

Two
little
Branches

How Love Grows in Unexpected Ways

VANYA KRISHNA



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Stories Matter
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Preface

Some stories do not end when a choice is made. They deepen.

This book continues Nina's journey, not from the place of longing, but from the place where love has already taken form and asks to be lived every day. If the first story was about courage, this one is about commitment. The quiet kind. The kind that wakes up early, stays steady, and keeps choosing love even when it is unseen.

Motherhood changes the way we hold the world. It teaches us that strength can be gentle, that sacrifice can be joyful, and that love does not always arrive wrapped in certainty. Through Nina, I explored what it means to stand by a brave decision and let it grow into a life that depends on you.

This story, too, is shaped by healing. Not the dramatic kind, but the daily kind. The kind that happens in ordinary moments, where resilience is built silently and grace reveals itself slowly.

Nina's journey is still not mine, yet she continues to carry pieces of me and of many women who learn that love does not always follow tradition, but it always follows truth.

And as always, I trust in Krishna. In the quiet intelligence of life. In surrender. In the belief that when we walk with faith, even the most unconventional paths unfold with purpose, love, and light.

— Vanya Krishna

Introduction

Karthik was a smart child. Quiet at first glance, almost shy, but once you crossed that invisible line of trust, there was no stopping him. Words spilled out of him in an endless stream, thoughts hopping from one idea to the next, curiosity stitched into every sentence. With everyone else he was polite and reserved, but with his mother, he was entirely himself. And that, strangely, worried her the most.

Nina was a single mother by choice, a decision she had made boldly and consciously. She had lost her parents young and grew up knowing what loneliness felt like, not the loud kind, but the quiet absence that lingers in the corners of everyday life. She understood that love alone was sometimes not enough, that raising a child took more than one exhausted pair of hands. So, when she chose to raise a child on her own, she made another choice alongside it: if she could not give her son a traditional family, she would give him a village.

Karthik did not have uncles or aunts by blood. Nina was an only child, and her family tree was sparse. Yet his life was full of uncles, aunts, grandpas, and grandmas who shared no DNA with him but were bound by affection and presence. Every birthday seemed to add a few more names to his growing circle. He never questioned it. In fact, he cherished it. Family, to him, was defined by who showed up.

Karthik had been born out of love, but not out of wedlock. Nina kept that truth carefully tucked away, waiting for a time she felt he could understand it. When he asked about his father, she told him gently that she had wanted him so deeply

that she had asked someone for a seed so she could bring him into the world. That explanation satisfied him. To a child, it simply meant one thing: his mother had wanted him more than anything. Sometimes he wondered if they could meet the “seed guy,” but Nina would smile and say that legally he had to be at least fourteen to meet a donor. The word *legal* always ended the conversation. Some words do that.

There were moments, of course. Moments when he saw his friends with both parents, a mother and a father, and felt a brief, unfamiliar ache. But even at that tender age, he sensed that his life was not lacking. His mother was present, capable, and strong in ways he saw missing in many homes with two parents. He never complained. Nina made sure nothing essential was missing. She was firm about schoolwork and routines, never indulgent, never careless. Yet a quiet worry lived inside her. No matter how many uncles surrounded him, she could not give him a father. And a father, she believed, was still a father.

Karthik was grateful for everything his mother gave him, but there were moments when he missed what he could not name. Watching his friends play ball with their fathers or share easy laughter during weekend rituals stirred something unfamiliar in him. More than that, he noticed his mother. The way her strength softened into fatigue when she thought no one was watching. The way her smile looked different in photographs of happy families.

He loved her fiercely, and somewhere in his young heart grew a quiet wish: he wanted her to be less alone.

And so, in his own innocent, earnest way, Karthik began a mission he never announced aloud.

He decided to find his mother a husband.

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Part I –
Roots & First Light

Chapter 1 – The Family Tree

“Ammaaaaa...!!! Where are you...?”

Little Karthik ran frantically into the hall, eagerly kicking off his shoes and flinging his bag across the room, his eyes searching every corner.

“Ammaaaa...!!”

But Amma was nowhere to be found.

“What happened, baba? Why so much fuss?” Daisy asked.

Daisy was the caretaker, but really, she was family. She had been with Karthik since the day he was born. She cuddled him like a mother and scolded him like one too.

“Daisyyyyy...!!!!” he spun around her excitedly. “I have something to tell Amma!”

“Amma had an urgent meeting, baba. She’ll be home late in the evening.”

Karthik sulked for a moment, but he knew his Amma worked very hard.

“You know what...!!” Daisy said brightly. “How about we order your favourite chocolate cake from Magnolia? I won’t tell Miss Nina, okay? Our secret. But only if you smile and give me a hug.”

Little Karthik leapt off the sofa and wrapped his arms tightly around Daisy.

Changed into his home clothes, his little legs dangling from the dining chair, Karthik dug into his chocolate cake. With his mouth full, he announced, "You know what, Daisy...!"

"Baba... no talking with food in your mouth," Daisy warned gently.

He quickly finished the bite and tried again.

"You know what, Daisy...!!"

"What, my boy?" Daisy asked, amused.

"We have a summer project, and it's awesome!" he exclaimed, wiping his chocolate-covered mouth with his tiny hands.

"Oh really...!!" Daisy humoured him. "What is this cool project?"

"We all have to make a family tree during the summer break!" He lifted his hands into the air, imitating branches spreading wide.

"Waaah... very nice, baba," Daisy said.

She gently lifted him and carried him to the couch-bed near the balcony. Trees lined the view outside, dotted with little flowers, sunlight spilling in to make the corner feel like a tiny garden made just for naps.

She wiped his face with her dupatta and kissed his forehead. As she tucked him in, she softly asked about his friends and his day. Karthik responded with sleepy nods and humming sounds, slowly drifting into sleep.

"Miss Nina, good evening! How was your day?" Daisy asked.

“It was good, Daisy,” Nina replied. “Where is my Kanna?” she enquired.

Nina was tired after a long meeting, but her whole heart was already at home with her son. She loved him deeply. He was the only family she had. Having lost her parents at a young age and navigating a complicated relationship with her extended family, Nina knew too well what an absent parent could do to a child. So, she tried her best to be present, cheerful, and whole around him, quietly filling the roles of both mother and father as much as she could.

“Baba was so excited to tell you about his summer tree project,” Daisy said softly. “Poor child, he just slept off.”

“The dal and aloo fry are ready. I’ve soaked the rice. Just switch on the cooker and I have made a few phulkas. I’ve also chopped all the vegetables for tomorrow,” Daisy continued. “You don’t worry about cooking or cleaning. You help baba with his tree project,” she added, stern yet affectionate.

“Okay, okay,” Nina smiled. “Now go home and get some rest.”

She pulled Daisy closer and gave her a gentle shoulder squeeze.

Once the door closed, Nina leaned against it and sighed. She tied her hair into a loose bun and walked into the kitchen to make herself a hot cup of coffee. This was her unwinding time. Once Daisy left, sometimes Karthik would still be awake, sitting on the kitchen platform, narrating stories from his day or asking the most unexpected questions. She often wondered where he got them from.

Today, he was napping.

She moved quietly, careful not to disturb him. Not even a minute passed before there was the soft sound of tiny feet dragging across the floor. Little Karthik appeared, rubbing his eyes, one pajama leg pulled up to his knee, the other slipping down to his ankle. The cutest sight.

He had heard the familiar sounds from the kitchen. The gentle clink of a ceramic mug on the counter. The soft hum and close of the refrigerator. These weren't loud sounds, but his nervous system was finely tuned to them. He knew Amma was home. So, he forced himself awake. He had a whole day to report.

The moment the fridge door closed, there he was.

"What...!!!!? Oh my God...!! Who is this...!!!!?" Nina exclaimed, bending down to his eye level.

Karthik was still groggy from sleep but absolutely delighted, standing there with a wide grin.

"I heard someone had chocolate cake in the afternoon," Nina teased.

"Hee hee," he giggled, saying nothing. Lying was bad, he decided silently in his little head.

"I was so sad you weren't here," he said honestly. "And you know chocolate makes me happy."

"Oh really...!!" Nina laughed, immediately tickling him.

They giggled and giggled until they collapsed on the floor together. Nina gently pulled him close, brushed his hair away from his forehead, and kissed his squishy little cheeks.

And just like that, all her fatigue vanished.

“Come, let’s have some coffee,” Nina said.

They sat in the balcony. Nina looked at him casually and asked, “So... what is this summer tree project?”

“Huh...!!!? What summer tree project?” Karthik dropped his toys and lay on his tummy, elbows resting on the carpet, chin cradled between his palms. He looked genuinely puzzled.

“Daisy said you have some tree project,” Nina repeated, still confused.

“Oh thatttt...!” Karthik giggled. “Silly Daisy. It’s a *family* tree project for summer.”

“You know, we have to make a big tree with our names and family members,” he continued, pushing his little trucks into each other. “Teacher said you would know how to make it. What’s a family tree, Amma...!!!?”

“Vroom... vroom... aaaahhh...!!!”

Nina laughed, a little awkwardly. “Of course I know,” she said quickly. “But now it’s time for homework. Go freshen up and then we’ll look at your almanac.”

“Ammmaaaaa...!!! Let’s play...!!!” He pouted, stretching the plea just enough to melt resistance.

“Okay,” Nina said. “Ten more minutes. Then homework.”

She got up from the couch, her smile steady but her chest slightly tight.

“Yaaay... vroom... vroom... here comes the monster truck... weeeiii...!”

Nina laughed and walked into her room to change.

As she changed, her mind began to race.

What should I tell him? I can't dismiss this forever. One day he will ask real questions.

About his father. About family. About where he was born. About all the stories that weren't simple.

Her eyes welled up slightly. She sat at the corner of the bed, folding her sari slowly, gazing into the twilight sky as evening quietly settled in.

Chapter 2 – The Day Daisy Stayed

Nina was new to the area.

Eight months pregnant, glowing with hormones, she had carefully chosen a gated community where a few of her friends had lived for years and spoken only good things about. A good community. Decent people. Excellent amenities.

She was nesting, preparing a warm home for her little Kanna. A home surrounded by people who loved his mother and would love him or her too. She had chosen not to know the baby's gender. She wanted to give herself that surprise, that moment of pure joy.

Nina was on maternity leave.

One morning, while walking slowly to her regular store to buy little goodies to satisfy her cravings, she noticed a young girl standing by the roadside just outside a school. The child had two piggy tails, her uniform a little untidy, kicking an empty can and sulking.

"Hey, little one," Nina asked gently. "Why are you standing outside?"

The girl looked her up and down. "You walk funny....!!" she said bluntly.

Nina chuckled. "Well, that's rude, missy."

"Sorry," the girl muttered. "I am just very bummed."

Nina tried to bend down to her level but couldn't. Her back protested. So, she walked slowly to a chair near the gate, sat down, and waved the girl over.

The child dragged her feet and came closer, clearly thinking Nina was some kind of sick lady.

"You sick or what?" the girl asked seriously.

"Nooo, silly," Nina smiled. "I have a baby in my belly."

The girl's eyes widened. "Oh my God... you ate a babyyyy!" She burst into laughter, amused by her own conclusion.

Nina laughed too. "What's your name?"

"Sam," the girl replied. "Everyone calls me Sammy only."

For a brief second, Nina's eyes welled up. Thoughts of the baby's father crossed her mind. She swallowed them quickly.

"So, Sammy," Nina asked softly, "why you not inside school? Why kicking can here?"

Sammy hesitated, then suddenly folded her hands. "You stranger, no?" she said quickly. "Teacher says no talking to stranger."

She turned her face away, firm in her decision.

Nina smiled. "Okay then. Come here."

She gently held Sammy by the edge of her uniform and extended her hand. "Hello, Sammy. I am Nina. Now we shake hand. See? Now we not stranger."

Sammy looked at the hand, then shook it seriously.

Maybe it was the hormones. Maybe it was instinct. Nina couldn't leave this little girl alone on the road.

After a pause, Sammy spoke in a very small voice. "I not paid school fees. Many months. Admin teacher say I cannot sit inside class."

Her eyes dropped to the ground.

"Hey... it's okay," Nina said immediately. "Come. We talk to admin teacher."

Nina walked her inside. Sammy waited outside the office, sitting quietly on the bench. She assumed Nina, being a big educated lady, was convincing the teacher somehow.

When Nina came out, she smiled. "You can go to class now."

"Reallyyyyy...!!!!?" Sammy's face lit up.

"Yes," Nina nodded.

"But why you help me?" Sammy asked, confused. "You don't know me."

"Because," Nina said gently, "if we are kind to others, the world becomes better."

She touched Sammy's chin and pointed to the building opposite the school. "You see that apartment? You can come anytime. Tell watchman Flat 3A. Nina Prakash Rao."

"Okay deal," Sammy said, shaking Nina's hand again.

She hopped and skipped into school, lighter than she had been all morning.

Sending Sammy back to school felt like a small win. It stayed with Nina through lunch.

After eating, she rested her hand on her round belly and eased herself into an armchair. She pulled an ottoman closer for her swollen feet, shifted, adjusted the pillow, wiggled a little, and sighed.

“Ugghhh....!!”

Suddenly, a loud knock crashed against the door.

Nina froze.

The knocking grew louder.

She pushed herself up and walked as fast as she could.
“Cominnnggg....!!”

Something about the knock unsettled her. She hooked the safety chain and opened the door slightly.

A young stout woman stood outside, fair yet deeply tanned, eyes blazing.

“Are you Nina Prakash Rao or what?” the woman snapped.

“Who is asking?” Nina replied cautiously.

“I am asking,” the woman said, pointing to herself. “Daisy.”

Nina noticed Sammy hiding behind her.

She unlocked the door.

Daisy stormed in.

“Just because you people got money doesn’t mean you can buy everything!” Daisy shouted. “We poor people also got self-respect, okay!”

Before Nina could respond, a sharp pain tore through her belly. Her back locked. Sweat broke out instantly.

She gasped and grabbed Daisy's hand.

"Ninaaaa....!!!" Sammy screamed.

"Maa!" Sammy cried. "She got baby inside! Now you made her sick!"

Daisy's anger vanished. She held Nina firmly. "Sit. Slowly."

She guided her to the couch and rushed for water. Sammy wiped Nina's sweat with her dupatta.

"Don't cry," Sammy said bravely. "Nothing happen. I here."

Nina struggled to breathe. Panic rose. It wasn't full term yet.

Daisy returned with water. "Drink little. Slowly."

"Something wrong," Nina whispered. "Something very wrong."

Daisy acted instantly. "Sammy, go call watchman. Tell neighbour also. Call ambulance."

She turned to Nina. "Which month?"

"Eighth," Nina cried.

"Sometimes pain come early," Daisy said calmly. "Don't scare."

"Am I having baby now?" Nina sobbed.

"Don't cry," Daisy said firmly. "Doctor will see. Crying not good for baby."

A neighbour drove them to a nearby clinic. Sammy cried the entire way.

"This all because you," Sammy yelled at Daisy. "You shout and now she hospital!"

Daisy hugged her. "Nothing will happen. Pinky promise."

At the clinic, exhaustion took over. Sammy slept on Daisy's lap.

Soon Nina was wheeled out, pale but relieved.

"See," Daisy said softly. "I told you."

"Braxton Hicks," Nina smiled weakly. "Practice pains."

"Practice?" Daisy frowned. "Body practicing or what?"

"Yes," Nina said. "False alarm."

They went home quietly.

The next morning, Nina woke up rested. She made herself Haldi milk. She hated milk, but drank it faithfully. Maybe it worked, maybe it didn't. It gave her peace.

She suddenly remembered Daisy.

I didn't even thank her.

The doorbell rang.

Daisy stood there with bags of vegetables.

"Good morning, Miss Nina. You okay now?"

She peeked into the mug. "Coffee?"

Nina hid it.

Daisy laughed. "Haldi milk only. Very good."

"I will make rice, palak dal," Daisy said. "Chicken also. You eat non-veg, or no?"

"What are you doing?" Nina asked.

“You eating for two,” Daisy said simply. “And alone also. Someone must take care.”

“I didn’t ask you,” Nina said softly.

Daisy smiled. “Now you know feeling.”

“But Daisy... I cannot pay you.”

“You already paid my Sammy fees,” Daisy said. “You said you will pay future also till I work for you. That enough.”

Nina hugged her.

“Enough Senti,” Daisy sniffed. “You eat chicken or not, tell fast.”

They didn’t need to explain themselves.

They understood.

In quiet solidarity. In sisterhood.

Just like little Sammy had wished, Nina’s pains began on Christmas Eve.

As they rushed to the hospital, the OB-GYN examined Nina carefully and spoke reassuringly. “Everything looks mostly fine,” she said gently. “But the umbilical cord is around the baby’s neck. He’s playing with it like a toy and isn’t moving much. He’s ready to meet his mama, but for his safety, we may need to do an emergency C-section.”

Nina, being Nina, shook her head weakly. “No... I want a natural birth,” she whispered.

Daisy held her hand firmly. “You already brave, Miss Nina. Natural birth or operation birth, both same. Brave mother only.”

Her friends gathered around, gently convincing her. This wasn't about fear or strength anymore. It was about safety. About choosing what was best for both mother and child.

Nina finally nodded, tears slipping down her cheeks.

And just like that, not on Christmas Day, but on Christmas Eve, Nina welcomed her little Kanna into the world.

He arrived into a warm, waiting world. A world with caring uncles and aunties. A fierce, loving Daisy. And a big sister named Sammy, who believed with all her heart that Santa had listened.

Chapter 3 – What We Call Family

After multiple reminders and plenty of nagging from Karthik, Nina finally sat down to work on the family tree project.

To distract him a little, she handed him an important task. “You draw the corners,” she said. “Write the title. And maybe draw some cute flowers and leaves on the border so it looks really beautiful.”

“Yesssss.....!!!”

Excited, little Karthik jumped up and ran to his room. He returned with crayons, sketch pens, markers, and gel pens, spreading everything across the carpet in the hall. The TV was switched on to his favourite cartoon. The little artist had clearly set the mood.

“Ammmaaaaa.....!!” He looked up suddenly. “Will you please make me Very Berry drink.....!!!!?”

Very Berry drink was just lemonade with crushed strawberries, but to Karthik, it was magic.

“Peeaaaassee....!” He joined his little fists together, batting his mischievous, innocent eyes.

Nina looked around at the chaos. “What is this.....!!!!?” she said, clearly upset at the art station. “Not in the hall,” she added sternly.

“Ammaaaa... Ammaaaa... pleaseee...” He tugged at her dupatta. “It’s summer vacation. No rules in summer, you said. Pleaseee...”

He looked at her with so much hope that resistance didn’t stand a chance.

“Fine,” Nina sighed, smiling despite herself. “Let me go make your Very Berry drink.”

She bent down and pulled him into a tight bear hug.

Truth was, Nina enjoyed summer vacations more than Karthik did. Of course, like any mother, she got angry sometimes. Irritated by tantrums, endless demands, food requests, and late-night movies. But she loved it all too. The mess. The noise. The small negotiations.

These were the days she would remember.

While making the lemonade, cutting the lemons and crushing strawberries absentmindedly, Nina kept thinking about how to make the family tree feel complete so Karthik would be happy and ask no questions.

Very cleverly, she left one side empty. In the middle of the blank right-hand tree, she drew a pink heart against an orange background. “The heart is you, Karthik,” she said, “and the orange is the love from everyone around you.”

On the left, she placed her photograph above Karthik’s. Above hers came her parents, and from there a fresh branch grew with Daisy and Sammy. Other branches followed, holding Sheila and Shiju with their children.

Sheila had started as a colleague and slowly become her closest friend. During Nina's pregnancy, Sheila had sheltered her in Bangalore, fed her endless bowls of coconut-rich Kerala food, and stood by her through everything. In every way that mattered, she was a sister from another mother.

The tree looked structured. It made sense.

Karthik was satisfied. He pasted the photographs carefully, drew neat outlines around them, and wrote the names of the family he knew. It was perfect for him. He felt proud.

And Nina felt relieved.

Finally, the summer break is over Nina is Glad and Sad at the same time that the home will be quite during the day.

Typically, it was Daisy who picked up Karthik from school. But during the summer, Nina found herself clinging a little more to motherhood. Something about the warmth of the season intensified it. Today, she stood waiting eagerly for the school bell to ring, already imagining squishing his cheeks and pulling him into a bear hug.

The bell rang.

And suddenly, the gates burst open.

Little prisoners came flooding out, yelling, screaming, laughing, and *weeeee-ing*. Nina watched them for a second and wondered what kind of torture went on inside those walls that made them so deliriously happy to escape. She chuckled at her own thought.

"Ammmmmaaaaa.....!!!!!"

This wasn't the sweet, sing-song call she expected. It was an angry grunt.

Nina startled slightly and looked down.

Dirty knees. Untucked shirt. Tie hanging loose. And in his hand, a half-torn family tree project.

"I hate my friends," Karthik announced. "I don't want to go to this school anymore."

He yanked at his already-ruined tie like a distraught corporate slave returning from a brutal meeting.

Nina bit back a smile.

Nina picked up his school bag, the water bottle hanging around his neck like a bell on a cat. He handed her the family tree project, still half torn.

She was just so happy to see him.

She bent down to his level, brushed the dirt off his knees, pushed his hair back from his forehead, and pulled him into a tight hug.

"Hate is such a strong word, bubba," Nina said gently. "Do we really hate them?"

And just like that, he began to wail. Hiccups breaking through his sobs.

"I hate this school...!" he cried.

Nina's heart cracked at that sound. She held him close, stroking his hair, murmuring reassurances. She told him softly that everything would be okay. That Amma was here. That she would fix it.

While Nina comforted her little boy, a small girl stood a little distance away, watching them with wide, yearning eyes.

She didn't fully understand what she was feeling. Only that something inside her tightened. Tears rolled down her cheeks before she could stop them.

She turned around and saw a tall man standing nearby. One hand on his hip, the other resting on his chin, confusion written across his face.

"Papaaaaa...!" The little girl ran to him and leapt into his arms.

He picked her up, spun her around in the air, made her laugh, then set her down gently. He slung her school bag over his shoulder.

It wasn't like the warm hug she had just seen. But the spinning made her feel better.

And for now, that was enough.

Chapter 4 – A Father Learns Alone

“No, Papa... not *this* one,” she said, pointing firmly at her white canvas shoes. “That one.”

Little Rhea was instructing her father on which uniform to wear on Wednesdays. Wednesdays were for the white uniform. And canvas shoes. Everyone knew that.

“Ohh... sorry,” Anubhav said quickly.

He picked up the white shoes, sat beside her, and placed her little legs across his lap. Carefully, a little awkwardly, he began tying the laces.

“Papa is still learning, Rhea. Sorry,” Anubhav said softly.

“It’s okay, Papa,” Rhea replied seriously. “Dadi knew how to do it. But it’s fine. I love you, so you can learn. But learn fast. We are getting late for school.”

Anubhav burst out laughing. Full, helpless laughter. His daughter was far too mature for her age.

They both jumped up.

“Let’s go,” Anubhav said, slinging her school bag over his shoulder. He hung her water bottle around her neck like a medal, as if she were the sweetest champion in the world.

“Papa...!!!” Rhea cooed.

“Yes, jaan,” Anubhav replied, just as lovingly.

Rhea paused, then looked up at him. “Why we came to Bangalore?” she asked. “Now you have to do everything all by yourself. And your dal and sabzi is not even yummy like Dadi’s.”

She sighed dramatically. “I miss Dadi and Dadu.”

Anubhav smiled, his heart tightening just a little.

“I know, betu,” Anubhav said softly. “But Papa got transferred, so we had to move.”

He smiled at her in the mirror. “You want lots of toys and chocolates, na...!!?” he teased.

“Yesss...!” Rhea grinned.

He scooped her up and settled her into the baby seat in the back. Soon, they were driving toward the school.

It was Rhea’s first day at her new school.

She was excited. Anubhav was not.

He was scared.

He wasn’t used to taking care of her alone. For so long, he had been consumed by his grief, his work, his loneliness. While he drifted through his days, his mother had taken over. She had cared for Rhea, loved her, raised her like her own child. Like a mother.

And now, Anubhav had taken Rhea away from the only maternal figure she truly knew.

It had only been a week. Between unpacking boxes and setting up the house, time had slipped by. Summer vacation had softened things. But soon the questions would come.

Why did we move to Bangalore? Why are Dada and Dadi not living with us? When will I see Dadi and Dadu again?

He pushed the thoughts aside.

She is excited, he reminded himself. *Let me stay in this moment with her.*

So, he listened to her little coos and giggles as they drove, memorising the sound of her happiness.

And just like that, they arrived at the new school.

Anubhav parked the car, sat still for a second, and took a deep breath.

Okay, he told himself. *You can do this.*

Anubhav was dreading the conversation with the principal.

Explaining late admission always felt unnecessarily dramatic, as if Rhea were missing some critical curriculum that would decide whether she'd become an IAS or IPS officer someday. They learned rhymes, yelled, ate, napped, and played. How hard could it really be?

He dropped Rhea off at the waiting and play area for children and walked toward the principal's office. He was relieved to notice how thoughtfully the space was designed. Even from the office, you could see the children playing. Open. Accessible.

Good, he thought. That added a few plus points to the pro-and-cons list he was quietly building for this school.

While waiting, Anubhav studied the framed photographs on the walls, his mind running through imaginary conversations.

Oh hello, Mr. Shrivastava. Oh hello, Ma'am.

Awkward smiles. Polite nods.

Then came the imagined lecture. About how switching schools mid-term could be “detrimental” to a child. About routines, consistency, rules. Blah blah blah.

“Anubhav Shrivastava...!!!!?”

The voice snapped him back to reality.

“That’s me,” he said, turning around, a little startled.

A woman stood there, extending her hand. She looked to be in her late thirties, dressed in smart casuals, confident yet warm.

“Hello,” he said, shaking her hand with a slight delay.

“I’m Nikita Gowda,” she said. “I’m the principal here.”

Anubhav blinked, then smiled awkwardly. “I was... um... expecting someone else,” he admitted. “Maybe an older lady. Late fifties. Big bindi. Crisp cotton sari. Hair neatly tied in a bun.”

Nikita burst out laughing. She pulled her chair back and gestured for him to sit.

“If you had come a year ago,” she said, still amused, “you would have met exactly who you just described. My mother.”

She settled into her seat. “She used to run the school. But I took over recently, out of my own interest and experience.”

“Experience?” Anubhav asked, genuinely curious.

“Yes,” Nikita replied easily. “I got divorced recently and moved back from Hyderabad to Bangalore with my two children. Finding schools, explaining my situation to admin teams... it wasn’t easy. And I realised my mother’s school followed the same rigid guidelines.”

She paused, then smiled softly. “So I thought, instead of asking for change, why not *be* the change?”

“My mother is quite happy now,” she added. “Being a full-time grandma, spoiling the **grandbabies** at home. I handle the school.”

Anubhav let out a small, relieved laugh. “Right...!! That’s *exactly* the lecture I was dreading,” he said. “I was actually practising my opening lines before you called me in.”

“I understand,” Nikita said gently. “Completely.”

And just like that, the tight knot in Anubhav’s chest loosened.

“We understand that jobs can be unpredictable,” Nikita said calmly. “Transfers, relocations... and sometimes situations where people like me have to uproot their lives from one city and start from scratch, carrying a lot of emotional baggage.”

She paused, making sure he was following.

“That’s why we work with experts and child psychologists,” she continued. “We have mandatory counselling training for all our teachers, both the ones who have been with us for years and the new ones who join. The idea is simple. So that parents have a little less to worry about.”

Anubhav let out a breath he hadn't realised he was holding. "That's a relief to hear," he said honestly. "I'm a single father with a daughter. And I don't always have the tools to understand what she's feeling, or to explain things to her in the right way."

"Don't worry," Nikita said reassuringly. "We've got you covered."

She pressed a small buzzer on her desk.

A moment later, a woman walked in.

"This is Sheena, my secretary," Nikita said. "She'll walk you through the formalities."

Then she added, turning to Sheena, "Please take Mr. Shrivastava to the admin block."

Anubhav stood up, visibly more relaxed now. "Please, call me Anubhav," he said with a warm smile, extending his hand. "It was really nice meeting you, Ms. Gowda."

She shook his hand and smiled back. "Then please call me Nikita," she replied. "We'll be in each other's lives for as long as your daughter studies here."

And for the first time that morning, Anubhav believed things might just be okay.

Chapter 5 – A Perfect Afternoon

There had been a time when Anubhav's life was full, noisy, and almost unfairly complete. Long before Rhea was born.

It was a summer evening, the kind where everyone naturally slowed down.

Anubhav had decided to spend more time at home. He had opted for hybrid shifts, saving his PTOs for what lay ahead. His wife, Geetika, was pregnant, almost full term. The baby could arrive any day now.

Geetika was on maternity leave, sipping coconut water, her legs comfortably sprawled across the couch. Her younger sister was giving her a foot rub, and Geetika felt like an absolute queen.

“Kya chal raha hai...!?”

An authoritative voice came from behind.

Startled, Geetika tried to sit up straight and put her feet down, but with her full, round belly, she barely managed. Her sister burst into giggles.

“Motu has leg pain, uncle ji,” Vanshika announced helpfully.

Geetika's father-in-law, Ramesh, might sound stern at first glance, but he was more a father than a typically hyphenated *government parent*.

“I was just pulling your leg,” Ramesh said quickly. “Sit *aram se*, beta. I won’t tell mummy ji.”

“Papa...!!! Mummy is not as strict as you make her sound,” Geetika protested.

“See,” said Rama, Ramesh’s wife and Geetika’s mother-in-law, entering the room, “no one understands me the way my bahu does.”

“It was a beautiful afternoon, filled with warmth and quiet love.

Geetika went inside to take her afternoon nap. Everything felt good. No pregnancy complications. Just the usual morning sickness during the first trimester, which had settled on its own. She had her fair share of strange cravings, and Anubhav was always there to fulfil them.

Her younger sister had volunteered to stay with her during the pregnancy. Officially, she claimed it was because she was studying for her MBA through an open university. Unofficially, she used the pregnancy as a very convenient excuse to delay job hunting. Geetika didn’t mind at all. In fact, she was secretly happy.

There were things she could demand from her sister that she never could from Anubhav. Not because he wasn’t loving or caring, but because sibling comfort was different. Softer. Effortless. They had known each other their entire lives.

Geetika lay down for her nap with a heart full of gratitude.

She woke up to voices and movement in the hall.

Pulling on her oversized fleece shrug, she instinctively tried to hide her tummy, which was hardly possible anymore. Curious, she peeked into the hall and froze.

“Mummyyyyy....!!! Papaaaaaaa....!!! When did you both come....!!!!?”

Sheetal, her mother, immediately rushed toward her.

“Areyyyy... uth gayi, beta,” she said, helping her carefully down the step, squeezing her shoulder and kissing her forehead.

They weren’t a hugging family, unlike Anubhav’s parents, who hugged freely even for a hello or goodbye. But the love was no less.

Geetika went straight to her father, Ravi Saxena, and snuggled into his side like a little girl. He squeezed her gently and caressed her hair.

“Kaisa hai mera bachcha....?” he asked softly.

“Very good, Papa,” Geetika replied, leaning into him. “Healthy and happy.”

The evening felt perfect.

Her parents. Her parents-in-law. Her loving husband. Her little sister.

Everyone under one roof.

Geetika closed her eyes for a moment and silently thanked God and the universe for this simple, rare blessing.

She settled into the recliner while the others sipped adrak chai and coffee. Geetika chose pakodas with lemon juice and a

pinch of salt. She had been careful throughout her pregnancy. Everything was normal, yet she still read, researched, balanced indulgence with nourishment.

She avoided caffeine. Ate fruits and green vegetables. Drank boiled rice water for an easier natural delivery. Took her prenatal without fail.

Her OB-GYN was more than pleased.

Once, smiling warmly, she had said, “Geetika, you are the kind of patient every doctor wishes for.”

Geetika smiled to herself now, resting her hands over her belly, feeling deeply, quietly blessed.

By dinnertime, everyone was busy.

Mr. Shrivastava and Mr. Saxena stood in the balcony, animatedly discussing society issues from the community where they both lived. Vanshika was in her room, busy making Instagram reels. Mrs. Shrivastava and Mrs. Saxena were in the kitchen, instructing the cook and house help with great seriousness about chopping and seasoning, preparing for dinner.

Geetika sat perched beside Anubhav in his study, watching him type. She smiled at him softly.

“Isn’t it nice,” she said, “everyone we love under the same roof?”

Anubhav stopped typing instantly.

He turned to her, held her face gently in his palms, and said, “This is the life we dreamed of. And I’m so glad our dreams became reality.”

Geetika got up from her chair and carefully settled onto his lap. With her round belly, she couldn't melt into his arms the way she used to. She fussed a little, adjusting herself, trying to hug him anyway.

She leaned forward and softly bumped her forehead against his.

Anubhav smiled and bumped his head back against hers, just as gently.

No words. Just a small, familiar gesture they had shared for years.

And somehow, that imperfect hug, that silly little head bump, felt just right.

"Beta, khana tayyar hai!" Rama called out from the dining area.

Dinner was generous and comforting. Rotis, palak paneer, matar pulao, aloo korma. Vanshika had added her own contribution, gajar ka halwa, announcing dramatically that ice cream would be ordered later. There was also a Greek salad made just the way Geetika liked it, bell peppers, carrot ribbons, diced cucumber, olive oil, lemon juice, salt, pepper, a light vinegar dressing. The house help knew the recipe by heart.

The table filled with the yummiest food and the heartiest laughter.

Geetika ate slowly, smiling, her heart full. Silently, she prayed. *Thank you for this family. Thank you for this love. I am grateful for this life.*

Yet somewhere inside her, a quiet string tightened. How could everything be so perfect?

She brushed the thought aside and stayed present, soaking in the warmth of the evening.

One by one, everyone retired to their rooms.

Anubhav wrapped up his work, switched his phone to silent, and slid under the comforter beside Geetika. He rested his hand gently on her belly and kissed her neck softly.

Geetika laughed and pushed his hand away. "This is exactly what got us into this situation," she teased.

They both laughed.

"As long as I get to spend the rest of my life with you," Anubhav grinned, "I don't mind these pauses."

He moved to the foot of the bed and began rubbing Geetika's slightly swollen feet.

"Aaaaah," she sighed. "This is the best kind of foreplay, you know."

They laughed again. After some quiet talking and the comforting rhythm of his hands, they drifted into sleep. Calm. Relaxed. Knowing everyone who mattered was safe and under the same roof.

At 3 a.m., a scream shattered the silence.

"Aaaaaaah!"

Anubhav bolted upright. "What... what happened?"

"It hurts," Geetika gasped. "Sharp pain in my abdomen."

“Is the baby coming?” he asked, panic creeping in.

“I don’t know,” she whispered. “But it doesn’t feel right.”

“Maaa!” Anubhav shouted, already out of bed.

The house sprang into action.

There was no panic. Only movement.

The mothers packed essentials. The fathers discussed logistics. Anubhav realised he could never have managed this alone.

Within forty minutes, they were at the hospital. Vanshika had packed food and water for everyone. It felt like a well-run startup, each person instinctively knowing their role.

In the waiting room, confusion lingered. Geetika’s water hadn’t broken.

A tall, confident doctor walked in. “Everything is fine,” Dr. Subhedar said calmly. “It’s early, but she’s very close to labour. Even if the water hasn’t broken yet, it will. Be prepared.”

“Oh, thank God,” Anubhav exhaled. “I was so scared.”

“I know,” the doctor replied. “Labour has its own timing. You don’t need to wait here; we’ll call if required.”

“No,” Vanshika said firmly. “We’re staying till Didi is fine.”

Everyone agreed. Sheetal squeezed Vanshika’s shoulder. “We cannot leave till we know our daughter is safe.”

Dr. Subhedar reassured them again and asked them to wait in the visitors’ lounge.

By morning, fatigue set in. Over vending machine tea and coffee, Anubhav gently insisted the parents go home and rest. It was nearly 7 a.m. Reluctantly, they agreed.

Vanshika and Anubhav stayed.

Vanshika dozed off in an armchair. Anubhav sat beside Geetika. There was no pain now, but her OB-GYN kept her under observation.

Everything felt fast. Too fast.

“We’re not ready,” Geetika whispered. “Something is not right.”

Anubhav brushed the hair away from her sweaty forehead. “Baby, it’s just hormones. Everything is fine. We have mummy, papa, your mummy, your papa, and Vanshu. Whatever it is, we’ll manage.”

He kissed her forehead and climbed carefully onto the narrow hospital bed, squeezing himself beside her. She snuggled close, letting his presence steady her.

She nodded, telling herself he was right.

But somewhere deep inside, she felt it. A ticking bomb. Quiet. Undetected.

She drifted into sleep.

Anubhav lay awkwardly across the tiny bed, one hand tucked under her neck, the other resting on his own stomach, as if reassuring himself.

It’s okay, his body seemed to say. *Everything is okay.*

After a brief nap, Geetika woke with a gasp, her hand flying to her belly. The pain again. Sharp. Familiar. She turned to her side. Anu slept beside her, peaceful, unaware. He was the love of her life. The sight of him steadied her instantly. She smiled, reassured. Her family was just a phone call away.

She walked to the bathroom, slow and careful, eased herself, and for a moment believed it had passed.

As she returned to the bed, another pain surged. Stronger this time. She froze.

And then it happened. A warm rush. A soft, unmistakable plop.

Geetika stood still, breath shallow, heart racing. Just like that, her water had broken.

She was in labour.

Part II – Fracture

Chapter 6 – The Night That Split Everything

Anu paced the waiting hall, his steps restless, counting nothing. Inside the labour room, Sheetal stayed close to Geetika, wiping the sweat from her forehead, murmuring reassurances. “Just a little longer,” she said gently. “You’ll have your baby soon.”

Geetika looked at her, eyes glassy with effort. She squeezed Sheetal’s hand, then leaned into her shoulder, focusing on her breathing as she waited for the doctor’s cue.

Nurses moved in and out of the room with practiced urgency. From the doorway, Anu finally caught sight of her. Their eyes met. Her gaze held desperation, raw and wordless.

He couldn’t stay back.

He stepped inside. “Sir, you can’t be here,” a nurse protested.

The doctor raised a hand, stopping them. “Let him stay,” she said, then turned to Sheetal. “We need space. Too many people will overwhelm the mother.”

Sheetal kissed Geetika’s forehead, gave Anu’s shoulder a firm squeeze, and stepped aside.

Like a child seeking shelter, Geetika reached out. Anu gathered her into his arms, holding her close. His embrace was firm, warm, unmistakably safe. The safest place she knew.

He pulled a stool closer and sat beside her, her fist tangled in his steady hands. He breathed with her, grounding her.

“Puuuusshhh... now, Geetika,” the doctor instructed.

She grunted, squeezed her eyes shut, focusing everything she had on the burning pressure at the threshold of her body.

Then she stopped. Her strength faltered.

“I can’t... I can’t,” she sobbed, collapsing against Anu’s shoulder, exhausted.

“Come on, baby,” Anu whispered. “I know it’s hard. Let’s try again.”

Through the pain, Geetika managed a weak smile. “Can you push for me?” she joked softly.

They both laughed, dry and breathless.

Anu climbed onto the bed behind her, bracing her with his knees and strong chest. He kissed her cheek. “Let’s push this little one out, shall we?”

She nodded, gripping his hands, resting fully against him.

“Come on, Geetika. Push,” the doctor urged.

With a deep groan, eyes clenched shut, she pushed with all her might.

“Almost there,” the doctor said, excitement breaking through. “One big push. Come on, brave girl.”

Geetika fixed her gaze on the doctor, dug her fingers into Anu’s knees, and gave everything she had left. One final, powerful push.

Then she collapsed back against his chest, breathless with relief.

“There she is,” the doctor announced. “It’s a girl.”

The baby was placed on Geetika’s chest. She broke down, laughing and crying all at once, kissing her baby girl again and again.

“Anu... oh my god,” she gasped. “She’s here. It’s a baby girl.”

Anu laughed, shouted, overwhelmed. “She’s here. She’s here!”

“Would you like to cut the cord, Dad?” the doctor asked.

Anu looked at Geetika, silently asking permission. The nurse stepped in to support Geetika as Anu moved forward.

The baby was carried away briefly for her initial checks.

Then suddenly, everything changed.

Geetika’s body stiffened. Her breath faltered. She began to convulse.

“Doctor... what’s happening?” Anu’s voice shook as panic seized him. “What’s happening to her?”

“We don’t know yet,” the doctor said quickly. “But we need you to step outside. Now.”

Before he could protest, an orderly gently but firmly guided Anu out into the waiting hall.

The doors closed behind him.

Anu remained outside. He did not go to the NICU to see his daughter, even as the others did.

“She looks like Didi,” Vanshika said, smiling through happy tears.

“No,” Rama replied softly. “She has Anu’s eyes.”

They laughed, relieved, celebratory. Childbirth was something women went through every day. Geetika would be fine. Of course she would be.

But Anu had seen her body seize. He had seen her eyes roll back. He had watched the life leave her face.

He paced the corridor, hands folded, unfolding, folding again, praying without words. Waiting for the doctor to step out and say she was fine. Waiting for the world to right itself.

When Dr. Subhedar finally emerged from the operating theatre, she removed her scrub cap slowly. It slipped from her fingers and fell beside the gurney.

Anu knew.

He ran toward her. “What did you do to her?” he shouted. “She trusted you more than she trusted her God.”

His voice broke into something unrecognisable. Rage, terror, disbelief tangled together. Orderlies rushed forward as he struggled, screaming, fighting the truth before it could reach him.

They sedated him.

The commotion drew the family running. They didn’t know what had happened, only that something had gone terribly wrong.

Dr. Subhedar stood still. She had known Geetika for over a year. From the day she walked in with lists and timelines,

announcing with shy confidence that she was ready to become a mother. Dr. Subhedar had smiled then. Geetika had been so full of life. So certain of love.

And now she had to explain her absence to the man Geetika spoke of with quiet devotion.

When Anu awoke, he saw the doctor seated beside him. He sat up abruptly, then covered his face and cried. Not loudly. Just deep, shaking sobs.

Dr. Subhedar waited until his breath slowed.

“Geetika had a complication,” she said gently. “It’s rare. There were no symptoms.”

She paused.

“She had an undetected aneurysm. The strain of labour caused it to rupture. There was nothing we could have done.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

The words finally found their place.

“No,” Anu whispered. Then louder. “No. No. No.”

The family rushed in. Rama held her son, who had become a father and a widower in the same hour. He had built a life with care and conviction. Fought for his marriage. Bent himself to lift Geetika higher, though she had always been the light.

Now that light was gone.

Rama did not know how to console a man whose future had vanished while his child still lived.

Chapter 7 – After

Anubhav bid farewell to Geetika with Hindu rituals, her ashes offered to the Ganges.

She had loved picnics under the palash tree in the nearby garden. So, Anubhav installed a small park bench there, in her memory. That had been their place. Geetika would pack a picnic basket, carry a thick bedsheet, and sit reading her books while Anu ate sandwiches and took afternoon naps. It was their quiet dreamland, undisturbed, almost boring in its bliss. And now, those ordinary moments had become his most precious memories of her.

Anubhav took ten days of bereavement leave. Then two months of paid leave. Then more unpaid leave. Time stopped making sense. He felt numb, drifting away from life, slowly eroding into nostalgia. Most days, he found himself sitting on that park bench, staring at nothing.

He felt both guilty and grateful. Guilty that his family was taking care of the newborn while he drowned in grief. Grateful that they were there at all. He wasn't prepared for this. No one ever is.

He moved through his days like a zombie.

Wake up. Eat a little. Wander to the park. Come back. Hide in the bedroom.

One gloomy afternoon, his mother rushed into his room and shook him gently.

“Anu,” Sheetal said, confused and worried. “Someone from your office called.”

He sat up abruptly and reached for the phone.

“Hello?” he said.

“Is this Anubhav Shrivastava?” a woman asked from the other end.

“Yes. And may I know who is calling?” Anu replied.

“I’m Archie Gupta from Human Resources,” she said. “You’re required to be at work tomorrow for a meeting with your Talent Manager.”

“What is this about?” Anu asked.

“It’s confidential,” Archie replied apologetically. “I was only asked to inform you that your presence is required, in person.”

“Okay,” Anu said after a pause. “What time?”

“Please be here by 12:00 p.m. You can call me on this number if needed.”

The line disconnected.

The next morning, Anubhav forced himself to get up. He bathed. Shaved. Put on semi-formal clothes, just enough to look presentable. As he stood in front of the mirror, he finally saw it.

How stuck he had been. How lost.

He realised he had neglected everyone around him, assuming no one else was hurting. But everyone was hurting. Everyone had lost Geetika.

He was still wearing the same sweatshirts of his that she loved, the ones she used to snuggle into. He refused to wash them. They wouldn't smell like her anymore. He hugged her favourite books when he slept.

He had sunk so deeply into his grief that he could no longer see beyond himself.

And somewhere inside, quietly, something began to stir. Not healing yet. Just awareness.

Anubhav sat alone in the meeting room. A few cans of soda, bottled water, and neatly arranged packets of chips and nuts were laid out on the table. It felt oddly formal. Too thoughtful.

Someone from facilities walked in, dressed in a crisp blazer. "Would you like any hot beverage, sir?" he asked politely.

The kind of arrangement usually made for client visits.

It unsettled Anubhav. For a brief, irrational moment, it felt like they were preparing to hand him a relieving letter, wrapped carefully in courtesy.

"Hey, Anubhav."

He turned around to see Rahul, his reporting manager.

Relief washed over him at the sight of a familiar face.

"Hey, man," Anubhav replied, his voice instinctively casual. "What's going on?"

Rahul stepped forward and hugged him. Anubhav didn't resist. It was brief. Wordless. The kind of hug men share when there's too much to say and no need to say any of it.

"Come," Rahul said, clapping his shoulder lightly. "Let's get cappuccino. You know facilities makes the best one in this block."

Anubhav nodded, grateful for the normalcy.

They walked to the small kitchenette where a barista and a supervisor were stationed.

As they waited, Anubhav finally asked, half-joking, half-nervous, "What's with all this setup? You kicking me out or what?"

Rahul looked at him and sighed.

"Boss, we've been trying to reach you for weeks. Phone straight to voicemail. Emails on out-of-office. We had no option but this HR ambush," he said gently. "We were worried about you, dude."

Anubhav stayed quiet.

Rahul continued, his tone softening. "I'm your reporting manager, yes. But more than that, we've known you and Geetu for years. We understand your pain. Truly."

He paused before adding, "We just want you to come back to work. Even if it's only as a distraction. You have to think of yourself. And the newborn. It's been six months now."

Anubhav took a slow sip of his cappuccino.

“We can extend your leave again if you insist,” Rahul said. “But I’m telling you this as a friend. Staying away this long won’t be healthy.”

Anubhav nodded. He already knew.

“Give me time till next Monday,” he said quietly.

Rahul shook his head. “You know what? Take another fifteen days. Come back when Q4 begins. Less pressure. Lean teams. More engagement stuff. Events, parties. Easier transition.”

A small smile appeared on Anubhav’s face. It felt unfamiliar, but not unwelcome.

“Thank you, Rahul,” he said sincerely. “I really appreciate this.”

Rahul clinked his cup lightly against Anubhav’s. “Anytime, man. We’ve got you.”

Anu used the next fifteen days carefully. He helped his parents ease into a new routine, arranged for full-time live-in help for the baby and meals, and brought structure back into a life that had been drifting.

The days of relaxed, unplanned living were over. They needed order again.

Soon after, the office Thanksgiving party arrived. Normalcy returned. Almost.

The years that followed were harder than expected. Too much sympathy. Unsolicited advice. Therapist recommendations. Well-meaning setups with friends of friends, and divorced friends. Each gesture reopened what he was trying to heal.

Eventually, Anu made a decision.

He asked for a transfer. Far away. A place where no one knew the story. A chance to begin again.

And just like that, Anubhav and little Rhea arrived in **Namma Bengaluru**.

Chapter 8 – The Girl at the Door

The doorbell rang.

Nina opened the door to find Daisy standing there, with a delightful little creature half-hidden behind her.

“Good morning, Daisy,” Nina said, raising her eyebrows slightly, her question unspoken.

Daisy gently pulled the little girl forward. “Didi, this is Rhea. Rhea Shrivastava Sahab’s daughter.”

Rhea, all of three years old, sweet and confident, tugged impatiently at Daisy’s chunni, urging her to hurry.

“She is leaving town,” Daisy added matter-of-factly. “She fought with her father. Says she won’t live with him anymore.”

“Aaaah...!” Nina exclaimed softly.

Daisy leaned in and whispered, “Shrivastava Sahab is the new neighbour. Two doors away.”

“Oh... is it?” Nina said, amused.

She gestured Daisy inside. “Go, start your work.”

Then she turned to the little girl and gently lifted the tiny backpack off her shoulders.

“So, Rhea,” Nina asked warmly, “where are you going?”

“To my Dadi’s house,” Rhea replied confidently, as if she had planned this all herself.

“And where is your Dadi’s house?” Nina asked gently.

“Kailash Niva...” Rhea replied quickly.

“And what is your Dadi’s name?” Nina asked, expecting this to be the point where things would unravel.

Instead, Rhea’s face crumpled.

“Dadi’s name... is Dadi...” she said, bursting into tears.

“Dadi’s name...!!”

Nina’s heart melted instantly.

She lifted Rhea up, and the little girl clung to her neck tightly, sobs growing louder. “I hate Papa,” Rhea cried. “I don’t want to live with Papa.”

“Aaaaww... accha,” Nina said softly, rocking her. “Tell me what happened.”

Rhea now sat comfortably on Nina’s waist like it was her rightful seat, one arm around Nina’s shoulder, the other tucked securely into the collar of her kurti. She looked at Nina with complete confidence, as though Nina could fix anything.

As Rhea narrated Papa’s many terrible crimes, Nina wiped her tears and walked toward the dining table, scanning for snacks.

Just then—

“Ammmaaa...!”

Karthik emerged from his room after his nap and froze.

A strange girl was sitting on his Amma.

He walked over, hugged Nina tightly, then stared at Rhea. He recognised her. The new girl from school. The one Principal Ma'am had introduced during assembly.

He pouted.

"This is my Amma," he declared firmly. "You get down now."

Rhea looked at Nina with wounded eyes and burst into louder tears.

"Kanna...!" Nina warned gently.

"Okay fine," Karthik relented. "You can stay there. But still, she is my Amma."

Nina carefully placed Rhea on the dining table, pulled a chair for Karthik, and one for herself.

The three of them sat facing each other like a serious strategy meeting.

"Papa doesn't know how to make sandwich," Rhea announced solemnly. "Papa doesn't know how to make yummy dal like Dadi. Papa doesn't know how to do my hair."

Her lower lip dropped even further.

Nina bit her lip to stop herself from laughing. "Really?"

Rhea nodded gravely, pushing hair off her face with tiny fingers. Very serious problem.

Nina pulled out bread, cheese spread, and cucumber slices. She trimmed the crusts and cut the sandwiches into tiny rectangles, perfectly sized for two little humans.

Rhea's eyes widened. "Wow..."

She grabbed one and took tiny bites. "I want sauce," she demanded.

Nina and Karthik burst out laughing. Rhea joined them, completely forgetting the drama from half an hour ago.

"Daisyyyy!" Nina called out.

"Haan, Didi?" Daisy appeared instantly.

"Get some milk for the kids," Nina said, "and call Shrivastava Sahab. Tell him to come collect Rhea."

"Nooooo!" Rhea protested. "I don't want to go!"

"Don't worry," Nina said gently. "Daisy will make everything okay. She can do your hair also."

Nina looked at Daisy hopefully.

Daisy shot Nina an annoyed look, then softened immediately as she looked at Rhea. "Yes, baby. I will do your hair."

Karthik turned to Rhea and extended his hand. "Friends?"

Rhea grinned, took his hand, and shook it vigorously. "Yes. Friends."

They burst into giggles.

Nina helped Rhea down from the table, fixed her dress, tucked her bright pink T-shirt neatly into her skirt. Rhea watched in fascination, touching her tummy, admiring her skirt.

"Kanna," Nina said, "get me a comb and my blue box."

Rhea watched silently, completely in awe. This was the lady she had seen hugging the boy in the morning. She smiled. A warm, glad smile.

Nina gently asked Rhea for permission to do her hair. Rhea nodded excitedly.

Nina turned her around, lifted her onto her lap on the divan, and began combing her hair carefully, checking gently if it hurt. Rhea giggled and shook her head.

Karthik sat on the floor, elbows on his knees, chin resting on his palms, a ready assistant.

“Kanna, open the box and give me two bands,” Nina said.

“What colour you want, Rhea?” Karthik asked.

“One pink and one purple!” Rhea clapped.

Nina’s eyes welled up. Her heart felt full. Karthik had found a little friend.

Rhea’s hair was neatly secured into two perfect pigtails. “There you go,” Nina said. “All done.”

Rhea jumped off Nina’s lap and touched her hair.

“Come, let’s see in the mirror,” Karthik suggested, whisking her away.

Nina followed quietly.

Rhea admired herself in the mirror. “Your mom is soooo pretty,” she said.

Karthik nodded proudly. “Isn’t she? She is the prettiest girl in the whole world.”

The two little humans laughed and ran toward his room.
“Come, let’s play!”

Nina smiled and turned to Daisy. “Daisy, go call Mr. Shrivastava.”

“Okay, Miss.”

A little later, Daisy returned with the tea.

The three adults sat together in the living room, cups in hand, the steam from the ginger chai curling lazily into the air. Nina brought out a small plate of biscuits, and without thinking, they all began dipping them into their tea, talking easily. Neighbours’ talk. Moving in. Schools. Small adjustments of new lives settling into place.

That was when Daisy began praising Nina.

She spoke about how Nina helped her little Sammy with schoolwork, how patient she was, how she never scolded but somehow made children listen. How Sammy looked up to her, how Nina had become such a positive influence in her daughter’s life.

“Daisy...!” Nina interrupted with a warning look.

Daisy shrugged apologetically and quietly picked up the empty cups, retreating into the kitchen. Somewhere along the way, Daisy had stopped being help and started being home.

“Rhea!” Nina called again.

Karthik and Rhea came running.

“Papa!” Rhea leapt into Anubhav’s lap, shaking her head proudly to show her hair.

He admired her. "Arre... tu toh ghar chhod ke jaane wali thi na?" he teased.

Rhea pouted, wriggled down, went straight to Nina and announced, "This is my new home now. Hain na?"

She looked at Nina hopefully.

Nina smiled and nodded. "You know you can have two homes. Now go with your Papa."

"Only because you asked," Rhea said grandly, and marched out.

"Bye Rhea!" Karthik yelled.

"Byeee Karthik! Next time you come to my house. I'll show you, my toys!"

Anubhav followed like a soldier, carrying the bags, while Rhea led like a commander.

He turned and thanked Nina.

"Please don't mention it," she said gently. "It takes a village to raise little humans."

He nodded.

Nina closed the door, lifted Karthik into her arms, and whispered a quiet thank you to the universe for sending a little friend her son's way.

Chapter 9 – A House with Many Mothers

Rhea is six now.

Anubhav made it a point to visit home as often as he could, ensuring that Rhea remained deeply connected to both sets of grandparents. There were weekend phone calls, video calls, birthdays celebrated on screens. But now, with Rhea about to begin first grade, he made a difficult decision. The visits would become less frequent.

Rhea had found her rhythm.

School. Friends. A warm community. And most importantly, Nina, Daisy, Karthik, and Sammy. A family, in every way that mattered.

Anubhav couldn't have chosen better even if he had tried. There were no transactions. No expectations. No unspoken bargains. Just people who showed up for each other.

At home, the change did not go unnoticed.

"Mummy," Vanshika asked one afternoon, "when is Jijaji and Rhea coming?"

"They're not coming," Sheetal replied gently.

"What...!!?" Vanshika snapped. "It's summer vacation. And Rhea's birthday!"

“Yes,” Sheetal said, “but she has finally settled into her school, her friends, the society. Damad ji doesn’t want to disturb her stability.”

She paused, then added quietly, “I don’t like it. He is becoming very distant from us.”

“It’s natural,” Ravi said, stepping in from the balcony.

“How long do you expect him to grieve his wife?” he continued. “It’s been six years. This is the closest to normal I’ve seen him. He may not be happy, but he’s no longer drowning.”

“Yes, Papa,” Vanshika said sharply, “but what about us? We also need to be in Rhea’s life.”

“And we are,” Ravi replied calmly. “We are her Nana and Nani. You are her Masi. But he is her father. He has the right to make decisions for her. We don’t get to override that.”

Sheetal hesitated, then said, “Also... Rhea keeps talking about this Nina person. I don’t know if she’s just a neighbour, or Rhea’s friend, or Anubhav’s friend, or—”

“And what, Papa?” Vanshika interrupted, furious.

Something sharp rose inside her. Jealousy? Fear? A feeling she had never named before.

She stood up suddenly. “I’m going to Bangalore,” she declared. “I’ll spend time with Rhea. With Jijaji.”

“That’s not appropriate,” Sheetal said immediately.

“You’re not a child anymore,” she added, her voice cautious. “You’re a young woman.”

“But he’s my Jijaji!” Vanshika cried, tears spilling over. “What are you even saying?”

“Beta,” Ravi said softly, “you’re of age now. Suitable for marriage. You know how people think. The Shrivastavas may misunderstand. I know your intentions are pure, but society doesn’t care.”

The words landed hard.

Vanshika felt accused of something she hadn’t even imagined. Ashamed. Confused. Angry.

She ran into her room and buried her face into her pillow, sobbing.

For the first time, she realised that distance doesn’t always come from geography.

Sometimes, it comes from unspoken fears.

After a week, Vanshika could no longer understand what she was feeling.

Was it fear of losing Rhea? Or fear of losing Geetika all over again? Or the unsettling thought that someone was slowly occupying a space that once belonged to her sister?

The idea made her restless. Uncomfortable. Angry.

Without telling anyone—not even Anubhav—Vanshika packed her bags and landed in Bangalore unannounced. Somewhere in her mind, there was an unspoken agenda. To catch him red-handed. To accuse him of replacing Geetika. To blame him for something, anything.

Except there was no sister left to cheat on. And no act waiting to be caught.

The journey drained her. Long commutes, airport waits, a six-hour flight. But it wasn't physical exhaustion that weighed her down. It was the constant spiral of *what ifs*, *maybes*, and memories of Geetika—her laughter, her silences, and the dreadful day she died.

With an anxious heart, Vanshika rang the doorbell.

"Yes...?" Daisy opened the door.

"Uh... Mr. Shrivastava?" Vanshika asked, confused.

"Who are you?" Daisy asked cautiously. Normally she would have opened the door without hesitation, but it was a Friday night, and a young woman with luggage was unexpected.

"I am Vanshika," she replied. "Anubhav's sister-in-law."

Daisy hesitated, then asked her to wait and went inside.

"Sahab," Daisy announced, "there is a woman at the door. She says she is your sister-in-law... Vanshika."

Inside, the living room was warm and noisy.

Nina, Anubhav, Daisy, and the children—Sammy, Karthik, and Rhea—were sprawled on the floor rug in front of the television. It was a cozy Friday evening. The kids were playing with toys, the adults watching an old 1990s movie, laughing at the exaggerated acting now that they were old enough to find it amusing.

Daisy's words broke the bubble.

Anubhav was on his feet instantly, rushing toward the door.

"Mausiiiiii....!" Rhea screamed with joy, running after him.

Everyone stood up, startled.

Vanshika walked in, her expression a mix of shock and irritation as she took in the scene. Who were these people? And why were they so comfortable?

“Nina,” Anubhav said quickly, “this is Vanshika. Geetika’s sister. My sister-in-law.”

“And this,” Rhea announced proudly, hugging Vanshika, “is my Mousi!”

Vanshika and Nina looked at Rhea with the same instinctive affection.

“Hi, Vanshika,” Nina said gently. “I’m Nina. We live next door.”

“Yes,” Vanshika replied sharply. “I’ve been told Rhea spends more time in your house than her own.”

Anubhav noticed the edge in her voice and was about to respond.

But Nina spoke first.

“Well... guilty,” she said lightly. “Karthik and Rhea are very good buddies.”

She ruffled Karthik’s hair and looked down at him. “I think we should go home now, bubba.”

“Amma...!” Karthik protested softly.

“Sammy, chalo,” Nina added.

Like practiced little helpers, Karthik and Sammy gathered their toys and began packing them away.

Daisy hurried forward. “Miss, why don’t you take the kids? I’ll finish up and bring the toys.”

“But Mummy—” Sammy began.

Daisy shot her a look that ended the sentence mid-air.

The three of them left.

Daisy finished her work as quickly as she could and stepped out of the house, already sensing the tension she was leaving behind.

She wasn’t wrong.

Daisy usually came a little later for Anubhav’s breakfast, around nine or so. He was never in a hurry. Rhea could always have breakfast at Nina’s, and both the children would get ready there before school. Nina dropped them off; Anubhav picked them up in the evening.

It was a well-oiled machine.

Rhea had her change of clothes, pyjamas, and toys for sleepovers at Nina’s. Karthik had the same arrangement here. No one was ever left behind. No one went hungry.

But today felt different. Like a quiet pause. Like everyone unconsciously stepping back, giving space until Vanshika either settled in... or cooled down.

The doorbell rang.

Little Rhea ran toward the door, already reaching for the handle.

“Hey, young lady,” Anubhav said gently, lifting her up. “You’re not allowed to open doors yet.”

He opened it.

“Daissyyyy...!!!” Rhea squealed, leaping from his arms straight into Daisy’s hug.

“What you doing here?” Rhea asked excitedly.

Daisy smiled, put Rhea down, held her hand, and looked at Anubhav with a cautious expression.

“Nina miss thought today Rhea baby should get dressed here,” Daisy said carefully. “So I come early. I cook breakfast for you also.”

It hadn’t occurred to Anubhav, but it made perfect sense.

“Ah,” he sighed in relief. “Phew.”

“Come, baby,” Daisy said, tugging Rhea gently toward the kitchen. “First breakfast, then shower.”

“Kaun tha?” Vanshika asked from the couch.

“Oh, that’s Daisy,” Anubhav replied casually, moving toward his phone. “Tea? Coffee?”

“Daissyyyy...!!! Filter coffee!” Vanshika yelled.

Anubhav froze.

“That’s not okay,” he said sharply. “We taught you better than that. You don’t boss Daisy around.”

“What’s the point of being in Namma Bengaluru if there is no filter coffee?” Vanshika snapped. “Did Nina not even stock filter coffee here?”

Her tone was unmistakably condescending.

“Watch your words, Vanshika.”

From the kitchen, Daisy spoke up quickly.

“Sahab, I put filter last night only. I make filter coffee. No worry.”

“Thanks, Didi,” Anubhav said, apologetically.

“Vanshika,” he said firmly, pointing toward his study. “A word.”

With the expression of a mix between an annoyed teenager and a jealous spouse, Vanshika followed him in.

Anubhav shut the door.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he demanded. “Who are you, and where is *my* Vanshika?”

“I should be asking *you* that!” she shot back.

“What are you even talking about?” he yelled, confused and angry. “Did you fight with your parents? Your boyfriend? I don’t even know if you have one!”

A knock interrupted them.

Daisy stood outside with two cups of filter coffee.

Anubhav opened the door, forcing an awkward smile. “Thanks, Didi.”

“Sahab,” Daisy said quietly, “you both talking very loud. Rhea baby getting scared.”

That stopped him.

He walked out with his coffee and called gently, “Rhea...”

She climbed onto the couch and snuggled beside him.

“Papa,” she asked hesitantly, “why you scolding Mousi?”

“No, baby,” he said softly. “I wasn’t scolding her. She left school once without telling teachers, so I was just explaining that it’s bad.”

“Yes, Mousi,” Rhea added seriously. “You should study hard and respect teachers. My school miss is very, very, *veryyyy* strict.”

Vanshika exhaled in relief, scooped Rhea up, and sat at the other end of the couch.

“Achhaa...?” she humoured her. “Do you like your school and friends?”

“Daisy,” Anubhav said calmly, “take Rhea baby, get her ready, and drop her at Nina’s.”

“No,” Vanshika protested instantly.

Daisy didn’t argue. She simply took Rhea gently, sensing the tension.

“Chalo, baby.”

Rhea went with her.

Anubhav picked up his phone and called Nina.

“Hey,” he said.

Vanshika noticed the smile immediately. Warm. Familiar. A smile she hadn’t seen on his face in a long time.

“I’m taking Vanshika out for lunch today,” he continued. “Bahut dino ke baad aayi hai na. I’m sending Rhea to you for the day.”

“All right,” he said after a pause. “Thanks.”

He hung up.

He hadn't asked for permission. He hadn't checked if it was convenient.

He had simply said, *I'm sending her*. As if that was where Rhea belonged. As if it wasn't a favour.

The thought unsettled Vanshika.

"Now," Anubhav said, turning to her, his smile polite but tight, "please get dressed. We're going to talk."

"I don't want Rhea confused," he added evenly. "Or worse, disliking you because of this new attitude."

The smile didn't reach his eyes.

Vanshika stepped out wearing a monochrome mauve georgette sari. Tall, slender, beautiful in an obvious, effortless way. Her straight, shoulder-length hair was left loose, and a single-string pearl necklace rested quietly against her collarbone.

Anubhav looked up from the couch and frowned.

He stood there in a casual T-shirt and three-fourth cargo pants, the uniform of a late-thirties Indian father who had long stopped caring about looking impressive.

"No," he snapped lightly. "Go change."

Vanshika blinked. "What?"

"Either your regular shorts and T-shirt or jeans," he said firmly. "Not this."

She sulked, muttered something under her breath, and disappeared into her room. A few minutes later, she emerged in jeans, a tank top, and a hoodie thrown over her shoulders.

“There,” she said.

Anubhav smiled instantly. Relief softened his face.

“There is my Vanshika.”

He pulled her into a side hug, his arm settling comfortably around her shoulders the way it always had. She caught the familiar smile, and something tight inside her chest loosened, just a little.

“Let’s go for drinks,” he said.

She raised an eyebrow. “Do *you* drink?”

“And should *you* be drinking?” he teased back.

Vanshika was twenty-seven now. But she had been only twenty-one when her elder sister died. Some losses freeze time like that. Either you get stuck at the age you were, or the relationship does. Moving on begins to feel like forgetting, and forgetting feels like betrayal. At least, that was how Vanshika had learned to survive.

They went to a popular brewery nearby. Anubhav ordered a simple craft beer for himself. He was never much of a drinker.

“What will you have?” he asked.

“White wine,” she told the waiter quietly.

It was, technically, her first drink.

After Geetika passed, Vanshika had buried herself in studies. Later, work. Distraction came easily to her. Her parents never

complained. She was the kind of daughter Indian parents brag about. Responsible. Focused. Unproblematic.

But her mother worried sometimes.

Vanshika used to have a house full of people. Friends. Noise. Laughter. Boys and girls who never seemed to leave. Proof of a life being lived loudly. After Geetika, that noise slowly faded. Friends grew up. Married. Moved cities. And one day, without fully realising it, Vanshika had left too.

The drinks arrived.

She took a sip of her wine, winced, sucked at her teeth, then confessed, "This is my first time."

They both laughed.

For a moment, it felt like the old days.

Anubhav pulled his chair closer and held her hand. Not fingers intertwined. Not tugging. Just her wrist resting in his palm, the way you hold a child's hand. Steady. Protective. Present.

"You want to order something else?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Let me try being an adult," she said, half-smiling.

He smiled back, gently.

"Dekho, Vanshu," he said softly. "You don't have to grow up yet. Maybe by age or society you have, but for me, you'll always be the little sister who came with my marriage."

She looked at him.

“I’ll always see you that way,” he continued. “And I’ll always take care of you that way. You don’t need to force yourself into any version of adulthood. Or marriage. That happens when it’s right.”

He paused.

“And if some guy ever forgets how to treat you properly,” he added lightly, “he’ll have to deal with me.”

He reached out and touched her chin.

Her eyes filled.

They knew their desi palates were not meant for cheese and wine, so they compromised with jalapeño cheese poppers and nachos.

One glass of wine in, Vanshika felt the warmth spread across her shoulders. Her nerves eased, her body relaxed, and for the first time since arriving, she found herself enjoying the Bangalore evening.

“Do you like her?” Vanshika asked suddenly.

“Who?” Anubhav looked up.

“Nina,” Vanshika said.

“Of course I do,” Anubhav replied without hesitation, genuine pride in his voice.

“Do you love her?” Vanshika continued, her tone half-curious, half-probing.

“Umm... I think I do,” Anubhav said, almost instantly.

Before she could jump to conclusions, he raised a finger gently, stopping her.

“But before you ask anything else, let me explain.”

“Jijuuuu...” Vanshika sang teasingly.

He held the finger up again.

“I like her because she can be a mother figure to my daughter without making things emotionally complicated for me,” he said calmly. “I love Geetika so much that I cannot imagine being with anyone else right now. Nina takes that emotional burden off me.”

Vanshika listened.

“I don’t know her entire story,” he continued. “But I know she is alone, with no family. I tried easing her burden by sharing responsibilities. And trust me, she never asked for help. She never accepted it easily either. I had to force her... even threaten her that I wouldn’t let Rhea come to her house if she didn’t accept my help.”

He paused.

“Whatever is going on in your head, Nina is a good woman. And I’ve always looked at her the way I look at you. I cannot look at any other woman the way I looked at my Geetu.”

Vanshika rested her face on her palm, elbow on the table, blinking slowly at him.

“Aaaawww...” she said softly. “That’s so sweet.”

“I think it’s time we go home,” Anubhav said, calling for the bill.

Vanshika wasn’t sure she was fully satisfied, but she was relieved. Anu and Rhea were well taken care of. Still, a small part of her wondered how two people of opposite genders

could be so comfortable without attraction. She shrugged the thought away for now and decided to head back home, to spend a little more time with her parents.

Daisy came early the next morning, just like the day before.

Vanshika apologised to her for her rudeness and asked for filter coffee.

“Didi, it’s okay,” Daisy said simply. “We are family.”

Vanshika hugged her instinctively.

“What is this, Didi?” Daisy asked, noticing the packed bags. “You leaving?”

“Yes,” Vanshika replied. “And no breakfast for me. Just drop me at Nina’s place after coffee. Jiju is still sleeping. Let him sleep.”

Daisy agreed, and a little while later, they headed to Nina’s house.

“Mousiiiiiii!” Rhea screamed with joy, throwing herself into Vanshika’s arms.

“Aap jaa rahe ho?” Rhea pouted. “Itni jaldi?”

Vanshika squished her cheeks. “Yes, beta. But I’ll come back.”

She tapped her temple thoughtfully.

“For Diwali!” Rhea shouted.

“Yes!” Karthik joined in. “Aunty, come back for Diwali. We’ll have so much fun!”

Sammy chimed in too. “Haan, Didi, please come.”

Vanshika barely knew them, yet they had already accepted her. She smiled.

“Thik hai,” she said. “I’ll come back for Diwali.”

Nina entered the hall with coffee, drawn by the noise.

“Good morning,” she smiled. “How was dinner?”

“It was good,” Vanshika replied. “After a long time, I saw Jiju relaxed. Thanks to you.”

“Me?” Nina laughed. “It’s the kids. Especially Rhea. When children are happy, adults breathe easier.”

“Maybe,” Vanshika smiled. “Your gang is quite something. I wish I hadn’t booked my ticket so soon.”

“When is your flight?” Nina asked.

“Five in the evening.”

“Oh no,” Nina protested. “At least stay for breakfast.”

“Yes, Mousi,” Rhea said proudly. “Nina makes the softest idlis in the whole world.”

Vanshika laughed. “Accha? Kabhi mere haath ke parathe bhi kha lena.”

Nina brought idlis, coconut chutney, and sambar.

“That was fast,” Vanshika said.

“I make breakfast early for the kids,” Nina replied. “They just finished. Let’s eat together.”

Rhea ran off to play with Karthik and Sammy.

“Is Anubhav not dropping you?” Nina asked.

“No,” Vanshika grinned. “I’m leaving without telling him. A sulking act. Please help me tease him a little longer.”

Nina giggled. “This will be fun.”

They shook hands like conspirators and ate their idlis.

“Mmm... they really are soft,” Vanshika admitted.

At 1 p.m., Daisy rang Anubhav’s doorbell.

“Sahab will be angry,” she whispered.

“It’s okay,” Nina encouraged, while the children cheered in unison.

Anubhav opened the door, sleepy and irritated.

“Kya, Didi? You have keys na.”

Daisy handed him a note.

“Vanshika Didi gave this.”

I’m leaving. Be back soon. Love, Vanshika. “She left?” Anubhav asked, startled.

“Yes, Sahab. She met Nina miss and left.”

“Didi, one coffee please,” he sighed.

Instant or filter?”

“Instant. Red lid.”

He splashed water on his face and hurried to Nina’s place.

The doorbell rang.

Sammy opened the door sternly. “Kya chahiye?”

“Open the door na,” Anubhav pleaded.

“No,” she said firmly. “We’re not talking to you.”

Rhea ducked under Sammy’s arm and ran straight into her father’s waist.

“Papa!”

He picked her up, swaying her gently.

Sammy cleared her throat dramatically.

Rhea slid down but held his thumb tightly.

Daisy arrived with coffee. “Give me that,” Anubhav said gratefully.

“Nina... please let me in,” he called softly.

“No,” Sammy declared.

They shut the door.

Daisy gestured. “Chaliye, Sahab.”

“They are all one team,” she said teasingly. “We are two homeless kids today.”

Anubhav laughed, understanding the game.

Back home, he sipped his coffee and smiled. He wasn’t worried. Vanshika would call.

Daisy brought a plate of hot idlis.

“Nina miss packed for you.”

Anubhav laughed warmly. “She’s crazy.”

“And she sent dinner list also,” Daisy whispered. “She bringing kids here.”

Anubhav felt something settle inside him as he ate.

This felt like home.

It was supper time. The kids were fed. On weekends, they were like puppies. Feed, play, nap, feed again.

Nina clapped her hands lightly. "Come, let's go to Anu's place."

"Noooooooo!" They all yelled together.

They didn't even know why they were protesting. They were simply enjoying the game, whatever it was.

Nina laughed at the united *no*.

"Daisy called me," she said casually. "She made matar pulao and raita."

Karthik froze. "What...!!!!?"

"And paneeeeeer tikka," Nina added.

"Yayyyyy!!!" Rhea screamed.

"And," Nina continued, raising her hands dramatically, "bread pudding."

"Nina Miss," Sammy whispered, pulling Karthik into a side hug, "aren't we fighting with Anu uncle?"

She leaned closer and whispered into his ear, "We are just playing."

Sammy was twelve now. A teenager. Not quite grown up, but already more mature than most of her classmates. She laughed softly.

"But," Nina added loudly, "there is no ice cream."

“Yaaaaahhh!” the little ones wailed.

“Okay, okay,” Nina sighed. “If I order vanilla ice cream to go with the bread pudding?”

“Yesssss!” Instant agreement.

Sammy and Nina helped the kids freshen up and change, and then they all marched to Anubhav’s house like a small parade.

Sammy rang the doorbell multiple times and hid behind Nina, even though she was almost as tall as her now. Nina hugged her from behind, both of them hiding while the little ones peeked out.

Anubhav knew immediately who it was.

He opened the door with mock anger. “Who on earth is ringing the bell like this...!”

Then he saw Nina.

His face softened into a smile. She returned it, warm and easy.

“Yayyyyy!” The kids ran straight to the kitchen.

“Where are you going!” Anubhav chased them, pretending to be fierce.

Sammy ran straight to the kitchen and hugged her mother.

Sammy had grown into a beautiful, confident young lady. From a little girl who once lived in the slums, speaking broken English, she was now eloquent, poised, and sure of herself. No one could tell where she had come from.

Daisy was endlessly grateful to Nina for being a role model for her Samantha.

“Can I help you with something?” Sammy asked.

Daisy shook her head firmly, proud but serious. “No, no. You go take care kids.”

Then, lowering her voice, she added, “Don’t forget, I still work for Nina Miss. She is not your friend.”

“Maa,” Sammy protested gently. “Nina Miss is not like that. She is my friend. Our friend.”

“I know,” Daisy said softly. “Nina Miss very kind. But we should not take that for granted. When you go her house, you clean, cut, help. Understood?”

“Yes, maaa,” Sammy replied obediently.

Nina accepted Sammy’s help only where there was learning, never household labour. Baking together. Taking calls. Helping organise things. Like an assistant, gently trained for her future.

“Go play now,” Daisy said. “I call you when food ready.”

“You really made bread pudding?” Sammy asked hopefully.

“Yes,” Daisy smiled. “Extra also. You take some home.”

Sammy hugged her tightly and kissed her cheek. “You are the best.”

She ran to the hall and plopped down beside Nina.

Nina pulled her close and kissed her cheek. “What’s Mumma doing?” Nina asked.

“Cutting, chopping, cooking like a robot with eight hands,” Sammy said. “Not letting me help.”

“Okay,” Nina laughed. “You play. I’ll help Daisy.”

She stood up.

Sammy and Anu exchanged a look. The same mischievous look.

They both ran toward Rhea’s room.

The house filled with laughter and happy screams. Nina and Daisy worked quietly in the kitchen, side by side.

And just like that, the equilibrium was restored again.

Chapter 10 – What Distance Stirs

Vanshika returned home still unsettled by what she had experienced in Bangalore.

Her father opened the door before she could ring the bell. “Arey beta... aa gayi?” he said warmly, taking her bags.

Vanshika didn’t respond. She walked straight into her room and collapsed on the bed.

The exhaustion wasn’t just from travel. It felt like she had relived her sister’s death all over again. The fear was unfamiliar and sharp. Fear of Nina replacing Geetika. Fear of losing Rhea. Fear of losing Anubhav too.

It was too much.

She slept like a log.

The next morning, she woke up to the familiar sounds of home. Her parents talking about society matters, morning routines unfolding exactly as they always had.

She walked into the hall and was greeted by a steaming cup of ginger tea.

“How is Rhea?” her mother asked immediately. “And how is damad ji?”

“Mummy... abhi toh uthi hoon,” Vanshika replied, mildly irritated.

“Arey... bata na,” Sheetal insisted. “How is my grandbaby?”

Vanshika pulled out her phone and showed them pictures from Anubhav's Instagram. Photos posted after she had left. Some with Rhea. Some with Nina. A few with Vanshika herself.

"Oh my God," Sheetal said, staring at the screen. "Rhea has grown so much in just six months."

Vanshika laughed softly. "Maa, how can she grow so much in six months?"

"Kids grow fast," Sheetal replied. "You don't realise it."

She paused on one photo. "Is this Nina?" she asked.

"Haan, mummy. That's Nina," Vanshika said. "That little boy is her son, Karthik. And that teenage girl is Samantha. Daisy's daughter. Daisy is the house help... I think they share her."

"They all look so happy," Sheetal said thoughtfully.

Vanshika hesitated. Then spoke.

"Maa... don't you think something feels off?" "Like... Nina is single. Jiju is single. And practically, they live in each other's houses. Not the adults exactly, but the children."

"Rhea has clothes at Nina's. Karthik has clothes at Jiju's. Their toys. Their medicines."

She frowned. "Mujhe lagta hai daal mein kuch kaala hai."

"There is something cooking. But at the same time... I've never seen Jiju so relaxed. He says he loves Nina the same way he loves me. And it's all very confusing."

Sheetal listened quietly.

Then she said gently, "Beta, don't you remember when you were little? You and Geetu practically lived at Sharma aunty's house. You were all a gang."

"The only difference here is that Nina is single."

She looked at Vanshika carefully. "You, of all people, should understand that."

Vanshika fell silent.

"You're just being cautious because Nina is a single mother," Sheetal continued. "There is nothing wrong with that. And Rama ji told me they live just one door away."

"Rama aunty knows?" Vanshika exclaimed.

"Of course," Sheetal said. "She talks to them every week. Half her conversations are about Karthik and Nina."

She paused, then added carefully, "To be honest, we think it's time we meet Nina."

"The way Rhea talks about her... we feel Anubhav and Nina *should* get married. But we don't know how they feel."

"We know how deeply Anubhav loved Geetu. But we don't know Nina's story."

"So, we are waiting."

"Waiting for what, maa?" Vanshika asked quietly.

"For the right time," Sheetal replied. "These things are sensitive. And Nina doesn't have parents, we hear."

Vanshika thought for a moment. "Maa... I promised the kids I'd visit during Diwali. Why don't we all go?"

Sheetal's face lit up. "Arey waah. This is good. I'll talk to Rama ji."

Despite herself, Vanshika felt a bittersweet ache. She liked Nina. She was warm, kind, loving.

But Anubhav remarrying felt like a full stop on Geetika's story. A final chapter she wasn't ready to close, even six years later.

"We'll plan a trip," Sheetal said decisively. "All of us. Shrivastavas and Saxenas."

"Diwali," Vanshika echoed. "I promised the kids."

Her voice was flat, compliant.

"I'll call Rama ji," Sheetal said, already getting up. "Ae ji, suno," she called to her husband. "Please book tickets for Diwali. We're going to Bangalore."

Vanshika forced a smile.

She didn't warn Anubhav. She didn't warn Nina.

Part of her hoped something would surface. A scandal. A mistake. Proof of something inappropriate.

But there was nothing.

No romance. No secrecy. Just a strange, functional family quietly holding each other together.

And that unsettled her the most.

"Ugh," Vanshika muttered to herself.

Soon, it was Diwali.

There was shopping. Lots of it.

Dresses and toys for Rhea. A few carefully chosen things for Karthik and Samantha. And saris for Nina and Daisy.

Bold, unmistakably South Indian colours.

Vanshika watched silently as her mother and Rama aunty picked out deep reds and emerald greens. Heavy Kanjivaram silks from a so-called elite local store. Saris meant to announce presence, tradition, and approval.

She knew, instinctively, that Nina wouldn't like them.

She had seen Nina closely now. Pastel kurtis with jeans. Soft cotton saris. Colours that didn't ask for attention.

But the elders were pleased. And when elders were pleased, logic usually took a backseat.

Everything was planned as a surprise.

The tickets. The dates. The coordinated arrival.

But Vanshika felt the weight of it pressing on her chest.

One evening, overwhelmed, she called Nina.

She told her that Anubhav's parents and in-laws were coming for Diwali. She kept her voice light. Casual. She hid the real agenda carefully.

She didn't say that this visit was meant to size Nina up. To see her as a possibility. As a future wife for Anubhav. As a daughter-in-law for the Saxenas.

Somehow, Nina had stopped being just a neighbour in her mind.

She felt like someone Vanshika needed to protect.

The feeling surprised her. A quiet, bittersweet affection.

Not rivalry. Not suspicion.

Something closer to friendship.

Time flew, and soon it was the week of Diwali.

Nina had already told Anubhav that his parents and in-laws were planning to surprise him. He wasn't upset. In fact, he was quietly pleased and more than happy to play along. They decided not to tell the children. Let them have the joy of surprise.

Diwali cleaning began in earnest.

Daisy was busy managing both houses, moving seamlessly between them. Nina, Anubhav, and Sammy helped her as much as they could in between work calls and school. Sammy, ever the diligent daughter, finished her homework early and insisted on helping her mother, despite Daisy's constant refusals.

Managing two houses was no small task, but Daisy treated both homes as her own. Just as Nina and Anubhav treated Sammy like their own child. She was cared for no differently than Rhea or Karthik, and in that quiet equality, something beautiful had taken root.

"What are you doing here?" Anubhav asked, surprised to see Sammy dusting the shelves.

"Cleaning," Sammy replied simply.

"Why?" he asked, all concern tumbling out at once. "Did you finish your homework? You should be playing with your friends or with the kids."

Sammy giggled. "I finished my homework. This is the least I can do to help Amma."

“You’re sure?” Anubhav asked gently. “I can do this. You go play.”

“It’s okay,” Sammy said. “I know you also have meetings and calls.”

Anubhav smiled. “Yes... I do.” He paused. “Tell me if you need anything.”

He returned to his study, deciding to work from home for the rest of the month. He knew his parents and in-laws were coming. He just didn’t know when.

This year, Nina and Anubhav decided to host the Diwali gathering at Nina’s place.

For the first time in years, Anubhav felt genuinely happy. The group was small and warm. Mostly Nina’s friends, but they had quietly adopted Anubhav and Rhea too. That’s how he liked to think of it.

When he and Rhea first arrived in Bangalore, it had been just the two of them. Nikita, Rhea’s principal, was the first friend he had made. Slowly, Nina came into their lives. And Daisy too.

Though she was technically the house help, Daisy felt more like a sister. She made sure he didn’t live on junk food, reminded him to pick up Rhea on time, learned his favourite dishes, and cooked them with care. Without her, he knew he would have survived on take-out and late dinners.

This life they had built wasn’t planned.

It had simply... happened.

And for once, that felt enough.

Part III – Arrivals

Chapter 11 – When Families Arrive

The Shrivastavas and the Saxenas were thrilled as they boarded the plane to visit Anubhav and his potential wife-to-be. Excitement, expectations, and the thrill of a “surprise” travelled with them in equal measure.

Vanshika, being a girl, understood how overwhelming surprises mixed with expectations could feel. So, as a small act of kindness, she shared the flight details with Nina, giving her a chance to brace herself for the impact.

Not that Nina truly needed it. For her, it was simply a visit.

She was overwhelmed, yes, but in a quiet, practical way. These were Rhea’s grandparents after all. That alone made them special. Nina wanted to welcome them properly, respectfully, the way family deserved to be welcomed.

Anubhav had already arranged a cab from the airport to home. He didn’t want Vanshika struggling with two sets of parents, nor did he want to rob them entirely of the satisfaction of surprising their son. A careful balance, as always.

Hey Vanshu!! Anubhav texted her the cab details.

You knew!!! Vanshika replied instantly.

Yes. I hope you have a good trip. We’ll talk later. But somehow, I feel this isn’t *just* a surprise visit. Anubhav sent back.

You think!?!? Vanshika typed.

She felt a strange heaviness, like she was hiding a secret. But there really was no secret.

Their parents hoping Nina would marry Anubhav wasn't a conspiracy. It was just hope. Quiet, cautious hope. Even they knew there was nothing *official* between Nina and Anubhav.

Yet Vanshika couldn't shake her own theory.

In her mind, no man and woman could be *this* comfortable without something deeper brewing. Maybe not romance yet. Maybe not desire. But a quiet kind of love that neither of them had recognised.

And without fully realising it, Vanshika had assigned herself a mission.

Not to expose a scandal. Not to catch anyone in the act.

But to make two people confess a truth that might not even exist – except in her head.

Before the elders could even ring the bell, everyone was already gathered at the peephole. The kids were jittery with excitement, whispering and giggling, barely able to contain themselves.

The moment the door opened, they burst out together.

“Surpriiiiise....!!!”

Caught off guard and laughing in a *what-can-we-do-now* sort of way, Anubhav, Nina, and Daisy instinctively joined in.

“Arey... how did you all know...!?!?” Rama asked the children, amused.

Rhea didn't answer. Instead, she proudly began introductions.

"Dadi... this is Karthik. This is Sammy."

Nina had made sure the children knew what to do.

Karthik and Sammy immediately folded their hands.
"Namaste, Dadi."

Nina had taught them to say *Dadi ji*, but the excitement had clearly overridden training. Before anyone could correct them, all three children ran off.

"Nina...!" she called gently, stopping them halfway. "Greet everyone properly."

A rushed chorus of *Namaste* followed, and then the children disappeared into Nina's house, laughter echoing behind them. Daisy followed soon after — the understanding being unspoken but clear.

Meals would be cooked and served at Anubhav's place. Operations were split neatly: Nina ran the kitchen, Anubhav handled expenses.

If only they lived in a mansion, Nina thought. But even in two apartments, the system worked.

Nina leaned toward Daisy and whispered, "Keep everything ready for tea or coffee. I'll call when needed."

She then turned back to the elders.

"Pranam, Auntie ji. Pranam, Uncle ji."

No touching of feet. It wasn't something she'd grown up with.

Rama looked pleasantly surprised and pleased. “Khush raho, beta,” she said warmly.

Sheetal smiled, reaching out to touch Nina’s chin affectionately.

The fathers smiled too – awkward, polite, typically Indian. “Khush raho, beta,” they echoed, already moving on.

For now, the adults stayed at Anubhav’s place. The children had completely claimed Nina’s.

Vanshika, without hesitation, chose the children’s house. Among giggles and noise, she felt more at ease. And in the eyes of most adults present, she was still very much a child herself.

It was late afternoon. Too late for lunch. Never too early for tea.

“Shall I arrange tea and snacks?” Anubhav asked.

“Accha, kya piyenge aap log – chai ya coffee?” he added.

“We were told Daisy makes excellent filter coffee,” Sheetal said with a smile.

“I’ll get both,” Nina said immediately. “Filter coffee and ginger tea.”

She turned and called Daisy.

Rama scoffed lightly. “Yeh toh room service jaise lag raha hai.”

“Maa...” Anubhav warned softly.

“Isn’t it?” Nina said innocently. “I genuinely don’t know how I’d survive without Daisy.”

Rama paused, then smiled. Nina hadn't meant sarcasm — and she hadn't taken it as such either. That pleased her.

Anubhav shot his mother a *please-be-gentle* look.

"What?" Rama replied casually.

"Aunty, Anubhav aise hi hain," Nina laughed lightly. "He's the one who tells everyone — bas, enough now, time to sleep. He needs to learn to relax."

Something shifted in Rama's expression.

She watched Nina closely.

Nina wasn't like Geetika — loud, opinionated, willful. But she was just as caring.

Geetika would scold them for missing medicines or meals. Rama imagined Nina would do the same — only more quietly. Feeding first. Medicating gently. No drama.

Without realising it, Rama thought: *I want this girl as my daughter-in-law.*

"Aa... mere paas baith," she said suddenly, her tone warm, switching effortlessly from *tum* to *tu*.

Anubhav noticed the change and smiled to himself.

"Aunty... sugar or without?" Nina asked softly.

No response.

"Maa?" Anubhav called.

Rama blinked, pulled out of her thoughts. "With sugar, beta. But very little."

Daisy arrived with two flasks — ginger tea and filter coffee — along with cucumber sandwiches and pakodas.

“Arey waah... tumko pata tha hum aa rahe hain?” Sheetal asked.

“No, mummy ji,” Daisy replied honestly. “But Vanshika Didi and Nina miss are good friends. Nina miss told me few days ago.”

Nina added gently, “Travelling can be tiring. We just wanted to make sure you’d have refreshments.”

The fathers quietly abandoned the pakodas, grabbed sandwiches and coffee, and moved to the balcony.

“Chai-pakoda toh normal hai na, Saxena ji,” Anubhav’s father said.

“Let’s enjoy coffee today,” he laughed — the other father joining in.

Anubhav moved between the hall and balcony, coffee in hand, watching it all unfold.

For the first time in a long while, the house felt... full.

The elders dozed off. The children followed soon after.

By the time the house finally went quiet, only Daisy, Vanshika, Nina, and Anubhav were left awake. They drifted naturally toward Nina’s place, like the day had decided for them.

Daisy busied herself in the kitchen, cleaning up. Anubhav opened a bottle of white wine. Not to celebrate. Just to soften

the edges. He sensed there was something unspoken in the room, but he was a patient man. He could wait.

“What’s this, Jiju?” Vanshika teased, raising an eyebrow.

“You liked it last time,” Anubhav replied casually. “So, I ordered it.”

“Naughty Jiju,” she laughed. “Bangalore aake relax karna seekh liya hai.” She nudged Nina’s shoulder. “You too... didn’t know you were hiding wine like this. Who’s teaching you all this, hmm?”

Anubhav tossed a playful punch in their direction. “Bahut bigad gayi ho dono.”

Vanshika caught the familiar tone. The same one he had always used with her. Protective. Familiar. Like a brother who never stopped being one.

Two sips in, she sighed.

“Maybe this is my fault,” she said quietly. “And Rhea’s too.” She pouted slightly, trying to lighten it. “I’m not the only culprit.”

“What did Rhea do?” Anubhav asked, surprised.

“She keeps praising Nina,” Vanshika said. “Talking about Karthik, Sammy... Daisy sometimes. Everyone could see how well she’s settled here. They were genuinely happy about it.”

She paused.

“But my last visit triggered things. I was angry. Maybe... a little jealous.” Her voice dropped. “You seemed closer to Nina than to me.”

She took a breath before continuing.

“The more I spoke about how you all live, the more my parents felt this is how communities are. Like when we were young. We practically lived in neighbours’ houses.” She looked down. “But honestly... it was jealousy. I felt like you were moving on from Didi.”

Her eyes filled.

Nina reached out immediately and hugged her.

“I can never replace Didi,” she said softly.

That word mattered. **Didi**, not Geetika. Vanshika noticed. It eased something tight in her chest. Nina’s attachment wasn’t to Anubhav. It was to Rhea. To her. To the children.

“And this is how communities work,” Nina continued gently. “I remember the same things from my childhood. Neighbours leaving kids with each other. People stepping in when someone was tired or busy. There’s nothing going on between me and Anubhav.”

She smiled faintly. “Also... he’s very mature. He doesn’t even know how to have fun.”

Vanshika pulled back, mock-offended. “What are you saying?”

Vanshika laughed. “He was very hard to control.” “And he kept Didi on her toes with his antics.”

All three laughed, and something settled.

Still, Vanshika hesitated. “But... I think there might be marriage talk.”

That made both Nina and Anubhav quiet.

Nina spoke first. “My friends ask me the same thing. They say we’re good for each other. That affection can turn into love.”

She paused. “But I don’t know.”

A broken love. A failed marriage. Single motherhood. Nina wasn’t sure she had the courage for marriage again.

Geetika was the only woman Anubhav had ever loved. It had taken him years to reach something close to normalcy. These connections he had now were precious. Safe. Nina had been the catalyst for much of it. Her care. Her nagging. Her insistence that he step out, meet people, live again.

She had introduced him to her closest friends. Pulled him gently into her inner circle.

He couldn’t risk that.

He wasn’t in love with her.

But he was deeply, quietly grateful.

And for now, that was enough.

Chapter 12 – Not the Love They Expected

The weekend slipped by in warmth. Good food, a full house, familiar laughter. And then, suddenly, it was Monday.

Rama woke up early and walked into the kitchen, instinctively taking stock. It didn't take long to realise that Anubhav's kitchen was... barely lived in. Tea, coffee, milk, sugar, a few snack packets. That was all. No vegetables in the fridge. No rice or lentils in the pantry. No atta.

She smiled to herself. Of course.

She was craving chai, but decided coffee would do for now. Breakfast could be figured out later. Bangalore mornings were cold. Not Delhi-cold, but still enough to make her reach for a shawl.

She turned back toward the bedroom.

The doorbell rang.

"Good morning, Mummy ji!" Daisy chirped, stepping inside.

She placed two thermal flasks on the counter. "Ginger tea. For you and others."

"I will bring breakfast after sending Rhea baby to school," she added, already moving.

"Thik se soya?" Daisy asked casually, picking up Rhea's things and walking toward her room.

She pulled the curtains aside gently.

“Rhea baby... good morning,” Daisy cooed, letting sunlight do the waking.

“Mmmmm... Daisy... thodi der aur,” Rhea mumbled, curling deeper into the bed.

Daisy smiled at the sleeping beauty and moved swiftly to the next room.

“Good morning, Sahab,” she announced, throwing open Anubhav’s curtains without mercy. “Rhea baby not waking up. If she late, you only drop her.”

“Oh shit!” Anubhav jumped out of bed instantly.

He scooped Rhea up, her head resting heavily on his shoulder as she protested softly, “Nooooo...”

He set her down on the stool at the sink and splashed cool water on her face, gently wiping it clean.

“Toothbrush. Toothpaste,” he gestured firmly.

Grabbing his own brush, he hurried to Rhea’s room, laying her uniform out neatly on the bed while brushing, then wandered into the hall.

“Good morning, maa,” he sang out cheerfully.

Everything was happening so fast that Rama didn’t even try to interrupt.

Soon, Rhea was ready. Uniform crisp. Bag packed.

“Arey... her hair?” Rama asked suddenly.

“Daisy or Nina or Sammy will do it while she eats,” Anubhav replied hurriedly, already halfway to the door.

Rama watched it all unfold.

The speed. The rhythm. The quiet teamwork.

Anubhav rushed to Nina’s place; Rhea balanced on one arm and her bag swinging from the other. Rhea giggled wildly and waved back at Rama.

“Bye Dadi....!!! Mwah!”

Rama laughed and waved until they disappeared down the corridor.

“Daisy, breakfast ka kya hoga, beta?” Rama asked.

Daisy smiled at the word *beta*. No family ever spoke to her like this. She often wondered if this was where Anubhav sahab got his manners from.

“Nina miss made breakfast,” Daisy replied. “After cleaning house and putting washing machine, I will bring breakfast.”

“No, no,” Rama said. “We’ll go there and eat.”

Daisy hesitated. “Okay,” she said softly.

She rushed to Nina’s flat to warn her, returned in barely five minutes, and giggled to herself. *Road Runner speed*, she thought, as she finally started the washing machine.

The house hummed. Everything was in order.

A little unsure, Daisy asked, “Mummy ji... may I have tea?”

“Of course, beta,” Rama said warmly. “Come, sit with me.”

She poured Daisy a cup and patted the chair beside her on the balcony.

Daisy sat, nervous. *What if she asks questions?*

But Rama didn't. She sipped her tea, plucked dry leaves from the plants, smiled at Daisy once, and went back to enjoying the morning.

Daisy relaxed. And drank her tea slowly.

At Nina's place, mild chaos.

Nina moved quickly, collecting bags, water bottles, lunch boxes.

"Sammy," she called, "please take Rhea and Karthik down to the parking. I'll join in five minutes."

"Yes, Miss!" Sammy saluted. "Little soldier reporting for duty."

She marched the kids out.

Nina turned to Anubhav. "Your parents and in-laws might come here for breakfast."

Anubhav nearly choked on his idli, which he was eating generously with ghee and podi while scrolling through the news.

"Why...!!!" he protested. "Daisy can send breakfast there. I can enjoy some alone time here. Netflix."

"I don't want to be late," Nina said firmly. "Daisy said your mum wants breakfast here."

She started pointing things out rapidly.

“Fresh idlis in the cooker. Scoop some into the hot pot. Sambar is here. Podi. Ghee.”

Anubhav nodded without looking up.

She stopped mid-sentence and stared at him.

“Okay, okay!” he raised both hands. “I’ll handle it. My parents and in-laws love me.”

“Exactly,” Nina replied, grabbing her bag. “Yours. Not mine. And I want my guests fed properly.”

She rushed out.

The elders arrived leisurely.

They paused, surprised, looking at the breakfast spread.

Idli. Sambar. Ghee-podi. Toast. Tea and coffee.

“Is this some hotel buffet?” Rama asked, amused.

“For a change, we’re not cooking,” Sheetal smiled, serving herself idli and sambar with filter coffee.

To them, it looked elaborate.

To Nina, it was efficiency.

Idlis steaming quietly. Pressure cooker doing the dal. Podi already made. Coffee filter set the previous night.

All Daisy had to do was temper the dal, add tamarind, throw in pre-cut vegetables, and boil milk.

Simple.

Nina's indulgent breakfast would have been poori-sabzi or stuffed paratha, but kneading dough wasn't her strength. Idli and dosa were instinct. Muscle memory.

The elders, however, saw effort. Care. Impression-making.

Was she trying to impress them?

Rama looked at Anubhav.

"Beta... you spend so much time in each other's houses. We don't object. But will this not set wrong expectations for Nina?"

"No, Maa," Anubhav replied gently. "This is about Rhea. She fell in love with Nina and Karthik instantly."

He smiled.

"In this whole arrangement, Nina, Rhea, Karthik, and Sammy are the main characters."

He gestured at himself and Daisy.

"We are low-paid side characters."

Everyone laughed.

Then, softer now, Anubhav told them how Rhea had once landed at Nina's doorstep when he was at his lowest.

How this unlikely group had quietly pulled him back from the edge.

And for the first time that morning, the room fell into a comfortable, knowing silence.

Chapter 13 – Diwali

It was finally here.

The homes were clean and in order. The little ones were dressed halfway, half-running, half-being chased. String lights stood in neat lines, like tiny sepoy at the border, ready to light up at command. Fresh dresses were laid out on beds, waiting patiently for the evening.

Daisy and Nina's elbows, ankles, and knees were dusted with rangoli colours. Flowers hung neatly at the front door, soft and fragrant, ready to welcome whoever crossed the threshold.

Nina was not an obviously traditional girl. But at heart, she was.

She didn't always do things the *right* way, the prescribed way, but she held close the traditions that felt like home. As a child, Diwali had meant new clothes, decorating the house, lighting diyas and trying to keep them alive for as long as possible. It meant kneeling on the floor with coloured powders, comparing rangolis with neighbours, hopping from one friend's house to another, soaking in the joy.

Nothing was the same now. She couldn't bring everything back. But she could carry fragments of it into the present.

Nina stood in an oversized T-shirt and comfortable jeans; hair tied into a messy bun. She pushed loose strands away with the

back of her hand, careful not to smear more colour across her face. Her palms were already stained.

She looked up.

Inside the house, aunties and uncles hovered lovingly around Rhea and Karthik, helping them dress, fussing over buttons and pleats. Sammy darted around them, snatching dupattas and teasing them mercilessly. At the dining table, Anubhav quietly arranged wine bottles and glasses, lining them up with the same calm focus he brought to everything.

Daisy moved efficiently between rooms, mentally planning her cooking, making sure she started early so nothing would be rushed once guests arrived.

Sitting by the door, shaping the final curves of the rangoli, Nina felt a sudden swell of gratitude. God, she thought, has compensated for every loss by sending me people who stand by me more than blood ever did.

Her eyes welled up.

From across the room, Anubhav noticed. He paused and gave her a small questioning nod.

She nodded back. *I'm okay.*

The quiet moment broke when Rama walked over.

“Nina,” she said gently, “come help me with Rhea’s hair.”

Nina smiled, wiped her hands on her jeans, and stood up.

Diwali had begun.

All the rough edges had softened.

The food was cooked. The sweets were served. The pooja was done by the aunties.

Nina didn't have a grand mandir or shelves lined with many deities. Just a small corner shrine, simple and quiet, with a single picture of Lord Balaji. It was enough for her. It had always been enough.

The aunties seemed satisfied. They completed their Lakshmi pooja with care, nodded in approval, and finally gave Nina and Daisy the signal to light the diyas.

That part belonged to them.

Rangoli and diyas were Daisy and Nina's favourite part of Diwali. Together, they moved between both houses, lighting lamps carefully, adjusting wicks, fixing tilted diyas, smiling at each other when one refused to stay lit.

As the last diya was placed, the doorbell rang.

Guests began to arrive slowly.

Anubhav moved easily through the room, introducing parents and in-laws to his newfound Bangalore family. It wasn't a large gathering. It was curated. A few people their age, a few elders closer to their parents' generation. People who belonged, in quiet ways.

The party warmed up gently.

Dishes were laid out buffet-style so everyone could help themselves. Nina and Anubhav hadn't planned an elaborate spread. Without discussion, it had naturally turned into a potluck. Someone brought dessert. Someone else brought

starters. And if they were still hungry later, they could always order in.

That was the beauty of it.

No pressure. No performance. Just friends, food, and the comfort of being together.

Rama and Sheetal finished their dinner early and settled onto the couch, quietly watching the younger lot talk, laugh, and move around. The children were playing, the adults entertaining each other. It was a familiar Diwali sight for them. The only difference this year was the presence of new faces.

“Aunty ji,” Nina said, arriving with her arm looped through another woman’s. “This is Sheila, my best friend.”

Sheila was a few years older than Nina, calm and composed.

“Namaste, Aunty ji,” Sheila said politely.

“Namaste, beta,” Sheetal replied warmly. “Come, sit with us. We were getting bored anyway.”

Sheila smiled and took the chair nearby.

“I’ll go check on the kids,” Nina said. “They’ll forget to eat while playing.”

She walked into the bedroom where the children were gathered, surrounded by a few other mothers who were already fussing in practiced harmony.

“Chalo, sab log,” Nina announced. “Dinner time.”

A group of five or six children assembled almost instantly. The threat was effective.

If you don't eat, you won't get to watch the new Disney movie.
That did the trick.

Still, the protests followed, as expected.

"I don't like this!"

"There's too much rice on my plate."

"I want chapathi."

"I don't want chapathi."

"I want my mommy."

"I'm sleepy."

But there were enough mothers in the room to handle all of it.

Plates were adjusted. Bites were negotiated. Sleepy heads were coaxed. Tears were distracted away.

Dinner, somehow, happened.

And Rama watched it all from a distance, quietly noting how naturally Nina moved among the children. Not loudly. Not dramatically. Just with an ease that made the chaos feel manageable.

Watching all this from a distance, Rama suddenly turned to Sheila and asked her directly, without ceremony.

"So... what's going on between my Anu and Nina?"

Sheila nearly choked on the cold drink she was sipping. She spilled some on her hand and fumbled for a tissue.

"Nothing, Auntie," she said quickly, dabbing at the spill.
"There is absolutely nothing going on."

She paused, then added honestly,

“How I *wish* there was something. I keep telling her to take a chance. She’s still young, and honestly, they fit so well together.”

Before Rama could respond, Anubhav’s voice cut in.

“Maa... meet Nikita,” he said cheerfully. “Rhea’s principal. And my good friend.”

Nikita was tall and composed, dressed in a beige linen collared kurti, no dupatta. It wasn’t that Rama had anything against modern clothes, but she noted quietly that it still felt festive. She glanced sideways at Sheetal.

Sheetal immediately shot her a corrective look. No commentary.

“Hello, Aunt,” Nikita said warmly.

“Hello, beta,” Rama replied.

Anubhav, a glass of wine in one hand and the other casually draped around Nikita’s shoulder, smiled at his mother and mother-in-law.

“She made my life so easy, you have no idea,” he said.

Before either of them could respond, he tugged Nikita along. “Come, let me get you a drink.”

As they walked away, Sheetal leaned in.

“So... what’s going on between *these* two?” she asked quietly.

“They look quite close.”

Sheila laughed softly this time.

“Nothing, Aunt. They’re close because of school stuff. But Anubhav isn’t interested in anyone. Not even trying.”

She lowered her voice.

“We’ve tried setting him up with our single friends. He’s very polite. He’ll go for lunch or dinner just to be nice. But he’s not interested.”

She paused.

“But...,” she added hesitantly.

“But what, beta?” Rama asked immediately.

“I *wish* Anubhav and Nina would think about it.”

“Hain na,” a voice chimed in.

Chitra aunty pulled her chair closer to the group. She lived in Flat 3B, between Nina’s and Anubhav’s. A few years younger than the elder ladies, her children were grown and settled abroad. Her days were quiet, and she happily filled them by entertaining Rhea and Karthik.

She had seen it all.

The awkward beginnings. The polite distance. The slow, easy friendship.

And like the others, she had quietly hoped it would turn into something more.

All the women laughed softly, Chitra included, amused at her own “hain na.”

Rama and Sheetal exchanged a look. It comforted them, knowing there were people here who watched over Anubhav. Not just neighbours. Not just friends.

Family.

“Next time we come,” Rama said decisively, “you make sure they’re together.”

“I’m trying my best, Rama ji,” Chitra chuckled.

Sheila smiled, gently excused herself, and drifted away from the conversation, leaving the aunties to their hopeful plotting.

Diwali concluded on a positive note. Gifts were exchanged, warm hugs lingered, polite handshakes followed, and just like that, it was a wrap.

Before leaving, Daisy handed Sheetal a neatly packed coffee filter along with a bag of South Indian ground coffee. “Eighty percent coffee, twenty percent chicory,” she explained proudly, showing her how to brew it. “It’s the smell,” Daisy said. “That’s what lifts your mood and wakes you up.”

Sheetal smiled, clearly pleased.

“What about me?” Rama asked, half-teasing.

“Main kya degi aapko, mummy ji,” Daisy replied softly. “I just wish your blessings stay with us... like God’s protection.”

Rama wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “Always,” she said. “Our blessings are always with you.”

Like all Indian grandparents, they pressed some cash into Rhea’s and Karthik’s hands.

Rhea accepted it without hesitation.

Karthik looked instinctively at Anubhav first. After a brief pause, he took it too.

“Spend it wisely,” Rama said, ruffling his hair.

“Yes, Dadi,” Karthik replied, wrapping his arms around her waist.

When it came to Sammy, she shook her head politely.

“I can’t accept this,” she said.

“Arey,” Rama shot her a look, “you shouldn’t say no to elders.”

“It’s not like that, Dadi,” Sammy said gently, holding Rama’s hands. She glanced at Daisy, unsure.

“Don’t look at Daisy,” Rama said firmly. “This is my love for you. If Daisy comes in between, I’ll scold her.”

She lifted Sammy’s chin softly. “You call me Dadi, no?”

Daisy gave a small, almost invisible nod.

Sammy accepted the money, bent to touch Rama’s feet, but before she could, Rama pulled her into a hug and kissed her forehead.

“Chalo, chalo,” Anubhav laughed, clapping his hands. “Is your Bollywood saga finished? Enough hugging and crying? Or should we continue?”

The cab was waiting.

Anubhav made sure every bag was loaded, nothing forgotten.

Everyone settled inside. No luggage left behind. Only memories.

“Achha hua,” Sheetal said contentedly. “Now we know... there is scope for Nina and Anu beta.”

“Maaa,” Vanshika muttered, pulling her hoodie over her head. “You’re still on that?”

She plugged in her earphones and stared out the window as the elders chatted animatedly all the way to the airport.

The city slipped past quietly.

And somewhere between teasing, resistance, and reluctant acceptance, something unspoken continued to rearrange itself.

Part IV –
The Shape of Almost

Chapter 14 – More than friends a lot less than partners

Friday night settled quietly. The children were teenagers now, absorbed in their own storms – exams, friendships, first heartbreaks, small rebellions that felt enormous to them. Daisy had taken on extra work. Sammy was twenty-two, freshly out of college, and Daisy was in a hurry – not panic, but urgency. She wanted to save. For marriage, maybe. For higher studies, maybe. Mostly because her body no longer bounced back the way it once did, and she knew stamina was not infinite.

Nina and Anubhav knew this. They guided Daisy when she asked, helped when needed, but Daisy refused to be a burden. Everyone had their own children now. Teenagers came with expenses that hadn't existed before – emotional, financial, invisible.

That evening, Nina and Anubhav sat at his place, sipping wine. Conversation stayed polite, friendly, safe – the kind they had perfected over the years.

After a pause, Nina asked softly, “Do you miss it?”

“Miss what, kiddo?” Anubhav asked, turning toward her.

She had learned to open up to him – slowly, carefully. Not all at once. “Having someone,” she said. “A partner. A companion.”

Nina wasn't much of a drinker, but with Anubhav, she allowed herself a little wine — white, sometimes rosé. Not to escape. Just enough to ease the weight she always carried on her shoulders. Loss, she had never fully mourned. Responsibilities she had never set down.

Tonight, the wine made her a little bolder. Not reckless — just honest.

They had started on the couch. Now they sat on the floor, backs resting against it, legs stretched out over the rug Nina had chosen years ago. His house had once been sparse. Over time, without him noticing, warmth had crept in — plants, soft lamps, rugs that held light instead of reflecting it.

He looked at her and smiled — not the smile of a lover, but something gentler.

“You do fill that space,” he said quietly. “Not as a wife or partner. But as a companion.”

The warmth bloomed in her chest before she couldn't stop it.

“And you do too,” she replied, almost shyly.

She stood to refill her glass, needing movement to steady herself.

“There was an incident,” she said, laughing softly. “When you first moved here.”

He joined her at the table. “Help me remember.”

“You took Karthik for a haircut. And shopping.”

He groaned. “Oh no.”

“I was furious,” she said, slipping into the memory. “Who do you think you are, taking my child without asking?”

She laughed now, but her younger self had been rigid, defensive.

“I understand I’m a single mother,” she had said then, pacing his living room, “but that doesn’t mean I don’t know how to raise my son.”

And just as her anger peaked, Rhea had appeared at the door.

“Ninaaa,” she had chirped, “will you do my hair? Daisy makes it all chipkoo.”

Nina’s voice had softened instantly. “Of course, baby.”

Immediately you smirked at my reaction where the anger melted into warmth at the sight of Rhea.

And you reminded with a hint of sarcasm of course that... it takes a village.

“Oh, I remember that very clearly,” Anubhav said, smiling. “You were so cute, yelling at me.”

“You were always Miss Goody-Goody,” he continued, teasing. “Always polite. Always sweet.”

The wine buzzed softly in her veins. Nina pouted.

“Nooo,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m not always polite and sweet.”

She stepped closer, slowly slipping her arms around his waist. She looked up at him, her gaze lingering first on his eyes, then drifting to his lips.

“Why did we never cross the line?” she whispered.

One of her hands rested on his chest. He could feel her warmth, her breath, the quiet courage it took to ask that question. Something pulled him toward her, like gravity. His heart raced. The wine. Her softness. Her lips. Her big, dark eyes.

He knew what the sober, careful Anubhav would do. Step back. Smile it off. Call her silly.

But this version of him — slightly undone, curious, willing — wanted to test the edge.

He leaned in and pressed a gentle kiss to her lips, barely there, and paused, waiting.

She didn't hesitate.

She pulled him closer, her arms sliding up around his neck. Rising onto her toes, she met his mouth fully. Not a peck. Not tentative. A warm, deliberate invitation.

He responded, slow and unhurried. Not a rush of fire, but something deeper — layers unfolding one at a time. He cupped her face in his hands, kissed her cheeks, her jaw, her neck. Then, without breaking the rhythm, he lifted her easily and set her down on the dining table.

She leaned back instinctively, arching slightly, her hands drawing him closer, opening herself to the moment. His hands moved along her back, steady and reverent. He kissed the hollow of her neck, the curve behind her ear, then found her lips again.

It was intoxicating — the wine, her skin, the familiarity turning suddenly unfamiliar.

And then—

The jingle of keys.

The door opened.

Rhea stood there.

Nina froze. She jumped down from the table, unsteady, flushed, suddenly aware of everything.

“What’s happening?” Rhea asked.

Her eyes went straight to Nina — not her father.

Because in Rhea’s world, Nina was untouchable. Perfect. Safe. Proper. The woman who never did anything wrong. Or anything... like this.

“You lied when Dada-Dadi and Nana-Nani asked. And now this... what is happening behind our backs?”

The words landed clumsily, crudely, but they carried something far worse than anger. Humiliation.

Rhea saw it the moment it crossed Nina’s face. Not rage. Not accusation. Disappointment.

And it was unbearable.

Nina looked at Rhea as if she didn’t recognise her anymore. As if the child she knew had slipped somewhere she couldn’t reach. She didn’t argue. She didn’t explain. She simply bent down, picked up her things, gathered what little dignity she could still hold, and walked back to her apartment.

The door shut softly behind her. That softness hurt the most.

Anubhav instinctively stepped forward, ready to follow her, to ask if she was okay, to fix something, anything. Then he stopped.

He turned slowly and looked at Rhea. The look was sharp enough to cut.

"You are crossing the line," Anubhav said, his voice low, controlled, dangerous.

Rhea opened her mouth to speak.

"Do you even remember," Anubhav continued, "what all that woman has done for you?"

"And just because—"

"Enough," Anubhav snapped, cutting her off mid-sentence. "I do not want to hear a single word."

His fury finally broke loose. He grabbed the lamp and threw it to the floor. It shattered, the sound echoing through the room like a gunshot.

"Go to your room. Now," he growled.

"I hate you!" Rhea screamed, stomping her feet. She flung her bag aside and ran to her room, slamming the door behind her.

Anubhav stood there, chest heaving.

"You should," he yelled after her. "Because this is the real me. And you better get used to it."

He turned and walked into his own room, shutting the door hard.

The house fell silent. And for the first time, silence didn't feel safe.

Chapter 15 – A little shake not quake

Nina had moved into a mid-level role at work, one that finally gave her flexibility. She no longer needed to be physically present all the time. She began her days early, and she enjoyed the quiet ritual of mornings. Feeding the kids, packing last-minute snacks, watching them leave.

They were independent now. Teenagers. Being dropped off by Nina or Anubhav wasn't "cool" anymore. They biked to school instead, laughing, racing each other down the street.

But after the incident with Rhea, Nina changed.

She made sure she wasn't home during breakfast. She returned late at night, when the house was already quiet, when no one could casually ask, "*Are you okay?*"

If Daisy asked gently whether she had eaten, Nina smiled and said she had eaten with colleagues.

Karthik noticed. Daisy noticed.

And Anubhav noticed too.

He learned of the pattern through Daisy, not because Nina said anything, but because silence has its own rhythm when something is wrong.

He didn't go to her door.

Not because he had done something unforgivable, but because he felt he had failed somewhere deeper. Failed his

daughter. Failed to protect the fragile balance he had spent years building.

He wondered, quietly, if things would have been different had he been the kind of strict father he had grown up with. The kind who demanded obedience before understanding.

But he remembered that childhood too. How it crushed curiosity. How it clipped independence. How it made children compliant but unsure of themselves.

He had chosen differently. And this time, that choice seemed to have worked against him.

Rhea missed Nina's warmth. She was angry, but she didn't quite know why. She only knew that something familiar was gone, and its absence felt louder than her anger. She missed Nina terribly.

Anubhav was no longer the goofy, easy father she was used to. He still loved her, still showed up, but the warmth had shifted. He couldn't meet her halfway until she understood what she had done and found it in herself to apologise.

It wasn't punishment. It was disappointment.

Disappointment in her, perhaps. Or maybe in himself. That somewhere along the way, he had allowed her to take the adults in her life for granted, to believe that love would always bend, always adjust, always make space for her demands without consequence. And now, for the first time, love was standing still.

"Where is Rhea?" Karthik asked Daisy.

She hadn't shown up for breakfast. Hadn't even come to pick up her lunchbox.

"Don't know, baba," Daisy replied. "She was already awake. Making milk for herself." She shook her head, half amused, half puzzled. "I've never seen Rhea baby in the kitchen before," she chuckled.

Karthik laughed along with her, but something felt strange. The house was quiet in a way that didn't belong to mornings. A silence layered beneath normal sounds. Something unspoken, tucked carefully away.

"Did you pack our lunchboxes?" Karthik asked.

"Yes, baba. On the table," Daisy replied.

"I'll give Rhea her box," he said. "Thanks, Daisy. Love you."

He rushed off to school as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world to say. For Karthik, it was.

For Daisy, it never was.

It was her favourite thing.

Karthik had grown up without a father, but Nina had raised him with gentleness and grace. Anubhav had given him confidence, taught him how to take up space without fear. Somewhere between the two of them, he was growing into a fine young man.

"Love you too, baba," Daisy replied softly, watching him go.

At school, Karthik went straight to Rhea's class.

She wasn't there.

Not in the library. Not on the playground.

He stood in the corridor, scratching his head, Rhea's Hello Kitty lunchbox dangling from his hand. He felt faintly embarrassed holding it, but more than that, he felt worried.

"Karthik!"

He turned to see Nikita.

"Hello, Ma'am," he said politely, instinctively trying to hide the lunchbox behind his back.

"What are you hiding?" Nikita asked, her tone mock-stern.

"Nothing," he said, then corrected himself. "It's Rhea's lunchbox."

He waited for a smile. Or a teasing remark. Maybe even a scolding for wandering around.

Instead, Nikita said gently, "She's in the admin building. Talking to the counsellor. If you go now, you might catch her."

She smiled and walked away.

"Thank you, Ma'am," Karthik said, already running.

She was sitting on the couch, sad eyes, playing with her tie.

Hello Kitty !! he tries to cheer you her up.

Karthik...! what you doing here Rhea suddenly excited and happy, someone who is not angry at me and has not changed Rhea thinks to herself.

He hands her the lunch box, Daisy made your favourite Mooli paratha with pickle, she made the tangy tomato coriander chutney if you would have come home for breakfast in the morning.

Really!! She exclaims and grabs her lunch box, Daisy; another person who hasn't changed she thinks and opens her box and takes a whiff of the paratha and the mango pickle.

He gently squeezes her neck between her elbow and teases her why are you sad dude. Says Karthik.

Bugger off !! she pushes him away...it's a girl thing says Rhea.

Oh, you are a girl now !!? but you don't behave like one says Karthik and jumps out of the couch making faces at Rhea.

You are going to pay for that you little ... and starts chasing.

Something is still intact, not shaken.

Karthik was one of those boys who had grown older than his age.

He had seen his mother struggle. She never spoke about it out loud. She pampered him and Rhea; bought everything he asked for without hesitation. But he noticed the quiet flinch when she glanced at a price tag. The pause that came and went too quickly to be discussed.

She never deprived him of anything. But he saw the cost.

At night, when the house was silent, she would sit in front of her laptop with an Excel sheet open. Expenses. Dues. Numbers marching across the screen. And the sighs. Soft, restrained sighs she thought no one heard.

Karthik heard them all.

He tried his best not to become one of those sighs. He hated them.

Sometimes, in his quiet moments, he wondered if it had just been the two of them, would they have been happy? Maybe quieter. Less loud than Rhea. Less carefree than Anubhav. Not unhappy. Just... balanced in a different way.

And sometimes, when he was younger, he wondered if Anubhav could have been his father.

But he saw things clearly now.

He saw how Nina kept a careful distance. And how Anubhav was goofy, everywhere at once, filling the house with noise and warmth. All over Rhea. Protective of Karthik too. But always respectful. Always stopping just short of Nina.

There was affection. There was care. But there was also restraint.

Lost in these thoughts, the television murmuring at low volume, Karthik lay sprawled on the couch in the living room, waiting for Nina. She was coming home late, and the waiting made him uneasy.

He heard the keys jingle.

Quickly, he lowered his head and closed his eyes, pretending to sleep.

Nina walked in, dragging her feet. Tired. Not from work, but from being away from her comfort for too long.

On ordinary days, she would wake early, catch up on emails, send out replies, then leave for work late enough to avoid traffic. She'd work five or six hours, return home, change into her jammies. Music would play softly in the kitchen. She would tease Daisy. Daisy would respond with mock irritation.

One chopping, one sautéing. Two separate rhythms that somehow formed a harmony.

The house would hum.

But now, everything felt scattered.

Not broken. Just scattered.

And no one seemed ready to gather the pieces. Or maybe they were afraid of what putting them back together would reveal.

Scattered made everything heavier.

She saw Karthik curled up on the couch and thought, *at least there is one person who speaks to me without a mask. Without filters.*

And Daisy.

There's Daisy too, Nina thought.

That small thought steadied her more than she expected.

Chapter 16 – Learning How to Stay

Anu couldn't take it any longer.

He missed his friend too much.

He missed her little ramblings about her young Quality Analysts who didn't understand the basics. Nina being Nina, too empathetic to scold, correcting gently, listening to their problems, becoming their elder sister. Giving life advice like an old crone trapped in a young woman's body. She was still a maiden, but she didn't behave like one.

With him, she could.

With him, she could rant, complain, laugh loudly, let her hair down, sigh, even cry. He would listen, offer advice. He was older than her, in life and in corporate years too. And like an obedient subordinate, she would nod, make mental notes, implement everything, then come back smiling.

"You know what... that worked like a charm."

But it wasn't just advice.

It was comfort. Intimacy of the safest kind. Someone to unwind the day with.

Enough was enough.

One night, Anu went to Nina's house. He sent Daisy to stay with Rhea at his place, and decided he would stay with Karthik. They never left the children alone. The kids were old

enough to manage, to call for help if needed, but the adults still needed that reassurance. That sense of order.

“Anu uncle... is everything okay?” Karthik asked.

“Yeah, bro. Why do you ask?” Anu replied casually.

Though Rhea called Nina by her name, Nina had always insisted that Karthik never call Anu by his name. Karthik had protested when he was younger, but he was such a mumma’s boy he rarely argued with her on things that mattered to her.

“You stopped coming,” Karthik said suddenly. “Even when you do, you just have tea and leave. Amma stays late at work. I don’t know if she’s eating properly. Once or twice, I saw her eating cold food by the sink.”

He paused, then blurted everything out in one breath.

“I’m scared to even ask her.”

“Come here,” Anu said softly, gesturing him closer.

Karthik walked over, shoulders drooped, worry etched plainly on his face.

“Main hoon na,” Anu said.

“Well... something happened. And I promise I’ll fix it.” He placed a reassuring hand on Karthik’s shoulder.

“Rhea is also very sad,” Karthik added. “She didn’t even come for breakfast today.”

“That’s a tough one,” Anu admitted. “But first I’ll talk to Nina. Then we’ll deal with the tougher cookie.”

He tried to smile, though it didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“Now go do your homework or sleep. I don’t know your bedtime,” Anu teased, raising an eyebrow.

Karthik laughed. “It’s not bedtime yet. But I’ll go. You kids talk.”

“Aye!” Anu laughed.

Karthik disappeared into his room, doing teenage things. Scrolling through his phone. Getting lost on the internet. Reading book reviews, author bios. Wandering through his own quiet wonderland, not unlike teenage Nina once was, just in a slightly different colour palette.

He too wanted to be a bookstagrammer someday. Nina was firm about one thing though. Reading for pleasure could wait until after PUC.

Soon, Anu heard the keys jingle.

He stood up instantly. The distance between the door and him was barely five or six steps.

Nina walked in.

She froze.

Her bag slipped from her hand. Keys clattered to the floor. And before either of them could say anything, she moved toward him and buried her head in his chest, sobbing like a child.

Anu held her tight. It broke his heart to see how long she had been holding everything in.

He brushed her hair gently, then pulled back just enough to look into her eyes.

“What happened?” he asked softly. “The world didn’t end. Nothing bad happened.”

“I failed you,” Nina whispered. “I failed Rhea. You trusted me. But I’m not her mother. I couldn’t discipline her. I couldn’t teach her. I’m sorry.”

“Oh Nina...” Anu sighed deeply. “You didn’t fail.”

He paused, then added with a dry smile, “Actually... we both failed.”

She leaned into him again.

“What do we do about that girl?” he asked gently, rocking her slightly as her sobs slowed.

Nina didn’t answer. She just accepted the warmth. Her guards were too tired to stand anymore.

Behind the wall, Karthik had heard everything.

When he heard Nina cry, his instinct was to rush forward. But when he saw her in Anu’s arms, he stopped.

Instead of worry, he felt relief.

For the first time, he was seeing his mother break.

She had always been stoic. Unshakeable. Like nothing could touch her. No pain, no hurt. Every time he tried to tell her he was grown enough to understand, that she could share her worries, she shielded him from everything.

Now she wasn’t.

He pretended he had just woken up and walked out rubbing his eyes.

“Amma... when did you come?” he asked.

“Oh, come on, dude,” Anu laughed. “You’re a terrible actor.”

“Guilty,” Karthik admitted, ducking his head.

Then, more softly, “Amma... is everything okay? You all have been so weird lately.”

Nina didn’t answer.

She tried to pull away, but Anu held her firmly, an arm around her shoulders like family.

“There was a problem,” Anu said calmly. “And we’ll fix it. Like I promised.”

“You promise?” Karthik said, holding out his hand.

Anu pulled him in, gathering both Nina and Karthik close.

“I promise,” he said, giving Karthik an affectionate head bump. “Everything will be okay.”

“Now go to bed,” he added, winking. “We kids need to talk.”

“Fine,” Karthik laughed. “Don’t stay up too late.”

After he left, Anu warmed up dinner. They ate together for the first time in days.

“I missed you,” he said simply.

“I missed you too,” Nina replied.

There was nothing romantic in it.

But they knew they were no longer just neighbours or friends. They were a family. A unit. A couple without intimacy. Two adults who had shared the responsibility of two children for far too long to pretend otherwise.

That one slip was just a glitch.

Their bond was too sacred to destroy.

And Nina's love for Rhea was deep enough that she would sacrifice any man for it. Not just Anu.

Saturday morning came.

Early breakfast. Daisy cooking. Adults chatting.

But Rhea was missing.

Karthik looked around, uneasy.

"Where is Rhea?" he asked.

"I don't know," Anu said flatly. "We barely talk these days."

It hurt. But he wasn't ready yet.

He knew if he spoke now, anger would take over.

He had always told himself she didn't have a mother, that he couldn't be strict with her.

But this time, she had crossed a line.

A bad one.

Chapter 17 – Why though; Why not?

While everyone was enjoying breakfast, Karthik quietly went to Anu's house to check on Rhea.

He barged into her bedroom, still carrying some anger, but the moment he saw her, it vanished.

She was crying. Soft sobs. Her face buried into the pillow.

"What happened, dude?" Karthik asked gently. "Why are you crying?"

"Go away!!" Rhea screamed at him.

Karthik was a little annoyed, but instead of leaving, he jumped onto the bed beside her.

"Tell me," he said. "Something is wrong. The other day you went to see the counsellor, and now you're not even coming home for breakfast."

He gently pulled her hair, affectionately. "You know you can tell me anything. We practically grew up together. Remember how we met?" he asked.

She lifted her head and turned toward him. Karthik was lying on his back, mindlessly scrolling through his phone.

"How?" Rhea asked.

"A pink T-shirt and a skirt," he said. "With skimpy hair. And Daisy said you were running away from home."

Rhea laughed. And then they both laughed.

She turned to her left, while Karthik stared at the ceiling.

He folded his hands dramatically and asked, "Tell me... what changed that innocent, happy little girl into this sobbing, sad one?"

Rhea turned flat on her back; eyes fixed on the ceiling.

"I think I hurt Nina," she said softly.

"I know," Karthik replied.

"What!?? How do you know?" Rhea shot up, all in one breath.

"I don't know everything," he said. "But I saw my mom hugging Anu uncle. Crying. Like proper sobbing. Saying she failed you. Saying she didn't take care of you properly."

His voice dropped.

"It made me very sad seeing her cry. But I was also glad Anu uncle was there. At least she wasn't crying alone."

"You're not bothered that they were hugging?" Rhea asked, amused, confused, and a little angry.

"Very non-issue," Karthik said casually. "Why would I be?"

"I've seen my mom strong all the time. Even when she worries or gets stressed. Everyone comes home, laughs, eats with us. But no one really checks on her."

He paused.

"Except Anu uncle."

"Well...!" Rhea hesitated. "I saw them kissing the other night."

“And?” Karthik asked calmly.

“Aren’t you mad?” Rhea exclaimed. “Isn’t it weird?”

“I don’t know what your problem is,” he said. “My mom has been almost like your mom for as long as I remember. And Anu uncle has been practically my father.”

He sat up now.

“I’m actually surprised they waited this long.”

“Come on, Rhea,” he continued. “They’re grown-ups. They spend so much time together. You’re a girl. Don’t you understand emotions? Love?”

“Would it really be that bad if they got together? Or even got married?”

He looked at her seriously.

“We already live like family. You and I are literally in the same bed right now. Imagine if my mom or Anu uncle walked in and said this was wrong. How would you react?”

“You need to grow up,” he said quietly. “And stop this silent war with my mom.”

“She’s been nothing but kind and loving to you. I’ve never seen her this sad.”

Karthik got off the bed.

“You’re making this way bigger than it needs to be. And honestly... it feels disrespectful to my mom.”

He walked toward the door.

“We were a family,” he said, without turning back. “And you’re breaking it.”

“Hey,” Anu teased lightly from the living room. “Didn’t you go to convince Rhea? Why are you back alone?”

“Maybe I was wrong about her,” Karthik said bluntly. “Maybe I should just focus on myself and my mom.”

He grabbed his sweatshirt and headphones.

“No one has ever hurt my mom the way Rhea has.”

He turned to Nina.

“Can I go out with my friends? I’m upset.”

She nodded. “Be back by seven.”

Karthik nodded, waved politely at Anu, and left.

Anu sighed. “See? Even now he asked for permission. He waved at me. And Rhea...”

“She must have said something,” he muttered.

“Please,” Nina said softly. “Teenagers don’t need reasons to be upset or happy. He’ll be fine.”

“I think I should go home and straighten her up,” Anu said, standing.

The doorbell rang.

Nina gently pushed him back into his chair. “You enjoy your poori.”

It was Daisy at the door. Rhea was hiding behind her.

Nina didn't react. She simply opened the door.

She went back to the dining table, picked up her tea, and sat down.

Rhea nudged Daisy with her elbow, trying to recreate the first time they met. Pink top. Blue skirt. Backpack.

Daisy hesitated.

"Nina miss," she said carefully, "look who I found in the hallway."

"Rhea baby," she added lightly, "our neighbour. Running away from home."

Anu stared at his plate, deliberately neutral.

Nina glanced at Daisy. Just one look. Daisy understood and slipped inside.

Nina stayed seated.

She had changed, still soft-spoken, still gentle, but she no longer bent backwards to please.

Friends and colleagues had taken her kindness for granted. She had toughened up just enough to survive.

Only with Anu did her guards fall.

Sometimes she wondered what they were now.

Friends. Family. Something unnamed.

She was relieved she didn't have husband problems to discuss like her colleagues. Her children were good. And the man who hovered in her life felt less like a partner and more like a third child when it came to food and shared laughter.

Daisy moved quietly into the kitchen.

Anu and Nina went back to eating, sipping tea, talking about ordinary things.

Rhea clears her throat and says, “Main ghar chhod ke ja rahi hoon.”

Nina looks at her plainly and replies, without raising her voice, “Tell that to your father,” gesturing toward Anu as she sips her tea.

“Doesn’t it bother you?” Rhea sulks.

“I always treated you like a friend,” Nina says calmly. “But I realise now you’re not that little girl who needs to be pampered or coddled anymore. You’ve learnt the adult language, so I’d rather speak to you in the same language.”

She pauses, then adds quietly, “Besides, who am I to you? If you’re looking for permission, Anubhav is the right person.”

Rhea drops her bag. Her eyes fill instantly.

Nina’s chest tightens. For a second, she almost gets up. Anu can see it. He can see how badly she wants to go to Rhea, to pull her into a hug. But she stays seated, holding herself together with effort.

Anu breaks the silence.

“You don’t have to run away,” he says firmly. “I’ve already spoken to Dada and Dadi. I’ll book your tickets. You can go live with them, if that pleases you.”

“Papaaa...” Rhea says, confused and teary. Why aren’t they consoling her? Hugging her? Pampering her like always?

She turns to Nina and sobs, “You are my mom. You’re the only mom I’ve ever known.”

“To mummy se koi aise baat karta hai?” Anu grunts at her.

That’s it.

Nina can’t hold herself anymore.

She walks toward Rhea with open arms. Rhea rushes into them like a baby, sobbing uncontrollably, hiccupping between words.

“I’m sorry, Nina. I really am. I don’t know why I behaved like this.”

Nina brushes her hair gently, soothing her, murmuring soft reassurances.

“Daisy,” Nina calls out, still holding Rhea. “Get some water for Rhea baby.”

She makes Rhea sit on the chair, wiping her tears. “Please stop crying now. You’ll get a headache later.”

“Come, have breakfast. Daisy, get some food for her.”

“She’s not a baby anymore,” Anu mutters. “This is how you’ve spoiled her.”

Rhea starts crying again, poori still in her mouth, eyes wide and wounded as she looks at her father.

Anu walks over, pulls her into a hug.

“Tu toh ghar chhod ke jaane wali thi na?” he teases gruffly.

“Papaaa...” Rhea cries again, burying her face in his chest.

“You’ve become a spoiled girl, you know that,” he says, holding her close, brushing her hair. “But this time, you did cross a line, kiddo.”

She peeks up from his embrace, barely lifting her face. “Sorry.”

“I won’t let this happen ever again,” Rhea says quietly.

Everyone knows it won’t be instant. Going back to normal will take time. They’ve all been hurt, a little.

Everyone knew it wouldn’t be instant. Going back to normal would take time. They had all been hurt, in small but real ways.

“So... when are you guys getting married?” Rhea teased Anu, the mischief back in her voice.

“I’ll send you a wedding card when our elders agree,” Anu replied evenly.

Rhea burst into laughter, loud and unfiltered, just like her usual self.

Nina smiled, a quiet relief settling in her chest.

Rhea was back.

Part V – Staying

Chapter 18 – Caterpillars to Butterflies

Today was the day. It was finally here.

Rhea was about to graduate high school. Karthik, his PUC.

They had plans. Big plans. The kind that feels urgent and fragile at eighteen, as if the whole world is waiting just outside the gate.

Karthik wanted to pursue Arts and History. He had good grades in Maths and Science, good enough for engineering or medicine, but his heart had made its choice early. Art made sense to him. Stories made sense. He had known that about himself for as long as he could remember.

Rhea, on the other hand, loved Maths and computers. She was certain she wanted to be a developer. She wasn't sure how yet, but she knew one thing clearly. She didn't understand the kind of creativity Karthik spoke about, and she was perfectly okay with that.

It was Farewell Day. Almost like prom, but more official. Less dancing, fewer dates. More speeches, more applause. An acknowledgement of effort, of years quietly survived.

They were still on the same campus, just in different blocks. Rhea and her friends had plans of their own. Make an appearance at their ceremony, then sneak into the seniors' farewell to spot crushes one last time. No uniforms. That alone was enough to make the girls giddy.

Rhea was in tights, a blouse, and an oversized T-shirt thrown over everything, running around the house frantically. Hair. Makeup. Something was always missing. Her two friends, in contrast, were calm and prepared. Blouses on, underskirts in place, saris neatly laid out on the bed, waiting for one of the adults to help with the draping.

Rhea had never been a makeup girl. But today felt different. Today mattered. For one small teenager, there were two adults and one almost-adult trying to get her ready.

Karthik pushed open his mother's bedroom door and was immediately met with a chorus of screams.

"Go awayyyy!"

All the girls, in perfect unison.

He burst out laughing and retreated instantly. He was already dressed. Black V-neck T-shirt, grey dress pants, backpack slung on one shoulder.

Rhea spotted him and scanned him from head to toe.

"Is *that* what you're wearing for your farewell?" she exclaimed.

"Yeah," Karthik replied casually.

"It's a once-in-a-lifetime thing," Rhea said, pushing him. "You'll never get this farewell again."

"My raw charm is enough," Karthik said, brushing his chin, the faint hint of a goatee just beginning to show, smirking at her.

"You dumb dodo," Rhea snapped, laughing as she shoved him out and slammed the door.

Inside, the room erupted in laughter again. For no reason. For every reason.

Finally, all the girls are ready in their beautiful Sari, Rhea had no reference of a grown-up woman apart from Nina, of course they had searched through internet for looks but rhea wanted her first ever Sari look to be like Nina's as a sentiment.

She did not let Nina help her with the Sari , Daisy and Rhea rummaged through Nina's wardrobe and found a sweet baby blue Tissue Sari with white flowers spread across the sari , very simple , elegant and screamed Nina , she let her hair flow in simple waves , with a white sleeveless blouse paired with a dainty stacked silver neckless , which has an R for Rhea , moon and stars a clean strapped watch and a silver simple charm bracelet on the other hand.

Nina helped the other girls with the Saris and jewellery and other moms joined like it was a big ceremony, well it was for them their girls were stepping in to their adolescence.

Rhea emerged from the bedroom in a baby blue sari, and Nina squealed. "You look like a mini me!"

They both burst into giggles and hugged each other tightly.

"Here, here—this is for you," Nina said, handing her a neatly wrapped box.

Rhea opened it eagerly. Inside was a beautiful clutch, perfectly matched to the sari.

"Aaaaww... thank you, Nina!" she said, hugging her again.

"The clutch is my gift," Nina added. "What's inside is your papa's."

Rhea quickly opened the clutch and froze for a second. Cash. And a smartphone.

“Oh my God....!!!” she shrieked.

“It’s postpaid,” Nina said calmly. “Mine, Karthik’s, Daisy’s, Sammy’s, and Anu’s numbers are already saved.”

Rhea jumped and hugged her again. “You guys are the best!”

Nina hugged her back, smiling. “This is only for emergencies. And you know your dad—he’s going to put every parental control known to mankind on it.”

Rhea shrugged, unbothered.

Soon the girls gathered around her, already planning which apps to install. Rhea was the last one in her group to get a smartphone. She had complained now and then, but never demanded one. When Anu bought it, he told himself it was a reward—for patience, for understanding, for being a good kid.

The mothers finally settled at the dining table with tea and snacks.

Soon enough, the chauffeur arrived. Anu had offered to drop the newly transformed young ladies—caterpillars turning into butterflies—for their farewell.

As they were leaving, Rhea hugged him tightly. “Thank you, Papa,” she said, squeezing him.

“What time should I come and pick you up?” Anu asked.

“It’s okay,” she replied casually. “We’ll come back with Karthik.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, but the girls had already disappeared, laughter trailing behind them.

Rhea walked a few steps like a small child—holding her sari like a skirt, clutch tucked awkwardly under her arm.

Anu smiled to himself. *Just by wearing a sari, you don’t grow up, betu.*

Then he saw her pause.

She steadied herself. Let go of the pleats. Adjusted the pallu. Held the clutch properly.

And walked forward—quietly, confidently—like a young woman.

While the girls entered the Auditorium, it was full all their classmates in Saris or Kurtis, basically ethnic wear, no formal dress, all the boys somehow managed to look decent, no denim, but formal shirts and pants but just like the school uniforms just in different colours.

The girls gathered in different groups, clicked pictures, with smiles, pouts, flaunting the pallu and hands in the air like we are free all done and now they were bored. The teachers gathered, the ceremony started the top three kids were given prizes and speech and blah blah blah thought the girls.

One by one, the girls sneaked out toward the senior block. They couldn’t use the main entrance, where they would be greeted and handed tags, so they slipped in through the back door, pleading with the security guard who practically knew every student by name.

For formality, he said, “No, didi, we can’t let high schoolers in.” But he also knew that every year a few rebellious girls would try their luck. As long as they weren’t outsiders, he wouldn’t get into trouble.

He let them in with a wink. “Don’t bring anyone else.”

The girls rushed inside, trying hard to blend in, to look like they belonged.

This was nothing like their own ceremony. That one had been formal, chairs lined up neatly, a stage, teachers everywhere. Here, there was no stage. No teachers in sight. A DJ booth stood in one corner, food stalls in another. Cute round tables with four chairs each, floral centrepieces placed thoughtfully. It felt like a proper mixer. A grown-up goodbye.

The girls went, “Aaaaww,” almost in unison, picked a table, and sat down, scanning the room.

“Stacy is looking so pretty... and so ladylike,” Rhea said.

“She looks so grown-up in that dress,” Gauri added. “All the seniors are in evening dresses. And here we are, in saris and kurtis.”

“Isn’t it?” Kriti chimed in.

“It’s okay,” Shreya said. “In two years, we’ll be here too. Wearing elegant dresses. Being grown-up.”

“Yeahhh!” they chorused, already getting up. Lemonade first. Food next.

While waiting for her lemonade, Rhea kept fussing with her pallu. On the shoulder. Off the shoulder. Wrapped around her waist. Then undone again.

“Stop fidgeting,” Shreya said. “Come, let me pin it halfway. It’ll flow nicely, and you’ll finally stay still.”

Rhea gladly handed her clutch over and tried her best not to move while Shreya worked.

That’s when she noticed him.

Tall. Grey trousers. Grey jacket. A black V-neck T-shirt, just low enough to hint at a toned chest. Sleeves pushed up. Not too formal, but formal enough.

She couldn’t see his face yet, but her heart began to beat oddly. She leaned left. Then right.

“Hey, stop moving,” Shreya warned.

“Okay, okay, sorry, mumma,” Rhea teased.

When the crowd shifted, she saw his face.

Karthik.

A simple silver chain rested against his collarbone. His hair was spiked. The goatee suited him far too well. He looked... different. Grown.

Something warm stirred in her chest.

She panicked.

“No!” she shrieked, dropping everything. “My eyes, my eyes!” She shut them dramatically.

Shreya froze. “Did I poke you?”

“No, no. You’re fine,” Rhea said quickly, bending down to gather her things. She shoved Shreya’s bag into her hands. “Come, let’s get the lemonade.”

She glanced back once more.

Karthik was smiling at Stacy. And handing her a rose.

Rhea didn't like it. She hated herself for not liking it.

She shrugged it off, smiled at Shreya, grabbed her lemonade, and said, "Let's eat."

They moved toward the food stalls, sipping lemonade, debating snacks. Rhea kept glancing back, searching for him without quite admitting why.

It's nothing, she told herself. He's just dressed nicely today. I'm only noticing that.

They sat down with stuffed mushrooms, paneer tikka, mocktails. The DJ started playing music. A few people began dancing. Slowly, the floor filled.

The girls decided to join.

Then Rhea saw it.

Karthik took Stacy's hand.

A sharp feeling cut through her.

"What is it, dude?" Kriti asked. "Why do you look so angry?"

"Nothing," Rhea said, forcing herself to move with the music.

"No, something's wrong," Kriti said. "You've been staring at Karthik and Stacy forever."

"Is it that obvious?" Rhea asked softly, her shoulders dropping.

"I don't know why," she admitted. "I don't understand myself. But I don't like how close they are. And he even gave her flowers."

"Dude," Gauri said carefully. "Do you like Karthik?"

"Eww, no!" Rhea blurted out. Then paused. "I mean... of course I do. We grew up together."

"Then why does it bother you?" Kriti asked.

"Stop it," Rhea said. "I'm confused."

She walked straight toward Karthik and stood in front of him, silent until he noticed her.

"Hey, you dodo," he teased. "What are you doing here? You're not supposed to be here."

"And what's this?" he added. "You suddenly look like a girl."

A small smile crept onto Rhea's face.

"I want to go home," she said, stomping her foot.

"Arey, it's only 7:30," Karthik protested.

"I don't know. I don't feel good. I want to go home," she insisted, suddenly very small.

"Fine. Book a cab," he said. "I heard you have a phone now, Miss Grown-Up."

"Karthik!" she squealed.

She pulled out her phone. "I'll tell Papa you don't want to take me home."

"Don't be a tattletale," he laughed.

He wasn't a crowd person anyway. He preferred books and podcasts to loud parties.

"You are such a spoiled brat," he said.

She grinned and hooked her arm into his.

"Where's your entourage?" he asked.

She pointed to the girls.

"Correction," he said. "Spoiled brat and diva."

He dropped everyone home one by one and finally returned with Rhea.

She was fine all the way.

The moment they stepped inside, she broke.

"Ninaaa!" she cried, throwing herself into Nina's arms.

Nina looked at Karthik sharply. "Nuvve edo chesuntaav," she said. *You must have done something.*

"She was fine till she saw you," Karthik protested. "Suddenly drama."

"Ninaaa," Rhea wailed.

"There is no chivalry these days," Karthik muttered, tossing his jacket aside.

Anu walked in, mock-scolding Karthik, and both men burst out laughing.

"He never takes me seriously," Rhea complained.

Anu sat beside Karthik. "Chal, beer peetein hain."

"Haaaw!" Karthik exclaimed.

“It’s okay,” Anu said. “You’re grown up now. You’re fulfilling my wish—to have a beer with my son.”

They laughed, shoulders slung together. “Don’t tell your mom,” Anu added.

“Don’t be out too late,” Nina called after them.

Later, Nina and Rhea slipped into their jammies, Rhea recounting every detail of the evening, limbs sprawled across Nina’s lap.

At a nearby brewery, Anu and Karthik clinked their glasses, enjoying the Bangalore night.

Nina watched Rhea yawn and ramble and thought: Sixteen, and still a child.

Chapter 19 – Frog to Prince

Summer was finally over. No more uniforms. No more Maths or Science, Karthik thought.

Unlike many of his classmates, college did not feel like freedom to him. He had grown up in an emotionally safe home, so independence didn't arrive as rebellion. It arrived as responsibility. And that made him a little nervous.

Growing up now meant becoming self-reliant. Soon, earning. Helping his mother in small ways, even though Nina had never placed that pressure on him. All she ever wanted was for him to experience life fully, without regret.

Life had taken so much from Nina that she was determined her son would not grow up shrinking his dreams. She wanted him to try, to explore, to pivot if needed. To choose without fear.

A part of her had hoped he would take Maths or Science. Something practical. Something that kept doors open. But when Karthik chose a Bachelor of Arts programme, she surprised herself by feeling proud.

He was excited. Nervously excited.

The area rug was covered with college brochures, Karthik lying on his stomach, flipping through pages, comparing syllabi, circling possibilities. He hadn't chosen his electives yet.

“Amma,” he called out. “Which elective should I take?” Then, almost shyly, he added, “I was thinking... Psychology.”

Nina smiled at his enthusiasm. He had always loved science, but Maths had never been his friend.

He had considered a BSc, briefly. But the pull toward creativity was stronger. He finally chose a Bachelor of Fine Arts, and Nina felt, quietly, that she might get to live a little through him too.

She joined him on the floor with her coffee and picked up a brochure.

“Psychology, huh?” she said, amused. “Do you think you can absorb something that dry?” she teased.

“Amma, don’t scare me,” Karthik laughed, rolling onto his side and placing his head in her lap.

She ran her fingers through his hair, then asked softly, “Have I been a good mother, kanna?”

He looked up, surprised.

“When you were little, you told me everything,” she continued. “Now you keep things to yourself. It makes me worry sometimes.”

He smiled, half-mischievous, half-gentle.

“Well, you should worry,” he said. “You always worry about Rhea. You’re my mother too. You should worry about me sometimes.”

“Aye,” Nina said, lifting her hand in mock warning.

Karthik laughed and rolled away, the brochures scattering around them.

Karthik was confident. Maybe not about the subjects, but about himself. He was determined to do something meaningful, to show his mother that he acknowledged her hard work and valued her. Every child does, perhaps, but Karthik had seen her late nights, her exhausted smiles, the way she never complained, always bending backwards to be there for others and for him.

He was eager to become an adult. To start earning. To take care of his mother and let her occupy some space in her own life.

As he looked through prospective educational institutes, he was also searching for part-time student jobs. Somewhere he could earn at least his pocket money and feel independent.

Though he was satisfied with his life, he wasn't completely immune to the questions that came with growing up. Questions about family. About fathers.

He had Anubhav. And among Rhea, Nina, and Anubhav, he had love. But slowly, he began to feel like a stranger in his own home.

Not that he didn't feel loved. Just that he didn't always feel seen or understood.

Chapter 20 – Wounds, Insecurities, Chaos Again

“Does Karthik have a girlfriend?” Kriti asks casually.

The girls, haphazardly sprawled across the bed, suddenly spring upright, sitting cross-legged and turning in unison toward Rhea.

“Don’t look at me,” Rhea says quickly. “I’m not his girlfriend.”

A tiny, traitorous blush creeps in, and she hopes no one noticed how flustered she’d been looking at him during the farewell.

“Dude... did you not see his socials?” Gauri asks.

Kriti unlocks her phone and shoves it toward Rhea. His feed is a strange mix: random pictures of leaves and flowers, a few cringe selfies, some group photos, and in almost every one of them, Stacy standing somewhere close by.

Before anyone can comment, Rhea blurts out, “Is he dating Stacy?”

“Maybe?” Shreya raises an eyebrow. “Looks like it.”

“Who cares,” Rhea shrugs, scrolling through her phone a little too aggressively.

“Oh, come on,” Kriti grins. “Don’t tell me you don’t have a crush on him. We all do. He’s grown up into such a fine man.

We just thought since you're close to him, we should stay away and make him our jiju."

"Shut up!" Rhea snaps, throwing a pillow at them.

The girls burst into giggles, chanting horribly off-key, "Karthik and Rhea sitting on a tree— K I S S I N G!"

The room fills with laughter, cushions flying, teenage chaos reclaiming the moment.

Later that night, Rhea keeps staring at Karthik's social feed. The same pictures. Again, and again.

She sends a follow request. Cancels it. Sends it again. Cancels it again.

When did this become so hard?

We grew up together. Talking to him shouldn't feel this complicated. Following him shouldn't feel like crossing a line.

Why am I so angry?

Is it hormones?

She checks the calendar. No.

She groans, flopping onto the bed and burying her face into the pillow.

"Uggghhh!"

The next day, Rhea skips school and goes straight to Karthik's college.

She tries to imitate Stacy. A sundress. Loose hair. Small hoops. A touch of lipstick. Still, she's sixteen. A duckling trying very hard to look like a swan.

The cafeteria is sparsely filled. A few students lounging. Some laughing. And in the corner, Karthik's table.

Stacy sits beside him.

Rhea feels something snap.

She walks straight up to them.

"Get up," Rhea says sharply.

Stacy looks up, amused. "Excuse me?" she scoffs. "Do I know you?"

"Yes," Rhea snaps. "You're sitting in my place."

Stacy laughs, glancing at Karthik. "Your place?" she repeats, loud enough for others to hear. "You should try reserving seats with confidence next time."

Heads turn.

"You think you're special because he sits next to you?" Rhea spits.

"I don't think anything," Stacy replies coolly. "He chooses to."

That's when it happens.

Rhea's hand reaches out, fingers tangling into Stacy's hair before she can stop herself.

"Ouch!" Stacy yelps.

Everything moves at once.

Karthik grabs Rhea's wrist, pulls her back, and slaps her across the face.

The sound cuts through the room.

"Get out of my campus," he says flatly.

Rhea stands stunned, one hand pressed to her cheek, tears spilling. She looks at him. At Stacy. At the crowd frozen in silence.

And then she runs.

Rahul steps closer to Karthik.

"Dude... didn't you say you love her?"

"I do," Karthik says, staring at the exit.

"Then what was that?"

"Just because I love her doesn't mean I like everything she does."

"She's still a kid," Rahul insists.

"She crossed a line," Karthik snaps. Then, softer, "I won't teach her that love means no consequences."

Rhea catches an auto. Karthik follows at a distance, anger and regret sitting side by side.

At home, she runs straight into Nina's arms, sobbing.

"He slapped me," she cries.

"Karthik!" Nina demands.

“Shut up, Rhea,” Karthik snaps back.

“Karthik,” Nina warns.

“Amma, you too?” he explodes.

“I’m sick of this,” he says. “She skipped school. She made a scene at my college.”

He storms into his room, shoves clothes into a bag, then returns, breathing hard.

“You take care of her like she’s your own,” he tells Nina. “But somewhere, while fixing yourself... you left me alone.”

Nina’s chest tightens.

“She wants everything,” he continues bitterly. “You. Her father. Me. And she never thinks about anyone else.”

He shoulders the bag and heads for the door. On his way out, he bumps into Anubhav. Karthik meets his eyes. “Sorry, man,” he says quietly. “I sympathise with you.” And leaves. The house falls silent. Not peaceful. Just hollow.

Chapter 21 – The Quite Monster

Nina had never seen that side of Karthik. So deeply hurt. So angry. Storming out like that.

Worry and contemplation began to play tricks on her. Did I fail as a mother? Did I mess up both my children – one by over giving, the other by holding back too much? I only meant well.

She wanted to be self-compassionate, remind herself that intentions mattered. But she had seen them both cross lines today, and Karthik's words refused to leave her head.

Did I really see myself in Rhea? Was it the love I never allowed myself that I poured into her? What was wrong with that?

And yet – had she neglected her own child without realising it?

Lost in her thoughts, Nina stood in the kitchen making dosas. Today, the kitchen was empty. No footsteps. No chatter. No shared silences.

For once, all the rules and rituals had been intentionally forgotten. Everyone had quietly agreed that distance was the only way to survive this chaos, at least for now.

But Nina had never been good with quiet. Not this kind.

At work, distraction came easily. At home, she was usually productively consumed. She had always avoided this kind of

blank stillness — the kind that forced her to sit across from her own thoughts.

She had filled her life with people and responsibilities so she could willingly disappear into them.

Now life had pulled the rug from under her and shoved her into a chamber that contained only Nina.

And she did not know how to face herself.

“Ouch.”

She pulled her finger back from the tawa, the sharp sting grounding her for a moment.

“Kanna...?” The word escaped before she could stop it.

No answer.

She stood still, listening to the house breathe — or not.

“Daisy...?” The name came softer this time, almost embarrassed. Daisy was on sick leave. She knew that.

Nina looked around.

The house suddenly felt too large. The silence wasn’t peaceful — it was loud, screaming in ways she didn’t have the strength to decode.

She didn’t try to understand it.

She changed quickly — jeans, sweatshirt, laptop bag slung over her shoulder like armour. She walked out without a plan, without locking the door behind her.

She wasn’t going anywhere in particular.

She was looking for chaos. For proof of life. For places where people laughed, where babies cried, where the world continued without asking her to be whole.

She decides to go to a mall. Not to shop. Just to sit.

She finds a corner seat in McDonald's. The kind that lets you exist without being seen. She orders without thinking.

A grilled chicken meal with pickled jalapeños. Six chicken nuggets tossed in peri-peri. A Coke Zero.

The tray feels heavier than it should.

At the first bite, something loosens. Not hunger. Not craving. Something quieter. The noise around her continues. Families, couples, teenagers laughing too loudly. Life moving in neat, careless circles.

The loneliness slips in without asking. Her eyes sting as she keeps eating. Burger. Nugget. Another bite. She doesn't stop. Doesn't wipe her tears. Just lets them fall while she chews, swallows, washes it all down with Coke Zero.

Invisible. Fed. Still alone.

Chapter 22 – Reconciliation or Repair

Karthik had moved into the campus dorm, and Rhea threw herself into her studies. She was still mulling over everything that had happened, but as a child she had learned that the easiest way to keep her father calm was simple. Study well. Score good grades.

She had grown quieter.

Maybe it was age. Maybe it was the college incident.

Everyone knew things could not go back to the way they were. White flags had been raised all around, a quiet surrender. The only agreement left standing was one shared meal together. Even that felt like effort now. Karthik stayed away.

But it was enough for the moment. Nina and Anubhav decided not to push.

There was a visible distance between Nina and Anubhav too. Whether Anubhav withdrew, or Nina chose to turn inward, neither of them spoke about it. They were growing apart, and Rhea carried the guilt of it like a private punishment, convinced it was her fault. She had no courage to ask questions, no right to interfere. Nina spoke only of trivial things during meals, and Rhea clung to those scraps of normalcy.

While the trio struggled through their quiet fractures, Anubhav found unexpected solace in Nikita's company. He

did not speak of it. The guilt was too heavy, and the timing felt wrong.

Karthik, meanwhile, had loved Rhea for a long time. It had started as something innocent, something unnameable. A childhood closeness that bloomed quietly with him. Being separated from her without ever telling her how he felt hurt more than he expected.

One night, unable to sleep, he sent her a short email. He did not expect a reply.

He still felt ashamed of slapping her. He still saw her as that little girl who had once arrived at his house and claimed it as her own. He remembered thinking she was the cutest thing he had ever seen. And while Rhea had blushed and fidgeted through the farewell evening, he had stolen glances at her too, surprised at how the girl in pigtails now looked like a young woman in a blue sari.

From: Karthik1306@xxxx.com **Subject:** Sorry, Kiddo!!

Hey Dodo, Truce? I miss my buddy... and I'm sorry. (Pouting. Holding my ears.)

Luv, Karthik

It was a small email. No drama. No declarations. Just a simple *sorry*. But it meant everything to her.

Rhea wasn't ready to explain herself. She didn't understand what had taken over her that day, and Karthik didn't ask. Maybe he didn't want to know. What he knew was simpler.

Life without her felt incomplete. She was the only love he had ever known, and he didn't want it to end bitterly, even if it was destined to remain unspoken.

The emails continued. Short updates. Funny college stories. Photographs of artwork. Rants from Rhea that he read smiling, hearing her voice in his head as if they were love letters.

Many nights he wanted to tell her everything. How long he had loved her. How he didn't know when affection turned into something deeper. How quietly it had happened.

Rhea understood her feelings too. But she was afraid. Afraid of losing her best friend to emotions she didn't yet know how to handle. So, she kept things light. Quirky. Safe.

At least they had found their way back to friendship.

Days turned into weeks. Weeks into months. Karthik started coming home more often, easing Nina's mind.

Soon he was in his final year, and Rhea had finished her PUC.

One evening, he told her he was moving to Mumbai for an internship with his mentor. He had taken a transfer to finish his final year there.

Rhea's heart sank.

They had never truly lived apart. Even during college, they had been in the same city. She had secretly hoped that now, older and steadier, they might find a way back to each other.

But Rhea had grown into Anubhav's daughter in her own way. Practical. Logical. She told herself his dreams mattered more than her feelings.

She didn't argue.

The night before his departure, Karthik's dorm room felt like a courtroom inside his head. One side urged him to tell her everything. The other reminded him of how overwhelming she could be, how little space there might be for him in her world.

He knew all of it was true. And still, he couldn't speak.

He had a difficult night — perhaps the longest one yet. Restless, he tossed and turned, checking his phone, refreshing his email, then putting it away again. He didn't have the courage to send even a text. For the kind of feelings he carried, a text or an email felt far too small — almost disrespectful — for someone as creative and expressive as Karthik.

Next day Rahul decides to take matters in his hand and calls Rhea.

"Hello? Is this Rhea Shrivastava?"

"Yes," she replied politely, her tone suddenly grown-up. "May I know who's calling?"

Rahul chuckled, amused by how composed she sounded. "This is Rahul. Karthik's friend."

"Oh! Hi," she said, instantly warmer. "How are you?"

"I'm good. Are you home?"

"Yes. What's wrong?" Her voice tightened. "Is Karthik okay?"

"He's fine," Rahul reassured quickly. "We're coming home. Your dad is dropping him at the airport."

Relief washed over her.

“Could you meet me in the corridor?” Rahul asked. “I’ll explain.”

She agreed and was there within minutes, pacing under the deep blue night sky, the moon hanging full and patient above her.

“Hey, Rhea,” Rahul said, jogging toward her.

“Did you run all the way?” she laughed nervously.

He laughed too, then stopped, serious now. “I’ll say this plainly. I don’t know how else to.”

“I’m in love with Karthik,” Rhea blurted. “Please don’t say you love me.”

Rahul burst out laughing. “Thank God. Because he’s been in love with you forever.”

Her breath caught.

“He doesn’t know I’m here,” Rahul continued. “He’s in the parking lot with your dad. I couldn’t let him leave Bangalore without telling you.”

Rhea didn’t wait.

She ran.

The elevator felt painfully slow. She took the stairs, three floors, then one more to the basement, heart pounding.

She collided with someone.

She looked up.

“Karthik.”

“Karthik!” she cried, hugging him tightly. Not like a friend. Like someone who had finally found her way home. “I’m sorry.”

He pulled her back gently, holding her face in his palms. “Shh. Stop.”

She obeyed.

“You are the most overbearing, self-centred, impatient, childish person I’ve ever met,” he said.

Her eyes filled with confusion.

“But I wouldn’t want you any other way.”

“I love you too,” she blurted through tears.

He laughed, pulled her into his arms, and kissed her. Soft. Gentle. Enough.

Rhea blushed, hiding her face against his chest. He smiled, holding her closer.

“Come to the airport with me?” he asked.

She jumped back, pointing a finger at him. “Only if you buy me ice cream.”

He sighed dramatically. “Fine.”

And just like that, they walked together, friends again. A little more than friends. Maybe lovers one day.

For now, it was enough.

No fear of the future.

Only the sweetness of the present.

Epilogue

Karthik finally settled in Mumbai. He and Rhea broke the news gently to Nina and Anubhav – met with a little protest, a little anger, and eventually, understanding. Rhea followed soon after, moving to Mumbai for her graduation, beginning adulthood and love in a different city, under a different sky, afresh.

Anubhav, too, found his courage. He told Nina that he had been seeing Nikita – someone who complemented him perfectly. Secure. Mature. Resolved. A woman who could hold her own and grow alongside him as an equal, not someone he had to manage. Anu took a transfer to Hyderabad to start his life anew.

Everything stung Nina, just a little. She was happy – for the young couple finding their way, and for the grown-up couple choosing themselves. And yet she wondered, quietly, where she had gone wrong – that after twenty-one years, she was again alone. No partner. No family clustered around her. Nothing left to manage except herself.

But Nina had always been an optimist.

She made a promise – not loudly, not dramatically – to heal. To find herself, or at least a truer version of herself. And maybe, one day, to find love again.

She knew there was someone for her somewhere. And when she was ready, he would find his way to her.

“Nina Miss...” Daisy’s voice broke the stillness as she entered the room. “The house feels so empty, na?”

Nina smiled. “Yes. But we’ll fill it with laughter again.”

Daisy hesitated, then grinned. “Do you think you and I are enough?”

Nina laughed softly. “Or maybe,” she said, teasing, “you can help me find a mister.”

Daisy laughed with her.

Acknowledgments

My gratitude and love to my Kannalu, for holding space without judgment, for letting me love without fear, and for giving me permission to remain a child in a world that rushes adulthood.

Rhea – though she is a fragment of my imagination and though story is about Nina, I could not have written Nina's story without Rhea.

About the Author

Vanya Krishna is a writer and storyteller who believes in the power of words to heal, transform, and inspire. She draws from everyday life, weaving tales of resilience, tenderness, and human connection.

Writing these stories is her way of expression; to heal through words and creativity.

