I be?”

“I know we are supposed to be friends and all, but I don't trust you enough to go riding with you on a bike.”

I have a fierce urge to hit something, and thus I move away from her. By the time I'm back after picking my backpack from the table, I am calm enough to say, “Suit yourself.”

“What? No friendship declarations to guilt-trip me into doing what you want? I am disappointed, Vikram Sethi,” she calls out.

“So am I, Mist. So am I.” Giving her a salute I leave before I say or do something I regret.

She makes me feel like there is something wrong with me, and the scary thing is I think she is right. The problem is that I have never been rejected before, and it kind of pisses me off that this girl keeps doing it time after time again.

I hop on my bike in the deserted parking lot and zoom out ignoring the warning of the security guard at the gate. I find speeding therapeutic, and today I need it.

CHAPTER 12

Mishti

As I watch Vikram take off from the library as if it's on fire, I mull over what happened?

His face became completely expressionless after I rejected his offer. Could it be that I hurt his feelings? Who would have thought Vikram Sethi has feelings?

"Ready to go? Where's Vikram?" Saahil asks as he spots me near the door of the library.

"He's gone," I say, still bewildered by Vikram's exit.

"Okay, let's go." He opens his backpack to slide his copy of 'The Catcher in The Rye'.

"Saahil." As we walk towards the school exit, I decide to ask him.

"Yes"

"Do you think I am too rude to Vikram?"

“To be honest, I think you are. What’s your problem with him anyway? Do you guys have some kind of history I should know about?”

“No, we don’t have any history.” At least not the kind he has in mind.

“So then, cut him some slack. You should watch him play basketball. The guy is a God on the court.”

“Really?”

“Yep. Tomorrow, after school, it’s the final inter-house basketball match of the season. I’m going to stay back to watch. You can come if you want.”

With you, I could watch an Opera.

“Okay. Can you give me your cell number, Saahil?”

“Sure.” He takes out a pen from his pocket and offers his hand. “Give me your hand. I am too lazy to take out a notebook.”

OMG! I place my hand in his. He jots down the number on my palm. It’s ticklish. I keep giggling throughout. He drops my hand as soon as he is done, too soon.

“I’ll make a what’s app group with the three of us to discuss the project. I think we should still keep discussing other options. Don’t get me wrong. I’m open to Vikram’s suggestion, but there is nothing wrong in looking for a better option,” I start babbling.

“It’s okay. It’s time we got each other’s numbers anyway. We are friends,” Saahil says.

“Yes, that we are.”

###

That night I message Megha.

Mishti: Drop everything. I need you.

Megha: Has the zombie apocalypse arrived in Indore finally? Mishti Ahuja doesn't need anyone, ever. It must be the end of the fucking world. Or at least of Indore. Are you ready to move to Delhi now? Something good comes out of the disaster after all.

Mishti: Am I a rude person?

Megha: No! You are a nice, sweet, and friendly person with an agreeable personality.

Mishti: You would think that because I like you, and I'm always good to you.

Megha: Oh, you mean you are rude to people you don't like. Who isn't?

Mishti: I think I might have hurt Vikram today.

Megha: Whoa! And that is a problem because?

Mishti: It's not a problem. It's just that I feel like a scum since I told him that I don't trust him, and he left without saying a word. He never does that. He talks non-stop even when I tell him to stop.

Megha: You wanted him to say something?

Mishti: Yes, I guess I did. The point is I hate hurting anyone, and him especially, since I never thought I could hurt him.

Megha: You like him?

Mishti: No. I don't.

Megha: Then why are we breaking our fingers talking about him?

Mishti: Alright! He is not all bad. He has a rough charm that has sneaked up on me.

Megha: See, it wasn't so hard. Now, go talk to him.

Mishti: I don't know. What if I am wrong? Maybe, he just remembered he had some other place to be.

Megha: You won't know until you talk to him.

Mishti: I hate it when you are right.

CHAPTER 13

Vikram

“Oh, there you are. I have been searching everywhere for you.”

I turn back to the voice of the last person I ever expect to say this.

“What the hell, Mishti! You scared me,” I whisper.

The corridor is empty. I'm standing outside the boy's locker room to drop off my stuff before the classes start for the day. She looks hot this morning with her hair tied back in two neat braids. The white buttoned-up shirt with a grey skirt and black slacks has never looked as sexy as it does on her curves. I remind myself, I don't like her right now. What's she doing here?

Last evening after I left school, I didn't go home. I was so fucking frustrated. I sped away far on the bypass road, stopped at a tea stall around fifteen kilometers past my house, and called Siya.

The girl I wanted to call thought I was not good enough for her. Fuck her! It wasn't supposed to be this way. I'm the one who calls the shot.

I'll take Siya's slim waist, long straight black hair, and lush mouth any day. I made good of my invitation to her for coffee. She was thrilled and I felt better. I even kissed her at the end of our date. But when I was on my bed at midnight, a curly-haired, big-eyed sorceress came to haunt me. You are not good enough.

She's fidgeting and not looking at me. Instead, her eyes are fixed on my backpack. "Vikram, I wanted to say sorry. I was just messing with you. The truth is, I've never been on a bike, and it kind of scares me. I know it's lame. But when you think about it, it's not. I mean how can such a heavy object stand straight on a narrow surface area of two wheels? It's science, it shouldn't be possible."

She is babbling. I'm mad at her but nervous Mishti is entertaining.

"Precisely. It's science. Something to do with angular momentum and centrifugal force acting on the bike in opposite directions that keeps it upright. You should have paid more attention in ninth-grade Physics class."

"See my mind knows, but my heart has a mind of its own. It starts protesting at the thought of getting on a bike, and I have to give in."

"Do you always listen to your heart?" I ask turning away from her to take off my backpack and pull out my water bottle. Not wanting her to see how interested I'm in her answer. But my eyes betray me anyway.

Her face breaks into a smile. “No, I choose whatever keeps me safe. Most of the time it’s my mind.”

“Not the way I want to live.” I smirk, taking a gulp of water from my bottle.

“Then it’s a good thing that we’re not friends.” But this time there is no bite to her blow.

“I guarantee you, in this life, you are not going to die of a bike accident, not while I’m driving. Worst case scenario, a few bruises and cuts here and there, I’m sure you can handle.”

“Sure jerk. My dad would kill you.” She hits me, and I catch her wrist.

“I know you don’t have much faith in me, but I’m known for my confidence, and it’s not unfounded.” She looks unsure. On an impulse, I put my arm around her shoulder. “Let’s go. It’s time for the class.” She stiffens. I stop breathing, waiting for yet another rejection but it doesn’t come. Her shoulder muscles relax under my arm. Small victories!

CHAPTER 14

Mishti

I'm not used to casual touches. My mom is the only one who has touched me for a long time. Now there is this boy, who doesn't even think before doing it. It's kind of refreshing, to be honest. I like the mindlessness of it. It proves something I have always believed, every touch between two people of the opposite sex doesn't have to be sexual. And since I'm thinking about sex, I guess I'm invalidating my own point. Yeah, okay. I like his arm around my shoulder a little bit, but that doesn't mean anything.

I shrug his hand off my shoulder before setting foot in the class, because I don't want others to talk. I head to Saahil, who gives me a wide-eyed look.

"You were right. He is not such a bad guy." I settle at the desk after he scoots over for me.

"Damn man! He's good. Does that mean you are coming to watch his match today with me?"

“Yes. But that, I’m doing to be with you. I’m not interested in over-confident basketball players and their inflated egos.”

“Lucky me.” He grins.

#

After English period, Mrs. Khanna calls me and asks me to see her in the staff room during recess.

As I approach the staff room my heart is racing and my hands are cold. I don’t know what I’ve done. I hope it’s not bad. My parents don’t need to know whatever it is.

I stop at the door and ask with my hands folded in front. “Ma’am, may I come in?”

Mrs. Khanna is the only one in the staff room. She is busy reading a notebook. Taking off her glasses, she says, “Yes, of course. Come on in, Mishti.”

She doesn’t look or sound upset. I walk and stand next to her table and watch my shoes.

“Christ School, Bangalore, is organizing the national parliamentary debate by the end of April. I want you to audition for it.”

What? Debate! I can’t speak in front of an audience.

“But Ma’am, I’ve never participated in a debate before and this is a national-level competition. I will ruin the school’s reputation.”

She smiles. “All the more reason for you to try harder.”

I can’t speak.

“Mishti, what are your plans for college?”

“Ma’am, I am applying to some colleges in the USA.”

“College applications are very competitive. Mishti, you’re an intelligent girl. You have exceptional language skills, and you owe it to yourself to hone them at this juncture of your life. Because once this time is gone, there is no way to get it back. Your academic record is flawless, but that’s not enough. You need some extracurricular achievements on your resume. I’m sure you’ll do well in life, but for that, you will have to learn to take risks now.”

I’m listening to her and yelling inside. “No!” I nod my head. “Yes, Ma’am.”

“Mishti, I know you can do this. All you need is some practice. The audition is on Saturday. You have four days. All the best.” She gives me a thumbs up and busies herself in whatever she was doing as if she hasn’t turned my life upside down in the last few minutes.

“Ma’am, can you please suggest some resources that can help me prepare?” I ask. I don’t need to make an utter fool of myself in case I do step on the stage and faint right before the audition.

“Yes, you can get ‘Critical Thinking For Dummies’ from the school library. Oh, and you can ask your English project partner Vikram. He won the interschool turn-coat debate last year. That is if you are up to talking to him long enough to ask him for some tips.” Mrs. Khanna gives a closed-lip smile.

I am mortified. “Ma’am, I don’t have anything against him. It’s just that, he is so annoying. And anyway I have to work with him on the project, might as well take his help on this.” Then it strikes me. “Why didn’t you ask him instead?”

“More students should get opportunities. Our job is to make every student shine. I have got a gut feeling that you’re going to be good at this. I’ve seen it in your writing. You have clear opinions and you can be pretty persuasive about it.”

“But that's not fair Ma'am. All the students should get the opportunity to audition, at least.”

Mrs. Khanna laughs. “And that’s why I love you, Mishti. You can’t take favoritism, even if it is directed towards you. Don’t worry, tomorrow there’s going to be a circular on the bulletin board inviting all the interested students to audition.”

CHAPTER 15

Mishti

I hate that I agreed to stay back to watch Vikram's game today. I have better things to do. I need to go home and tell Mom that I love her, and then go into my room and hang myself. Because that's the only way I see Saturday in my future. My funeral day!

I know what Mom would say. 'Mishti, you can do anything. You need to believe in yourself more.' I wish she knew, believing in oneself doesn't make one smart. How can I assert my views, when I don't know what they are? Debating is not my thing. Ugh, I wish I was invisible to Mrs. Khanna.

Saahil is waiting for me after the last period at my class door. "Took you long," he says.

"Yeah, I was just checking if I had the book that I borrowed from the library, in case I get bored during the game." I don't want to tell Saahil about Mrs. Khanna's irrational request. It was more like an order, but I don't think I can go through with it.

As we walk to the basketball court, I remember something and stop. “Saahil, you go ahead without me. I’ve something urgent to do. I’ll meet you there.”

“What? What’s so urgent? Come on, you can do it later.”

“No. I’ll be there in a few minutes. Save a seat for me, please.” I run back inside the main school building before he asks anything else.

In the school library, I search for the book Mrs. Khanna recommended. Just in case, I manage to stay alive till Saturday. I stuff the book in my backpack and rush to the basketball court.

###

It’s strange how I’ve been part of this school for the last fourteen years, yet I’ve never seen the basketball court filled to its capacity. It’s a heady feeling. Like I’m part of the real high school experience for the first time in my life. Actually, it’s sad but let’s not dwell on it right now.

The cacophony of the crowd and thump thump of the dribbling basketball promises action in my life I just might need right now. I find Saahil in the middle, sitting on the first step. He waves when he sees me, and lifts his backpack from the space reserved for me. We keep our backpacks on the floor.



“What’s the score?” I ask Saahil as if I know anything about the game. It’s an inter-house event, the final match between Agni house and Prithvi house. I’m in Prithvi but Vikram is in Agni. I ask Saahil, “What’s your house?”

Not taking his eyes off the court. “The score is 40-46. Prithvi has the lead. My house is Agni.”

Should have figured it out by the way he’s supporting Vikram’s team. Well, at least my house is winning. Yay!

Saahil keeps me updated through his commentary.

I wonder what has kept me away from the sport for so long. Teenage boys in sleeveless jerseys and shorts are eye candy. I know I am objectifying men, which is ethically wrong, but why? I mean if these boys knew right now that I think they are hot, would they mind? I don’t think so. And to be honest, if I come to know that any boy thinks I’m looking hot or sexy, I will go and give him a thank you card with my lips pressed on it with red lipstick. Not that any boy will ever do. Just saying.

And Vikram. Wow! He is the tallest, but that’s not his only scoring point. He has spring attached to his feet. He’s electric in passing the ball to his teammates. His wavy

brown hair is all wet with sweat. Once, he shakes his head and sweat droplets fall off like a fountain.

The opposing team is trying to surround Vikram when he jumps and makes a three-pointer. Saahil leaps from his place and shouts. "Vikram! Vikram! Vikram!"

The crowd follows his lead. The score is 43-46.

Vikram turns to Saahil and salutes. His gaze glides over me, and then he does a double-take. His lips curve into a smile and he winks. What? The guy is so infuriating. Ugh! Good thing, I'm not obliged to clap for him because he's not playing for my house.

The game resumes. Vikram's headband and t-shirt are completely soaked in sweat, but there is no plunge in his energy. He passes the ball to Shivam who makes a basket for one point. 44-46

Prithvi is still in the lead but they are trying harder to keep the ball away from Vikram. One of the guys from Prithvi gets a foul for hitting Vikram on the shoulder. Vikram uses the free throw to make a two-pointer. And it's a tie with 46-46.

The last basket is made by Vikram again, and it's a three-pointer. Saahil along with half the kids sitting in the audience stands up and starts dancing.

"Okay, Saahil. I get it you are happy. But it's just a game."

"We won! You're a loser."

"Whatever!"

All the teammates surround Vikram and lift him up. Vikram closes his eyes and lifts his hands surrendering himself to

the adulation. When he opens his eyes, he looks at me directly.

This time I lift my hands and clap for him. He deserves it. And then I wink at him back. He pretends to fall back with his hand on his heart. Oh my God! What am I doing?

CHAPTER 16

Vikram

She clapped for me. See, I told you I can win anyone over.

When I saw her sitting beside Saahil with her haughty I-don't-care attitude, I knew I had to make her care. That wink at the end must have been a glitch in her eye though. Or maybe not.

I am grinning from ear to ear while watching Shivam and one of the guys from the team playing Grand Theft Auto on PlayStation in my living room. The basketball team is here to celebrate the win.

Mom is upstairs in her room. She knows better than to wander in her own house when I've my friends over. Just like I'm not allowed to be in the same room when their friends visit.

We ordered food—chicken burgers, chicken nuggets, fries, and cold drinks. I would have slipped in some liquor, but I don't know most of the guys from the team very well. Someone might snitch.

If you ask me, I don't care if they tattle, but Shivam's dad is a nightmare. There's my dad who doesn't care, as long as I don't end up in the prison. And then there is Shivam's dad, who cares too much. A few years back he wouldn't even let him come to my house like he were a girl. I mean, can't there be a balanced parent? I know what this world needs. A parent's finishing school. From where all the parents come out cool and trust their kid's instincts. And even if we do mess up, so what? We're kids. Who wants to live a mistakeless life? It would be too boring.

Just like the one I am making right now, daydreaming about the girl, who must be texting Saahil at this moment, with her sunny smile.

My cellphone beeps.

Mishti: Hi

I pick up the phone and check the message again. Yes, it's from her. I text back immediately.

Vikram: Hi

Mishti: Are you busy? Can I call you?

No, and YES YES YES.

Vikram: I'm free.

My phone rings.

"Congratulation, Captain."

"Thanks." Scanning the room full of boys, I don't take her name.

"First things first. I did not wink at you after the game."

I burst out laughing.

Boys turn to look at me. I move to the balcony. But they're all still staring. Damn! They won't let me live it down.

"Okay," I say.

"Why are you laughing? You believe me, don't you?"

"No, I don't. You clearly communicated something illicit and naughty to me. I'm not gonna forget that, Mist."

"No. I didn't," she screams.

"Would it be so bad? It was just a wink. I winked at you first."

"Yes, so you are the culprit. Why did you?"

"I wink at everyone. It doesn't mean a thing."

"I don't agree. But let's make an exception in this case."

"Prude."

"Does your opinion about me matter? No. So, moving on. I need your help."

"First, you call me. That is enough to give me a heart attack. And now you are saying you need my help. Do you want me dead, woman?"

"Do you really want me to answer that?"

"No, don't." I laugh. "So, what is it?"

"Mrs. Khanna ordered me to audition for the debate in Bangalore. I don't know what to do. I have never spoken publicly before. My mind shuts off when I see the audience. I don't know what she was thinking. Do you think I can do this?"

"Of course, you can do it. You just need some practice."

“Vikram, how are you so good at everything you do? I already knew you are a good speaker. Then today I saw you play. Wow! I’m not the kind of person who would praise you on your face, but you know what I mean.”

Warmth envelopes my insides. My face turns red. Closing my eyes, I savor her words. I’m used to being praised and expecting it, but her half-ass compliment tastes better than a full *maska^s-pav^t*.

When I don’t say anything for some time, she says, “Vikram?”

“You still standby your statement that you didn’t wink at me?”

“Yes, Asshole. Just tell me, will you help me prepare for the audition?”

“And why would I do that? You know I’m also going to audition for it?”

“I’m dead meat. Thanks for making me go on for so long to stroke your ego, Vikram. I always knew you wouldn’t help me.”

“I never said I won’t help you.”

“Then what are you saying?”

“We can practice together.”

“Is there a point, if you are auditioning too?”

“There are usually two students selected for this event.”

She squeals. “Okay, thanks. Tomorrow after school you and Saahil can come to my home. First, we’ll discuss the English project, then we can practice for the debate.”

Ah, Saahil. Do we need him?

#

When I hang up the phone and join the guys, one of the junior guys announces, "Sethi has a girlfriend!"

All the guys turn to me.

I say, "When have I not?"

Shivam gives me a look. He surrenders his remote to another guy and walks over to me. I'm already tired of this obligatory party. I wish they would all go away. All they want is free food and games.

I walk out of the living room to my bedroom where only Shivam is allowed. My room is large but devoid of any furniture except for my bed. I need space, a lot of it too. There is a basketball hoop hanging on the wall opposite my bed. I was a hyperactive child and my parents could think of no other way to deplete my extra energy.

When Shivam follows me to my room, I turn to ask abruptly, "What?"

"Who was she?"

"How do you know it was a girl?"

"I know you, Sethi. I can tell by your tone when you're talking to a girl." He picks up the basketball from the basket in the corner of the room and throws it in the loop. He makes the basket. I pick up the ball.

He says, "You said you are tired of relationship drama."

"Last I heard, talking to a girl doesn't require a ring on the finger."

He nods. "But you know it always starts this way."

"Yeah yeah. Who made you my therapist?" I snatch the ball from him while he is dribbling and jump to make the basket. I miss it. Scowling at the basket, I turn my face to Shivam.

"I've seen you after breakups. It's not a pretty sight. You act like you don't care, but then you drink yourself into a stupor and hate on everyone, including yourself until there is some other girl who makes you feel better. How long has it been since you broke up with Saira? Like one month."

Saira and I used to go to CLAT coaching together, till last year. Our relationship lasted for three months. She started becoming clingy and wanted to know all the time where I was or who I was with. I broke it off with her, but before leaving, she gave a long monologue about all the things wrong with me. I got over her but the speech, not so much.

"Yes, but what's your point?" I maintain my scowl. I hate that he knows me so well.

He starts laughing. "Nothing dude. I'm winning. Was today's match too much for you, Sethi? You need an energy drink?"

"To overpower a loser like you? Never."

CHAPTER 17

Mishti

The next morning, before school, I make our project WhatsApp group and name it 'Jai Veeru Basanti' and wait for them to react.

Jai, Veeru, and Basanti are famous characters in the most successful movie of Indian cinema, 'Sholay'. My mom loves the movie, and I had to suffer through it numerous times when I was a child. And, somehow, it became my favorite too. Sometimes, on family movie nights, we watch just the comedy scenes of the movie on Youtube.

Vikram: Be honest, Mist, am I being designated the 'Veeru' of the group?

Veeru is a womanizer in the movie.

Mishti: Lol. You said it. Plus, your names have the same initials.

Vikram: I'll take it, as long as I get Basanti in the end.

My heart starts racing. I bury my head under the covers that I haven't been able to get out of yet. I know he is a flirt

and talking this way comes naturally to him, but I wish he would stop doing this to me. It does something to me.

Saahil: You are the taller and meaner Jai, I'm the charmer, Veeru.

Saahil is awake. Good, I am speechless anyway.

Saahil: Basanti is mine.

Why doesn't Saahil's declaration evoke the same butterflies in my gut?

Mishti: Is this a game to you two?

Vikram: Everything is a game to me.

Mishti: I know. Now, the reason I made this group was to remind both of you to inform your parents that you are coming to my house after school.

Saahil: Okay, I'll inform Dad. Although he's never home when I get back from school.

Vikram: You think my parents know when I come home?

Mishti: Idk. Well, mine does. Oh and Saahil, reminder: Do bring TCITR you borrowed from the library for me.

###

Vikram and Saahil board the bus with me after school.

On the way, Vikram says, "Final years of school should be full of lots of firsts. Although I have done some good stuff in the last few years, going to Mishti Ahuja's house ranks among the best."

I gape at him open-mouthed. I'll never understand this guy.

“Tell me about the good stuff you have done in the last few years.” Saahil rubs his hands.

“Good stuff should be done, not talked about.” Vikram smirks.

No, I don’t want to understand this guy.

The bus drops us at the edge of the dead-end street where my apartment is the last one.

A street dog comes running with his tail wagging. He jumps on me.

“Down, Gabbar, down.”

Saahil bursts out laughing. “His name is Gabbar? Who named him?”

Vikram says, “Our very own Sholay-obsessed friend, Mishti.” He points both his index fingers at me.

I show him my tongue.

Saahil asks, “But why Gabbar? He was the bad guy, yaar.”

“This small guy here is a bully, just like Gabbar. He won’t let me go inside my house unless I give him something to eat. He looks at me with these puppy eyes. How can anyone ignore these eyes and go on with their lives?”

Vikram kneels down to pet the dirty brown dog with spiky hair. Gabbar presses his nose into his left hand and licks it away.

Vikram laughs. “This guy is dangerous with his puppy eyes and dancing tail.”

“Ew, Vikram. He is dirty. How can you touch him? Plus, he is a street dog. Who knows if he is vaccinated? Aren’t you

scared he will bite you?” Saahil backs away a few steps from us.

Okay, Saahil might not be as perfect as I thought. “He is vaccinated, Saahil. Our colony makes sure all the street dogs in our neighborhood are vaccinated,” I say.



“I’ve dogs at home. I’m not scared of them,” Vikram says, standing up.

“Wow! You mean you have more than one? How many?” I ask as we resume the walk to my building.

Vikram does some mental counting in his head. “Five.”

“No!”

“Yes. It’s a couple who just had three puppies.”

“Puppies!” I squeal. “I wanna see them.”

Before we reach home, Gabbar catches up with us and sits before the elevator staring at me.

“See, the Devil. Move over persistent buddy. I’ll bring some curd for you.”

I grab the handle of the metal door of the elevator and slide it open. The metal doors clack loudly. The canine moves over, now that he knows I am on the mission to feed him.

Yes, my building is ancient with an elevator with sliding metal double doors. And also, it's tiny. I never use it when there is someone in it already. My apartment is on the third floor. I would much rather take the stairs, which I prefer to take these days anyway to burn calories.

"Is this thing safe?" Vikram asks but follows me inside.

"Yes, as safe as riding on a bike with you."

When Saahil is inside I close both the metal doors.

"You mean you subject yourself to this adventure daily? Living dangerously, Mist, huh?" He bumps his shoulder to mine.

I turn to respond but he is close, very close. I don't say anything and resume watching the iron door. With two grown-ass boys standing beside me in this cramped space, I can't breathe. It was a bad idea to use the elevator.

At home, Mom's waiting for us. In the morning, I informed her I would be bringing two boys home, and she is not allowed to ask any questions about them to me and definitely not to them. And I asked her to make herself scarce.

To this she took offense, saying, "As if I don't give you enough privacy. You're an ungrateful girl, Mishti."

But I don't worry much about that. It's the melodrama she has learned from her seventies and eighties movies fixation.

When I introduce Vikram and Saahil to her, she just nods and keeps her lips sealed. I know she is dying to ask questions.

“My room is the last one on the right. Why don’t you go in there? I’ll feed Gabbar and come back in five minutes,” I say.

In the kitchen, I give Mom a thumbs up. “Well done, Mom,” I say while filling a plate with curd.

“Who is the taller one?” She asks.

Why did she have to ask about him? She could have asked about Saahil. He’s the new guy after all.

“Vikram. Why?”

She nods her head smiling. “You go ahead. They are waiting for you.”

I frown at her. Mothers can’t be trusted.

CHAPTER 18

Vikram

It's a small room. On the left side of the bed, there is a soft board, where 'They Said: The Feminists Unite' is pasted with a caption, 'Winner of 2018 poetry writing contest, Indore International School', signed Mishti Ahuja class XI-Humanities.

They Said: The Feminists Unite

*They said you are pure,
I asked are you sure?
Because our intentions are grilled,
And then fried on the altar of the devil.*

*They said you should conform,
I asked what about my body form?
It's my own,
Not your property to hone.*

*They said you better be docile,
I said why don't you let me pile
All the ways I could be eaten alive,
And then spit on the ravine.*

*They said you are an angel,
I said the angel of death maybe.
For I have seen an angel die,
To appease those she couldn't satisfy.*

At the end of the sheet, there is a handwritten note, 'Remember, you did this. You can do anything.'

I smile. I can picture Mishti writing this poem and the note. It's a printout from the school blog, that I never read. Maybe I should.

On the opposite wall, there is a giant bookshelf. In the center, there is a queen-size bed and a window above from where the sunlight is pouring on her bed.

Under the soft board, there is a study desk on which many of the heavy course books are scattered. Besides that, it's a fairly clean room with lemon yellow walls and beige shades.

On the soft board, there are tiny printouts of the pictures of Taylor Swift, Blackpink, and Ariane Grande.

Dimple boy is sifting through the books and notebooks on the study table. "Can you believe it? She has already started making notes for the mid-terms."

"What can I say, not having friends does leave me with a lot of time to kill," Mishti says from the threshold of the room. "Are you both satisfied with the perusal of my space?"

"Only you can kill time studying Psychology, Mist," I say.

“What’s with this name ‘Mist’, you keep calling her? Is there a secret history?” Saahil asks.

Only in my mind. I throw my bag on the bed and straighten a pillow to sit.

“We do not have any history, Saahil. I know it’s hard to believe when Vikram acts as if he belongs here more than I.” Mishti marches into the room, sets her backpack on the table, and says, “Don’t try to get too comfortable, you are too tall for my bed.”

“Wanna bet? I will fit right in,” I say, “even with you beside me,” as I stretch my legs on her bed.

Mishti’s big eyes pop out and her mouth opens. Ah, that soft full mouth. I want to shut it with my own.

Saahil laughs and pulls up the study chair to sit.

Mishti turns to Saahil and says, “Saahil, what did you think about ‘The Catcher In The Rye’?”

She proceeds to ignore me for the next hour.

#

“I don’t think we have a lot to discuss until I read the book. I’m not sure I want to though. Whatever you both have told me about the main character, I don’t think I’m going to like him.”

Mishti is sitting at the table, at least ten feet away from me. She changed into a plain white t-shirt with the quote ‘I have no shelf control’ and a pair of blue jeans. Her hair was open but then she just bunched them and tied them into a bun while talking. It’s so effortless, and I used to think girls spent hours in the salon to get this hairstyle and look. She

has a birthmark on the left side of her neck. She chews a pencil when she is thinking. I haven't seen her writing with a pencil. I guess its whole purpose is to be a martyr to support her cognitive abilities.

"I'm sure you are not going to like him, Mist. But I'll make it easy for you. Just think of me in his place when you read; you won't have that problem," I say.

"Hahaha. That's a surefire way for me to tear the book, burn it, and then flush it down the toilet."

"You two are entertaining, but I need a break. I'm hungry," Saahil says.

"Mom must have gone for Yoga class. I am sure we'll find something to eat. Let's go." Mishti hops off the table, and we follow her.

The kitchen is small and doesn't have a separate wall. It's connected to the living room. An island counter acts as the partition. There are two bar stools on either side of the table. Saahil and I settle on them.

Mishti opens the refrigerator.

"What do you want, *Didi*?" A voice startles us.

We look behind the refrigerator door. A slip of a girl in salwar kameez is sitting on the floor, with her knees drawn in. Her hair is tied in two long braids.

Mishti places her right hand on her chest. "Jyoti, you scared us. What are you doing down there?"

"Nothing, *Didi*. Just thinking."

"Thinking? About what?" Mishti hunches on the floor with her. "You have been crying? What happened? Did Mom say something to you?"

“No no. Your Mom is too kind. Don’t worry about me. Your friends are here. Don’t bother them with my troubles.”

Mishti gets up and turns to us. “Oh, these two.” She wrinkles her nose. “Are they my friends? Yeah, I guess so. Jyoti, meet Vikram and Saahil. Can you believe it? I have friends finally in the last year of my school.”

Jyoti giggles and stands up. “Well, I think they are lucky.”

Saahil and I wave at Jyoti. “Hi.”

“*Bhaiya*, will you have tea or coffee?”

“No, Jyoti, we will manage.” Mishti opens the refrigerator again.

“Don’t you have chips or nachos to munch on?” Saahil asks.

“No. My mom is a fitness freak. Refuses to keep these things at home. Oh good, we have boiled potatoes. Do you like Bombay masala sandwich?”

“I love it. And I can make killer cold coffee to go with it. Wanna try?” I say.

Mishti raises her head from the refrigerator to look at me.

“Is there anything you are not good at, Vikram Sethi?”

I’m not good at talking with my household help as if she is my younger sister. “No,” I say.

“Then take these and peel them. I’m sure you’ll be great at this too.” She hands me a bowl full of potatoes.

“What about me? What do I do?” Saahil asks.

“Can you cut onions?” Mishti asks.

“Oh, no, *Didi*. I’ll cut onions. Don’t ask guests to cut onions, please.” Jyoti cries out.

“Only if you tell me why were you crying?” Mishti says.

The girl looks down and says, “*Didi*, *Baba* is not well.” And starts crying again. “He has Typhoid. It has already been three weeks. He is not getting any better. The doctor says they need to operate on him. The operation would cost a lot. We don’t have money as whatever we had was spent on his medicines.”

“Did you ask Mom?” Mishti asks.

“I already took money from her two weeks ago for the hospital stay. I can’t ask her again.” She wipes her tears and takes out onions from a basket to cut.

Mishti leaves the kitchen.

I look at Saahil who is looking at his feet. I say, “Come on bro, help me. These are so sticky. Yuck. I’ll never peel potatoes again.”

Jyoti laughs. “Leave it. I’ll do that too and won’t tell *Didi*.”

“I’m not scared of your *didi*,” I say.

“Are you not?” She smiles. “But she is the best. Isn’t she?”

Mishti comes back with a hand full of five hundred rupees notes. “Here, take this.”

Jyoti doesn’t take it. “No, *Didi*, this is your money. I can’t take this.”

“Last year, on my birthday, I got this money. I saved it to buy something for myself, but couldn’t think of anything until now. And now my birthday is just around the corner. I’ll get it back. You take it. It’s fifteen thousand rupees. I hope this is enough.”

Jyoti takes the money and touches Mishti’s feet.

“What are you doing? I’m the same age as you.” Mishti moves back, embarrassed.

“But you have a big heart, *Didi*. Thank you.” Jyoti leaves the kitchen wiping her tears.

Mishti calls out. “Listen, Jyoti. Don’t tell Mom.”

She looks spectacular to me when she turns to us and avoids making eye contact. I think of all the money that I have stacked in my locker at home. I plan on buying a brand new PlayStation, the latest CDs, new shoes, new basketball, and some books. Will I give it up for someone, if they needed it more than I?

She looks at us finally. “Where were we? Vikram, you’re not doing a good job here. So have we finally found something you are not good at?”

CHAPTER 19

Mishti

Watching Vikram across the table, after Saahil is gone, it hits me. We are alone at home. Jyoti left at six p.m. Mom has gone to the club. She is a yoga instructor. Usually, I go with her because, according to her, working out is as important as breathing. Today, she spared me for school work. She won't be back before seven-thirty. And it's six-fifteen now.

Earlier, I was thankful for Vikram's chatty presence after the awkwardness of the situation. Soon, it became a fun-fest, except for the part when Vikram forgot to place his hands on the jar lid while blending the cold coffee, and we were all splashed with creamy Vikram special, or when I burned my hand while placing the sandwich in the toaster. I am learning that doing things with friends is hilarious and catastrophic at the same time. And messy too. Ugh.

"I've to clean up. I can't let Mom see the kitchen like this. She'll kill me." I whine.

"That sneaky bastard," Vikram mutters.

“Haw, Vikram! Mind your language.”

“Well, your friend, Saahil, knew it’s time for cleaning, so he left.”

“I think he was just getting late. It’s okay. It would take ten minutes. You go in my room and wait.”

“No, I’ll help you.” He gets up from the barstool and takes the dirty dishes to the sink.

“Okay.” I start putting back all the things I got out of the refrigerator and shelves.

Turning back to check on Vikram, I find him still holding the first plate with the washcloth in his hand.

I go and stand beside him. “Is there a problem?”

“Where do the leftovers go?” He asks.

I give a soft laugh. “You don’t have to do this. Here, give this to me.”

I try to take the plate from him, but he grabs my hand with his right hand. His warm, slippery and wet hand. A jolt of awareness passes through my body. His eyes meet mine, and I am speechless. I can’t take my eyes off his.

“I might not be good at everything, Mist. But when I take on a task, I complete it.”

I think my face resembles the tomato sauce on the plate. Why are you blushing? You idiot! He’s not flirting with you. He is just stating a fact.

“Okay.” I squeak. “Let me help you then.”

He grins. “That’s fair.”

Butterflies in my stomach decide to full-on jazz, and my heart is pounding. I'm in big trouble. God! Not him, please.

###

"How do you know she wasn't lying?" Vikram asks when we are back in my room.

He takes my bed again. It means I can't sit on my own bed, again. Ugh.

"Who?"

"Jyoti."

"Why would she lie?"

"Why do people lie, cheat, and murder? For money."

I never thought of that actually. "Even if she was lying, still she needed that money more than me," I say. "I have everything I want."

Vikram settles on my bed while resting his back on the headboard and studies me.

"What?" I say.

"Nothing." He still doesn't look away. "When is your birthday? You said it's around the corner."

"It's next week," I say. Why am I the center of conversation here?

He keeps looking at me with narrowed eyes.

"Okay! It's on Thursday, twenty-fifth April. Nobody at school knows. Please, don't tell anyone."

"Why?"

“Because it’s not a big deal. It’s just another day. I don’t like all the fuss people make around a birthday. It’s fluff.”

“No, it’s not. It’s your birthday,” he says.

“I don’t like the attention. The phone calls, the texts, and the birthday songs at school. So annoying. And everyone asking what do you want for your birthday? Oh please, why don’t you leave me alone? That would be the best present. I would much rather have a single friend, my favorite person, with whom I spend the whole day. And night. Especially night, when someone would stay awake for me, sneak away from their house just before midnight, and give me a surprise visit.” I blurt in a dreamy state of mind.

“You are a romantic.” Vikram is lying down on his stomach on my bed with his face in his hands.

“I’m not.”

“You are.”

“Can we start with the practice?”

#

“The topic for debate is given half an hour to one hour before the debate. So, don’t worry. You will get the time to research. Remember the seven Cs of communication: clear, concise, correct, concrete, coherent, considerate, and courteous.” Vikram writes this in a notebook and says, “The most important thing is clarity. Clarity comes from research. And research from a neutral state of mind, not from what is going to be your stand.”

“What if I’m given a stand I do not ethically agree with? How do I convince others when I don’t believe in something myself?”

“That’s where debating skills and hard work at research come into play. Let’s say the topic that you get is ‘Are zoos necessary?’ What’s your stand for it?”

“Obviously no. Who gave humans the right to capture, confine and breed other animals? It’s wrong. I’m against it.”

“But if you’re asked to debate in favor of zoo, then?”

“I’ll keep my mouth shut and let my opponent win. Which would be the case anyway, whatever the topic.”

“No. You’ll google.” I drag my chair near the bed when he takes my laptop and types ‘benefits of zoo’ and lo and behold, there are ten billion search results.

“I don’t want to live in a world where there are ten billion reasons for keeping animals captive,” I say.

“We also have three million disadvantages of zoos,” he says after searching on google.

“Which is significantly less than benefits.”

“Maybe it’s because animals are not writing articles, humans are,” he says. “Moving on, all you need is research and some practice. Now, I’ll give you fifteen minutes. I want you to make up reference points in favor of the zoo, and I’ll make mine against it.”

“No, I want against.”

“That’s why you are getting in favor.”

“You are mean.”

“I know. Now get to work.”

#

By the time my mom comes home, I'm ready to kill Vikram. He has an argument ready against all my valid points. I climbed the bed with him because we are sharing my laptop.

“How can you say captive breeding is wrong when that's the only way to save some of the species from extinction?”

“Oh hi, I didn't know there was someone in here with you-” Mom says, as she stops at the door of my room.

I spring out of my bed. “Oh, Mom. He is going anyway if he thinks it's okay for humans to just walk away and let the Panda and Arabian oryx die when humans are the ones responsible for their being endangered in the first place.”

“So, what you're saying is that the wild animals are safer and more likely to survive in a human-controlled environment than in the wild?” Vikram says.

“Yeah. That's what...” And then I shut my mouth with both hands.

Mom looks with confusion from me to Vikram.

He is grinning. “My job here is done. Ciao.”

CHAPTER 20

Vikram

I could have kissed her twice that day. Once in her kitchen, near the sink, or on her bed. She was so close. God knows it was hard to resist leaning in and tasting her sweet mouth when it was firing away her passionate opinions. But I didn't do it. I was terrified she would reject me again. I've never been rejected by a girl, but something about this girl makes me lose confidence. I'm not even sure if she likes me at all. Maybe she's spending time with me only because she doesn't have a choice.

Now sitting beside her in the school auditorium for the audition, my mind is on her and what she's thinking. She's biting her nail and watching the proceedings carefully.

There are a total of eight auditioners. A girl, Nancy, comes on the stage. She used to be my classmate in ninth and tenth grade. She is also the daughter of my dad's best friend. We used to be good friends, but we were young and foolish. We decided to date, and that was the end of our friendship. I miss her sometimes, especially at family gatherings that she avoids.

After her, it's my turn. I'm not nervous. The topic that we are given is 'Should everyone be vegetarian?'. I have to speak against the topic. I can do this in sleep. I love non-vegetarian food and can come up with scores of facts to prove that it's the best way to eat for humans.

"Archaeological evidence shows that eating meat has been an essential part of human evolution for 2.3 million years. If we include meat in our diet, it provides us with a dense form of nutrients and protein that, along with high-calorie carbohydrates such as roots, allow us to develop our brains and intelligence. Humans have evolved to crave meat. It can't be denied that this is the way nature planned human evolution. Who are we humans to disturb the cycle?" I end my speech with this snippet.

After me, it's Mishti's turn. "I shall start with my argument against, my friend, Vikram's claim that the human body is designed to eat meat. On the contrary, the human anatomy has evolved to support a vegetarian diet. Carnivores have large mouths with pointed teeth and short intestines, and their livers can detoxify the excess vitamin A absorbed from the meat. Human teeth are short and flat; we have long intestines, which are ten to eleven times the body length, and our livers cannot detoxify excess vitamin A."

I rise to argue. It's fun to do that with her anywhere. "When did I say we are carnivores? Why compare our eating and digesting abilities with carnivores when we, humans, are omnivores. Our bodies can handle both meat and plant matter pretty well. In fact, our taste buds have evolved to crave meat's savory flavor. Our body is unique because our diet is unique, not like any other species on earth."

Mishti's not about to give up. "There is archaeological evidence that shows that early humans were mostly

vegetarians. Meat-eating was rare. And the communities that indulged in it more suffered from health issues like obesity, diabetes, and heart diseases. Humans were always as foolish as they are now, but our bodies always know what's good for us. Let's not ignore the archaeological evidence and elaborate studies. Humans are not meat-eaters. Sure, they'll survive. Maybe our environment will too, but being healthy is more than just being alive. Isn't it?"

###

After all the auditions are done, we are asked to wait for the results. Two students will be chosen to go to Bangalore. I hope Mishti and I are chosen. I want to be close to her and maybe, just maybe, I will gather enough courage to kiss her finally.

Mishti is sitting beside me. "Vikram, even if I am not selected for this, I'm glad that I participated. I have learned a lot from you. I couldn't have done this without you." And then she focuses her big brown eyes on me and says, "Plus, I got to know you. You are an amazing person. I hope our friendship won't end with school."

I'm a goner. I have goosebumps on my arms that I stare at for a while and ponder how to say something funny to diffuse the situation. I'm not a deep person. "So, we are friends who can't stop hating each other?"

"Or we're enemies who are not very good at hating each other anymore." She laughs.

Mrs. Khanna takes the stage. "I commend the efforts of all the students who auditioned today. It was a tough one. But since only two students can go to Bangalore for the debate,

we had to make a choice. The first student we unanimously selected is Vikram Sethi. While choosing the other one, we were in dilemma. Both the girls put in impressive arguments. I was especially bowled over by one of the students because this was her first effort. But since we had to choose one and as the score worked in Nancy's favor, we have chosen Nancy Singh. So our final team for the national parliamentary debate is Vikram Sethi and Nancy Singh."

All the other participants clap for us. Mishti is clapping too. Nancy gets up and thanks everyone. I don't.

Mishti pushes me. "Congrats, Vikram. Stand up."

"Nah. What did you say the date for the competition is?" I whisper leaning over.

"Twenty-seventh of April," she says.

"Crap!" I say and chase after Mrs. Khanna before she leaves.

"Congratulations, Vikram." She turns when she sees me. "But then we always knew you are going with us to Bangalore anyway."

"Ma'am, if I can't go, who would be your third choice?"

"As I mentioned, I think Mishti did pretty well too."

"I can't go out of Indore next weekend as I have a basketball match at the club."

She doesn't look happy. "You shouldn't have auditioned if you didn't want to go."

"I didn't know the dates. I'm sorry, Ma'am." I try to look as humble as I can.

She nods her head and says, “Okay, I’ll think about it and let you know on Monday.”

CHAPTER 21

Mishti

At the dinner table, Mom and Dad are discussing our summer trip to Manali when I get a call from Mrs. Khanna. I ask them to be quiet before picking up the phone.

“Hello, Ma’am,” I say.

“Mishti, is this too late to call?”

“No not at all, Ma’am.”

“Listen, do you still want to go to Bangalore? One of the students has withdrawn since he will not be able to make it next weekend.”

He? What the hell!

“Yes, Ma’am, I can go. But why did he say he can’t go?”

“He says he has an important basketball match at it his club. He can’t miss it.”

“But, Ma’am, Vikram is the best. Don’t you think if he goes we have a better chance of winning?”

“Mishti Ahuja, are you scared to go?” Mrs. Khanna says in a stern tone.

“Yes. No. I don’t know. This is sudden. I was completely relaxed and eating my dinner after a good day. I wasn’t selected, but you appreciated me, that was enough for me. But now this. I don’t understand.”

“Mishti, we can’t force anyone to participate.”

“I know, Ma’am, I’m sorry. I’ll be there if Vikram doesn’t go. I won’t disappoint you.”

“Thank you. That’s why I love you. Good night.”

My parents are watching me.

“Congratulations?” Dad asks.

“No, I can’t go. Vikram should be going to Bangalore. He is the best debater in our school. He can’t do this to the school.”

“And to you?” Mom adds.

“Yes, to me too.” I nod. “I mean he wanted to go. I know because we discussed going to Bangalore together. Why would he back out now?”

“What reason did he give?” Mom asks.

“That he has a basketball match at his club. But it’s just a local club, not as important as a national level competition.” Frowning, I leave the table.

#

“Are you insane?” I yell when he picks up the phone.

“Not as much as you. Who greets someone on phone like that?” Vikram says.

“Why did you withdraw from the debate?”

“I gave the reason to Mrs. Khanna. I’m sure she told you.”

“But it’s not a valid reason. You can’t do this. If not for school, think about yourself. Do you know how much weight a national-level competition adds to college applications?”

“Building a college resume is not what I live for. You should be happy, you’re getting the opportunity to make yours impressive.”

“But I’m not good enough.” I talk in a frenzy of emotion. “You can tell me the real reason. Why are you opting out?”

“If you don’t believe that I wouldn’t betray my team when they need me, I don’t owe you an explanation,” he says.

“I hate you!” I hang up on him.

###

Mishti: I hate Vikram Sethi.

Megha: Great! You’re back.

Mishti: Who the hell does he think he is, saying he doesn’t owe me an explanation?

Megha: Uhm, explanation for what?

Mishti: For being a quitter, coward, and selfish asshole.

Megha: Okay I’m with you on all the name-calling, but why does he owe you an explanation?

Mishti: I’ve to go to Bangalore.

Megha: Wow! They selected you?

Mishti: Oh no-no. I wasn't selected. It was he who was selected with one other girl. But he quit.

Megha: So now you have to go?

Mishti: Yes.

Megha: I might be missing something here, but wasn't this the same thing you wanted yesterday?

Mishti: No! I wanted to go with him.

Megha: Ohhhh, twist in the tale.

Mishti: He helps me calm down. I can't go without him.

Megha: We are talking about Vikram Sethi, right?

Mishti: He helped me prepare for the audition. He's a good guy. It's when he acts this way like he doesn't care what anyone says or thinks. I wish I could shake him up and make a milkshake out of him.

Megha: And drink up the tantalizing mix?

Mishti: No. I hate him in any state of matter.

Megha: I may be way off the mark, but have you considered that he did this for you? So that you could go to Bangalore.

Mishti: No. Don't be stupid. He doesn't do anything for anyone else.

Megha: He helped you prepare.

Mishti: He needed to practice for the audition too.

Megha: Did he, really?

CHAPTER 22

Mishti

“Can we cancel today?” It’s past midnight on my birthday.

Megha calls me because on rare occasions like our birthdays, we do talk on the phone.

“Not if I have a say in the matter. It’s your day, darling, enjoy it.”

“Who do I enjoy it with? You are in Delhi, and I have no other friends.”

“You have Saahil and Vikram. You said they were your friends.”

“I don’t know. I’m not good at this friendship thing. Saahil doesn’t know it’s my birthday. I’m not obviously gonna tell him myself. It would be pathetic, and Vikram-”

“Oh yes, Vikram-”

“I told Vikram my birthdate but chances are slim that he would remember. Also, I haven’t talked to him since

Saturday. He's so unpredictable. Sometimes, I think it's better I stay away from him."

"How's your prep for the big day going?"

"Mrs. Khanna makes me and Nancy practice daily at school, but I need to practice more. Vikram told me to practice in front of a mirror, but it's not the same. I wish I could time-travel to Monday. No birthday, no practice, no flight to Bangalore, and no competition."

"Don't do this to yourself on your birthday."

"I wish you were here."

"Oh, darling, I'm there with you. Just close your eyes."

It's a quarter past midnight. My parents wished me at twelve and went to sleep.

After Megha's call, I switch off my cell phone. I need to sleep as there is school tomorrow, but sleep evades me.

Tap-Tap. I turn sharply and listen for the sound. Tap-Tap. Yes, the sound resurfaces. And it's coming from the balcony door. I'm terrified. I try to recall if I locked the door. Yes, I distinctly remember I did. Thank God! Should I wake up my parents or handle this myself?

I'm seventeen, almost an adult, why not act like it? Pulling back the curtains slowly, I peek through the door. A hand taps again from the shadow. I cry out and back away.

There's a muffled sound, "Mishti."

"Vikram?" I pull back the curtains to confirm.

Covering my mouth to stop myself from screaming, I keep staring at him. He is wearing a white button-down shirt tucked inside blue jeans. His face is not visible because of

the dark, but it's him. He remembered my birthday! And what I said about how I wanted it to be.

He leans in to bring his face in light and mouths, "Open the door."

I unlatch the door with trembling fingers. He comes inside and closes the door after him.

"What are you doing here? How did you climb my balcony?"

Turning back to me, he says, "Happy birthday, Mist! I might not be your favorite person, but I've something for you." He puts his hands inside his shirt.

My heart is pounding. I never expected this in my wildest dream. "What's inside your shirt?"

A white fur soft-toy with black spots on its coat, and black beady eyes, emerges from inside his shirt.

He offers the toy to me.

Before I could react, The toy blinks at me. I shriek and move back several steps. "This is alive. It's not a toy."

He laughs. "You thought it was a toy?"

"Yes, I've only got soft toys as a gift since childhood, not alive soft puppies."

Tracing back my steps to Vikram, I touch the furry delight and take it in my arms. "Awww... This is so cute. I can't believe you brought a puppy for me."

"Neither can I," unbuttoning his shirt, Vikram says. "The dickhead peed inside my shirt."

I double-over with laughter. With the puppy in my right hand, I fall on my bed, trying to stop making noise with the other hand.

But then he takes off his shirt and his vest follows. The laughter dies inside my throat. He's glorious.

I sit up straight on my bed. "Why are you taking your clothes off?"

"Because they smell of piss." He dumps them on the floor, turns to me, and smirks. "Does this bother you?"

"No." I look anywhere but at him. Puppy is a good excuse. "But you're in my room, shirtless, in the middle of the night. What if my parents come?"

He goes ahead and locks my bedroom door.

"Problem solved."

"Weren't you scared that I might not open the door, or wake up my parents, or scream?" I say still petting the puppy.

"Yeah, the thought did cross my mind, but you're worth the risk." He winks

He says it so casually, I can't believe he said that. I gape at him. He grins and walks over to the washroom.

I'm wearing my cute teddy bear night suit. I took my bra off before bed, and it's hanging on the other side of the bathroom door.

"Why are you going to the bathroom?"

"Do you always ask stupid questions or is it the time of the day?"

He walks over to the washbasin, which is directly opposite the door. If he closes the door he would be able to see the back of the door in the mirror.

I follow him and stand at the door with the sleeping puppy in my hands pressed to my chest. His smooth lean muscular

back is on display. If his front was glorious, his back is spectacular. He has a tattoo just below his nape. It's an eagle with its wings spread.

The eagle represents freedom and power, and Vikram is the epitome of it for me at this moment. The freedom to do anything at any time of the day and the sexual power he has over me. There is a throbbing between my legs and my knees are about to buckle. I lean on the door for support. I know I should look away but can't.

He takes the hand towel from the washbasin, dampens it with water, and is cleaning his torso with it. When he looks up, his eyes meet mine in the mirror. His hands stop moving. And so does time.

CHAPTER 23

Vikram

“**Y**ou have a tattoo?” she asks. “You are only seventeen. Isn’t it illegal?”

Breaking the eye contact, I shake my head and laugh. Of course, she would judge me.

“What do you get by following the rules?”

“They are there for a reason. You’re still too young to get a permanent mark on your body. You might regret it later.”

“I’d rather regret the things I’ve done than regret the things I’ve never done.”

She turns away from me and walks back into her bedroom. “When you put it that way, I wish I had done a few things that I regretted.”

She sits on the bed hugging the puppy. Ahh, the puppy life!

“You can put him down, you know. He won’t get up if that’s what you are afraid of.”

“Nah. I’m fine.” She says shaking her head, not looking at me. “What will I tell my parents? Where did he come from? I can’t tell them that you visited me at midnight to give me my birthday present.”

“What else can I give to the girl who has got everything she wants?”

She turns red, glances at me, and quickly looks away. “You needn’t have brought a gift for me at all.”

“You don’t want him?” I ask.

She looks up sharply. “No, I want him. Now more than when I’d never seen him. Look at him, all soft and tiny. Who wouldn’t want him? But who’ll take care of him when I’ll be in school, or who’ll feed him? He’ll pee and poop all over the house. My mom wouldn’t let me keep him.” And her eyes fill up with tears. “I can’t take up his responsibility. I don’t deserve him.”

I cover the distance to the bed in a second and sit beside her. “Shhhhh... Don’t think too much. You just said you wish you could do something that you would regret. This is your chance. Don’t think, just do it. You’ve to fight for things that you want. And I’ll tell you one thing, you’ll never regret this guy.”

She smiles through her tears. “Where did you get him?”

“Oh, he’s mine.”

She laughs. “I always knew you were a dog.”

I like to make her laugh. She gets up from the bed, opens her wardrobe, takes out the school’s sports t-shirt, and throws it at me.

“Cover yourself. This is the only t-shirt I have that is big enough for you.”

“I can’t wear this. This is a Prithvi house t-shirt. I am a loyal Agnian.”

“Fuck you! I know how loyal you are. Just put it on.”

“Mishti Ahuja swears?” I raise an eyebrow as I give in and wear the t-shirt.

“Only with you, Vikram Sethi. Only with you.” She says in a sing-song voice.

“Good.” I grin.

She is sitting at the far end of the study table. I walk over to her. The puppy is still plastered to her body like a shield.

“Do you know puppies have a small bladder? They pee a lot.”

“Oh!” She gets off the table and takes out a towel from a drawer on the side of her bed. “Can you help me fold this?”

“I can hold him.” I offer my hands to her but she backs away.

“No. It’s okay. I’ll do it myself.” She proceeds to fold the towel with one hand on her bed.

I fold my hands and watch her, puzzled and somewhat pissed.

She sighs and lifts her head. “I’m not wearing a bra. The puppy is kind of keeping me...”

“Oh!” Fuck! I am speechless for the first time. Don’t look there.

I take the towel from her, fold it and place it on the floor and wait for her to part with the puppy. Still not looking at her.

I know everyone thinks I'm an asshole, but when a girl is uncomfortable, I won't subject her to more unease. I'm not a lecher.

As soon as she lets go of the puppy, she runs to the bathroom and locks the door.

I sit on the floor with my back against the bed and smile, allowing myself to fantasize about what she is doing inside.

When she comes back, she sits on the floor beside me.

"Your parents know where you are?" she asks watching the sleeping puppy.

I chuckle. "Nope. They never know where I am. I've the dream life of a teenager. My parents neither know nor care about what I'm doing."

She frowns but doesn't ask anything more about my parents. I'm relieved. "Do you have a sibling?"

"Four."

"Wow! Tell me about them." She crosses her legs and sits up straight.

"I'm the youngest. Four elder sisters, two married, two in medical college."

"What a fun childhood you must have had! I'm an only child. I remember I used to fight with my mother daily when I was thirteen or fourteen that why couldn't she have had one more child, maybe then I would have been normal," she says.

"Normal? What's normal?" I ask.

"A teenager who has friends and is excited to go to school trips or birthday parties."

"I'm all those things but I ain't normal either."

“Finally, something we agree upon.” She hugs her knees and rests her chin on them.

“Having siblings, and especially so many, is not the party you think it is.”

“It’s not?” Her genuine question makes me laugh.

“I was the youngest and a boy. They all hated me. With my parents, I always got my way but they stood like a rock against me.”

I never talk to my friends about my family. It’s embarrassing that in this day and age a couple would have five kids for the want of a son.

I’m not gonna tell her that, but talking about my sisters isn’t so bad. And then the conversation moves on to my dogs.

She watches me while I talk, and when I’m done, our eyes meet and stay.

“I’ve never seen such long eyelashes on a boy,” she says.

“Is it a good thing or bad?”

“You don’t need me to tell you that you’re good-looking.” She gives a shy smile.

God, she is sweet. “You think that?” I lean forward and say, “Wanna try something else you’d regret tomorrow?”

“Isn’t one enough for a day?” She says, her gaze not leaving mine.

“It’s your birthday. You are allowed to be reckless for a day.” I inch a bit closer to her.

She doesn’t move back. It’s a good sign.

“Woof! Woof!” The puppy chooses this moment to get up and bark.

Mishti jerks away from me. Little fucker! Do you go to jail for killing a puppy?

She picks up the puppy and without looking at me says, “Why is he crying? What if he is hungry?”

“Puppies don’t need to be fed at night. Just give him some water.”

There is a knock on the door.

She whispers, “Shit, my parents are awake.”

“Mishti, what’s this noise in your room?” It’s her Mom.

“Nothing, Mom, I am watching a movie.”

“Birthday is no excuse to skip school. Go to sleep, Mishti. Turn off the movie or no mobile for you at bedtime from tomorrow.”

Mishti is continuously petting the puppy to keep him quiet. I’m trying to hold back my laughter. This is entertaining.

But I’m not good with parents.

“Bye. Happy birthday once again, Mist.” I give her a quick kiss on her forehead.

Before she can react, I open the balcony door carefully and flee. She’ll survive.

CHAPTER 24

Mishti

My google search history at two a.m., twenty-fifth April 2019:

What do puppies eat?

How often do puppies eat?

Puppy names

How to tell your Mom that you got a puppy for your birthday?

How to make puppies stop barking at night?

How often do puppies pee?

Debate topics for parliamentary debate.

How to kiss?

The last one takes up the major part of the night. I sleep at four.

My six o'clock alarm goes off twice and I shut it each time.

Mom bangs my door at six-thirty. “Mishti, get up. I don’t know why you set the alarm when I’ve to wake you up every day anyway.”

He was going to kiss me. It would have been my first kiss. Oh my God! I would have messed up. I don’t know anything about kissing.

The puppy, whom I named Kipper after the protagonist of my favorite series about a dog with a heart of gold, slept with me on the bed. He wouldn’t keep quiet otherwise, and I couldn’t let my parents hear him bark again.

I pick him up and take him to the balcony, and close the door. After checking the balcony for any holes from where he could jump, I lock the door.

Vikram’s shirt and vest are on the floor. I pick them up, put them in a paper bag, and shove them inside my wardrobe. I’ll wash it later but never return it to him. They would be the reminder of my best birthday ever.

I’m ready in record time. I’ve to tell Mom about Kipper but not now. I rush to the kitchen, take a banana, one empty bowl, and one bowl full of water and hurry back to my room.

Mom shouts. “I’m making eggs for you. What do you want the banana and these bowls for?”

“Can’t I have both?” I yell from my room.

Thankfully, she is busy. She doesn’t come to see what I’m doing with the supply I just smuggled from the kitchen.

I mash the banana in the empty bowl and keep both the bowls in front of Kipper who’s still sleeping.

I’m back in a minute and smile sweetly at her. “Mom, it’s my birthday. You didn’t wish me.”

“Oh, sorry, sweetheart. I did at night. Come on, give me a hug. You’re the best you know that, don’t you?”

I give her a hug. “Don’t forget that when I tell you something after coming back from school today.”

“You can tell me now.” She hands me the omelet and toast on a plate.

“Later. It’s a good day. I’ll always remember my seventeenth birthday as the best birthday of my life.”

“You have a whole lot of life left.”

“Yeah, but a birthday this good comes only in a lifetime.”

“Is there a boy?” She asks.

“No!” I don’t want to tell her, but my body gives me away. I turn red and avoid eye contact.

“Oh my God, I was just joking, but it’s true, isn’t it?” Her eyes widen. “When you come back from school, you’ll tell me all about him.”

“Mom, there is no one. Please.” I gobble up the breakfast to escape her questions. “Bye, I’m late.”

###

Vikram kept his promise. He didn’t tell anyone about my birthday.

I see him in the morning and wave at him. Heat creeps into my body just by making eye contact with him. His presence in the same class keeps my heartbeat high, and I have to use superhuman effort to not look at him throughout the class. But he’s busy chatting with his partner, Siya Sharma. I don’t

know why it would bother me, I never thought I was the jealous type.

I want to tell Saahil that it's my birthday and plan a small celebration with him and Vikram.

Saahil and I are sitting in the lunchroom when Vikram joins us.

"How's our favorite debater doing today?" Vikram asks.

"Don't let Nancy hear you," I say.

"Who'll tell her? Saahil doesn't know her and you..." he pauses and says conspiratorially, "are good at keeping secrets."

I laugh.

"What secret?" Saahil asks.

"You didn't tell him?" Vikram asks wide-eyed. "Well, I can remedy that. Thank me later, Saahil."

He pushes his chair back and stands on it.

"What are you doing, Vikram?" I cry out.

He picks up a clean stainless steel plate and spoon from the table and bangs them together. "Attention, mates! There is an important announcement. You need to brace yourself and still your hands and mouth in whichever eating positions they're."

I whisper angrily, "Stop it, Vikram." I look at Saahil. "Stop him."

Saahil ignores me. What? It's my birthday, and he ignored me!

“Someone was born today. Someone smart, kind, and sneaky. She is so sneaky that she has been living among us for the last fourteen years, and never let us know that she, like all of us, is a human and has a birthday. Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you the birthday girl, Mishti Ahuja.” He points both his hands at me. “Let’s sing the birthday song for her.”

My worst nightmare ever!

“Die, Vikram Sethi,” I yell, but he didn’t hear with everyone singing.

He laughs. When the song is over, some kids who are trained well in social etiquette leave their chairs to wish me and shake my hand.

Nancy is watching me from a table in the far corner with a smile as if she is enjoying my distress. I like her from all the interactions we had because of debate practice. She mouths, ‘Happy birthday’.

I leave my table and flee. Not wanting to face my classmates at the moment, I lock myself up in a bathroom stall. I’ll not leave until the period bell goes off.

I hate him. I don’t how I can love him and hate him at the same time.

Some girls enter the washroom. Not my problem. They’re not getting this stall. I’ve put the toilet seat down and am sitting on it with my legs up so that nobody knows I’m here. Vikram is right, I am sneaky.

“Doesn’t it bother you that your boyfriend is being nice to another girl?” One of them says.

“Since when did being nice become a crime?” The other one says.

“But still, he made a grand gesture for her. You should talk to him. What does she mean to him?”

“She means nothing to him. Do you think Vikram likes that fatass more than me? How can you even compare us, Shubhi? She doesn’t have the personality, drive, or moves to hold Vikram’s attention. Did you see her after Vikram’s announcement? She was crying. What kind of baby cries in high school?” Siya Sharma says.

“Yeah, she’s weird. Anyway, did you and Vikram have the talk? You know, about being official,” Shubhi Dixit says.

“No, but it’s understood. We went on our official first date last week.”

“Oh, and have you guys kissed?” Shubhi asks.

“Oh yes, sweetheart, and he’s the best kiss I’ve ever had.”

“Oh my God! I want a hot boyfriend too.”

“Not getting mine. And don’t tell anyone, but he’s planning to visit me at midnight on my birthday eve,” Siya says.

“Oh, that’s on Saturday. It’s perfect! Maybe he’ll stay the night, and who knows how the night is gonna end,” Shubhi whispers.

“At first, he told me he won’t be there for my birthday because he has a debate competition in Bangalore. I was livid. I threw such a tantrum that he had to withdraw from it. See, you need to have some feminine wiles to get what you want.”

“I should learn from you. Please, oh please, be my mentor.”

Both the girls leave the washroom giggling.

CHAPTER 25

Mishti

Let me tell you what heartbreak feels like. There's a tightness in the chest, almost like a heavy rock is kept over it. You want to move it, breathe normally, but it wouldn't budge.

How this purely emotional stress transforms into physical pain is why the human body amazes me. The pain is crushing, but I won't cry over the unfairness of the world. No, I am a writer, I'm feeling and assimilating the pain. Because a writer should take notes of all the new experiences of life.

The school was a nightmare, but home is scarier. I have to tell Mom about Kipper. I think of him as a balm to my ailing heart. I want to cuddle him and sleep for days.

When I reach home, I find a huge carton on the dining table. Taking off my shoes, I tiptoe to the table.

My secret is once again revealed without my consent. Kipper is trying to jump out of the carton, scratching the walls of the box, making a squeaking sound.

“Kipper, baby. I’m here. Come on.” I pick him up and kiss him on the forehead. He is excited to see me and tries to lick every corner of my face, and I let him. He is so small and alive. It feels like a miracle.

“Where did it come from?”

Here it comes. No respite for me today.

“He’s my birthday gift.”

Mom walks over from her room to stand before me. “Who gave you a puppy and when? It wasn’t there last night when we wished you.”

I sigh. “Vikram gave it to me, and please don’t ask when and how?”

“I heard the barking and complained to neighbors. One of the neighbors saw him on our balcony and told me about it. This whole thing is so strange. I’ve been trying to come up with an explanation as to how he got into your room after midnight. But I can’t.” She forces me to face her. “Look, I’m not upset. Just help me make sense. Did someone come after midnight?”

I nod.

“Vikram?”

I nod again.

“Did he come from the front door? Because I don’t remember hearing anything, except for noises in your room.”

I shake my head.

Mom stares at me.

“He climbed through the balcony of my room. Don’t ask me how he did that, because I don’t know.”

“What? Was he in your room when we knocked? Oh, and the door was locked. Why?”

I don’t answer and let her interpret my silence in whichever way she wants.

“You opened the balcony door for him? How could you do that?” Her voice is stern.

“Mom, it wasn’t some stranger. It was Vikram. He’s a good guy. I trust him.”

I don’t hate him. I can’t, even if I try. What if he has a girlfriend? He still did something nice for me last night. And he gave me Kipper. It’s my fault for reading too much into his actions. He didn’t say that he wanted to kiss me. He didn’t say he wanted anything more than friendship from me. I just assumed. That’s what you get for staying away from people because when they do come close, you assume you mean as much to them as they do to you.

Racing into my room, I lock the door. All I need is this puppy and no one else for today. I lie on the bed and cover Kipper and myself with the blanket and go to sleep.

“Mishti, it’s your birthday. I’m sorry I yelled at you. Please open the door. We’ll talk about this later.” She bangs the door for some time, but when I don’t respond, she gives up.

###

“Mishti, someone is here to see you. Open the door.”

Shit! No! No! No! I don’t want to see anyone.

I've been lying awake in my room for half an hour. I'm hungry, but I don't want to face Mom. I thought of picking up my phone and checking the messages, but then I dropped the idea in case there was a message from Vikram. I'm not ready to talk to him. I'm glad that I don't have to see him tomorrow because I'll be going to the airport directly from home in the morning.

Mishti, stop feeling sorry for yourself! The world doesn't owe you anything. You have got a competition to go to tomorrow. You don't have time to mourn the loss of a relationship you never had. Get up, and move on.

"Who is it?" I call out.

"You'll have to come out and see." She replies.

Damn it, Mom!

I get off the bed and change my school clothes. I wish nobody was waiting for me outside, or I would have changed into my pajamas. I put on a black t-shirt and jeans and open the door.

It's Saahil. Thank God!

"Hey, where did this little guy come from?" he asks.

Kipper is a permanent appendage to my body now. I do let him down occasionally to pee and eat.

"He's my birthday present."

"Wow! Nice."

Saahil is holding carnations in multiple shades of purple and a box of chocolates.

It's good to see him. I put Kipper down to take my gifts from him. "Awww... Saahil, thank you so much."

He follows me into my room and takes the chair beside the study table. Kipper comes trotting after him.

“You were sleeping?” he eyes my messed up bed and asks.

“Yeah.” I get up to fold the blanket.

“I don’t know what to say.” He hesitates. “What Vikram did today was thoughtless. You are a private person, and he should have respected that. He just likes to get a rise out of you, but this time he might have gone too far.”

“No, it’s okay. I’m fine.”

“Are you really? Because when I tried to talk to you in class, you didn’t respond.”

“Oh, yes. I’m fine.”

“What’s surprising is that Vikram knew about your birthday, but you never told me. I thought we were friends, and you don’t even like Vikram.”

He’s hurt. As I watch him talk, I think, he’s right. I’d decided consciously at the beginning of the year that Saahil is the guy I like, and he won’t break my heart. When did everything spin out of control?

I walk to him and sit on the floor beside him, and take his hand. “I’m sorry if I hurt you but, believe me, it wasn’t because I prefer him to you. He just has a knack for asking me the wrong, or maybe right questions.”

Kipper climbs my lap as he finds me sitting on the floor and proceeds to eat my fingers. I yelp. Saahil laughs.

I’m feeling better already. Thank God for Saahil.

CHAPTER 26

Mishti

My birthday wasn't a total washout. By the time Dad came home, Mom was making a special dog cake for Kipper. When I announced that I wanted to buy stuff for him on my birthday, they agreed. We took Kipper with us in a basket. My parents bought a crate for him. Although I told them that he's sleeping only on my bed, they wouldn't listen. Did you know they sell artificial bones for dogs to chew on at the pet shop? Or candies to calm them down? Or that they have special dog toothbrushes?

We cut the cake and ordered food because dogs are not allowed at restaurants.

I switched on my phone just before going to bed. There were a few messages from Vikram. He was sorry for what he did at school and asked me to call him. I didn't. Instead, I sent him a message.

Mishti: Vikram, today was a long day. I'm tired and going to sleep. Thanks for the gift. It made my day. Don't worry about what happened at school. I'm fine. Goodnight.

I switched off the phone again after sending the message.

Today is the big day. I'm on a flight to Bangalore. Nancy is sitting beside me. Mrs. Khanna is sitting directly behind us.

Nancy is skinny, petite, and an extrovert, everything I'm not. I knew that she talks a lot, having spent hours with her practicing at school, but didn't know that she could find humor in every situation.

A flight attendant proceeds to familiarise the passengers with the security procedures. Nancy's monologue continues the whole time.

"Mishti, if the oxygen drops, you have to help me first. I'm the child here. My birthday is still four months away, in August."

I suppress a smile and nod my head at whatever she says.

"What if there is an emergency and we have to open this emergency door? I don't think anyone but the flight attendants should be allowed to open the door. What's the point of telling us about that. I wouldn't let any passenger open the door. What if the plane tilts and we all fall out? You'll help me, na?"

I chuckle. "Sure." I don't know how to respond to her outlandish requests.

When the flight has taken off, she asks casually, "So, what's the story?"

"What story?"

"Vikram and you?"

"What?" I jerk back. "There is no story. What makes you think that?"

“Duh! Do you remember yesterday?”

“That was Vikram just being Vikram. Asshole!”

She laughs. “He is, isn’t he? I used to date him in ninth grade. Glad it’s over.”

“Ninth grade? You must be like what? Fourteen? Not surprised that it’s over.”

“Yeah, we were young. We used to fight a lot. I think we honed our debating skills while fighting with each other.”

I laugh.

“Why did he back out from the debate?” Nancy asks.

Avoiding her eyes, “I don’t know,” I say.

“He did it for you?”

I look at her wide-eyed. “No.”

“Okay,” she says.

“We are just friends. And I happen to know the reason for his not coming to Bangalore. It’s got nothing to do with me.”

“Tell me.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s someone else’s secret. I don’t spill secrets.”

“Mishti, you are the worst kind of friend if you tell a friend that you know a secret and not tell her the secret. Like, you’ll go to hell for that, and there they would cut you in pieces and fry you in hot oil,” she says vehemently.

“Whatever.” I shrug.

###

Since it’s just the three of us from Indore, Nancy and I have to share the room with Mrs. Khanna in the hotel. It’s a different level of awkwardness to share a room with a teacher, even for Nancy. Especially for her because she wants to talk but can’t. So she texts me. It’s torture to keep a straight face.

Christ School, Bangalore, is much larger in the area than our school. Nancy expresses an urge to explore the place, but I’m ready to throw up my breakfast.

We are competing with Vasant Valley School, New Delhi. The topic given is “Does social media corrupt human interactions?”

We have to speak in the favour of the motion. We are given half an hour to prepare our speech and arguments.

The opposition speaks first. “I don’t think social media has corrupted human interaction. In fact, I think social media has revolutionized the way humans interact. It has given people, who otherwise wouldn’t have, a platform to speak up. For example, more than half the people who experience bullying wouldn’t speak up to the people they know. Vulnerable people are far more likely to gain support online. Everybody deserves to feel like a part of a community regardless of what their demographic is.”

Nancy takes the microphone. “Social media is causing depression among people. People who check social media most frequently are found 2.7 times more likely to develop depression than an average person. That depression is

affecting the way we interact with each other. So yes, social media is corrupting the way we interact.”

It’s my turn to speak. “Perhaps, more disturbing is the relationship between social media and eating disorders in young people. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Tumblr are giving young people distorted images of how their bodies should look, and often the result is a serious mental illness that has far-reaching complications. And I’m not talking about girls only. This disorder spans all genders of all races, socioeconomic backgrounds, and ages.

“Social media is not evil, but it may very well be dishonest. It does give a platform to vulnerable people to find a connection but how honest is that connection? We should all be more skeptical about the support we get on social media.”

There is applause after we finish. I go back and join Nancy in the audience. I take her cold hands and squeeze.

After all the rounds are over, they announce the results. The school from Mumbai win, but we are second.

Oh my God! I place both my hands on my mouth. Nancy catches my face between her hands and kisses me and then we hug and jump up and down. It’s surreal. I’m part of the runner-up team in a debate competition.

#

Nancy and I decide we can’t sleep early. Last night we were nervous, but today we’re hyper excited. Celebration is mandatory. We wait for Mrs. Khanna to sleep and sneak out of the room.

After having coffee at the hotel's coffee shop, we're wandering when we spot the swimming pool. It's quiet up here. We lay down on a deckchair and watch the sky.

"Since you are good at keeping secrets, I'll tell you one," Nancy says.

I face her.

"I like girls."

My head goes on a spin. I don't react at all.

When she looks at my face, she bursts out laughing. "I'm not hitting on you, girl. I'm just telling you because I like you."

"Wow! Nancy, that must be tough. Have you told anyone else?"

"Yes, a few close friends at school."

"But you said you dated Vikram?"

"Sexuality is something you learn by trial and error."

I nod my head.

"I haven't tried, but I'm pretty sure I'm straight. Although I wish I wasn't. Boys are..." Not being able to find a word, I shudder.

"You have a crush on someone?" she asks.

I turn red. "No."

"Oh, pleeeeeeaaase. It's written all over your face. Tell me."

I shake my head.

"I know. It's Vikram. The guy sneaks up on you."

"No," I shout.

“Right. You are too smart to fall for his charm. Then Saahil. These are the only two boys I’ve seen you talk to.”

I shrug. It’s better if she thought I like Saahil than her knowing I fell for the player too.

“Saahil is cute,” she says.

“And he’s a nice guy too.”

“I know. We don’t find those anymore.”

I nod my head and watch the sky.

CHAPTER 27

Vikram

I almost blew it. I don't know what's wrong with me. Why do I have to go and ruin everything? Everything was perfect that night. She liked me. No. She more than liked me. She wanted me. I could see it in her eyes, her shy smile, and her body language when I was going to kiss her. Her formal reply to my messages on her birthday was like cold water being spilled on my hopes to be forgiven. But then, she texted me after the debate yesterday.

Mishti: OMG! Vikram, we are the runner-ups. Can you believe it?

Vikram: Wow! Congratulations.

Mishti: It was amazing. All the time I was thinking, how would Vikram respond to this? Which point would he argue? Which angle would he take? Wish you were here.

God! It felt good. I'd been irritated and restless for two days. When Siya reminded me it was her birthday on Sunday and she expected me to do something special for her, I almost

lost my temper and told her that she should stop expecting things from me as I'm not her boyfriend. It was a mistake to take her out on a date.

Vikram: Well, if I'd been there, you wouldn't have. And then we wouldn't have been the runner-ups.

Mishti: Right! We would have been winners then. Thank you, Vikram. For whatever reason, you made this possible for me.

#

It's Sunday and I didn't go to Siya's birthday party. Maybe, she'll get a hint.

The sad thing is my parents have guests for dinner. I'm trying to keep myself out of the drawing-room, but I need food. I see someone strolling on the balcony.

"Hey, what are you doing here?" I call out to Nancy. I didn't know her parents were the guests.

"Funny that you would ask. Tell me, isn't it child abuse to drag your child who has just returned home after a two-day outstation academic trip to a family gathering? Mind you, academic trip, not pleasure. I mean how much stress can a sixteen-year-old take?" Nancy starts in true Nancy fashion.

"I hear congratulations are in order." I pick up a tray of veg seekh kebab from the kitchen and join her on the balcony.

"Oh, she told you. Thank you. I can't believe we were the runner-up at a National level competition. And Mishti, wow! She is great. At first, I was skeptical about her because she kept whining about how nauseated she was feeling. But the girl can see the big picture."

I can't hide my proud smile. "I know. She's something else."

"You know what my parents said to make me want to join them tonight?" Nancy says as I stand beside her against the railing.

"What?"

"They said, 'Come on, Vikram would be there. You won't be bored.' As if I like you."

I chuckle. "Come on, you know you love me."

"In your dreams. I used to like you in ninth grade, but that was before we had the disaster called relationship."

"Aw, it wasn't so bad."

"You would say that, wouldn't you? I wasn't the one throwing tantrums when you left my message on read. You once punched a boy I was only talking to."

"Ouch! For what it's worth, I think I have grown out of that moody toddler phase."

"I'll believe it when I see it."

"You want something to drink?" I ask.

"Fanta would be fine." She shrugs.

"No, idiot. I mean a drink!" I whisper.

"Oh, no-no. My parents would kill me if they caught me drinking alcohol."

"They wouldn't know."

“The bar is in the drawing-room. How will they not know?”

“Trust me.”

#

Our parents stop talking as soon as we step into the drawing-room. It's utter silence. I wonder what illicit activities are being planned. Maybe wife-swapping or something. My eyes land on Nancy's mom, Sushila Aunty. In a short black dress, she is sitting crossed-legged at the corner of the sofa. Sensing my eyes on her, she leans forward to pick a piece of chicken tikka from the table and winks. Ah, I miss the days when mothers looked and behaved like mothers. And then I look at my mom and close my eyes. Fuck! No!

“Um, we need some soft drinks from the refrigerator,” I say and cross the room to open the fridge.

Nancy is still standing at the door. Everyone is watching their drink or eating silently. What I wouldn't give to go back a few minutes and eavesdrop on them.

Taking out a Fanta and a Sprite, I close the fridge with my hip and go over to the bar to get some glasses.

“Sushila Aunty,” I say, although she insists I call her Sush. I don't want to hear Dad's lecture on appropriate behavior later. “Your glass is almost empty. Do you want me to pour you a drink?” My parents would be so proud of me right now.

“Oh yes, *Beta*®. Here take this. I'll have vodka with cranberry juice,” she says with special emphasis on '*Beta*', handing her glass to me. The woman is going to hell.

I pour her the drink and sneak in some vodka in our glasses along with the soft drink.

As I take our glasses out of the drawing-room, I roll my eyes at Nancy. She turns away.

“That was fun.” She sniggers as I hand her the glass. “Did you notice how quiet they were? I mean what can they possibly be talking about that their conversation just died on seeing us?”

“Sex.”

She almost spills her drink and then nods. “You’re right.”

“When am I not?”

“Oh, don’t get me started?” She heads to the balcony. “Where are your sisters?”

“Tsk tsk, Nancy, don’t you know all the birds from the Sethi household have been sacrificed to medical college or marriage pyre? Except me, who is not so easy to let go of. What kind of a friend are you?”

“I’m not your friend.”

“I don’t know why I keep hearing this from girls. I might start thinking I am not a friend-material.”

“Who else said that?”

“Mishti.”

“Now, that’s interesting because she specifically told me, ‘Vikram and I are just friends.’ ”

“She did, huh? She talked about me?” I ask, watching my drink while leaning on the balcony railing.

“We talked about everything.”

“Everything?” That’s a loaded statement.

“Yes. She is sensible, open in some ways, secretive in others, but not self-absorbed like most of the other girls in our class. Thanks for backing out, asshole. I got a cool friend, and who knows who would have ended up dead if we had gone together.”

“You’re welcome.”

“By the way, how was your match?”

“What match?”

“The basketball match you missed the debate for?”

“Oh, that. Well, turns out, it’s next week.” I shrug.

“I knew there wasn’t any match.” She points her finger at me.

I grin but don’t say anything.

She turns around leaning on the railing, sipping on her drink. “Why are you getting me drunk, Sethi?”

“Drunk! It’s just one drink, Nancy. And why the hell would I get you drunk?”

“I think you want information.” She takes another sip.

I stand straight. “Information? What are you talking about?”

“Well, we talked a lot and she told me who she has a crush on.”

I turn red and avert my face.

“She likes Saahil,” she says turning towards the railing and looking down at the deserted street.

A rock settles on my chest. The hand on my glass tightens. I turn back to look at the street with her.

“Why are you telling me this?” My voice is hoarse.

She looks at me. “I thought you care.”

Tilting my head at her I smile. “I don’t.” And empty my glass in one gulp. “You want more?”

“No. I’m good.” She raises her half-empty glass at me. “How will you get it this time? Please pour one for your mom. My mom is already dealing with a real possibility of alcohol addiction.”

“Wait and watch.” There is a constriction in my chest like someone has squeezed and twisted my heart. I need more alcohol.

I peep inside the living room through the glass window. Fuckers! They have moved to the dining table now. This means my dad has locked the liquor cabinet.

I feel a wave of bubbling anger and hurl the glass in my hand at the opposite end of the balcony.

Nancy takes a few steps away from me. “Vikram! What’s your problem? You scared me.”

Shit!

As I escape into my room that is connected to the balcony, Nancy runs after me.

I hold up a hand. “Don’t come after me, Nancy.”

“Vikram, what happened? Do I call your parents?”

“No! Just stay away!”

CHAPTER 28

Vikram

High-pitched voices from the living room are piercing the silence in my room, but my heart is beating so hard that I can't hear anything. I'm lying on my bed and watching the fan moving overhead. The drink I've had comes up to my throat, and I get up.

There's a beep indicating I have a WhatsApp message on my mobile. I ignore it. There are several successive beeps in a few seconds.

I pick up the phone and read the messages from the notification bar. They're from Siya.

Siya: Vikram, when'll you come? I won't cut the cake without you. Waiting...

Siya: This is not done.

Siya: Please come now. It's so humiliating. I've told everyone that you're coming.

Siya: On our date you said you'll give me a surprise on my birthday. I'm still waiting for your surprise.

Siya: This is not fair. It's my birthday. You're the worst boyfriend for making me cry on my birthday.

That's enough.

Vikram: I'm not your boyfriend. Stop telling everyone that I am. I would never be a boyfriend of a whiny lying bitch like you. Don't call or text me.

After sending the text, I throw the phone in the far corner of the room. Crack!

Not caring for the phone's fate, I pick up the basketball and start the dribble and basket routine furiously.

There's a knock on the door. I don't respond. The door opens slowly. It's Nancy.

"Are you okay, Vikram?" she asks sheepishly.

"Yeah. Wanna play ball with me?"

She frowns. "Um... No. I'm good. We're leaving. Bye."

The door closes after her. I throw the ball at the door.

Putting on some blaring music and closing my eyes, I fall onto my bed.

Jo main jaanti ke preet kare dukh hoy

To nagar dhindora peet.ti kehti

Preet na kariyo koi

Jo main jaanti ki mann khud bairi hoy

Har nagar dindhora peet.ti kehti

Preet na kariyo koi

To nagar dhindora peet.ti kehti

Preet na kariyo koi

Har dagar dhindora peet.ti kehti

Preet na kariyo koi

Kaash ke yun ho jaave

Neend meri khul jaave

Aur koi kehde humse

Ye sapna tha

Kaash ke yun ho jaave

Neend meri khul jaave

Aur koi kehde humse

Ye sapna tha

Ye sapna tha

#

Monday is the student council interview at school. I'd filled up the form for the post of head boy. Shivam texts me at six-thirty in the morning to remind me.

If you're wondering, yes my mobile survived. The screen is broken and it's dented from the side but it's operational. I switch it off again and go back to sleep.

Mom bangs on the door at seven. "Vikki, are you going to school?"

"No."

She goes away.

I'm not looking forward to watching Mishti and Saahil's reunion after the three-day-long break. I don't know how

could I have been so blind. She'd made her decision early on. I should have known.

Oh sweet! But she tricked me good. Complimenting me, making me believe that she liked me so that I'll help her. And then that night. God!

A wave of nausea makes me jump out of the bed, and I throw up finally.

#

It's four p.m. and I still haven't left the room. Mom banged the door twice to beg me to eat something, but my insides are churning; I can't eat.

My phone rings. I glance at the screen. Mishti. I let it ring. Thrice. The fourth time, I pick up the call and shout, "What do you want?"

She's silent for some time then says, "Are you okay?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you come to school today?"

"Just didn't feel like it."

"Your mom lets you skip school without reason?"

"Stop judging. What do you want?"

"Well, okay. So, you see, Mrs. Khanna and my mom had been asking me to fill up the student council form, but I'd been avoiding it because I didn't think I had a chance. But after the debate, I think I'm not as stupid as I thought. I know you won't agree, so I'm not asking for your opinion. I just want your help in filling out the form. I'm filling it out

now and have taken permission to submit it late as I was out of town.”

“What position do you want to apply for?”

“Head girl,” she says.

I laugh.

She’s silent for some time. “Why’re you laughing?”

I don’t say anything.

“Vikram, why are you laughing?”

“You’ve become delirious after the competition. Maybe you should think again before aiming so high. How many extracurricular activities have you participated in since ninth grade? Any sport you have won a medal for? Or maybe landed the starring role in an annual function play? What have you done? Only academics doesn’t cut it, Mishti. Stop wasting my time.”

“I’m wasting your time? I thought we were friends...” I could hear her voice choking. But I’m hurt, and I can’t stop myself.

“Friends! You thought a few meetings for the project and a charity project for your birthday made us friends. I don’t make friends so easily.”

“Thanks for telling me. I’ll keep that in mind.” She bangs the phone.

I hurl the phone on the floor once more and cry.

CHAPTER 29

Mishti

Can a broken heart be broken again? Apparently, it can, when idiots like me think that a guy who has a girlfriend and is still flirting with other girls, is a good guy. When did I become so naive? Mishti Ahuja, you were the cynicism personified. How did frolicking with the enemy make you blind?

I know there are zero percent chances of me becoming a head girl, but when did it become a crime to try? Tears well up in my eyes.

The first thing that I did after coming from school was to call him. I didn't even change the uniform. I was excited to see him after coming back from Bangalore. He didn't go with us to Bangalore, but he was there with me in my mind. He helped me get there. I was so proud of myself.

I slide to the floor from my bed, pull my knees in, and cry. Kipper, who was sleeping earlier on his soft puppy bed, gets up and looks me in the eye. As if the little guy senses that something is wrong, he scurries and sits down beside me. I

pick him up and hug him like he is a human. He immediately goes for my face and licks away the tears.

Vikram Sethi, I can't even hate you because you gave me Kipper.

#

Mom knocks on my door.

"Yes, Mom," I call out, lying on my bed.

She comes in. "What are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?"

"I thought you were filling student council form. Is that done?"

"No." She stares at me. "Well, I thought about it. What's the point? You know Nancy is also competing for the same post. Why would school choose me over her when she's more qualified than I?"

"I know odds are against you, but do you know when there is no chance of them being in your favor?"

I don't say anything.

"When you don't try at all. Don't be scared of failure, sweetheart. The best thing about failure is that nobody can fail without trying. And trying in itself is a victory, a victory within oneself."

I hug her and cry.

"What's wrong?" She asks.

"I'm tired," I say. "Can you sleep with me?" I scoot over to give her some space on my bed.

She looks concerned but does as I ask her to.

I put my hands around her. “Why are some people cruel?”

“Because they know you’re better than them and want to feel good by putting you down. But self-esteem doesn’t work this way. It comes from within; when you seek it outside it always backfires.”

“So you think I’m good enough for student council?”

“Absolutely.”

“Of course, you’d say that. You’re my mother.”

“No. Not because I’m your mother, but because I’ve lived a life full of regrets of not trying things because I was too scared. The worst that could happen is what you already expect. But so many amazing things can happen only if you give it a try. You know life is full of surprises.”

“Believe me, Mom. That I know.”

###

“Hi,” I say.

“Oh, hi. How’re you, debate mate?” Nancy replies on phone.

“Nancy, will you hate me if I tell you that I’m filling up the student council form for the head girl?”

“You back-stabber, Mishti. I won’t ever forgive you. Bye,” I was stunned. Then she laughs. “Come on, Mishti, more than half of the girls in our batch are my friends. Everyone wants to grow and do well. I can’t control them. And what kind of a person would I be if I did that? So chill.”

“Thank God. You scared me.” After a soft, embarrassed laugh, I say, “I kind of need your help. I’m filling it now and

I'm stuck at the part where I've to give the list of school events I've participated in, which are not too many but I was hoping we could go through the events held in school since ninth grade."

"Oh great... I'm bored. I'm coming over. Send me your location."

Just like that... everything is so easy with her. I laugh. "Sure."

I jump out of my bed and open my wardrobe to change my uniform. Behind my black Marvel t-shirt, I catch a glimpse of a white paper bag. I dig it out and look inside. It's Vikram's white shirt and vest. I never took it out to wash.

I feel my heart squeezing, and I drop the bag as if it was on fire.

No. I'll not cry.

I take out his clothes from the bag and give them to Kipper. Kipper destroys everything. He has eaten two of my slippers. I don't bring my shoes to the room anymore. He has already half-eaten his doggy bed. He's been consistently trying to eat a leg of my bed. I wonder how long it would be before I'll be sleeping on a lopsided bed.

I'll burn them after Kipper is done.

Taking out my clothes from the cupboard, I go to the washroom to change.

When I come back, Kipper is sleeping blissfully on the white shirt. It doesn't look torn or damaged. I sit on the side of my bed and smile. Vikram said Kipper's his. My eyes again threaten to spill. You're a sentimental fool, Mishti Ahuja. He doesn't even deserve to be in your thoughts, let alone you crying over him.

My phone rings. It's Nancy. "What's your apartment number?"

By the time Nancy comes, Mom has gone to the club.

Nancy surveys the room before settling in. She stops at my soft board. "You wrote this? I read this on the school blog. Nice. And you got the first prize?"

"Yes, I did," I say, proud of myself.

"Have you written anything else for the school blog or magazine?"

"Yes. I wrote an article on secularism in India on Independence Day and a short story in ninth or tenth grade, I don't remember when."

"This is perfect. That's your contribution to the school. You can write about these in your application form."

I smile. "Really?"

"Not everyone can write, Mishti Ahuja. It's a skill worth recognizing."

Kipper comes running from the balcony on hearing our voices. He jumps on Nancy. Nancy is scared and backs away from him.

I laugh. "He's so tiny. Don't be scared."

"I know. He's just a baby. Did you get him recently?" She touches him tentatively.

"Yes."

"Birthday gift?"

I nod.

“Wow! Your parents are awesome? My parents would never let me keep a pet.” She sits on the floor to pet him.

“No. They didn’t. My mom wasn’t thrilled that I got him as a gift. But then, just like all moms do, she fell in love with him. Now she says, it’s a good thing that she’ll have him when I go to college.”

“Who gave him to you then?”

I hesitate. “Vikram.”

“Really?”

“Yep.” I bring the student council form to her. “So, can I mention our debate competition too?”

“Yes, of course. You’re lucky, you can mention we were the runner-ups. I submitted the form before going to Bangalore.”

“Who are you kidding? All the teachers know you and what you’ve done for school in the last three years.”

She shrugs. “Have you talked to Vikram after coming back from Bangalore?”

“No.” I lie.

“Oh, did he come to school today? I didn’t see him.”

“I don’t know. I didn’t notice.” I lie again.

“I saw him last night after coming from Bangalore,” she says.

Why are we talking about him? “Nancy, please let’s concentrate on this. Tomorrow is the last day for me to submit.”

She nods and doesn’t mention Vikram again.

CHAPTER 30

Vikram

I didn't go to school on Tuesday and Wednesday. Wednesday was the last day of school before summer vacations. I missed the student council interview. I should be upset because it had been my goal since I entered high school. But I can't seem to bring myself to care.

Dumbo brings his toy pillow to me. I take it from him and throw it at the far corner of the garage. He runs after the pillow. His two puppies chase him but they are too young and tiny to catch up. When Dumbo brings the pillow back to me, they try to snatch it away from him on the way. But Dumbo beats them and softly places the pillow on my lap. I love playing this game with Dumbo. It's soothing because of its predictability. And he never gives up. Every time I throw the toy, he brings it back to me.

The garage's sliding door opens, folding up to let a brand new black Tata Harrier drive in. Puppies run to hide behind their mother to make room for the beast. Mr. Sethi is home.

Mr. Sethi, my dad, is a tall and lean, fifty-nine years old man. He frowns when he spots me sitting on the garage floor with Dumbo beside me. “Why are you not in school?”

I give a mirthless laugh. Isn’t it a bit too late to worry about my education, Dad? Do you even know which class I’m in?

“Vikram, when will you take your future seriously?”

“Oh, Dad, I take my future very seriously. I have a basketball league semi-final match at the club this weekend, and I skipped school to practice.”

He glares at me as if saying, ‘You, dickhead, basketball is not a future; it’s a perpetual waste of time.’ He shakes his head and goes inside the house.

“Reena, what’s Vikki doing in the garage at this time of the day?” I can hear my dad shouting.

This is worse. Mom always has to bear the brunt of my misbehavior. I get up and go after him.

“Oh, he’s in the garage? I thought he had gone to school,” Mom says.

“What? Are you blind? Or is he pulling the wool over your eyes? Can’t you see how undisciplined he is? I got a call from his school principal that he has skipped the school council interview scheduled for Monday. They wanted to know if he’s okay.”

“Oh, I didn’t know about the interview,” Mom says as if it’s her fault that I don’t tell her anything.

“Mr. Batra called me last week to tell me that he saw our son entering the house at two a.m. I can see our neighbors and teachers are more alert about our child’s well-being than you are.”

My mother looks down at her feet.

“Where were you that night?” I ask him.

“Which night? I don’t know, which day it was. I was out of Indore the whole week.”

“How convenient. Nobody can blame you for my unruly behavior.”

“It’s your mom’s job to know where you are.” He points a finger at her.

“And what may I ask is your job in my life?”

“You think you’re such a smartass. Always talking back to elders. Moreover, I am not talking to you. I am talking to your mother”

“No. You’re angry at me. Talk to me.”

“Go to hell. I’m not talking to anyone.” He walks into his room and slams the door.

Mom says, “*Beta*, why do you make him angry?”

I laugh. “I make him angry? It’s not my fault that the sight of me makes him explode.”

“Just don’t talk back to him. Now I’ll have to hear your complaints the whole time he’s here.” She’s old, around fifty-five years, and looks defeated. She pulls out the dining chair and sits on it, massaging her knees.

I feel bad for the times I thoughtlessly said hurtful things to her. I sit on the floor beside her chair and whisper, “Doesn’t it make you wish he goes away again?”

That makes her smile. “Shut up, *Nalayak*.”

“Mom, how easy your life would have been if you just had four girls?”

“Don’t talk rubbish. You know how much we wanted you.”

“But your daughters have made you more proud than I ever have. Two are already doctors and two are in medical college.”

“Sons are important. They stay with you when the daughters get married and go away to their homes.”

“Are you kidding me? You want to take care of this headache for the rest of your life?”

She hits me gently. “*Pagle*. You won’t understand.” She goes away into her room.

No. I won’t. My mother always made me feel like the most awesome person in the world because I was a boy. I’m now learning that I’m not even close to being awesome.

Mishti did say that I was awesome but what did I do to her?

The pain resurfaces and grips me.

There hasn’t gone a single moment since she banged the phone on me that I haven’t wished I could take back my words.

I was hurt and wanted to hurt her. But she didn’t deserve that. She’s a hard worker and can do anything she wants. I never believed in the things I said to her.

Ugh, I hate myself. I don’t know how to face her. At night, I stay awake thinking of her tearful voice telling me, ‘But I thought we were friends...’

And now, we are not that again.

CHAPTER 31

Two months later

Mishti

My parents and I came back from the North India tour a week back. Our summer vacations lasted through May and the major part of June. We visited Manali, Shimla, and a small town in midst of mountains, Satkhol.

School closed from the second of May and the last few days of school were spent in student council interviews. Vikram skipped school on those days and didn't show up for the interview.

He was the undeclared head boy of the school since eleventh grade. His absence from school on those crucial days was noticed by everyone. Teachers were concerned and then pissed when they realized that he was reading their WhatsApp messages and not replying.

I was relieved I didn't have to see him. It's ironic that he felt I wasn't good enough when he didn't even show up for his calling.

Today is the first day of school after summer vacation. After two months of hiatus, I'm over Vikram Sethi. The thought of seeing him again doesn't make my heart race or make me want to puke.

He's already in the class. I hate myself for noticing because he doesn't exist for me. He's sitting with Shivam. He straightens up and looks away when he sees me.

We have assembly after the lunch break. It's time to declare the student council of the year. I sit with Nancy and Saahil.

Nancy and I are holding each other's hands. It's nice to have a friend who's a girl and physically approachable (as opposed to Megha). We saw each other numerous times during summer vacation when we were both in town. We watched shows on Netflix or went shopping. For the first time, I went shopping with a friend and bought something. She's crazy about shoes and made me buy heels.

Saahil came to my house twice. This was also the first summer I had friends coming over. My mom was pretty happy.

Our principal, Mrs. Kasturi, takes the stage and announces the council.

She announces the primary positions first. Shivam is the head boy, and Nancy is the head girl. I'm disappointed, but I'm also happy for Nancy. There are a total of twelve positions on the Council.

Then Mrs. Kasturi announces, "The student editor, Mishti Ahuja."

I can't believe it. I look at Nancy and she squeals. "Yayyyyyy."

I can't believe I'm part of the Student Council. The student council comprises twelve students who are selected from two hundred students from the whole batch. And I'm one of them.

###

After school, Nancy corners me before I board the bus and whispers, "I'm planning a party for all the student council members. You have to come."

Party? I didn't sign-up for parties. "What? Why?"

"Duh! Being part of a powerful group of students calls for a celebration. It's almost like we are the government."

I laugh. "Don't forget we have teachers, principal, and vice-principal above us."

"I know, I know. That was a bad metaphor but you know what I mean."

"Where's it?"

"My house."

"Will there be drinking?"

She hesitates. "No."

"You swear?"

"How can I swear? You know boys. I can't control what they bring to the party? I promise nobody will force you to drink."

“Ugh, I don’t like parties. Can’t you just do this without me?”

“No. You’re my best friend.”

I take a step back and say, “I’m your best friend? But you’ve so many friends?”

“Yes, and you’re the best among them,” she says.

She knows how to push my buttons. Ugh. “Okay, I’ll be there.”

“Saturday, six p.m, my house.”

#

If you’re an introvert like me, you can guess what’s going on in my head at five p.m. on Saturday. 101 excuses to skip a party.

But I go because I promised myself I won’t hold back this year. This is the last year of school and the only year left to make some memories.

I wear a red knee-length halter neck dress, which I bought with Nancy, my new golden heels, and apply a bit of make-up, just for fun.

I’ve never been to a teenage party. For the last few years, all I got was some pity invites, for which I suffered no guilt skipping.

Nancy lives in a bungalow. It’s a three-story and the party is on the terrace. June is the month of rain in Indore. The weather is pleasant and moist. There is a big jacuzzi at the corner of the terrace.

I ask Nancy, “Do you guys bathe here in open?”

“Yeah, that’s kind of the point of it.”

“Naked?” I ask wide-eyed.

She nods.

I survey the neighborhood homes from where her terrace is visible. Nancy bursts out laughing. “You’re so easy. I wear a swimming costume if I use it, which is not often anyway. It’s just for show.”

“Hey, Nancy, what’s the plan for food?” Shivam bellows.

She goes away to talk to him. Saahil was not invited as he’s not a council member. I wish he was. I don’t talk to most of the people here. What do they do at parties?

I get the answer when I overhear a bunch of students saying, “Let’s play spin the bottle”.

No. I don’t belong here. I’ve to go. I’m waiting for when all the kids start sitting in a circle. That would be my cue to leave.

The terrace door opens and he walks in, all tall and vain. What’s he doing here? He’s not a member of the council.

Vikram Sethi spots me. For the first time since my birthday, our eyes meet.

CHAPTER 32

Vikram

Ladki beautiful kar gayee chul... blares on the speaker.

Dekh tera rang saarwa hua baarwa

Ladki nahi tu hai garam maamla

Bolti bandh meri, kahooh kya bhala

Kuchh bhi kahaa nahi jaaye...

I didn't expect her. She's not a party person, but I know, more than anyone else, that people change.

God, she looks lovely in red. I had hoped that after two months of staying away from her, the constant urge to kiss her would have passed, but I was wrong. Her curly hair falls on her bare shoulders. Her red lips part when she sees me. She didn't expect me. That's why she's here. Her confused stare punches me in the gut, and I look away.

Shivam hits me on the shoulders. "You came, bro. Thanks. It's no celebration without you. Frankly, you should be the

one holding the post I have. I don't know how I got here." He hugs me.

"You're better than you give yourself credit for," I say. "You belong in the council."

"You did too. Why did you let it go?"

"I don't know. It wasn't important anymore," I say, and my eyes wander back to where I had spotted Mishti before, but she's not there. She's sitting with Nancy and all the other kids on the floor.

Shivam drags me there. There is a place beside Mishti. I leave some space and sit. She leaves her spot and moves on to the other side of Nancy.

"If this is a game, I'm out," I tell Shivam.

"Why, Sethi? What happened to you? You used to be the life of the party. Come on," Shivam says.

I leave my spot on the floor and climb the stairs attached to the jacuzzi and sit on the marble edge of the bathtub with my legs dangling outwards.

###

Mishti

"Why are we sitting on the floor?" I kneel to ask Nancy moving as far as I can from him, suspecting that I won't like the answer.

"We'll play spin-the-bottle."

"Nancy, I don't want my first kiss to be for a game and with anyone at this party, please," I say.

She laughs. “No, idiot. It’s not that type of spin-the-bottle. We spin the bottle to choose who’ll do the Truth or Dare.”

“Oh.” It’s Truth or Dare. I don’t know if it’s better or worse.

“Can I go home?”

“No.” She grabs my hand and pulls me down.

The game starts. It should be called Dare and Dare because revealing the truth is more daring than any dare anyone can think of. It’s fun though. A girl is dared to take a selfie on the toilet and post it on her Instagram page. Another boy is asked to stand on the water tank and shout, ‘I’m on top of the world,’ Titanic style. All the neighbors are watching the show. They clap for him. It’s entertaining until the bottle lands on me. Gosh!

“Truth.” I’ve nothing to hide.

“Wait. I know, I know. Nobody says a word.” Nancy holds up her hands and turns to me. “Mishti Ahuja, the best secret keeper ever. Tell us,” she pauses for effect, “have you ever been in love?”

My eyes betray me. They’ve been so good till now except when I saw him enter. They seek his eyes, which are already on me. I look away and shake my head. “I switch to dare.”

“Boooo...” All of them shout.

“I never took you for a coward. Anyway, anyone has a suggestion for a dare for her?” Nancy asks.

Shivam says, “Hey you write na? Recite something written by you.”

I can’t back out twice. I pick up my mobile and look for something short I’ve written.

“And not something that’s on the school blog,” Nancy adds.

I glare at her. Nancy, die!

“This is something I wrote recently. It’s not that great, just sometimes writing is catharsis. You just have to let the feelings out. So please don’t expect too much,” I say.

“I’m not all that;

I’m just me.

I don’t need your heed

Nor your penchant to succeed.

I am the blossom that you can’t wipe

From your shining shoes and perfect whites.

I’m the itch you can’t scratch

With your pointy spikes.

I’m the croak in your throat,

You can’t swallow or spew.

I’m the smoke that fills your chest

When you burn the dreams of a nest.

I’m not all that;

I’m just me.”

###

Vikram

Why did she look at me, when Nancy asked her if she has ever been in love? But that was the only time she has looked at me. It’s almost like I’m invisible to her.

The poem sounds as if she was angry while writing it. Is it for me? I hope it is. I can take her anger, not her indifference.

There is loud applause after her poem.

“Girl, you’re awesome as you’re,” Nancy shouts.

The game resumes. It’s Nancy this time. She stands up and takes a bow. “Dare. Because if I speak the truth, half of you guys would want to die.”

Mishti hasn’t spoken at all except for her poem. “I’ve something for you.”

Nancy raises an eyebrow. “So it’s revenge time, huh?”

Mishti shrugs. She picks up a heart balloon from the wall it’s stuck on and gives it to Nancy. “Give this to your crush.”

Everyone’s mouth is open. Someone shouts. “What if he’s not here?”

Mishti smiles. “Oh, they’re here.”

“You know me so well.” Nancy takes the balloon and gives it back to Mishti. “You’re my one true love, Mishti. Here is my heart that beats only for you.”

Everyone laughs and the bottle starts spinning again. Nancy’s mom walks in through the terrace door. I hope she doesn’t see me. She’s cool and all but... she just tries too hard. Plus, she looks too young and hot. Sometimes, I forget that she’s not one of us and that’s a red flag.

And then she catches sight of me.

“Vikki Darling, what are you doing here? All these kids not cool enough for you?”

“Nah, Sush. I think I’ve outgrown these games.”

“I feel ya. Do you think slipping in a bit of alcohol will help liven up this drag of a party?”

I laugh and shake my head. “I don’t know. Ask your daughter. She’s the host.”

I know how Nancy will react. This mother-daughter duo never fails to entertain.

###

Mishti

“Liar,” I whisper in Nancy’s ears.

She has a crush on the swimming team captain, Sofia. Sofia is sitting directly opposite us. Although Nancy is bold, I know she’s insecure about her sexuality. She feels people would hate her if they knew that she is a lesbian. I hope she finds the courage to come out soon for her own sake because her sexuality is a part of her. She’ll never feel truly accepted if she keeps it hidden.

“Well, it was a dare, not truth. I’m allowed to lie,” she says. “By the way, nice try.”

Nancy’s Mom enters the terrace and goes straight to Vikram. She’s wearing tight jeans and a crop top.

“Oh no! Mom, please don’t,” she whispers.

“What?” I ask.

“Nothing,” Nancy says, although I know she wants to say something more.

“Hey, guys, you all having fun?” Nancy’s mom walks over to us after talking to Vikram.

“Yes, Auntie. Thanks for having us.” Shivam says.

“Oh please. Call me Sush. I’m not much older than you all. This looks like a fun party. You’re playing spin the bottle. Oh, I remember, I got my first kiss while playing this game.”

Nancy stands up and claps. “ Game over, Everyone. The food’s here. Let’s eat.”

CHAPTER 33

Mishti

After the first week's hype of the Student Council and pledge-taking ceremony, on Monday, Mrs. Khanna brings us all down to reality. "I need you all to submit the English project by the end of July."

I haven't even started reading the book. Ugh.

Saahil and I are having lunch when Saahil brings up the issue. "You can't run from it anymore. Read 'The Catcher In The Rye'."

"Do you think Mrs. Khanna would notice if I don't read the goddamn book?" I ask.

"Mishti, you're already talking like Holden Caulfield, and you haven't even read the book," Saahil remarks.

###

Mishti: Can you explain, why there is no plot in this book?

Saahil: Who needs a plot, when you have a Holden Caulfield? He's hilarious.

Mishti: That he is. But he's also angry, moody, and obscene. It's like he thinks he's the smartest person in the world. When in reality, he's just a liar and a hypocrite. But it's a good book to write a report on because, by God, I have opinions on this guy I want to pen down.

Saahil: Lol. At the rate you're going, I'm sure you'll be done by tonight.

Mishti: Yep. Let's meet tomorrow at my house after school.

Saahil: I'll tell Vikram.

###

Mishti: SOS.

Megha: Why's your life so dramatic that I get an SOS every week?

Mishti: No, you don't. Anyway, Saahil wants Vikram to sit for the English project meeting.

Megha: That's only fair. He's part of the group.

Mishti: I love how supportive you are.

Megha: Whatever. You have to move on. You can't go the whole year without talking to him.

Mishti: I can.

Megha: Or just tell Saahil how much you don't want to be in the same room as Vikram. Maybe he'll understand.

Mishti: Ugh. Is that necessary?

Megha: Communication is the key to a good friendship.

Mishti: Thanks, Counselor.

###

“Vikram said he can’t come and asked us to go ahead with the project without him,” Saahil informs me in English class.

“How convenient,” I mumble.

Saahil frowns. “Did something happen between you two? Vikram is acting weird. He doesn’t come to us at lunchtime the way he used to earlier. And you’re acting like he doesn’t exist.”

Because he doesn’t. “I never liked him. You know that.” Liar.

“But something happened that you’re not telling me about.”

“I can’t right now. I’ll tell you after school when you come to my house.”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

###

“Why does he hate adults so much? I mean what’ll our lives be like without them? They not only provide for us, but they’re also the only ones to fall back on when we’re in trouble,” I ask Saahil, discussing Holden Caulfield’s ever-elusive teenager charm.

“Mishti, not everyone is as lucky as you in the adults’ department,” Saahil says. He pauses and adds. “You know I live with my father. Where do you think my mom is?”

“Uh... I just assumed she is dead or something,” I say.

“No. She left. She never wanted children. She had my sister under family pressure, and I was a mistake. She wanted an exciting life, and caring for two kids dampened her style. She’s living with a friend in Mumbai. She left me and my sister without a second thought. I was eight at that time.” He covers his face with both hands. “I still remember how angry I used to be all the time. She never came back to see us. She wrote my sister, who was thirteen, an email to explain that seeing us would be more traumatic ‘for her’ than cutting off the ties.” He silently cries.

Oh my God! He’s sitting on the bed. I leave my chair and hug him sideways.

“How’s an eight years old boy supposed to understand this situation? She left us because we were not good enough for her. All of us combined.” He looks up. His red eyes reflect his pain.

“You know that’s not true. You’re the best guy I know.”

“Yeah. From what I’ve seen, you don’t know many guys.” He smiles.

I hit him. “Haw, that’s rude,” I say, happy that he’s smiling. “It’s not my fault, they’re all douchebags. You wanted to know what happened with Vikram. Well, so here it is. He laughed at me when I asked for his help to fill out the student council form. He said there is no way I could be considered for the head girl post. Hello, who’re you to pass judgments on someone else’s aspirations?”

“I’m not surprised. That guy is too full of himself. There was a point before summer vacations when I thought you liked him. Glad that you saw the real him before it was too late.”

“No, I never liked him.” I give an embarrassed laugh.

###

After two hours of making the notes and then having dinner of delectable Sindhi *kadhi charwal* made by dear mom, Saahil says, “Can I stay for some time? There’s no one at home. My sister has gone to college, and Dad doesn’t come before nine.”

“Sure,” I say. “Let’s watch a movie.”

“No, we’re going to watch ‘Made in Heaven’ on Netflix,” Mom says. “You’re welcome to watch it with us.”

“Mom, you’re so mean. I’ve got a friend over and you can’t relinquish the control of the TV for one day.” Then I turn to Saahil and say, “And you say I’m lucky in the adult department.”

“He said that. Awww...” Mom says. She takes Saahil’s hand. “Come on, we’ll watch ‘Made in Heaven’ together. You’ll love it.”

Saahil laughs. “I don’t mind watching anything, as long as I don’t have to go back to my haunted house.”

Saahil and I sit on a couch, our feet on the table. Mom and Dad take the sofa to the left.

“Any backstory you need to fill us in on,” I ask them.

“Nah. Not much. The male and female main characters are wedding planners. They work in partnership. Each episode has a different story of new characters getting married,” Mom says.

“Mom, what kind of losers watch a whole series made over weddings?” I say.

“We do,” Dad replies. “Now shut up.”

Today’s episode has a modern girl, who’s preparing to be a pilot, being married into a royal family. She is faced with the prospect of being the only witness of sexual abuse of a minor household help by her father-in-law. However, she gives in to the family pressure and does injustice to the girl.

I cried out. “What? This is the end? Did she really do that? There must be some resolution. Start next episode.”

“No. It ends here. This is life. Doesn’t it make you wish that you could do something to change this world?” Dad says.

“Let’s watch another episode anyway,” Saahil says.

He slips his hands into mine, making sure my parents can’t see our hands. When I turn to him he gives a shy dimpled smile, and I can’t remember why I am upset.

CHAPTER 34

Mishti

Mishti: Help!

It's 11 p.m. when I text Megha.

Megha: Your life should be declared an emergency and President's rule must be imposed.

Mishti: Mr. Perfectly Fine asked me if I would be his girlfriend.

Megha: Wow! Please name the guy. I am picturing two different guys bent on their knees and your hand in their hand.

Mishti: Haw, Megha, how can you think of Vikram? He does not exist. I'm talking about Saahil.

Megha: Oh, the nice guy. Just the one you prescribed for yourself. What did you say?

Mishti: Well, he's Saahil. How could I say no?

Megha: Hey, I need details.

Mishti: He held my hand most of the time while we watched a series on Netflix with my parents.

Megha: Wow! Ballsy... huh?

Mishti: Oh, he was careful of my parents. We went into my room later, and he told me that he likes me.

Megha: Awww... did you guys kiss?

Mishti: No! Let me finish.

Megha: Oops! Sorry. Go on.

Mishti: He told me about the last relationship that he had with a girl in his old school.

Megha: She was a bitch. Wasn't she?

Mishti: No! She's quite sensible, in fact. They broke up only because Saahil was moving to Indore with his father. She said she didn't think a long-distance relationship could be maintained.

Megha: Ohhh. Poor Saahil.

Mishti: I know. He was heartbroken. But he said he's ready to move on and asked me if I'll be his girlfriend.

Megha: And you said yes?

Mishti: No. Not right away. I asked him why he likes me?

Megha: What?

Mishti: Yes. Honestly, I don't know why anyone would like me.

Megha: Hello, have you seen me?

Mishti: No. I haven't actually.

Megha: Lol. I mean you know that I like you.

Mishti: I know that, but it's different.

Megha: What did he say?

Mishti: He said, "I like you because you don't follow the crowd. You're your own person and that's rare."

Megha: Awww...

Mishti: That did it. I said yes.

###

We don't tell anyone at school because it's not anyone's business. I tell Nancy though, only after making her promise that she won't tell anyone. I don't know if I can trust her, but she said I'm her best friend, so I'm trying to be a good friend.

On Saturday, Saahil comes to my house again. I tell him to come at a time when Mom won't be home. What? I'm a teenager, and I have a boyfriend. I'm allowed to be sneaky.

Since nobody's home except us and Kipper, I'm not sure if we should go to my room, but Saahil heads for it without asking me. My heart is beating hard when I follow him into my room. Kipper comes running from the balcony when he hears us. I keep the door open.

I sit on the side of the bed while Saahil is still standing. Kipper jumps to kiss Saahil. Saahil moves away.

"Can we do something about him?"

"Oh, he doesn't bother. Just let him lick you for a while and he'll be happy."

Saahil frowns at Kipper.

“Ah, okay. I’ll lock him in the balcony,” I say as I pick up Kipper.

When I’m back from the balcony, Saahil’s closing the door of my room.

Oh my God! Oh my God! Oh my God! My heartbeat skyrockets, and I’m sure he can hear it.

He walks back to me and sits on the side of the bed beside me.

“I’ve never kissed before.” I blurt out.

“Is that what we’re going to do now?” He smirks.

“I don’t know. Just wanted to give you a heads up,” I say.

He’s looking into my eyes and takes my hands. “Do you think it matters?”

“Yes, it does. You have kissed before.”

“I’ve never kissed you before. I’m as nervous as you are.”

I can’t wait for my first kiss any longer and lean in for a kiss. He reciprocates my emotion.

His mouth is gentle and sweet. I open my mouth to take in his tender exploration. I want to get lost in the feelings, but my mind wouldn’t shut up. The writer in me never sleeps. I’m trying to take notes of how my first kiss feels for future reference. I don’t know what to do with my hands. I’m not sure I’m allowed to touch him. Only our lips touch. I flail around my hand to land on something for support and *crash*. I knock the night lamp on the side table.

We jerk away from each other. Kipper starts barking.

We look at the floor. I can’t believe I broke a night lamp for my first kiss. We laugh together.

CHAPTER 35

Vikram

“**V**ikki, what are you doing here? I’ve been home for the last two hours,” my sister, Anika, says when she finds me watching a spider crawling on the wall in the garage. “How mighty have fallen? Finally, a spider makes my energetic brother stop jumping?”

“Hello, Anastasia, what made you leave your evil lair?”

I call her Anastasia, the evil step-sister of Cinderella. I used to say she was not my real sister but an evil step-sister because of the way she tormented me when I was young.

Dumbo, Bambi, and their two puppies run to attack her with their kisses.

She laughs, “Where’s the third one? Mom told me Bambi gave birth to three puppies.”

“I gave away the third one.”

“Oh, to whom?” She says, sitting on the floor, rubbing both the puppies’ tummies.

“A friend,” I say. “At least she used to be my friend.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Sounds like a sad story.”

“Where is the brat?” I ask.

She let me change the subject. “You talking about yourself? Because my son is not a brat,” she says and sits beside me on the floor of the garage.

“You hate me, don’t you?” I say.

“Yeah, you can say that, but then you do redeem yourself occasionally by giving Krishiv a piggyback ride or by treating him to his favorite ice cream.”

“It’s okay. You can say it. I don’t like myself either.”

“What’s wrong? Never heard you say that before.”

“How can anyone like oneself when everybody else hates them?”

“One could look inside for the reasons to love themselves.”

“What’s the point? Everyone else will still hate them.”

“Who hates you, Vikki? What are you talking about?”

“Ahh, everyone. And those who don’t, they’re either liars or my mother.”

“You didn’t include your sisters in your fan club?” She looks at me.

“Come on, I know you all hate me. You said that yourself,” I say looking down at my feet.

“What? When?” She’s alarmed.

“Do you remember Rakshbandhan when I was ten? You refused to tie me rakhi because I was throwing tantrums over all the gifts my sisters were getting and I wasn’t.”

“Oh my God! Yes, I do remember but that doesn’t mean that I hate you. You’re my brother. I love you.”

“I’m your brother because we shared the same womb. That doesn’t obligate you to like me.”

“I know it doesn’t. Vikki, you’re not the same person you were then. And I’m not the same person either. I was young and stupid, just like you.”

“You might have grown, but I’m still stuck at the same place. I can’t control my anger, and I hurt people just like I hurt you back then. I don’t know how to take back my words and say sorry.”

“Vikki, growth is in the moment you admit to yourself that you’re guilty. You’ve passed that bridge already. Now own up to it. Say sorry to whoever you’ve hurt.”

“But she’s too proud. She won’t even talk to me to let me apologize.”

“Oh, it’s a she! Is she the same ‘she’ who you gave the puppy to?”

I nod.

“I’ve to see her. Let’s trick her to make her listen to you.”

“Are you crazy? She already hates me. I’m not gonna lie to her.”

“Oh come one, Vikki. Think of something. Also, I missed your cold coffee. Come make one for me.”

###

The next day, as I enter the class, I catch Siya Sharma’s eyes. She is sitting in the third seat on the left side of the room.

She doesn't look away. Her eyes are accusing, but I don't look away either. It's time to build bridges.

She called me after my message that night. I didn't pick up. She then messaged me apologizing for her persistence. I was so angry at that moment that I blocked her.

I've been feeling like the scum of the earth lately, so I stayed away from her. But that's not me. I'm a charmer. If I could make her like me once, I could do it again.

I ask her, "This seat taken?"

She stares at me as if she can't believe what she's hearing. "Nope," she mutters.

I take the seat and stare at the pencil scratches on the wooden desk for five minutes before saying, "I was drunk that night. I'm sorry for saying those things to you."

"Uhm... Well... you could have just told me that you're not coming instead of ignoring my messages," she whispers.

Phew... she's taking it well. Not throwing anything at me. That's a good sign. "I'm also sorry if I led you to believe that I want you to be my girlfriend. I was confused."

"So you decided to confuse me, huh? What was I supposed to think when you call me, ask me to meet, and the day ends with a kiss?" She's warming up.

"I'm sorry but that was before..." I stop. Oh my God, what was I going to say? That was before I fell in love with another girl.

"What?" She retorts.

"Nothing. I'm just sorry. I've no other explanation for my behavior."

“You called me whiny lying bitch.”

Did I? I’m in deep shit.

“I’ll never forget that. So if you’re here to get back together with me for a make-out session, then go to hell.”

“No! I just wanted to say sorry. That’s it.” I get off her seat and move to sit with Shivam.

###

The confrontation with Siya didn’t go well. I’m changing strategy.

That day, after school, I message Saahil.

Vikram: Hey!

Saahil: Hi, Vikram.

Vikram: I need help with the project. Can we meet?

Saahil: You and me?

Vikram: No.

Why would I want to see you, dickhead?

Vikram: Our group has three members.

Saahil: I’m not sure if she’ll agree.

He knows. Shit!

Vikram: Leave that to me. We’re meeting at my house on Saturday at five p.m.

Saahil: Done.

I type a message to Mishti ten times and delete it, but I successfully send it the eleventh time.

Vikram: Hi.

She takes her sweet time to respond. While I'm checking my mobile each second, she replies after thirty minutes.

Mishti: What do you want?

Vikram: We need to write a report for the project.

Mishti: Yeah. I have started writing.

Vikram: How can you? It was to be discussed with all group members.

Mishti: Well, if a group member finds it convenient to remain absent, others assume their opinion doesn't matter.

Vikram: You don't know what I've to say.

Mishti: Actually, I'm not interested in what you've to say.

Vikram: I've talked to Saahil. He agreed.

Mishti: Did he?

She takes a few minutes.

Mishti: Vikram, do you remember I made a group for the project? Why didn't you message both of us there?

Vikram: I didn't think of it.

Mishti: Or maybe you didn't want to face a slightly public rejection.

Vikram: You can think whatever you want.

Mishti: We're going to discuss the project, that's it. And this would be the last meeting of the group.

Vikram: Okay.

Mishti: I don't trust you, but since Saahil is coming... okay. When and where?

Vikram: Saturday, five p.m., my house.

CHAPTER 36

Mishti

“Hey, beautiful,” Saahil says as I join him in the cab.

Vikram’s house is in the outer part of Indore—
Jhalaria. Saahil tried to borrow the car from his
father, but his father didn’t allow it, so we had to book a cab.

I’ve tried not to dress up. I’m wearing faded jeans and a
black fitted top. My hair is open because I just washed it.

I say, “I hope this outing would be worth the cab fare.”

“If nothing else, Vikram is entertaining.”

“Nope.”

“Okay,” Sahil shrugs.

The cab drops us in front of a giant metal gate. Two
uniformed security guards with rifles open the gate.

“He didn’t tell us his father is Yashvardhan Raichand,” I say.

“Who?” Saahil asks.

“Amitabh Bachchan in ‘Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham,’” I say.

Saahil chuckles.

One of the guards asks, “Who do you want to see?”

“Vikram Sethi,” Saahil says.

He looks back at the other and nods. “They want to see Vikki *Bhaiya*.”

There are two perfectly landscaped gardens on both sides of the house. A fountain is running at the center. At the back stands a mansion with two stories spread over ten thousand square feet.

“This house gives me ‘Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham’ feels,” Saahil says.

“Yep. I’m half expecting Jaya Bachchan to open the gate with a pooja ki thali,” I say.

Saahil laughs.

A puppy comes running and a boy follows after him.

I give a delighted squeal. “He must be Kipper’s brother.” I pick up the puppy.

The boy frowns at me.

“How’s he Kipper’s brother?” Saahil asks.

Oops! I never told Saahil that Vikram gave Kipper to me.

“Who are you?” The boy asks.

Thanks, buddy, for deflecting Saahil’s question.

“I’m Mishti, and he’s Saahil. And who are you?”

“I’m Krishiv. But why are you here?” he folds his hands and says.

Oh my God, he looks five or something but the kid has an attitude like his uncle. Vikram had told me about his sister's son that night.

"We're here to see Vikram," Saahil says.

"Okay." He unfolds his hands. "Hand me the puppy. I've been trying to catch him for some time. He runs fast."



Awww... tiny boy. "I'll tell you a trick. Sit on the ground," I say.

He sits on the grass, and I leave the puppy on the ground.

"Now call his name," I say.

"Casper baby, come to me," Krishiv says.

The puppy runs straight to him.

"If you run after him, he'll run away, thinking you are playing with him. But if you stay at a place, he'll come to you,"

"Wow! You're smart."

He gets up with the puppy in his hands and runs towards the house and pushes the door open with his back. "*Nani!*", someone has come to see Vikki *Mama!*"

An old woman in a saree comes to the door. She squints at us. “Sorry, *Beta**, I don’t recognize you. Who are you?”

“We’re Mishti and Saahil. Vikram must have told you we were coming to complete our English project,” I say.

“Oh no. He didn’t. But it’s okay. He never tells me anything anyway. You two come on in.” She gestures toward the sofa.

We sit on the sofa, and I grab Saahil’s hand. I hate visiting someone’s house. You never know what to say or what to do with your hands.

Krishiv comes back running with Casper in his hands. “Do you know how to make Casper listen to my commands? I want to train him. Mom says if I train him well, we may take him home with us.”

“Sure. Do you have dog treats?” I ask.

“Yes, I think. I’ll ask *Mamu*. I’ve seen him give some to Dumbo.”

“Just give him one when he does as you ask him to. He’ll learn soon enough that he’s being rewarded for his good behavior, and he’ll keep it up.”

#

Vikram

It’s her laugh. She’s here. I run to the window and part the curtains to watch her from my room. Casper licks her feet. I’ve missed the jingle of her laughter.

Anna pushes me forward. “Hey, Romeo, come on. Introduce me.”

“Shhh... I’m not Romeo. Shut up, I’ll kill you,” I whisper.

We enter the living room and face them. My eyes catch sight of her hand in Saahil's. When they notice us, Mishti disengages their hands and watches me warily.

There is an all too familiar burning sensation in my chest again. But I've learned to control it.

"Hello, partners," I say.

"Hi," she says.

"Hello, Vikram. Your house is magnificent. I'm impressed. I'd love to see more of it," Saahil says.

"Yeah, I'll give you the tour later." Don't count on it though. "Right now, let's get to work."

Anna comes forward. "Hi, I'm his sister, Anika. He wishes I was invisible that's why he foregoes my introduction. But surprise buster, you guys can see me. Right?"

Mishti laughs, "Of course, *Di*. Is he your son?" She points to Krishiv.

Anna says, "Yes. Is he bothering you? Good, because I can't cope with him. He's too enthusiastic and energetic for my energy level."

"Nah, I love his company."

Krishiv's face lights when he hears that. He jumps and runs out of the room.

I take Mishti and Saahil to my room.

"I think one important aspect of the book we never discussed is the theme of this story. What do you think is the theme of 'The Catcher In The Rye', Vikram?" Mishti asks.

Hearing my name from her mouth takes me by surprise. I come out of the trance that I get into while watching her talk. “Holden Caulfield mourns the loss of his innocence and wants to preserve the innocence of whoever he still considers innocent.”

“He also never wants to grow up. He wants the time to stand still,” Saahil says.

“Which is kind of the same thing as wanting to preserve the innocence, Saahil,” Mishti says.

“In a way, I could see Holden’s hypocrisy as the theme because he accuses others, especially adults, of being phony, but he himself is a liar and a cheater,” I add.

“That’s interesting. I never considered his hypocrisy as the theme,” Mishti says with her pencil in her mouth. She then writes down something.

They’re sitting on my bed. I’m walking and observing them. Saahil says something in her ears and she blushes.

I pick up the ball and jump to make a basket. He again says something and she giggles.

Krishiv comes running. “Mishti *Di*, come, I’ve to show you something.” He takes her hand and drags her wherever he wants to. Smart boy!

There is an awkward silence after they’re gone.

“Dude, what’s with you? We’ve missed your obnoxious comments lately,” Saahil says.

“Nah, I can see you two are doing fine. You dating her now?” I ask.

Saahil nods. He’s looking smug. Asshole!

“But you told me she’s not your type.”

“Yeah, but she’s cute and available. I’m having a good time. She’s not high maintenance either. Occasional make-out sessions with a girl, who doesn’t ask for anything. Now, what else can a guy ask for?” He laughs.

CHAPTER 37

Vikram

He didn't just say that.

I target the asshole's face with the basketball. He catches it. "Woah! Watch it, dude. I could have lost my teeth." He gets off the bed.

He's deliberately trying to provoke me. I can see it in his eyes.

"Tell me you didn't mean that," I snarl.

"Why? Because it's your precious, Mishti?"

I glare at him but don't say anything.

He walks over to me. I'm glad that I'm taller. I stare him down.

He says, "It's kind of satisfying to make out with the girl whom great Vikram Sethi wants but can't have."

I catch him by the collar and push him to the wall. "You mean you're with her just because you're playing some kind of sick game with me?"

“You said that, not me. Dating her is not a hardship either. I mentioned the perks, didn’t I?”

I raise my hand to punch him.

“How’ll you explain my bleeding jaw to my girlfriend?” He asks.

“I’ll tell her the truth that you’re a bastard.”

He laughs. “And she’ll believe whom? You or me?”

Fuck! He’s right. I loosen his collar and let him go. “Leave my house. Right now.”

“Yeah, I’m just about done here. I’ve to collect my girlfriend though.” He smirks, grabs his and Mishti’s bag, and leaves.

After he’s gone, I take my head in my hands and fall on my bed. I can’t let this happen.

###

Mishti

Krishiv takes me to the garage to show me a puppy house he made with his Lego blocks. It’s tiny with enough space for the puppy to enter but no room to move about. I tell him to try to make a bigger one. He brings his mom’s mobile and saves my number so that he can send me the picture of the bigger house he’ll make.

I adore this boy already. He’s active and always ready with new possibilities. He reminds me of Vikram I used to know for a brief time.

When I enter the house again, Vikram’s sister, Anna, is sitting on the sofa.

She calls out. "I think my son has fallen in love with an older woman."

I giggle and go to her. "You don't say!"

"I know. I thought I still have at least ten more years to compete for his affection. He's a charmer like Vikki."

I sit beside her and say, "Please teach him to be empathetic. Because no charm can make others like him if he's not kind," I say.

"Where did this come from?" Anna watches me carefully. "Is this about Vikki?"

"No." I cry out. Moron that I am, I've trapped myself in an uncomfortable conversation with Vikram's sister. Great! "Nah. I'm just a bit melodramatic." I laugh.

"He told me you're not talking to him," she says.

I turn red and turning my face away I watch my nails. "He told you about me."

She ignores my question. "I'm not his lawyer. In fact, I'm hundred percent sure he did something horrible for which you can't forgive him. I just want you to know that he was not only the only boy in a family of five kids but also the youngest. My parents never denied him anything. It's not a healthy environment to grow in for a child. I'm not telling you to forgive him. Just take your own advice and be a bit kind. He's trying to be a better person as he grows up. He's not quite there yet, but he'll be if he gets kindness and acceptance from people he respects."

I don't know what Vikram told her about me but one thing is sure, she has got it all wrong. Would he talk to me like he did if he respects me?

Saahil emerges from Vikram's room with his backpack and mine too. "Oh, are we done?" I ask.

"Yep. I'll fill you in on the rest of it. I've booked the cab."

"Where's Vikram?" I ask.

"He's busy. Let's go."

Vikram's sister hugs me and calls Krishiv who gives me a goodbye kiss on the cheek.

"It's sad that I won't see him ever again," I say kissing him back. I look towards Vikram's room hoping he'll come out to say bye.

"Oh, you'll be back. Don't worry," Anna says.

After we settle in the taxi, Saahil asks, "Why did Vikram's sister say that you'll be back?"

"I don't know." I shrug.

He puts an arm around me and says, "We haven't been alone for some time. Let's make the most of this car's backseat."

He inches closer to me. My mind's still on Vikram. Saahil's proposition is not in the least tempting for me. In fact, it makes me want to open the door and flee.

"No. The cab driver can see from the rearview mirror," I whisper.

"So what? He doesn't know us."

"But I don't like anyone watching us."

"Okay." He drifts away to one corner of the backseat and looks outside.

I'm too preoccupied to care.

CHAPTER 38

Vikram

“I’ve to tell her. I don’t know how.”

I’m at Shivam’s house, fifteen kilometers away from my own. I left my house immediately after Mishti and Saahil left.

“Let me go over again what you just told me.” He stops pacing to ask, “You like her?”

I nod.

“But she’s dating Saahil?”

I nod again.

“You think Saahil doesn’t care for her? He’s just having a good time?”

“Yes.”

“Vikram Sethi, you’re a hypocrite. This is exactly what you’ve been doing with girls like Siya and Saira. And how can you say that she doesn’t just want to have a good time with him?”

“No. She does not. I know her.”

He comes close and studies me. “You love her?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know. But just the thought of Saahil touching her with his depraved hands wants me to punch a hole in the wall.”

“Vikram, if they’re dating, she obviously likes him. And you said she hates you. I don’t know how your word against his would make a difference.”

I hate that he’s always right.

“You think I shouldn’t say anything to her?” I ask him.

“You should apologize to her for your behavior,” he says.

Aahhh... the long-overdue apology.

I nod.

“Let’s hit Eighteen,” I say. Eighteen is a bar. We’re not of the legal age, but the owner’s father is my father’s friend so we’re never denied entry.

“And that’ll help?” Shivam sighs.

“It always does.” I drag him with me.

###

Mishti

Mishti: I met Vikram’s sister today.

Megha: And?

Mishti: She’s funny and smart.

Megha: But?

Mishti: I don't know. She acted oddly familiar.

Megha: How?

Mishti: She told me about Vikram's childhood and what a terror he used to be.

Megha: Why?

Mishti: Have your dictionary of monosyllabic words not been exhausted yet? Why? How would I know why? Why would I talk to you if I knew why?

Megha: Sorry about that. I was accused of talking too much by my brother today when we went out for a dinner with Dad and him. Dad agreed with him. It hurt.

Mishti: But, Megha, our friendship is literally based only on talking. We can't do anything else with each other. No dinners, lunches, movies, or shopping. I don't mind when you talk too much.

Megha: Love you. I think I should also get a boyfriend online. He wouldn't mind my talking too much either.

Mishti: He better not.

Megha: How was the visit to Vikram's Sethi's house? Did you go with Saahil?

Mishti: Yes, and the visit was interesting. I met Kipper's brothers. Yay!

My phone rings.

Mishti: Oh my God! Speak of the devil. He's calling me.

Megha: Who? Kipper's brother?

Mishti: No, idiot. Vikram. Why is he calling me? Can't he text like normal people?

Megha: Wow! This should be interesting. Pick up the call. I'll wait for the update.

I let it ring for some time before swiping right.

"Hello." There is no answer from the other end. I say, "Hello," again.

"You picked up the... call. I thought... you wouldn't. Are you happy? With... him." He says in high pitched voice. His words are slurred.

"Are you drunk, Vikram?"

I haven't talked to anyone who is drunk but movies do train you to recognize the drunken blabber.

"I know... I know. I... shouldn't be. But that... isn't important."

There is music blaring in the background.

"Where are you, Vikram? Are you not at home? I need to tell your parents. Please don't drive back home."

"Shhh... No. Forget being... responsible. Listen to me. Will you?"

"What do you want to say?"

"Saahil... is not a... nice guy."

I'm furious. "And who's the yardstick for niceness? You?"

"No... Mishti. I'm not a nice guy... You deserve better. You deserve better... than Saahil or me."

"Don't say things you don't mean. You made it perfectly clear that you think that you are better than I. I'm not arguing. I just don't want anything to do with you. Why are

you calling me? To warn me against my boyfriend? Why do you care?"

"Because... I can't goddamned think of anything except you... Mist! Everything... Everything is nothing if I can't have you."

"What?" I shout but the phone is dead.

CHAPTER 39

Mishti

“Pick up the phone you moron, dumbass, idiot, dickhead,” I say aloud while Vikram’s phone keeps ringing. He doesn’t pick up.

What he said is in the back of my mind but, at present, my mission is to make sure he’s safe. He’s drunk, not home, and not picking up his phone.

I don’t know whom to call. I don’t have the number of anyone in his family. Shivam is his best friend. He must know where Vikram is right now. Even if he doesn’t, he can at least inform his family.

I look up Shivam’s number in the student council group and call him.

Shivam takes time to respond. I have almost given up when I hear “Hello?”

There is music in the background. I take a sigh of relief.

“Are you with Vikram?”

“Um... yes. But who are you?”

“Oh, I’m Mishti,” I say embarrassed now that I know Vikram has someone with him who is sober.

“Mishti?” He says surprised. “Why’re you calling? Um... I mean, do you need something?”

“I’m calling to make sure Vikram is okay. He called me fifteen minutes ago and then hung up abruptly. I could tell he was drunk. I was concerned. Is he okay?”

“I don’t know if I can call him okay when he’s passed out on the couch of a bar,” he says.

I mentally curse Vikram profusely. “Why’s your best friend such a dickhead? Please tell me you didn’t drink.”

“No. I don’t drink.”

“Thank God! Why don’t you stop him?”

“You think he listens to me?” He laughs.

“Right. Okay then, just take him home. Bye. I’m glad he has someone like you,” I say.

“No, wait.” The music volume is getting low. He’s moving out of the bar. “Can I ask for a favor?”

“Yeah, sure.”

He takes a deep breath. “When we came here, Vikram called his home and informed them he’s not going back home tonight. He’s staying at my place. I didn’t know he planned to get wasted. My father is very conservative. He would ban Vikram from my life if he sees him like this. I can’t take Vikram to my home in this condition.” He hesitates. “I was hoping... maybe if you could talk to your parents... and ask them if he can stay the night at your house.”

“What?” This is a night of surprises.

I want to see Vikram to make sure he’s fine and then beat the hell out of him, but asking my parents if he could stay the night, that’s unreal.

“Shivam, I don’t know what to say. Why me? Isn’t there anyone else?”

“You called to make sure if he’s okay.”

“That doesn’t mean anything. I don’t even like your friend. He’s so annoying. He’ll say something controversial on the phone and hang up. Then pass out at whichever place he’s at and not pick up the phone. I’ll not care if he falls in a ditch and dies. My life was much more peaceful when I didn’t know him.”

“What did he say on the phone?”

“I’m not sure if I heard him right,” I say. Although I’m hearing it in my head on repeat.

“Okay,” Shivam says.

After a pause I say, “What’re you going to do?”

“I don’t know.”

“Take him back to his own place.”

“Can’t. They’re not in Indore, and he doesn’t have the keys.”

“But they were when I went to his house in the evening.”

“I don’t know they must have left later.”

“Ugh! What’ll I tell my parents? What’ll they think?” I say.

“Tell them the truth.”

“Ah... okay. I’ll talk to my parents, but I don’t have much hope.”

###

Dad is half asleep with the laptop on his lap, and Mom is reading a book.

“Hey, Mom,” I say.

“Yes, sweetheart. Do you want something?”

Dad wakes up. “If you can’t sleep, take your mom with you. She wouldn’t switch off the light and let me sleep either.” He closes his laptop and goes back to trying to sleep.

“Mom, Dad, I’ve to say something,” I say.

Dad gets up and sits straight. Mom gets off the bed and comes to me with a frown.

“No, I’m not pregnant,” I say.

Dad laughs and lies back in bed. Mom’s facial muscles relax.

“That’s not funny,” she says.

Oops!

“There’s a friend who needs my help. And I can’t help him without your permission.”

“Of course, you should help him. You know we won’t stop you,” Dad says.

“What does he want help with?”

Mom is always the more cautious one.

“He wants a place to sleep. His family is out of Indore, and he doesn’t have the keys to his home,” I say.

“That’s it? Yeah, go and call him. He can come and stay,” Dad says.

“Yeah, okay,” Mom says.

“Um... there’s more. Actually, he’s kind of... drunk... and unconscious,” I say sheepishly.

“What?” Mom’s eyes widen. “Who’s he?”

“Vikram.”

“The tall guy you had a fight with?” she asks.

“How do you know?” How does she know everything? It’s not fair.

“Well, he stopped coming, and you stopped talking about him,” she says.

Makes sense.

“Why do you want to help him?” Mom asks.

“Because he needs help,” I say.

“It’s okay, Alka. All kids experiment with alcohol at this age. It’s not a big deal,” Dad says.

“Doesn’t he have any other friends?” Mom asks.

“His best friend, Shivam, is with him. But Shivam’s father is very conservative. So, Shivam doesn’t want to take Vikram to his house,” I say.

“Every house has one such tyrant dictator,” Dad says looking at Mom.

I suppress laughter. He’s trying to manipulate Mom.

Mom glares at him. “If I was a tyrant dictator, Vikas, you would be dead.” She faces me. “Are you sure he doesn’t have any other place to go?”

I nod my head.

“Ahhh... okay.” She turns around and goes back to bed.

“Does that mean yes?” I ask to confirm.

“Yes,” she says from under the covers.

“Now the woman will sleep when I’m wide awake,” Dad says.

I giggle. “Thanks, guys. You’re the best.”

###

Shivam arrives at a quarter past midnight. Vikram’s standing with his support. I’ve already set the sofa-cum-bed in the living room. My parents didn’t sleep and are watching us. I guide Shivam to the bed where he makes Vikram lie down and takes off his shoes. I cover him with the blanket.

Shivam touches my parent’s feet.

Not a word is spoken until Dad asks him, “Did you drink?”

“No, Uncle,” Shivam says.

“You’re a good friend,” Dad says.

“Thanks.”

Shivam looks at me. I nod my head, and he leaves. I lock the door after him.

Dad calls me, “Mishti,”

“Yes, Dad,” I say, turning while walking into my room.

“Lock your door tonight.” He looks slightly embarrassed.

I turn red. Dad, he's unconscious. If any seduction is going to happen then it would be from my side. And I can open my own door. Duh!

"Okay," I say.

Sleep is hard to come by tonight. Oh, shit! I told Megha I'll let her know whatever happens.

She must be asleep by now. It's twelve-thirty. I drop her a message.

Mishti: Vikram Sethi is homeless. He's living with us now.

I smile imagining her reaction when she reads it.

As I close my eyes, all the thoughts that I've been trying to ignore come over me like a flood. Can what he said be true?

Why would he like me? He's like the most popular boy in the school. I'm no one. Nobody knew me before the twelfth standard. No. I must have heard wrong.

Who knows if he would remember anything about what he said in the morning? Should I bring it up or not? I hope he talks to me. Why is he drinking? At school, he's not acting like he used to be. I haven't seen him participate in any activity lately. What's eating him?

I hope he doesn't suffer a lot in the morning. I've seen in movies how much a hangover hurts.

He should drink water if he gets up. It's good for the hangover I've read.

I get up to fill a water bottle and place it by his side on the table. I've been avoiding looking at him. I catch a glimpse of his sleeping face and almost stumble upon the table leg.

He's gorgeous even when asleep. He's sleeping on his back. His long eyelashes cast a shadow on his face. His lips are slightly parted and one hand is on his chest that is moving up and down softly. I have a sudden urge to touch his face. To touch his lips and move my hands over his strong jaws.

He moves to sleep on his side. It brings me out of the trance, and I run back to my room.

No, not Vikram Sethi, please.

CHAPTER 40

Vikram

Ah, my head is killing me. With my head in my hands, I open my eyes. It's dark. Where am I?

I look for my cell phone in my jeans pocket but find it on the table near the sofa I slept in. There are a dozen missed calls, ten of them are from Mishti. Wtf? Why was she calling me?

There's a WhatsApp message from Shivam.

Shivam: Talk to her, asshole.

I turn my head, and my eyes land on the kitchen table behind the couch. Fuck! This isn't Shivam's house.

No! I'll kill Shivam. I've to leave this house. Now.

I get up with a jerk and almost fall face first, as my legs tangle in the blanket. Using the table for support, I wrestle with the sheet to free my leg.

Stumbling to the door, I turn the locks haphazardly. It doesn't give. There are two locks on the door. I turn the

latch on both of them anti-clockwise and then clockwise and pull the door handle. It still doesn't open. I'm trapped.

I can't avoid it anymore. I've to wake her up. Shit!

I use mobile light to navigate the living room with soft steps. There's a plastic picture frame of a younger Mishti with a teddy bear. She is laughing with her curly hairs half-covering her face. It reminds me of the times when she used to laugh with me. I lift the picture from its place and stash it inside my shirt.

Great, now I'm a refugee and a thief.

At Mishti's door, I let my head fall on the shiny brown wood and knock softly. My buddy, Kipper, wakes up and barks. He's in her room.

It takes her a while before she opens the door and grabs my hand to pull me into her room. She locks the door. In any other scenario, I would have been excited about what was coming next.

She glares at me. Even in my painful state of head, I can appreciate how sexy she looks with her disheveled wild curly hair and brown eyes spitting fire.

"You, idiot. My parents are sleeping. Do you want to wake them up?"

No! No parents. Parents don't like me.

Kipper doesn't acknowledge the tension between us and is excited to see me. I sit with him on the floor and let him kiss me all over. At least someone is happy to see me.

"What am I doing at your house?" I ask.

"Good morning to you too, and you're welcome." She turns away from me to get back to her bed. She sits on her bed,

one leg folded and the other hanging out. “No, actually, thank Shivam for this.”

“I called him. His mobile is off.”

“Maybe he switches off his mobile while sleeping like normal people. You don’t? Oh, how would you? When you don’t know when and where you are going to doze off.”

I wish she’ll stop the sarcasm. It hurts more when you are hungover. I hold my head in my hands.

“Does it hurt?” She gets up from the bed.

I nod.

She leaves the room and comes back in a minute. “Here. Take this painkiller.”

She hands me the aspirin and a glass of water.

“Finish up. It’s good for a hangover. Didn’t you drink water when you got up?” She says when I hand her leftover water in the glass.

“No. I didn’t think of anything except getting out of here, but your front door wouldn’t open. What’s wrong with it?”

“What is wrong with you? If the door had opened, would you have left, just like that, without seeing me or my parents?”

She looks at me as if I have sprouted two heads.

“Listen, I didn’t want to come here. It’s Shivam’s doing, and I’m going to kill him for this.”

“Yes. Kill him and everyone who likes you. Because that’s what you are good at. Killing feelings of people who make the mistake of caring for you,” she says turning away from me.

She has always acted as if I mean nothing to her. This is the first time she has said something that hints at her being hurt.

“Why did you call me last night?” I ask.

“Because you called me first,” she retorts.

Fuck no!

“Should I ask what I said?” I ask sheepishly.

She doesn’t answer. She’s sitting on her bed again and staring at me.

I meet her gaze. “Did I say something to piss you off again? Because if I did then I’m sorry.”

She still doesn’t say anything.

“Come on, I must have said something that made you call me back,” I say.

“I called you back because you were drunk and not at home. I didn’t know if you were alone or with someone who could take you home,” she says calmly.

“What do you care what happens to me?” I ask.

She laughs. “It’s funny how I asked you the same question last night.”

“Did you?”

“Yes.”

“What did I say?”

She’s quiet again but looks down at Kipper sleeping on my lap.

“I don’t know what to make of what you said.” She opens her mouth to say something else but then stops.

I wait for her to continue.

She speaks again. "I thought you hated me. Why else would you be so rude to me?"

"I've never hated you, Mist. I'm sorry for hurting you. You've no idea how much I've regretted it. And I have no excuse for my behavior. I didn't mean anything I said that day."

"But there must be some reason," she says.

I nod looking at Kipper eating my toes. "No reason can justify it."

"No, it can't be justified, but I need to know the reason. You don't know how many nights I couldn't sleep trying to come up with a reason for your behavior."

I close my eyes feeling like a heel. "I was jealous."

Although I keep my eyes close, I can hear her getting up from the bed and sitting beside me.

"Why?" She says, her face close to mine.

I open my eyes and lose myself in her chocolate ones.

"Because I love you. I've missed you like crazy in the last two months. All I see is your face when I go to bed and when I get out of it. I can't concentrate on anything. You're the itch I've tried to scratch, but it's making me bleed. The night of your birthday, I thought you liked me too, but then Nancy told me you like Saahil. I was shattered. Why did you choose him, Mist?" I say with a hoarse voice.

She hides her face with her knees. "God, I don't believe this."

I've laid it down to her and that's all she has to say. Okay, I deserve this.

I wait for her to say something. When she finally does she breaks my heart all over again.

She looks up with red eyes. “I’m with Saahil now. You shouldn’t be telling me this, Vikram.”

CHAPTER 41

Mishti

I've always thought that one of the highest points in my life would be when someone would say 'I love you' to me and mean it. Vikram's words fill me with warmth and a deep acknowledgment of the feelings I had that night, a lifetime ago. But I'm not the same person anymore. Back then I believed that people can change.

There is no way in hell that Vikram Sethi and I are ever going to work. He's too gorgeous, unhitched, and spontaneous, and I'm plain, cautious, and predictable. Come to think of it, why does he want to be with me anyway?

And then there is the minute detail that I'm not single. I've no business feeling ecstatic that the guy I'm attracted to likes me back. And he shouldn't be confessing his love to another guy's girlfriend.

He nods when I call him out for that. "I know and I don't expect you to feel the same." He manages to actually make me feel bad for him. "Just be careful with Saahil. He's not what he seems."

“Why would you say that?”

“Yesterday evening when you came to my house, he said something about you that I didn’t like at all.”

“What did he say?”

“I’ve got a feeling that he’s using you to make me feel jealous.”

And with that, all the soft feelings that had started coming back for him in my heart burned in my gut again.

“Get over yourself, Vikram Sethi. Is it so hard for you to believe that someone likes me for who I am?”

We’re still sitting on the floor.

He leans close to me. “Don’t get mad, please. I know I’m thoughtless and say stupid things but don’t think for a minute that I see myself or any other asshole out there worthy of you. You’re so beautiful that my heart is racing like I’ve run a marathon just because you’re sitting this close to me. You asked me why I call you ‘Mist’? Because you’re the mist that blurs everything else in the room by your presence. Do you remember what you were wearing at last year’s farewell we gave to seniors?”

I nod. I remember but I’m incapable of speaking right now.

“It was a red salwar suit with a red shimmery chunni. You had a red bindi on your forehead. You were wearing silver danglers in your ears and bangles on your right wrist. I can still hear the jingling of those bangles when you moved your wild curls behind your ears. You then came backstage and made some changes to the script you wrote for the farewell. An actor made an outrageous suggestion and you laughed. That was when something happened inside me.

And you became Mist for me. I've tried to go out with other girls, but their laughter never did for me what yours does."

Warmth fills inside me. He's looking in my eyes, and I can't look away for the life of me.

This can't be happening to me. I've always thought I'm incapable of arousing wild passion in anyone, and that's okay with me because I'm a sensible girl. But hearing Vikram say these things about me, I want to forget sense and shower him with wild kisses and stay in his arms until my parents break the door and separate us.

He doesn't move to touch me. I'm grateful for that. Whatever wild emotions my body is going through, I'm still Saahil's girlfriend.

I force some distance between us and move to the bed.

"Don't get mad, Mist. You asked for this," he says.

No. I didn't ask for this. I just didn't want to feel lonely all the time, but this is a complication I could have done without.

"Can you honestly tell me that the night of your birthday you didn't feel the same magic between us, that I did?" he asks.

"Yeah, but your girlfriend broke your spell on me quite soon," I say.

"My what?"

"You already had a girlfriend at that time."

"No, I didn't. Who're you talking about?"

"Siya Sharma. I heard her talking to Shubhi Dixit the next day in the girl's washroom."

He gets up from the floor and moves his hands through his hair. “Fucking hell! I should have known something was not right. I’ve never dated her. Why didn’t you talk to me?”

“Was she lying when she said you kissed her?”

He closes his eyes.

I get my answer.

“It’s not important now. That ship has sailed. I’m in a relationship now, and I’ve always believed that the worst thing a person can do to another person is to cheat on them. I’ll never do that to anyone. And don’t worry about Saahil’s intentions. I know how to read people. I can take care of myself. You better learn to take care of yourself. Stop drinking yourself to a stupor and become more active in school. This is the most crucial year of our lives.” When did I start talking like my mother?

“Mist...”

“No, Vikram. Please, don’t say anything. I’m not mad at you. In fact, I’m grateful for this chance to clear things between us. Maybe we can be friends again,” I say.

He doesn’t say anything after that. He calls a cab, and I open the door for him to leave. I don’t ask him where he’s going. It’s morning, and he’s sober. He’ll be fine.

CHAPTER 42

Vikram

The surprising thing is that I'm not surprised how this turned out. I've treated girls as if they're disposable. I've gloated over the fact that no girl could ever say no to me. My conscience knew all along that it would all come back to me one day.

I reach home at seven a.m.

Anna opens the door. "Shivam kicked you out before sunrise. What did you do? Cried on his shoulders all night."

I flip her off. She follows me to my room.

"Leave me alone."

"Not before you tell me why your eyes are bloodshot, and you look like you survived an earthquake?"

"Because I went to a bar last night and drank until I passed out. Now go tell Mom and Dad."

"Why would I do that?"

“Because I’m a screw-up. They better control my unruly behavior now, or I’ll be out of their hands, which, according to them, I already am.”

She doesn’t say anything but neither does she move. She folds her hands and waits.

I ignore her and go to the washroom. When I come back, she’s still there.

“I didn’t sleep at Shivam’s house,” I say.

“Why?”

I laugh. “My best friend is ashamed of taking me to his house. This is a new low.”

“Where were you last night?”

“Oh God, why don’t you just go back to your own house? It’s so much more peaceful here without you. Mom and Dad don’t ask any questions.”

“Mom is old. She doesn’t have the energy to keep up with your schedule, and Dad, let’s not talk about him. I’ve always seen you as my child. Maybe it’s the ten years of the age gap. But it was always I who called you out on your bad behavior when everyone else was busy appeasing you. You can’t get rid of me. Even when I’m not in this house, I’ll be in your mind, reminding you that you can be better.”

I sit on the bed and cover my face with my hands. “I told her I love her and she said, ‘I hope we can be friends again.’ ”

“Ouch!” Anna sits beside me. “What about that asshole? Did you tell her about him?”

I nod. “But she doesn’t believe me.”

“Where did you spend the night?”

“At her house. Don’t ask me how because I’ve no idea. I guess Shivam dropped me there when I was out.”

I reach for my phone.

“Why not your own house?”

“Why don’t you ask him? I’ve just dialed his number.” I hand her the phone.

She laughs and stands up. “Nah, I don’t want to witness Shivam’s slaughter.” She leaves.

Shivam answers in a groggy voice, “Vikram, are you home?”

“Oh, I’ve one? I didn’t know that,” I say.

“Can we do this later? I’ve sleep to catch with.”

He has the gall to act irritated with me.

“No. Get up, or I’m coming there with a knife.”

He sighs. “Vikram, you said you didn’t want to go home after drinking as your dad was there and you know my dad. He would have thrown me out of my house if I took you there.”

“But, Mishti?”

“She called me. I didn’t call her,” he says.

“Yeah and said, ‘Can I take your drunk friend home?’ ”

“No. But she cares. She was mad at you but wanted to make sure you were okay. By the way, did you talk to her?”

“Yes.”

“See. I knew you wouldn’t talk to her otherwise.”

“Do you want me to thank you for the most humiliating morning of my life?”

“Yet, Vikram Sethi, yet. You have more to come if you don’t take a closer look at what you’re doing with your life. Why would anyone like Mishti give you a chance?”

“She won’t,” I say, resigned.

“Oh! So we’re hitting the bar again tonight? Please make an alternate night stay arrangement. Her parents won’t have you again.”

“Asshole, you’re going to rot in hell,” I shout.

He laughs. I hang up.

Mishti

After Vikram is gone, I can’t sleep. Vikram’s words keep echoing in my ears.

Nancy! Why would Nancy tell Vikram something that I told her in confidence? This is why I don’t let people in. They would give away anyone’s secret to feel important.

My phone starts firing up with messages. I smile. Megha is awake.

Megha: Homeless?

Megha: How?

Megha: Living with you?

Megha: Is he there now?

Megha: Can I see him?

Megha: Just click a picture of him while he’s sleeping.

Mishti: No. I’m not a creep like you.

Megha: Haw.

Mishti: No, actually, I'm a creep. I watched him sleep last night and wanted to touch him.

Megha: Now we're talking. Did you?

Mishti: No.

Megha: Girl, there is no hope for you.

Mishti: I know. Especially when the object of my desire tells me he loves me and I tell him, 'No, thanks.'

Megha: What? Did he say that?

Mishti: Yes.

Megha: Oh my God, tell me everything.

I fill her in. With Megha, there is no filter. She never judges me.

Mishti: I'm a bad person.

Megha: What? No.

Mishti: I have a boyfriend, and I'm still crushing over another guy.

Megha: Are you kidding me? After all the things you told me he said to you, I'm crushing over him. I don't know how you could send him away.

Mishti: Words don't mean anything if he's still acting like a jerk with other girls.

Megha: You're too sensible for your own good. It's a flaw you need to work on.

Mishti: Not today. I'm too tired. Bye.

I keep my phone at the bedside and resume my attempt at sleeping when there is a message again.

Megha: Hey, what's the name of Vikram's best friend?

Mishti: Shivam.

Megha: Is he single?

Mishti: What?

Megha: Great. Give me his number. He sounds like a cool guy.

Mishti: No.

Megha: Why? You've two guys mooning over you. I've none. Come on share some love.

Mishti: I'll block you.

CHAPTER 43

Mishti

Next week our class teacher informs us that on Saturday there's a Parent-Teacher Meeting and all the students are required to attend it with their parents.

Sitting beside me, Saahil says, "Yay! Holiday."

I scoff. "Did you not hear her? We've to come to school."

"Nah. I don't because neither of my parents would." He smirks.

"What about your father?"

"He's an awkward person. Doesn't like to meet people. He has never attended any of my PTMs since primary school."

I feel bad for him. I know no child's happy about going to a Parent-Teacher Meeting unless they're one of the toppers, but still, it's good to know that your parents care enough to make an effort to be part of your education.

I squeeze his hand under the desk.

He leans closer. "Let's plan something for Saturday."

“But I’ve to be in school. Not only for the PTM, but I also have to volunteer the full time as a council member.”

“Yeah okay. I guess I’ll just have to sleep in.”

Something has changed. I’m not sure if it’s because of what Vikram said about Saahil or it’s Vikram himself.

My eyes move to the right of their own accord. Vikram is sitting beside Shivam. His long legs extended below the desk. He’s relaxed and saying something to Shivam. His long eyelashes and chiseled jawline are distinct from the side. The first button of his shirt is open, and the tie is loose. The shirt sleeves are folded. His arm is visible. The brown skin sprinkled with hair hypnotizes me, and I can’t look away. His eyes move to the side and spot me. He stops talking. We just stare at each other.

It’s awkward, so I say a silent ‘Hi’, and he smiles. Oh, God! His crooked smile. I was so proud that his smile has never worked on me, and now it gives me goosebumps. Why would this striking specimen of the male gender find me attractive? And more importantly, why am I watching him like a stalker even though I turned him down?

Although I’ve been keeping my distance from Vikram, I’m incapable of ignoring him anymore. This shift in my feelings for him has affected my relationship with Saahil. Whenever I’m with Saahil outside school, I feel like something is not right. Yesterday, he wanted to come home when Mom was not there. I told him no because I had to complete a political science assignment. The truth is, I could have done it by staying awake at night. Saahil is my boyfriend. I should

want to spend time with him. If only I could control my wandering eyes, vibing back with Saahil wouldn't be hard.

###

On Saturday, I'm at school early in the morning when the bus comes to pick up the volunteers. My feet are killing me by noon when Mom arrives. I have to stand at the front door of the school and make sure parents' time is not wasted in searching for the class their child is in.

"Mom, you should have come earlier. You know how parents talk for hours with teachers." I say while walking her to my class.

"I just enjoy gossiping with other parents waiting in line."

"Okay, just don't believe any rumors you hear about me," I say and turn back to go wait on the parents at the front gate.

But Mom catches my arm.

"About you? Wow! Should there be a rumor about you?"

"Nah, but you know how idle ladies make up stuff about other people's kids. Like, you know, Alka Ahuja's daughter has a boyfriend. I saw her with a boy at Mr. Beans," I say.

I know she suspects that Saahil and I are dating, but she has never come out and asked. I like to torture her with snippets. She calls me, but I ignore her and go back to my job.

A woman, older than Mom, is standing at the door. Her face looks familiar, but I can't quite place it. She's short and plump. Wearing a saree with plastic glasses, she's observing the cacophony of school as if she's here for the first time.

“Can I help you, Ma’am?” I ask her.

“Yes, please.”

“Which class is your child in?”

“Actually, it’s embarrassing. I don’t know which class he’s in. He’s in twelfth standard, that’s all I know.”

“That’s okay. Don’t be embarrassed. Many parents don’t know the section their child is in,” I say, feeling bad for her.

“Thank God, I thought I was the only one whose child doesn’t want their mother to step foot in their school. I wouldn’t have known about this PTM if I hadn’t received an email from the school,” she laughs softly.

“Can you tell me his name? Maybe, I know him.”

“I doubt that because he’s new to the school. His name is Saahil Mahajan,” she says.

No. I must have heard her wrong. I laugh. “Can you repeat his name because I don’t think I heard you right?”

“Saahil Mahajan.”

“But he said...” I stop and put a hand on my mouth.

Oh no!

The woman frowns. “You know him?”

“No. I don’t,” Apparently I never did. “But I’ll show you the way to his class. Please follow me.”

I’ve to do the job I’ve been assigned.

CHAPTER 44

Mishti

I scan the corridor for someone who can cover for me at the school gate after showing Saahil's mother our class. Nancy bumps into me.

She says, "Hey, who're you looking for?"

"No one... No, actually, are you free? Can you cover for me at the school gate? I've something urgent to do," I say.

"Sure, but what's so critical?"

If this happened a week back, I would have told her that Saahil had lied to me, but not now. "Nothing. My mom is waiting for me in the class."

"Okay. Say hi to Aunty." She calls out as I hurry to the class.

Mom is sitting at the back chatting away with a woman. I've no idea whose mom she is. I walk over to her and say, "Mom, come on, let's sit in the front. You won't ever get the chance to talk to the teacher if you keep sitting at the back."

“Who wants to talk to the teachers? It’s kinda boring. All they ask is how did I manage to bring up a perfect child. I think they just want to get parenting tips for free from me.”

I laugh. “Mom, I’m not perfect.”

“I know!” She cries out. “But they don’t.”

When Mom is in drama mode, it’s difficult to make her listen. So, I just grab her arm and pull her with me to the front seat where I can hear the conversation between Mrs. Khanna and the parents.

When our chance comes and Mom is about to get up, I pull her down and tell Saahil’s mother, who’s sitting just behind us, “Aunty, you may talk to the teacher now.”

She’s nervous and takes a seat opposite Mrs. Khanna. “Ma’am, I’m Saahil Mahajan’s mother. How’s he doing in the class?”

Mrs. Khanna is surprised. “Oh, Saahil told me yesterday that his parents won’t be able to attend as you were not in the city. Did you come back early for this meeting? That’s so responsible of you, Ma’am. Thank you.”

Saahil’s mother sighs. “Ma’am, we didn’t go anywhere. I know why he’s trying to keep us away from his new school. But it’s not the solution. He has to face his past and the consequences of the things he has done.”

With this, she leans in closer after scanning the room and proceeds to fill Mrs. Khanna in with the details of the puzzle she just created for me.

Mom is sitting closer to them. I change seats with Mom.

Mom looks at me with narrowed eyes. “I never took you to be an eavesdropper.”

“Shhh... Mom. This is Saahil’s Mom,” I whisper.

“And that makes it okay?”

“Yes. Now please stop talking, I can’t hear anything.”

I couldn’t hear anything after that. When Saahil’s Mom is gone, I leave Mom to talk to Mrs. Khanna.

#

After thinking a lot about it, I come to the conclusion that I suck at hiding my feelings. There’s only one solution and that is to talk to Saahil about this.

“Hey, Mishti, I was just about to call you. Let’s hang out. Can I come to your house?” Saahil says when I call him.

“No. I want to see your house. Send your location. I’ll come,” I say.

“My house. Yeah, sure. But...”

“What?”

“Not today. Umm... My dad is home. I’ll bring you here myself someday when he is not here.”

“Why?”

“Look, Mishti, my father is not like yours. Can’t you just drop this right now?”

“No. Not unless you tell me why?”

“Okay, let me come to your house. I’ll explain,” he says.

“Okay.”

As soon as I disconnect his call, I make another call. “I need your help.”

###

Saahil arrives after twenty minutes. Mom’s not home. Jyoti left at six. I’ve never been scared to be alone with a boy in my house before.

He tries to kiss me at the door but I move away quickly.

“How was your day at school?” he asks.

“The usual. I’m tired of being on my feet for hours. How was your day?” I sit on the living room sofa.

“Boring. I’ve been waiting to call you. Let’s move into your bedroom. I’ve missed you.”

“Come on. It was just this morning, otherwise, we see each other daily.”

“Not the way I want to see you,” he wriggles his eyebrows.

I cringe inside. “Nah, I’m comfortable here.”

“Okay, there’s no one at home. Wherever you like.” He smiles and falls back on the sofa with me.

I spring out of the couch.

“Do you want something?” I ask him.

“Yes, you.”

I sit back on the other sofa and say, “Saahil, I need to talk to you.”

“Can we do that later?” He moves to my sofa and keeps his hand on my thigh.

I get up. “No. Can you please not touch me right now?”

“Why? I’m your boyfriend. I’m allowed to touch you.”

“No. Not when I don’t want you to,” I shout.

“Girls are strange. Why do they want a boyfriend if they don’t want to be touched?” He gets up.

I’ve never been so scared in my life. I try to stay calm.

“Saahil, I need to talk to you.”

“You’re breaking up with me?” he asks calmly.

I don’t say anything but move back from him.

He moves towards me. “And why? Because hunky Vikram Sethi wants you.”

“No.” I hit the wall while backing away.

“You think I’m a fool. I knew you two were hot for each other from the beginning. All your fights were just the foreplay. You made me proud Mishti when you stopped talking to him. I thought this girl is different. She’s not like my ex-girlfriend, who didn’t even have the decency to dump me before making out with the jock.”

“But you said you two broke up because you moved away, I’ve to keep him talking.

“Yeah, a better story to tell rather than I was cuckolded by the girl I loved.”

“Just like the story you made up about your mother?” I say.

“I saw your mother at school today.”

He’s taken aback for a while but recovers fast. “Oh, is that the reason for your touch-me-not attitude?”

“You lied to me. Why Saahil?”

“I don’t know. I don’t always know why I lie. It’s fun to make up stories and gain sympathy. It worked, didn’t it? You were in my arms in a few days.”

“Was that all I’ve ever meant to you?”

“No. I’ve liked you. You mean so much to me because Vikram wanted you, but he couldn’t have you. I hate that guy. He thinks he’s better than me. He insulted me by turning down my offer of friendship at the beginning of the year. It’s gratifying to know that popular guys lose sometimes to underdogs.”

“Stop talking about me like I’m someone’s property or a prize.” I cry out.

“You’re not a prize for sure if you won’t let me touch you like I want to,” he says and catches me by the waist to pull me close.

CHAPTER 45

Vikram

I shouldn't have pushed it. My knees are protesting after non-stop action for three hours. Getting back to routine is hard on the body but good for my soul. I had avoided playing basketball at the club, reading books, and doing all the things I'd enjoyed earlier because I couldn't muster the willpower to concentrate. But being miserable is not romantic. It makes you lose respect for yourself. I need to earn it back.

I take out my change of clothes and mobile from the locker of the Yeshwant club. I should shower first. Giving a glance at my mobile, I stop. It's Nancy's message. She never messages me. After our last encounter at my house, I pondered her intentions. One thing was clear, she knew what she did to me.

Even when we were not friends after our break-up, I never disliked her. But after that night, I thought for the first time that maybe she's not crazy about me. I can't blame her for my behavior though. She told me the truth. I didn't know how to handle it.

Nancy: Vikram, where are you?

Nancy: Can you come to Mishti's house?

Nancy: It's urgent.

Nancy: I can't explain. Just come.

Wtf!

I call her. She doesn't pick up the phone. This is ominous. I message her.

Vikram: What happened?

She doesn't reply.

I forego the shower, grab my mobile, drop the bag on the bench, and run to the parking lot of the club for my bike.

#

Mishti

I kick him in the nuts, but he twists away.

"Nancy!" I cry out.

He frowns and turns back to my room, where Nancy is standing with her mobile, recording what she witnessed. He moves fast to grab the knife on the kitchen table.

"Bitch!" he roars, looking at me. "I thought you loved me and you were setting me up." He then moves the knife to Nancy. "Switch off the camera, and give this mobile to me."

Nancy throws her mobile on the floor.

I motion for her to go back to my room, but Saahil shouts again. "Go, stand with your best friend."

He has a knife in his hand. I don't want to tick him off.

“Saahil, I do care for you, but I didn’t know what to think when I met your mother today.”

“Ahhh... my mother. Did she tell you that you should stay away from me?”

Nancy comes closer to me and catches my hand.

“No. I didn’t tell her I know you. She only talked to Mrs. Khanna and left.”

“No, not again. All the strings of counselors and therapists trying to talk to me. Why did Mom have to do this? That’s why I hate her and wish she didn’t exist. She had to go and do the right thing, even if the right thing would put her own son in jail.”

“What did you do?” I ask.

“I found the douchebag football player in my girl’s apartment kissing her. I didn’t do anything to him. I let him go that day. But I couldn’t let the insult slide. I went back to her and made her pay for what she did to me.”

Oh my God!

Nancy’s phone rings on the floor but it’s silent, so Saahil doesn’t notice.

“My mother made a big deal out of it. Thank God, my father is an IG. I had to change the school and move, but nobody could touch me.”

And now you’re doing the same thing to another girl. All thanks to your powerful father.

Saahil’s back is to my room. I catch some movement there. It’s Vikram. How did he come? I look at Nancy. She squeezes my hand.

“Saahil, I didn’t cheat on you.”

I have to keep him distracted while we inch closer to the tall flower vase by the side of the sofa.

As soon I feel the vase in my right hand. I spun around and clasp it in both hands and throw it at Saahil.

Vikram comes running from the room and grips Saahil’s throat from behind with one hand and grabs his hand-holding knife. “Drop the knife!”

Saahil doesn’t loosen his hold on the knife. “Who are you trying to fool, slut? What’s he doing here, if you’re not cheating on me?”

Vikram tightens his grip on Saahil’s neck. I’m scared he’ll kill Saahil. “What did you call her?”

“Just what all girls are. Always looking for someone better.” Saahil says gasping for breath.

Vikram’s going to strangle him. Saahil drops the knife.

“Vikram, please don’t kill him.” I cry out.

I pick up the knife and run to my room to get my mobile to call Mom.

#

I can’t stop hugging Mom. How easily this nightmare could have been real if I didn’t call Nancy and she didn’t message Vikram?

I hug Nancy after the police take Saahil away. Vikram is watching silently leaning on the living room wall with folded hands.

“I’m sorry I didn’t believe you,” I say.

“No dammit, I’m sorry. I gave up when you didn’t believe me,” he says.

I smile. “What could you have done? Stalked me?”

“I don’t know. All I know is that I could have killed him today.”

CHAPTER 46

Vikram

With a cry, she comes running into my arms. My sweat-soaked t-shirt, which had dried, moistens again. Her mother and Nancy are watching us. But I don't care. I put my arms around her and hold her tight. This may be the only chance I'll get to hold her in my arms. I take a deep breath and close my eyes. The lemony scent of her shampoo fills my nostril. I can hear her heart beating.

When I open my eyes, her mom is gone.

"Why do you always say things that make it impossible for me to stay away from you?" She says softly against my chest.

The warmth of her breath seeps through my thin t-shirt. My chin is on her head.

I whisper, "Ouch!"

She laughs through her tears and hits me in the chest.

"You're doing a pretty good job of it though," I say.

“No, I’m not. Look at me!” She raises her head to look into my eyes.

Nancy clears her throat. “Mishti, I’m heading out. My parents have no idea where I am. I don’t want to call them and fill in on phone. They’ll freak out. Please take care of yourself.”

“Thanks, Nancy. I owe my life to you. I’ve been thanking God that I had the presence of mind to call you.”

“Why didn’t you call me?” I finally ask the question that had been in my mind since I knew she called Nancy for help.

She doesn’t look at me and moves away. Hugging Nancy she says, “I’ll see you in school.”

After Nancy is gone, she looks at me and says, “Can you come to my room for a few minutes?”

I nod and follow her.

Mishti’s mom is sitting on the floor with Kipper, sliding a hand over him. “Was he a good boy? Did he make a noise when you came through the balcony?” she asks me.

“Yeah mostly. Although I had to give him my sock to chew on to keep him quiet.”

Mishti sits beside her mother and picks up Kipper. Her mom leaves the room.

Without looking at me Mishti says, “I didn’t want you to know that I doubted Saahil. And at that point, I was hoping there was some explanation for his lie. I didn’t want to believe that I was wrong about him.”

“You thought I would say ‘I told you so’?” I ask.

“No... Yes... Maybe. I just hate to be wrong. That’s why I don’t trust people. I trusted you, you broke my heart. I trusted Nancy, she betrayed me by giving up my secret, and now Saahil...” Her voice breaks. “It hurts too much.”

“But you still called Nancy.”

“Yes, because she doesn’t expect anything from me, Vikram. I can’t give you what you expect from me.” She looks at me. “When this year started, all I wanted was some friends and a boyfriend if I was lucky. But I didn’t know to trust someone was to open oneself to a whole lot of hurt. I can’t go through this again. I don’t need a boyfriend right now.”

She’s wrong. I know her and I never expected that she’ll come running into my arms just because she’s hurt and needs a shoulder to cry on.

I sit beside her on the floor. “I would offer you my friendship, but that wouldn’t work without trust, would it?”

Her eyes are red.

She shakes her head. “No, it wouldn’t.”

I nod.

“Mist, I don’t expect anything from you. You’ve changed my life by existing. I’m glad I met you. I was always in awe of my own achievements and looks and didn’t know there was someone like you for whom kindness is more important than cars and medals. What I feel for you is not going to go away anytime soon. But I can’t be your friend either if you can’t trust me.” I get up and walk to the door.

At the door, I turn back to look back at her. Her eyes are welling up. I wonder if it’s because Saahil broke her heart or because she has broken mine once again.

“I know love hurts, but it’s also the only thing that makes us feel alive. You may not admit it yet but I heard your heart beating against mine today. I know you’re alive.”

CHAPTER 47

Mishti

Going back to school on Monday isn't easy. I, along with Saahil, was all over on the newspaper, social media, and WhatsApp on Sunday. I used to think blaming the victim mentality belonged to the previous generation, but I was wrong. What kind of girl asks her boyfriend to come when she is alone at home? She's asking for it. Girls should be cautious. Girls should be responsible. Girls should watch what they say. We can't blame the boys. They're the victims of their body's needs. As if they're animals. This coming from teenagers on social media makes me lose faith in humanity.

Students are whispering behind my back. I'm once again the recluse. I half expect Saahil to walk in and sit beside me in the class. It all seems so unreal.

During the lunch break, Nancy doesn't let me brood. "Okay, first of all, don't look like you killed someone."

"I'm not." I scan the room and say, "But everyone is looking at me."

“Oh, they’ll get over it. Ignore them. I’ve to tell you something,” She says and hesitates. “Um... Actually, I’ve been thinking of telling this to you for a long time, but I was avoiding it by justifying that it wouldn’t make a difference but then... I saw you with Vikram on Saturday, and I knew I had to tell you.”

I interrupt her. “I know.”

She stops. “What do you know?”

“That you told Vikram that I like Saahil after we came back from Bangalore,” I say matter of factly.

“Shit! Is that the reason why you’ve withdrawn from me?”

“Nancy, it’s not a big deal. I know everyone talks.”

“No, it is a big deal. And now you hate me.” She covers her face.

I laugh. “I wouldn’t have called you when I needed a friend if I hated you.”

“I wasn’t much help there. Was I? I was nervous and messaged Vikram for backup.”

“Good thinking on your part, but we’re lucky he actually came,” I say.

“Oh, I knew he would come. He cares for you. I was not sure when I told him about your crush on Saahil, but I did after his reaction. And then your reaction to his mention added up to my guilt. I knew something has happened between you two.”

I’ve been trying to keep the question inside for a long time, but it comes out finally. “Why did you say anything about what I shared with you as a friend?”

She pauses for a moment. “It’s complicated. I don’t know if I’ll be able to explain. When Vikram and I started dating, we were young. We didn’t think of the consequences on our families who were friends. When they came to know, they were ecstatic, especially my mom, since she’s Vikram’s biggest cheerleader. Since we were in the same class, we were constantly compared. According to my mom, I was not good enough for him. She said that to me after we started dating. Resentment towards him kept building up, and I would successfully find reasons to fight with him. We broke up after two months. It was a mutually thought-out break-up. We finally agreed on something. But when my mother came to know, she said I was crazy to break up with him. He was such a catch. He would be back with another girl within a week.”

She stops and takes a deep breath. “Well, she was right. When we started dating my feelings for him were real. I was confused about my sexuality, but I really did care for him. The fact that he would be with another girl within a week, hurt. I know it doesn’t justify what I did. Because I knew he cared for you. I had seen it in the way he talked about you that night with me, and I wanted to hurt him.”

There’s an ache in my heart. Nobody’s perfect. I’ve no right to judge anyone. I nod and place my hand over hers.

“It’s okay. Vikram and I are not meant to be anyway.”

“But why? I thought there was something between you two that day. Even your mom acknowledged and left.”

I turn red. “Oh, is it? She didn’t say anything to me.”

“You’re lucky. My mom would have interrogated until she got the last detail.”

“It’s just as well. I wouldn’t know what to say to her. Especially when she had seen my first relationship become a disaster. I’m not ready for another, Nancy. Not with Vikram. Never with Vikram. He doesn’t think before venting his anger on others. I don’t want to be in his vicinity when he loses his temper again.”

The bell signals the end of the lunch break. We get up and turn. Vikram is sitting at the table behind us with Shivam, with his eyes focused on his food that’s untouched.

I look at Nancy with horror. She puts her hand on her mouth.

Vikram gets up slowly, looks into my eyes, and says, “We’re officially even, Mist.” His voice is calm. And without giving us a second glance he leaves.

CHAPTER 48

Mishti

Ironically, when I said that I don't want to be in Vikram's vicinity next time he has a reason to be pissed, he was there and he didn't react. Has he really changed?

He had been good to me lately. I hate to think that I've hurt him.

At the beginning of this year, he didn't mean anything to me. In fact, I went out of my way to be rude to him so that he stays away from me. And now that I know him, I can't remember why I hated him then. My body acts strange around him. My heart beats a bit faster. Butterflies in my stomach come alive, and all I want is to see him smile at me again.

The whole week Vikram has ignored me. My heart hurts. I can't sleep at night thinking up ways to make things better between us, but give up eventually because it wouldn't change the fact that I meant every word Vikram heard from my mouth.

On Monday, Mrs. Khanna asks us to present our English project report in class on Friday.

The need to reach out to him, which is strong, wins this time, and I message him that evening.

Mishti: Hi.

Vikram: Yes.

Mishti: I need your help with putting finishing touches to the English project report.

He doesn't reply for an eternity. And when he does...

Vikram: No, you don't.

He's always blunt. Why do I love this about him?

Mishti: Okay, but can I talk to you?

Vikram: I know you, Mist. You're feeling guilty and want to go back to how things were when I didn't know what you thought of me. But believe me, I like it this way. No games anymore.

Mishti: I'm not a player. You were never a game to me.

Vikram: Right. I was nothing to you.

Mishti: Please, Vikram, let me explain.

Vikram: Listen, I'm not upset. Life doesn't give you everything you want. It's a lesson everyone learns as they grow up. I might have been a bit slow, but I've got it. It's not a big deal.

###

Vikram

“Holden Caulfield is real. No matter how many critics thrash him for his hypocrisy and foul language, he’s the most realistic representation of teenage angst. And I can vouch for his feelings. He’s screwed up, confused, drinks, and swears. But he’s also vulnerable and looking for a real connection with another human being like every teenager.

‘The Catcher in The Rye’ is one of the books where there is no resolution. Holden Caulfield doesn’t change. He’s still in as much trouble as he was at the beginning of the story. But it doesn’t take away from the experience of finding yourself in a fictional character and wishing you could meet him someday and ask him what happened to him after the story ended. Was he able to finish high school? Or did he transform into one of the adults he hated when he grew up? All he wanted was to protect the innocents in this world. Was he able to give hope to the readers? Because life looks pretty grim for most of us right now.”

As my report ends, my eyes glide over to Mishti for a second but I pull away.

Mrs. Khanna claps for me and adds. “Well done, Vikram. Although you’ll have to change some words before we send your report for the board’s evaluation, it does hit the nail.” She looks at Mishti. “Mishti is your partner. I expected good work from both of you. You haven’t disappointed me. Do you want to add something?” she asks Mishti.

It gives me an excuse to look at her. She had been staring at me throughout my speech.

She gets up. “Yes, Ma’am.”

Mrs. Khanna motions for her to proceed.

I head back to my seat. She takes my place at the center of the class.



“I get where Holden Caulfield is coming from. He believes all adults are ‘phony’—his favorite word. He may be right. But I believe this phoniness starts much before adulthood. Teenage is the training period for adulthood. Emotional independence, fake bravado, and the need to protect your heart germinate into such a strong shell that letting go is unimaginable. But we’re not snails. Living life hating everyone for being themselves is an injustice to humankind. I hope Holden Caulfield or J.D. Salinger, the author learned the lesson before he died. Because I have.”

She takes a deep breath and looks at me. “Protecting the heart is almost as painful as giving in to what it wants. I can’t do it anymore. Vikram Sethi, you make me wish I were reckless. I wish I could dive into an adventure our time together promises to be. Because what I feel for you is not something that comes easily in life. And this time I’m not going to run.”

My whole body is flushed, and I can’t look away from her deep brown eyes. Mrs. Khanna and others do not exist.

CHAPTER 49

Mishti

Someone shoot me now. I know what you're thinking. I didn't plan this. Come on, I'm Mishti Ahuja, who would keep her birthday a secret because she doesn't want attention. How can you think I would plan my own suspension from school?

Class is as silent as a grave. Only the fan is making a creaking noise. My hands are cold, and I'm weak in my knees. The precise moment Vikram's confused stare turns into an admiring smile is when I let my breath out.

"Mishti, is this your book report?" Mrs. Khanna strolls over to me.

Oops! I forgot she's there. Her face is stern. It's hard to say what she's thinking. Warmth creeps into my cheeks. I look down and shake my head.

"Good. Because this would need a lot of editing, and Vikram Sethi isn't a character in the book."

The class laughs.

She comes close and says, “You two, see me after the class in the staff room,” pointing her pen at Vikram, who can’t stop grinning.

“Who’s next?” She addresses the class.

I know she’s not done with me, but it’s a relief to be dismissed.

Everyone gives me a secret thumbs up while I do the walk of shame to my seat. See, that’s why I make it a point to not let people in on my business. They enjoy others’ distress too much.

My seat is at the left end of the class and Vikram is sitting on the right side of the class. I don’t pass by him. But I look at him after sitting back in my seat. He blows a flying kiss to me. A collective gasp goes through the class.

“Stop this circus right now!” Mrs. Khanna bellows.

I keep my head down for the rest of the class.

After the class, Vikram’s beside me in a flash and whispers, “That was hooooottttt!!!”

His hot breath makes me shiver.

I touch my warm cheeks and say, “I don’t know about that, but now I’ve to pay for this hot display.”

He takes my hand in his. “Yep. Let’s go.”

I glance at our joined hands and then at the class that’s watching our every move. My instincts shout to pull back my hand, but after the confession a few minutes back, this is nothing.

Vikram is skipping through the way to the staff room.

“Aren’t you scared? We can be suspended. All because of my stupidity.”

“Hey, it was worth whatever the consequences. I mean, was that you, Mist? The girl who didn’t talk to me for two days because I announced her birthday in public?”

“No, that was because your girlfriend/non-girlfriend/ex-girlfriend decided to have a tête-à-tête with her best friend in the girl’s washroom on my birthday. I hate that I still don’t know the status of your relationship with her. Remind me, why do I love you again?”

“You love me?” He stops and forces me to turn.

“Vikram, stop. We’re in school.” I say and drag him to the staff room.

“This conversation is not over.”

#

Mrs. Khanna is alone in the staffroom. Thank God for small mercies.

I knock at the door. “May we come in, Ma’am?”

She nods her head without looking up.

I snatch my hand away from Vikram when we enter the room.

“Why shy away now when you didn’t hesitate to broadcast your feelings in front of the whole class?” Mrs. Khanna looks up.

I open my mouth but no words come out.

“It’s my fault,” Vikram says.

I gape at him. What is he talking about?

“Ma’am, you’ve read the book, right?” Vikram asks her.

She nods her head.

“When Mishti read the book, she said I’m like Holden. Can you believe it? She said she could write the book report using my name and nobody would know the difference. She compared me to not only a high school failure but also a non-athletic loser. I challenged her to do it. I didn’t think she would actually do it.”

Losing the battle with herself to not laugh, Mrs. Khanna gives in. “You think I’m stupid, Vikram. I heard what she said. It had nothing to do with the book or Holden.” She pauses and adds, “Still, I do admire your attempt to protect her.”

She looks at me. “Mishti, I honestly don’t know what to say. You’ve appalled me with your boldness. If you would apply this assertiveness in extra-curricular activities, you would benefit more. I won’t lecture you on proper behavior because I know you’re aware of it. I’m not sure if you broke any of the school rules, so I’ll let this one slide. I got a message from the library that they need students to sort books in alphabetical order. I think you would be the perfect candidate for the job. Go to the library after school today and tell Mrs. Bhargava that I’ve sent you.” Mrs. Khanna says in a way of dismissing us.

Happy to still be a part of the school, I turn to leave when Vikram asks, “Can we sort the books together?”

Mrs. Khanna chuckles. “Vikram, you’re pushing it. No. Now go.” Then she shakes her head and mutters, “God! I miss being young.”

CHAPTER 50

Mishti

“I have strict instructions to not let you enter the library when Mishti is organizing the shelves,” Mrs. Bhargava says looking at Vikram over her glasses.

“But I’m a student of the school. You can’t take away my right to study in the library. Exams are approaching. I need to make notes,” Vikram says righteously.

“You want me to call Mrs. Kasturi to inform her about the little incident in your class today?” she says.

“No!” I cry out. I drag Vikram to the side. “Vikram, please go for your basketball practice. I’ll see you before boarding the bus at four-thirty. I promise.”

“Okay, but don’t board the bus. I’ll drop you home,” he says and waits for my response.

He’s testing me. Anxiety raises its ugly head. I stare at him intently for a few seconds and nod my head slowly. “Okay... see you at four-thirty.”

I head back to talk to Mrs. Bhargava. When I turn, he's gone. I'm disappointed, but I'll see him after school. Yay!

Scanning the huge task before me, I feel grateful. I love books. I don't know how much work will get done today because I've been assigned to organize the shelf containing books of English poetry.

I'm more of a fiction reader, but some poets like Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath hit you where it hurts. That feeling of being hit by words placed exactly a certain way to have this effect on humans pulls me towards the shelf. It's the feeling you come back for again and again.

I pick up some of the books from a nearby table.

In the flush of love's light

We dare be brave

And suddenly we see

That love costs all we are

And will ever be

Yet, it's only love

that sets us free.

Maya Angelou catches my attention and I'm lost.

"Tsk... tsk... Mist, you're not a good employee."

I drop the book with a jerk and look all over.

He's standing, hands folded, leaning on the shelf, which I was supposed to be sorting.

"How did you come in?" I whisper.

“One would think you would be aware of the futility of asking this question to me by now.” He straightens, moves across to me, and picks up the book I dropped.

“What are you doing? Mrs. Bhargava can come here anytime.”

“I’ve never seen her leave her chair in all the years I’ve studied in this school.”

“What about Priyanka? She can come.”

Priyanka is a college student who works part-time in our school library.

“Nah. She won’t say anything.” He places the book on the table and traps me between both his hands on the table.

“How can you be so sure?” My voice is barely audible. I can hardly breathe. He’s so close.

“Because.” He leans in and touches my waist lightly with his hands, looking into my eyes as if asking for permission, and whispers, “She’s the one who let me in from the back door.”

“What?” I’m hot all over. “How do you do it?”

“Do what?” His face is just an inch from mine and his gaze is fixed on my lips.

“Make people do what you want.” My mouth opens slightly.

“I’ve been wanting to kiss you for a long time, but...”

“How long?”

“I can distinctly remember the red shade of your lipstick you wore at last year’s farewell party.” He moistens his lips with his tongue.

“Are you going to kiss me now?” My heart is beating outside my body; it’s so loud.

His adam’s apple moves. “You want me to kiss you now?”

Yes.

“We’re in the library. Anybody can come.” I break the eye contact and look over him to the part of the library on the other side of the shelf. There’s no one there. But anyone can come. “I’ve already disappointed Mrs. Khanna today. Don’t want to do it again. Please.”

“Why did I have to fall in love with the teacher’s pet?” He turns away slowly and shakes his head.

I grab his hand and say, “No, don’t go,” and drag him to the shelf I’m supposed to organize. “Help me do this. So that we can leave early.”

###

“I don’t think that I’ve been in love as such,
Although I liked a few folks pretty well.
Love must be vaster than my smiles or touch.
For brave men died and empires rose and fell
For love, girls follow boys to foreign lands.
And men have followed women into hell.
In plays and poems, someone understands,
There’s something that makes us more than blood and bone,
And more than biological demands.
For me, love’s like the wind unseen, unknown.

I see the trees are bending where it's been.

I know that it leaves wreckage where it's blown.

I really don't know what I love you means.

I think it means don't leave me here alone."

I read 'Dark Sonnet' by Neil Gaiman aloud and look back at Vikram. We're sitting on the floor with Chris Riddel's collection 'Poem to fall in love with'. He's bad when it comes to books.

I keep my head on his shoulder and quote, "I really don't know what I love you means, I think it means don't leave me alone..."

He laces his fingers in mine.

"She walks in beauty, like the night

Of cloudless climes and starry skies;

And all that's best of dark and bright

Meet in her aspect and her eyes."

This is nice. Sitting with my favorite person, discussing books and reading poetry. I'm content.

I turn my face to him. He's smiling. Inching forward, I place a kiss on his mouth. His eyes widen, and he drops the book. Putting his hands around me, he deepens the kiss.

My mouth opens and his tongue explores. An electric current goes through my body. His one hand reaches over and lets my hair open that's tied in a ponytail. His hand moves in my hair. I shiver with the sensation.

“You never cease to amaze me, Mist. You’ve got a rebellious streak you’re unaware of,” he says when he raises his head. “Mrs. Khanna should know about this.”

“No.” I turn red and get up. “Oh, God! When will we get out of here?” I cry looking at the pile of books on the table.

“Or the other option is we hide and let them lock the library thinking that we’ve left and be stranded inside it through the night,” he says, still sitting on the floor, not in a hurry to complete the task.

I consider the tempting idea. “Yeah, but then we have parents who expect us to be home.”

#

I ride back home with Vikram on his bike. It’s not hard to let go of my fears when he asks me to put my arms around his chest when he drives. I rest my head on his shoulder and surrender to the feeling of coming home.

CHAPTER 51

Vikram

After climbing it twice, this balcony feels like home. I land over the railing with a thump. But there are voices coming from her room. My buddy, Kipper, starts barking. He knows I'm here. Good boy. I miss him. But voices don't stop. There's laughter, a lot of it. I frown. When I talked to her in the evening, she didn't tell me about a party. Did she?

I try to peep inside through the curtains that are drawn. There's someone else in the room. Shit! I should have called her first.

I text her.

Vikram: I miss Kipper.

She replies after a few minutes.

Mishti: Aww... What about me?

Vikram: I don't miss you.

Mishti: Haw.

Vikram: Because I can see you right now.

The door of the balcony opens, and she cries out, "Vikram! You came." And she pulls me in a hug.

Wow!

"There's someone in your room?" I ask softly.

She takes my hand and drags me inside. "Yep."

It's Nancy. She scowls at me. "What's he doing here? I know he's your boyfriend, but this is a girl's night. No boys allowed."

I pick up Kipper and cover his ears. "Shhh... You'll hurt his feelings. This is his home too, you know."

"Yeah, but you do have a home. Why do you keep hanging on Mishti's balcony?"

Mishti's laptop speaks up. "Is that Vikram? I want to see him. Please, pretty please."

"Who is she?" I ask walking over to Mishti's bed where they were having a video call.

"Ummm... she's Megha," Mishti says.

"Who's Megha?"

"Huh... he doesn't know about Megha?" Nancy covers her mouth with her hand.

Interesting.

"She knows me?" I ask.

"Of course, she knows you. She's my best friend. You've made my life hell since seventh grade. I had to vent to someone," Mishti says.

"What?" I move away from the laptop.

Nancy falls to the floor laughing.

“It’s okay, Vikram. She knows it’s your past. You’re not the same person,” Mishti says.

“Hullo, I’m still here, folks. Acknowledge me.” The laptop speaks again.

Mishti picks up the laptop and brings it to me. Megha is a small skinny girl with spectacles and short straight hair.

“Hi, Megha, this is Vikram. Refrain from making any comments on his hotness because I’ve recently discovered that I’m not mellow when I’m jealous,” Mishti says.

“Yeah, yeah, he’s okay. But, Vikram, how about your best friend, Shivam? Is he single?”

“Oh my God, Megha! You’re a disgrace.” Mishti disconnects the call.

I can’t stop laughing. “What did she say? When did she see Shivam? How does she know him?”

Mishti takes a deep breath. “She doesn’t. It’s a long story.” She falls onto her bed.

I lay down beside her.

Nancy gets up from the floor. “Vikram Sethi, no PDA please or I’ll puke.”

Nancy hides in the bathroom.

“She still hates me,” I say.

“No, she doesn’t. I know you heard her when we were talking in the lunchroom, but it was more about her guilt for what she did to us.”

“She didn’t. I did.”

Mishti moves closer to me in bed and rests her head on my shoulder. I marvel at the miracle that this kind, beautiful, and amazing girl loves me.

“Promise me one thing,” I say.

She raises her brown eyes to meet mine.

“If I do this ever again to you, please don’t forgive me.”

CHAPTER 52

Epilogue

Mishti

“I hate this.” I cry on the phone. “My parents were never like this. I’m almost eighteen, and I’ve new rules! It’s not fair.” I punch the pillow and throw it at the other end of the bed.

“New rules?” Vikram laughs. He thinks it’s funny.

“Yes, and it’s all your fault,” I say, sitting straight on the bed with another pillow on my lap.

“My fault?” He shouts. “What the fuck did I do?”

“My mother wants to lock my balcony and keep the key with herself because climbing my balcony is your favorite sport. I’ve never had a curfew, but she wants me home by nine p.m. now. She even suggested taking away my phone at bedtime. And all that is okay, but the worst part is my mother finally

had the talk with me that I thought I was lucky enough to escape.”

“The talk?”

“Yes, the talk.”

“The bird and the bees?” He can’t stop laughing.

“No,” I hesitate. “Not exactly that. For that, she had given a book named ‘It’s so Amazing’ in my hands when I was ten. It was an interesting book, I must say. I read the whole book in two hours. I still have it somewhere on the shelf. In case you want to broaden your knowledge on the subject.”

“Are you kidding me? I know everything.”

“I’m not going to ask from where.” I climb out of my bed to walk over to Kipper. He jumps and catches my pajama bottoms between his teeth and pulls me to the floor. I give in and sit crosslegged with him on my lap. “Anyway, it started with her concern that I’ll lose my focus and not give my best shot to my dream of going to NYU, now that I have a boyfriend. But then she started coming up with wild scenarios that I won’t be able to go even if I got into the University.”

“What wild scenarios?” Vikram asks.

“Oh like, what if I got pregnant? I mean, Mom, please!”

“Wow!” Vikram snorts.

“It’s almost like she’s expecting us to have sex even before we’re thinking about it.” I cry. “It was so embarrassing. I agreed to whatever she said and pushed her out of my room.”

“Talk for yourself. I’m always thinking about it,” Vikram says.

“What?”

“Sex.”

I hide my face on my knees. “Stop, Vikram. I’m serious here.”

“Okay. So your balcony door is locked, and I can’t come. What other option do we have? I want to see you.”

“No, I didn’t let her lock the door because the balcony is where we’ve trained Kipper to pee. We can’t take him for a walk every time he wants to pee. It worked, but then she forbade me to lock my room from inside ever. I mean, God, doesn’t she trust me?”

Vikram clears his throat and says, “No, I think it’s me she doesn’t trust.”

“But she knows me. I won’t do anything to ruin my chances of going to a good college.”

“I think you’re disappointing her already. You know what she expects us to do. Why not do it?” He says.

“Asshole, get your head out of the gutter?” I take Kipper to my bed. “Good night. Call me again in the morning when your mind starts working.”

The sleep eludes me. I miss him. We haven’t seen each other out of school since he was here with Nancy last Saturday. We haven’t kissed after that iconic kiss at the library. God, I want to taste him again.

At school, everyone knows we’re dating, thanks to my scandalous confession in class. They’re always watching us. So I’ve to be extra cautious.

But at night, when we talk, it’s magic. He makes me laugh, blush, and mad at the same time. I just want to touch him again. Ahhh... the pain.

###

Vikram

I'm back on the balcony. She texted me today informing me her parents are out for a party and she's 'Home Alone'. Sweetest words I've read this week.

I text her. She's out in a second. Kipper comes trotting after her. She stares at me for a while.

"Ummm... everything okay? Are they gone?" I ask.

She nods. It's dark on the balcony. Her face is in the dark. I walk over to her slowly.

Kipper bites my leg to attract my attention, and I cry. "Ouch!"

I pick Kipper from the floor. Mishti opens the door wider and moves away from the door.

I follow her inside, watching her face that's averted. "Mist?"

She turns to me but doesn't look me in the eye. "Yes?"

"Look at me." I face her.

She looks, but her face turns beetroot red, and she looks away again.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"Nothing." She moves away, picks up her clothes from the chair, and starts folding them.

We're alone for the first time as a boyfriend and girlfriend, and she's feeling awkward. I distract myself by examining the room.

Her room is smaller and has much more furniture than mine but somehow looks cleaner, I don't know how. I stroll over to the bookshelf.

“How Not To Be A Dick.” I pick the book from the shelf and raise my eyebrow, facing her. “Not a book I would expect in Mishti Ahuja’s library.”

She walks over to me and stands close to me. Her hand brushes against mine as she whispers, “Nah, I bought it as a gift for someone I know.”

“Really? When were you planning to give it to me?” I ask.

She’s wearing a plain white cotton pajama set. She smells of lavender. Her wild curly hair is open. I lift my hand to touch a strand. It’s soft and wavy.

She closes her eyes and presses her cheek to my hand. Her cheek is cold. I let the hair go and rub her cheek with my thumb.

“Mist.” Her eyelids flutter.

“I want to touch you. But if you want me to stop at any time, just say ‘No’. I’ll stop.”

She doesn’t say anything.

“Please nod or say something,” I say.

“Yes, Vikram Sethi, please.” She breaths out.

I spread my hand on her neck. She shivers. I lower my head to trace her lips with my tongue. She opens her mouth and captures mine impatiently. I chuckle. God, I love her.

###

Mishti

After exploring each other for the next fifteen minutes on my bed, Vikram put a stop to the make-out session,

whispering, “Mist, remember you don’t want to get pregnant.”

I push him off the bed. He laughs.

“It’s not funny,” I say.

“Yes, it is. Everything is funny until it happens.” He lies sideways on the floor with his face in his palm.

“Although Megha sent this book to me as a joke when we were fighting, you are the one who needs this.” I throw the book at him.

He catches the book with a single hand and sits up.

I hear the front door of the apartment open. I jump off the bed.

“Oh my God, they’re back. Vikram, what are we going to do?” I whisper.

They’re at my door. I didn’t lock it because of my mother’s condition. She barges in without knocking. I’m dead.

I watch her wide-eyed.

She walks in. “You’re not asleep?”

She hasn’t noticed Vikram yet. I look back at where he was. He’s gone.

What? Where did he go? He was on the floor.

Mom says, “Oh, it was such a boring party. I don’t know why people insist on marrying again at the twenty-fifth anniversary as if marrying again would solve all their problems.”

She walks over to the study table and books shelf, scanning the room while she’s talking.

“Mom, what are you looking for?” I know what she’s looking for.

“Oh... me... nothing. Just making sure balcony door is closed.” She moves over to the door that’s open.

“See, you’re so careless. I’ve told you to check the door before you sleep.” She latches the door and then moves to the other side of my bed.

“Mom, Vikram is under the bed,” I say.

She gives a nervous laugh. “Shut up, smartass. I’m not looking for him. Go to bed now. It’s late.” And she leaves.

I fall to the floor to look for him and lo and behold, he is under the bed.

Thank God for sarcasm, or I would’ve been shifted to nunnery tonight.

Glossary

Hindi words meaning in English:

- 1) *Rotis*- a flat round bread that is cooked on a griddle.
- 2) *Khatta*- something that tastes sour.
- 3) *Teekha*- something that tastes spicy.
- 4) *Maska*- butter
- 5) *Pav*- a small loaf of bread
- 6) *Didi*- elder sister
- 7) *Bhaiya*- elder brother
- 8) *Baba*- father
- 9) *Beta*- son
- 10) *Nalayak*- calling someone worthless in affection
- 11) *Pagle*- Moron
- 12) *Nani*- maternal grandmother
- 13) *Mama*- Mother's brother.